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Discourses of Sustainability: Critical Approaches in Contemporary Contexts

Discorsi di sostenibilità: approcci critici nel discorso contemporaneo

Edited by
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Unsustainable Digital Discourses

Right-Wing Climate Policy Delegitimization on Instagram in the United States and Italy*

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Abstract

The article examines how climate-oppositional discourse on Instagram contests environmental governance across Italian and U.S.-centered material. Adopting a qualitatively driven comparative Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), supported by descriptive corpus-assisted observations, the investigation analyzes a purposively assembled dataset of 118 public posts and reels. Four recurrent, non-mutually exclusive strategy clusters emerge from the dataset: (i) enemy construction; (ii) ridicule and affective downgrading; (iii) economic and national-interest reframing; and (iv) the reappropriation of 'serious environmentalism'. The analysis shows how policy delegitimization can enact climate delay by challenging the authority or motives of climate-governance actors and institutions, and the fairness or feasibility of policy instruments without requiring explicit rejection of climate science. Economic reframing is recurrent across both Italian and U.S.-centered subsets, while enemy construction and 'serious environmentalism' are especially prominent in the Italian material. The comparison shows how similar discursive functions are localized through different institutional targets and semiotic resources, and how Instagram's multimodal and hashtag-based affordances shape their presentation and potential circulation without establishing audience persuasion or uptake.

* The article was jointly conceived and discussed by the authors. For the purposes of individual attribution in Italian academic evaluation, Giuseppe Balirano is responsible for the Introduction, sections 4.1 and 4.2, and the Conclusion; Robin Donadio is responsible for sections 2, 3, 4.3, and 4.4, and the Discussion. The introductory part of section 4 and *Table 1* are jointly attributable to both authors.

Keywords: climate policy delegitimization; discourses of climate delay; Instagram; multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA); right-wing climate discourse.

1. Introduction

Climate policy has become an increasingly visible object of political contestation in digital communication (Lamb *et al*. 2020). Indeed, climate measures are often framed not as technical responses to environmental risk but as questions of legitimacy, authority, cost, and political identity. In right-wing climate-oppositional discourse, regulatory measures may be represented as coercive, economically punitive, ideologically motivated, or detached from the interests of ordinary citizens (Wodak 2021).

This article examines how such contestation is constructed on Instagram across Italian and U.S.-centered material. The comparison is functional rather than premised on political equivalence: the two contexts differ institutionally, and the immediate targets of opposition are not the same. In the Italian material, European institutions and the European Green Deal are recurrent objects of criticism; in the English-language material, federal regulation, Democratic administrations, and climate-policy initiatives are more prominent targets. The comparative question is therefore whether related discursive functions recur while being adapted to different institutional settings.

A central distinction concerns denial, delay, and delegitimization. Climate denial rejects or substantially disputes the scientific understanding of anthropogenic climate change. Climate delay, by contrast, can acknowledge climate change while justifying postponement, obstruction, or insufficient action through arguments about cost, feasibility, responsibility, or fairness (Roper, Ganesh, and Zorn 2016; Lamb *et al*. 2020). In this study, delegitimization is treated as one discursive mechanism through which delay may be enacted: climate governance is opposed by challenging the authority, motives, rationality, or moral standing of its actors, institutions, and policy instruments.

The Italian case is contextualized through research on European 'green backlash' (Bosetti *et al*. 2025), while scholarship on political and climate-related Instagram discourse informs the analysis of the platform's multimodal resources (Dobkiewicz 2019; Gardam *et al*. 2025). Taken together, these perspectives support an examination of how climate-policy opposition is represented in particular institutional and communicative settings.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitatively driven comparative MCDA, supported by descriptive corpus-assisted observations. The primary emphasis is interpretive: the analysis examines how recurrent verbal and visual resources construct social actors, assign responsibility, and legitimize or delegitimize climate governance. Corpus software is retained as an exploratory retrieval aid rather than as the basis for statistical inference. Given the small, purposively assembled dataset, the analysis therefore focuses on discourse function and multimodal configuration (Baker 2023; Machin and Mayr 2023).

The article is guided by four research questions:

1. Which recurrent discursive strategies and multimodal configurations are used in the Italian and U.S.-centered Instagram material to contest or delegitimize climate and environmental governance?
2. How are these strategies adapted across the two sociopolitical contexts, particularly in relation to different institutional and political targets?
3. How do the identified strategies relate to the distinction between explicit climate denial and climate delay through policy delegitimization?
4. How do captions, images, typography, and other audiovisual resources combine to construct these strategies in the examples analyzed?

Section 2 establishes the conceptual distinction between denial, delay, and delegitimization, and situates the study within scholarship on green backlash and platformed climate discourse. Section 3 describes the dataset and the comparative MCDA procedure, including the supporting use of descriptive corpus-assisted observations. Section 4 presents the four strategy clusters, while sections 5 and 6 discuss their comparative implications and the study's contribution.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. *Denial, delay, and delegitimization*

Climate opposition encompasses analytically distinct forms of discourse. Climate denial, in its stricter sense, rejects or substantially disputes the scientific understanding of anthropogenic climate change, including its existence, human causation, or seriousness. Opposition to climate action, however, does not necessarily depend on direct science denial. Research increasingly identifies forms of obstruction that accept climate change

as a legitimate topic, and may acknowledge environmental risk, while nevertheless justifying inaction, postponement, or systematically insufficient responses (Roper, Ganesh, and Zorn 2016; Lamb *et al*. 2020).

Lamb *et al*. (2020) conceptualize these as discourses of climate delay that can shift responsibility, emphasize the economic or social costs of mitigation, promote inadequate alternatives, or represent effective intervention as unrealistic or unfair. In the present study, delegitimization is treated not as a category equivalent to denial or delay, but as a discursive mechanism through which delay can be enacted, targeting the authority, credibility, motives, procedures, or moral standing of actors, institutions, and policy instruments associated with climate governance. A policy may therefore be rendered unacceptable because it is represented as ideologically driven, economically damaging, externally imposed, irrational, or promoted by untrustworthy actors.

Delegitimization may draw on authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and other forms of legitimation identified by van Leeuwen (2007). Moral evaluation and rationalization are especially relevant here: climate measures and their proponents can be negatively evaluated as ideological, excessive, or unfair, while competing positions are framed as pragmatic or grounded in 'common sense'. Positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation likewise help organize climate-policy disputes around polarized social and institutional actors (van Dijk 1998, 2006).

2.2. *Green backlash and right-wing climate-policy contestation in Europe*

The Italian material analyzed here is situated within broader European resistance to climate-transition policies. Bosetti *et al*. (2025) describe a 'green backlash' in which climate measures become politically contestable when distributive consequences, economic costs, employment, or national competitiveness are foregrounded. The present study does not test voting behavior or electoral outcomes; the relevance of this literature is contextual, providing a wider setting for examining how the costs and authority of environmental governance are represented in the Italian data.

Within such discourse, supranational institutions can become salient targets because climate regulation is represented not only as environmental policy but also as a question of economic autonomy, national interest, and institutional authority. Right-wing populist discourse more

generally has been analyzed through oppositions between 'ordinary people' and political or institutional elites, together with strategies of polarization and negative other-presentation (Wodak 2021). The analysis in section 4 examines how these resources are localized around EU climate governance without assuming that every criticism of EU policy has the same ideological or political function.

2.3. *Why Instagram matters*

Instagram is relevant because political discourse on the platform is constructed through combinations of verbal, visual, and audiovisual resources rather than caption text alone. Images, typography, captions, hashtags, memes, video, spoken language, and on-screen text can work together to construct political actors and evaluations (Machin and Mayr 2023; Jones 2024). Hashtags are particularly relevant as metadiscursive and affiliative resources: searchable talk can organize discourse around shared topics and stances, while ambient affiliation describes forms of social alignment that do not require direct conversation (Zappavigna 2011, 2012, 2018; Zappavigna and Martin 2018).

Research on political Instagram communication and climate discourse further supports a multimodal approach (Dobkiewicz 2019; Gardam *et al*. 2025). In the present study, however, platform affordances are treated as features of communicative design rather than as evidence of persuasion or algorithmic amplification. The analysis examines how verbal, visual, and audiovisual resources construct climate-policy contestation within the sampled items. Hashtag-based searchability provides relevant platform context, but circulation, algorithmic amplification, and audience uptake are not investigated at present.

3. Data collection and methodology

3.1. *Dataset and sampling*

The study draws on a dataset of 118 public Instagram items relating to climate and environmental-policy contestation: 64 Italian-language items (42 static posts and 22 reels) and 54 English-language items (32 static posts and 22 reels) centered primarily on U.S. political discourse.

Appendix 1 and *Appendix 2* list 44 items through reel-format permalinks and 74 through post-format permalinks, the latter of which may also contain moving-image material. The sampling frame is discourse-centered rather than account-centered. The dataset therefore includes material posted directly by political actors and organizations as well as media or aggregator accounts when they circulated or recontextualized the climate-oppositional discourse under examination; the ideological identity of every posting account was not itself an inclusion criterion. Therefore, eligibility depended on an identifiable connection to climate or environmental governance, its proponents, or the legitimacy of environmental action. This connection could be expressed in captions, images, on-screen text, or spoken discourse. Actor-focused criticism and conspiracy-oriented material were included only where their environmental relevance could be established from the item or its documented context; the political affiliation of the posting account alone was insufficient.

Data were collected manually in two rounds, between September and December 2025 and in May 2026. Retrieval used a newly created Instagram research account with no prior following, liking, posting, or engagement history to minimize personalization based on prior account activity, while recognizing that platform personalization could not be eliminated. Searches combined issue- and actor-based retrieval. Terms included 'climate scam', 'climate hoax', 'Green New Scam', 'follia eco' (transl.: 'eco-madness'), 'Von der Leyen', and 'EPA', alongside searches for prominent actors and accounts associated with climate-policy contestation, including Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lega, and Giorgia Meloni. The sampled items had originally been posted between January 2023 and March 2026.

The same retrieval procedure was applied to static posts and reels. Collection continued through successively less prominent results until a drop of approximately 50% or more in visible engagement indicators, such as likes or views, was observed in subsequent results; this served only as an operational stopping procedure, not as a representativeness threshold or measure of audience response. All hashtags visible in collected captions were retained as part of the post-level material. Comments were excluded because they constitute a distinct interactional layer with separate methodological and ethical implications. Permalinks and visible posting dates were recorded for traceability. *Appendix 1* and *Appendix 2* provide the account names and permalinks for the sampled items.

The search vocabulary and attention to visible engagement shaped which items were encountered and retained. The resulting dataset there-

fore supports comparison within a selected body of climate-oppositional discourse, rather than estimates of the prevalence of particular strategies across Instagram or either national political context.

3.2. *Analytical procedure*

The study adopts a qualitatively driven comparative MCDA, supported by descriptive corpus-assisted observations. Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al*. 2014) was used as an exploratory aid for inspecting lexical recurrence and retrieving relevant textual instances for comparison.

Cross-lingual comparison is conducted at the level of discourse function rather than direct lexical equivalence. Following cross-linguistic corpus-assisted discourse research, the analysis compares recurrent rhetorical and semiotic operations while allowing their linguistic realization to vary across contexts (Partington, Duguid, and Taylor 2013; Taylor and Del Fante 2020). The comparison focuses on what the discourse does: how social actors are positioned, how responsibility and blame are assigned, and how climate governance is legitimized or delegitimized.

All 118 items were examined manually. Analysis considered captions and hashtags together with represented participants, gaze, salience, composition, typography, and image-text relations, where relevant to evaluation and social positioning (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021; Machin and Mayr 2023). The 44 items listed through reel-format permalinks were watched and listened to in full. Spoken discourse was examined through repeated listening and analytical notes. On-screen text and relevant temporal features were considered alongside the verbal and visual material.

The analysis distinguished the stance of a represented speaker from the framing supplied by the posting account. Where an item reproduced a political statement, the strategy expressed in that statement was attributed to its speaker; its inclusion did not automatically establish endorsement by the hosting account. This distinction was particularly important for media and aggregator posts.

The four strategy clusters discussed in section 4 were developed iteratively through repeated close reading, combining concepts from climate-delay and delegitimization research with attention to patterns emerging from the material. These categories were non-mutually exclusive: an item could receive several codes, although criticism of costs alone did not establish 'serious environmentalism'. Both authors participated in developing and refining the categories, reviewing coding decisions

and resolving any disagreements through discussion. *Figures 1-9* provide close analyses of selected cases across the two subsets and a range of formats, including political graphics, memes, and video stills. The examples allow specific verbal-visual relationships to be examined in detail and illustrate both overlapping strategies and distinctions between them. They are illustrative cases within the dataset, rather than a separate representative sample.

3.3. *Ethical considerations*

All material was publicly accessible at the time of collection and was gathered manually rather than through automated scraping. The dataset consists principally of public political communication produced or circulated by politicians, political organizations, institutional accounts, advocacy actors, and media or aggregator accounts. Because the sampling frame is discourse-centered, ethical treatment is determined by the status and communicative role of the material represented rather than by assuming that every account belongs to the same category of public actor. Public statements by identifiable political and institutional actors are quoted and attributed where attribution is analytically relevant.

Comments were excluded from the dataset and informed consent was not sought from public political or institutional actors whose openly disseminated material forms the object of the analysis. This approach is consistent with Internet-research ethics frameworks emphasizing contextual assessment of publicness, vulnerability, potential harm, and expectations of online participation (franzke *et al*. 2020; Stommel and de Rijk 2021). A distinction is nevertheless maintained between public political actors and ordinary users, and where reproduced screenshots incidentally display comments or identifying information belonging to private individuals who are not objects of the study, usernames, profile photographs, and comment text are cropped or obscured.

Visible likes, views, and comments are not interpreted as evidence of persuasion or political effect. Engagement indicators contributed only to the operational stopping procedure during purposive retrieval and are not analyzed as audience-response data. This distinction is important because such metrics vary with account size, post age, distribution, and other factors that are not controlled in the study.

4. Findings

The qualitative analysis identified four recurrent, non-mutually exclusive strategy clusters: (i) enemy construction; (ii) ridicule and affective downgrading; (iii) economic and national-interest reframing; and (iv) the reappropriation of 'serious environmentalism'. These clusters describe ways of contesting environmental governance and may accompany explicit denial, arguments for delay, or combinations of the two. *Table 1* reports descriptive coding frequencies within the dataset; individual items may instantiate more than one strategy. The table does not quantify the relative prevalence of denial and delay, and its figures are not population estimates.

Table 1. – Distribution of recurrent strategy clusters across the two subsets.

Strategy cluster	English-language N = 54	Italian N = 64	Total N = 118
Enemy construction	23 (42.6%)	59 (92.2%)	82 (69.5%)
Ridicule and affective downgrading	25 (46.3%)	40 (62.5%)	65 (55.1%)
Economic and national-interest reframing	33 (61.1%)	52 (81.2%)	85 (72.0%)
'Serious environmentalism'	2 (3.7%)	15 (23.4%)	17 (14.4%)

4.1. *Politicization through enemy construction*

Enemy construction is a recurrent strategy in which climate measures are associated with actors represented as untrustworthy or illegitimate, allowing policy legitimacy to be challenged through the identity, motives, or authority of those represented as responsible. It appears in 59 of 64 Italian items and 23 of 54 English-language items. In the Italian subset, European institutions, the European Commission, and Ursula von der Leyen repeatedly function as focal antagonists. The name Leyen occurs 15 times, but its analytical significance lies in its recurrent evaluative environment rather than in normalized frequency. Statements such as "Ursula von der Leyen vuole distruggere l'industria italiana ed europea" (transl.: "Ursula von der Leyen wants to destroy Italian and European industry") and "Le follie Green di Von der Leyen e della Commissione europea stanno devastando l'industria europea" (transl.: "The 'Green' follies of von der Leyen and the European Commission are

destroying European industry")[1] shift attention from policy rationale to alleged institutional intention and harm. The combination of 'follie' (transl.: 'follies') and 'devastando' (transl.: 'destroying') represents institutional action through alleged irrationality and industrial harm, linking the political antagonist to the threatened productive constituency shown in *Figure 1*.



Figure 1. – Example of enemy construction from the Italian subset. Instagram post by @isabellatovaglieri (December 17, 2025). Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DSXOAsjDNNX/.[2]

In the English-language subset, a comparable function is directed towards Democratic administrations, federal regulation, and climate-policy initiatives. The recurrent label "Green New Scam" exemplifies

[1] All translations from Italian are the authors' own.

[2] English translation of the headline and slogan: "GERMANY: INDUSTRIALISTS SOUND A SHOCKING WARNING: 'THIS IS THE WORST CRISIS SINCE 1949; OUR MODEL HAS REACHED THE END OF THE ROAD'"; and "GREEN DISASTER". English translation of the post caption: "The Green follies of von der Leyen and the European Commission are destroying European industry. Revising the ban on internal combustion engines from 2035 still does not go far enough. Our battle to stop Brussels' eco-madness does not end here".

this move: scam occurs 18 times in the textual material and frames environmental intervention through deception and illegitimacy. Across both subsets, the key mechanism is polarized attribution: environmental governance is associated with an out-group represented as lacking legitimate authority (van Dijk 1998, 2006).

Figure 1 shows how this attribution is reinforced visually. The expression "DISASTRO GREEN" (transl.: 'green disaster') is combined with an image of factory workers. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) visual grammar, the composition links an abstract institutional threat to a materially recognizable constituency whose livelihood is represented as endangered. The workers are functionalized through uniforms and industrial activity, supporting an opposition between productive "ordinary" actors and distant decision-makers (Machin and Mayr 2023).

The visual organization therefore makes institutional conflict concrete: climate governance is represented through its alleged consequences for work and production rather than through environmental outcomes.

A parallel multimodal strategy appears in *Figure 2*.

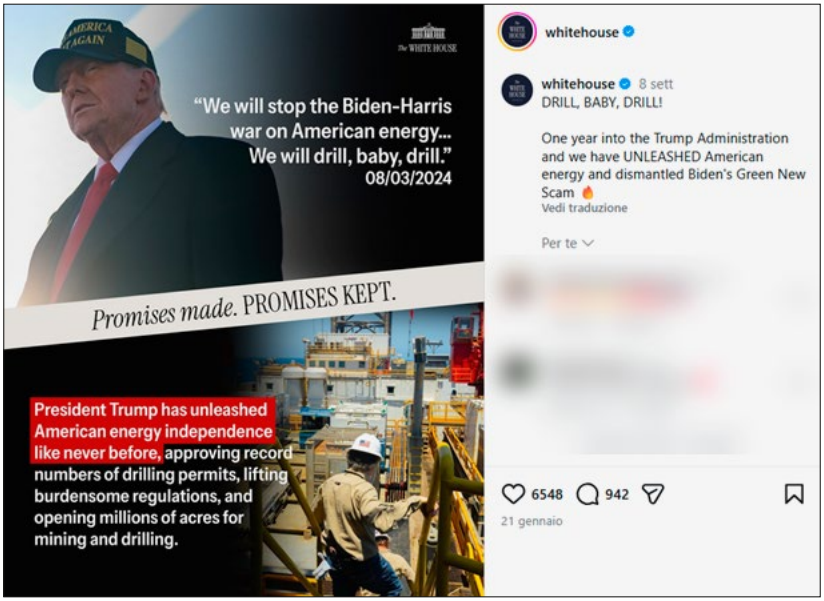

Figure 2. – Example of enemy construction from the English-language subset. Instagram post by @whitehouse (January 21, 2026). Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DTx-zp-E8un/.

The post declares that the administration will stop the "Biden-Harris war on American energy" and combines this verbal claim with a vertically divided composition. Donald Trump is represented in profile and looking off-camera in the upper section, while an industrial worker occupies the lower section. The absence of direct gaze supports an "offer" reading, while the vertical arrangement connects political promise with material energy production (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021).

The comparison is therefore functional rather than visually identical. In the Italian example, EU policy is connected to industrial threat; in the U.S.-centered example, leadership is aligned with energy production and the worker. In both cases, climate-policy conflict is organized around an in-group/out-group distinction rather than around environmental evidence.

Taken together, these examples show how delegitimization can target authority and motive without requiring direct rejection of climate science. Different institutional antagonists are inserted into a comparable oppositional structure.

The particularly high incidence of enemy construction in the Italian subset reflects the recurrent discursive centrality of EU institutions as objects of blame, a point developed further in the Discussion.

4.2. *Ridicule and affective downgrading*

Ridicule constitutes a second recurrent strategy, appearing in 40 Italian and 25 English-language items. Rather than functioning primarily as an argument against policy content, it operates as a stance resource through which contempt, irritation, or amused disbelief are made available as preferred orientations. Terms such as 'follia' (transl.: 'madness'), 'eurofollia' (transl.: 'EU madness'), 'assurdo' (transl.: 'absurd'), 'scam', and 'hoax', together with memes, sarcasm, and visual exaggeration, position the object of criticism as unworthy of serious consideration.

In the Italian material, affective downgrading frequently targets EU regulation and climate activists. *Figure 3* reduces the EU directive on tethered bottle caps to a physically recognizable inconvenience and anchors it with the polarizing slogan "MENO EUROPA / PIÙ ITALIA" (transl.: "less Europe / more Italy"). The humor establishes an evaluative frame in which environmental governance can be read as absurd, intrusive, and detached from everyday experience.



Figure 3. – Example of ridicule and affective downgrading from the Italian subset. Instagram post by @matteosalviniofficial (May 27, 2024). Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C7dfhO_PcJk/. [3]

Climate activists are similarly downgraded through personalized attacks. *Figure 4* accompanies criticism of Greta Thunberg with the phrase "Che fine misera" (transl.: "What a miserable end"), redirecting attention from climate-policy claims to degradation of the activist's public persona. Such resources invite an affiliative reading in which rejection of the out-group is presented as common sense rather than as a position requiring extended justification.

[3] English translation of the image text: "LESS EUROPE / MORE ITALY"; "12 days until the 2024 European elections, Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 June"; and "MORE ITALY, LESS EUROPE: I'M VOTING LEGA". English translation of the post caption: "Surreal environmental rules promoted by Brussels? No, thanks. Yes to common sense! For MORE ITALY and less Europe, choose Lega. 12 days to go. #On8and9JuneIVoteLega".



Figure 4. – Example of ridicule directed at climate activists from the Italian subset. Instagram reel by @silviasardone (November 2, 2025). Source: https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQkBEUAgKKE/. [4]

Comparable mechanisms occur in the English-language material through memes and conspiracy-adjacent formats. *Figure 5* uses the recognizable "Soyjak vs. Chad" structure: a distressed figure shouting "They can't control the weather!!!" is opposed to a calm figure presented alongside a dense list of patents. The visual contrast reverses a conventional rational/irrational distinction, associating skepticism towards weather-control claims with emotional instability and the counter-position with apparent evidential authority.

[4] English translation of the on-screen text: "GRETA TAKES TO THE STREETS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. THIS IS RIDICULOUS!". English translation of the post caption: "Thunberg is worse than Landini: Greta takes to the streets against the government alongside left-wing extremists after appearing as a guest on Fazio's TV show. What a miserable end...".



Figure 5. – Example of Internet-meme ridicule and affective downgrading from the English-language subset.
Instagram post by @realmarjoriegreene (October 7, 2024).
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DA1mUtnSS8i/.

Memes can communicate ideological positioning through incongruity and humor (Aslan 2022). In *Figure 5*, the contrast between the distressed figure and the apparently composed counter-position offers a clear evaluative alignment between the two positions. This can be understood in relation to the potential for ambient affiliation around shared values (Zappavigna 2014). The evidence concerns the alignment offered by the image, rather than viewers' actual responses: the meme makes one position available as an object of ridicule while presenting the opposing position as credible.

4.3. *Economic and national-interest reframing*

Economic and national-interest reframing is the most recurrent strategy, occurring in 85 items: 52 Italian and 33 English-language. Environmental measures are translated into questions of distributive harm,

affordability, employment, industrial competitiveness, energy security, or national economic strength. The evaluative center of gravity consequently shifts from environmental necessity to the alleged social and economic consequences of mitigation.

In the Italian material, this framing frequently intersects with sovereignty and EU antagonism. Environmental regulation is represented as an external constraint threatening households, workers, farmers, businesses, or strategically important industries.

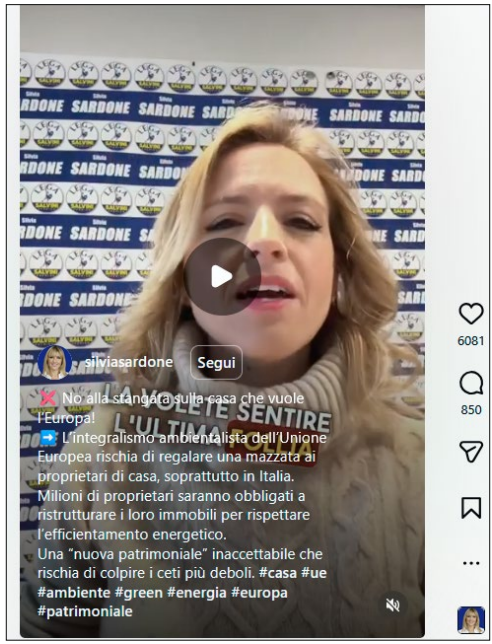

Figure 6. – Example of economic and national-interest reframing from the Italian subset. Instagram reel by @silviasardone (January 13, 2023). Source: https://www.instagram.com/reels/CnXeOenI9uT/. [5]

[5] English translation of the post caption: "No to the financial blow to homeowners that Europe wants to impose! The European Union's environmental fundamentalism risks dealing a heavy blow to homeowners, especially in Italy. Millions of property owners will be required to renovate their properties to meet energy-efficiency requirements. An unacceptable 'new wealth tax' that risks hitting the most economically vulnerable groups. #home #EU #environment #green #energy #Europe #wealthtax".

Figure 6, for example, describes the EU energy-performance directive as a "stangata sulla casa" (transl.: "a financial blow to homeowners") and characterizes it as "Una 'nuova patrimoniale' inaccettabile" (transl.: "an unacceptable 'new wealth tax'"), warning that it risks affecting the "ceti più deboli" (transl.: "the most economically vulnerable parts of the population"). Such formulations activate a topos of burden by presenting environmental governance as a material sacrifice demanded of valued in-groups (Wodak 2021).

The same logic appears in claims that the green transition threatens businesses, jobs, automotive production, household bills, agriculture, or European competitiveness. These representations repeatedly combine economic vulnerability with criticism of political elites or supranational regulation.

In the English-language subset, recurring references to household costs, electricity prices, taxation, public expenditure, energy reliability, and national economic strength perform a comparable function. One item states that "When energy prices go up, all prices go up"; another claims that more than $100 billion in Green New Deal loans did "zero" to lower energy costs for Americans. Elsewhere, environmental measures are associated with higher electricity rates, expensive technologies, taxpayer expenditure, or reduced reliability.

The significance of this pattern is therefore established through repeated contextualized instances rather than through statistical collocation. Hoax and scam index deception; they are not used as proxies for inflation or cost-of-living discourse. Cost framing is instead evidenced directly through reference to bills, prices, taxes, employment, industry, and energy affordability.

Figure 7 develops this economic framing through the conventions of financial-news discourse. Its Fox Business format draws on the familiar visual and verbal conventions of financial broadcasting, while spoken and on-screen material foregrounds the alleged inability of green lending to lower energy prices or increase reliable production. An abstract climate-policy dispute is thus translated into a register of affordability, expenditure, and economic management. Its caption describes "$100B+ Green New Scam loans" and attributes to @SecretaryWright the claim that the lending would do "Precisely zero" to lower energy costs or expand "reliable, affordable energy". The combination of monetary scale, categorical negation, and affordability language evaluates climate-related expenditure through its alleged failure to deliver practical economic benefits.

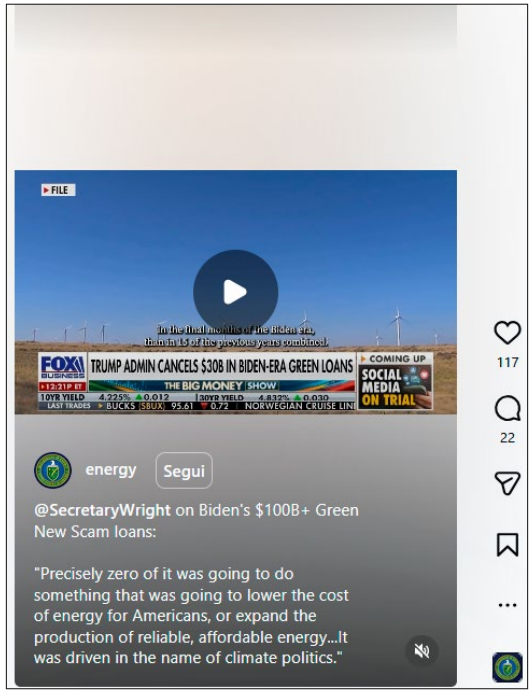

Figure 7. – Example of multimodal economic reframing from the English-language subset. Instagram reel by @energy (January 27, 2026). Source: https://www.instagram.com/reels/DUB7WY8j-f7/.

Italian visual material performs a comparable function through different resources: factories, machinery, workers, cars, agricultural producers, and politicians in institutional settings repeatedly anchor policy debates to employment and productive activity. These configurations invite climate governance to be interpreted through potential effects on livelihoods and national economic capacity.

Economic reframing therefore constitutes an important point of convergence between the two contexts. Climate opposition is presented not principally as opposition to environmental protection itself, but as opposition to policies construed as financially punitive, socially unfair, technologically impractical, or damaging to national prosperity. This closely corresponds to climate-delay arguments organized around feasibility, cost, and distributive burden (Lamb *et al*. 2020).

4.4. *Reappropriation through 'serious environmentalism'*

The fourth strategy is less frequent overall but provides the clearest comparative divergence. 'Serious environmentalism' occurs in 15 Italian items but only 2 English-language items. The term refers to a repositioning in which speakers acknowledge the legitimacy of environmental protection while distinguishing their preferred approach from an allegedly ideological, extremist, unrealistic, or economically destructive environmentalism. Rather than rejecting environmental concern, the discourse contests who is entitled to define legitimate environmental action.

A particularly explicit example comes from Tilde Minasi (*Appendix 2*, item 44): "L'#Ambiente va certamente tutelato, ma non a scapito della crescita e dello sviluppo, magari solo per adeguarsi acriticamente all'ideologia #green europea, priva di buonsenso" (transl.: "The #Environment must certainly be protected, but not at the expense of growth and development, perhaps merely to conform uncritically to European #green ideology, which lacks common sense"). The initial assertion, reinforced by 'certamente' (transl.: 'certainly'), establishes an explicitly pro-environmental position. The adversative 'ma' (transl.: 'but') then restricts the conditions under which environmental protection is considered acceptable, subordinating it to growth and development. The subsequent contrast between 'buonsenso' (transl.: 'common sense') and 'ideologia' (transl.: 'ideology') presents the speaker's position as reasonable while discrediting the competing approach. The hashtags also participate in this local evaluative contrast: '#Ambiente' (transl.: '#Environment') occurs within the affirmative statement of protection, whereas #green forms part of the negatively evaluated description of European policy. This combination distinguishes the example from economic reframing alone. The speaker both foregrounds material costs and claims authority to define an acceptable form of environmental action.

Figure 8 illustrates a related positioning in the English-language subset. The statement "Climate change is real" establishes acceptance of the problem, while "but so is human progress" introduces a counterweight to the urgency associated with a "climate apocalypse narrative". The landscape of mountains and sunset supplies familiar environmental imagery alongside this verbal repositioning. The combination constructs a pro-environmental self-positioning while challenging the framing of the problem as catastrophic. The example can therefore be read as environmental reappropriation, although the reproduced wording alone does not establish the speaker's position on a particular policy instrument.

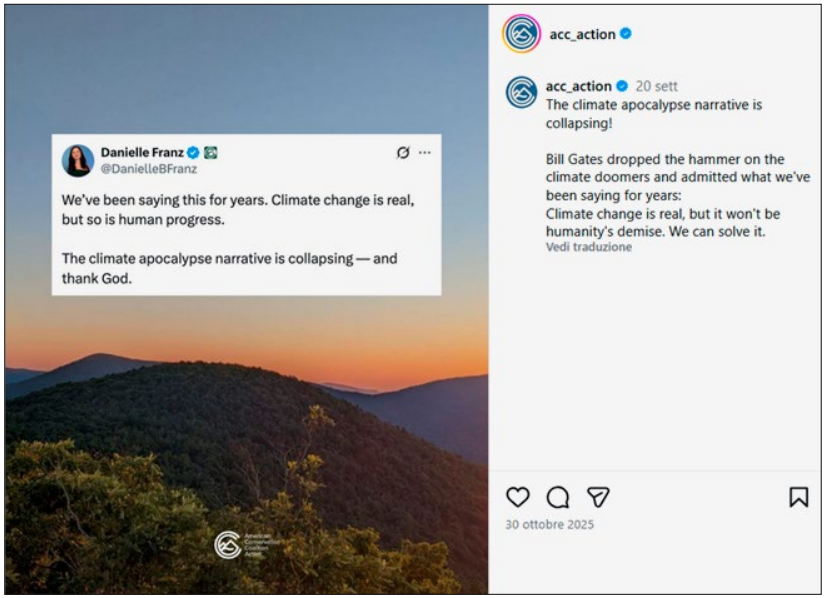

Figure 8. – Example of environmental reappropriation and pristine-nature imagery from the English-language subset.
Instagram post by @acc_action (October 30, 2025).
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DQcOQINgYMP/.

Figure 9 also clarifies the boundary of this category. The institutional setting can project political authority and competence, while the reproduced caption attributes industrial decline to European policies and "ideologia green" (transl.: "green ideology"). These features support readings of enemy construction and economic reframing. They do not, by themselves, establish an affirmative claim to environmental responsibility. Institutional presentation alone is therefore insufficient evidence of 'serious environmentalism'; that interpretation requires additional verbal or visual evidence of environmental commitment.

Comparatively, this strategy separates environmental legitimacy from existing governance mechanisms. Speakers can oppose binding measures while retaining an explicitly pro-environmental self-positioning. 'Serious environmentalism' therefore represents an adaptable form of policy delegitimization: rather than denying the environmental problem, it contests the legitimacy, proportionality, or rationality of the proposed response.



Figure 9. – Institutional staging accompanying economic and anti-EU framing in the Italian subset. Video still from an Instagram post by @paoloborchia (October 8, 2024). Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DA3iODOIjtx/. [6]

5. Discussion

The two subsets share several discourse functions, but they differ in the relative prominence and localization of these strategies. Across the dataset, climate governance is contested through antagonistic actor construction, affective downgrading, economic reframing, and, less frequently, reappropriation of environmental legitimacy. These strategies often overlap within the same item, allowing institutional blame, mate-

[6] English translation of the visible on-screen text fragment: "FACTORIES CLOSED / COLLAPSE OF...". English translation of the post caption: "Europe has completely wrecked the automotive sector through its policies, causing a crisis that has led to factory closures. We were world leaders; today we are on our knees before China, thanks to green ideology. It is not the apocalypse, but something close enough".

rial burden, ridicule, and claims to pragmatism to reinforce one another. The findings also clarify how policy delegitimization can operate without explicit denial of climate science. The analyzed examples challenge proposed responses by discrediting their agents, instruments, or anticipated consequences, illustrating a discursive route through which climate delay may be justified. Delegitimization is therefore best understood here as one discursive mechanism through which climate delay can be enacted (Lamb *et al*. 2020).

Economic and national-interest reframing is the most recurrent strategy overall and is prominent in both subsets, suggesting that the translation of environmental governance into affordability, taxation, employment, competitiveness, energy reliability, or national economic strength is a form of contestation that recurs across both contexts. Its localization differs: Italian items frequently combine economic burden with supranational governance, whereas English-language items more often foreground energy costs, federal regulation, taxation, and the economic consequences attributed to climate policy.

Enemy construction is especially pronounced in the Italian subset, where EU institutions and Ursula von der Leyen repeatedly function as antagonists. This is consistent with the discursive conditions discussed in green-backlash scholarship, in which decarbonization becomes contestable when represented as externally imposed or distributively unfair (Bosetti *et al*. 2025). The present study does not test electoral response, however, and should not be read as corroborating claims about voting behavior. In the English-language subset, a comparable antagonistic logic is directed towards different targets, including Democratic administrations and federal regulation. The cross-contextual similarity therefore lies in function rather than identical vocabulary or institutional structure.

The most evident cross-context divergence concerns 'serious environmentalism', which is markedly more characteristic of the Italian material. By opposing allegedly ideological environmentalism to common sense, realism, pragmatism, gradualism, or technological neutrality, speakers can reject existing climate-governance mechanisms while claiming environmental responsibility. This extends the analysis of climate delay by showing how opposition may operate through an attempt to occupy the environmentally responsible position itself. The contest is not simply environmentalism versus anti-environmentalism, but over which forms of environmentalism can be represented as legitimate.

Instagram's platform conditions are relevant to how these strategies are packaged, not as a causal explanation for their success. Captions,

hashtags, images, typography, memes, broadcast excerpts, spoken discourse, and video can be assembled into condensed multimodal configurations that make antagonism, burden, ridicule, and pragmatism recognizable. Hashtags can connect individual items to wider searchable stance environments, but the present data do not establish audience uptake, persuasion, or algorithmic amplification. Likewise, visible engagement metrics are not treated as evidence of rhetorical effectiveness. Future research incorporating comment-thread analysis, longitudinal engagement data, or audience methods would be required to investigate reception and uptake.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how climate-oppositional discourse on Instagram contests environmental governance across Italian and U.S.-centered material through a qualitatively driven comparative MCDA of 118 items. Four recurrent, non-mutually exclusive strategy clusters were identified: enemy construction; ridicule and affective downgrading; economic and national-interest reframing; and the reappropriation of 'serious environmentalism'. Explicit denial forms part of the repertoire, but opposition more often operates through climate delay enacted by policy delegitimization: actors, institutions, instruments, and proposed forms of mitigation are represented as ideologically motivated, economically punitive, irrational, or contrary to valued social interests.

The comparison reveals both convergence and local patterning. Economic reframing recurs across both subsets, while enemy construction is particularly pronounced in the Italian material. The clearest divergence is 'serious environmentalism', substantially more prominent in the Italian subset, where appeals to common sense, realism, pragmatism, technological neutrality, and alternative ecological transition allow speakers to challenge existing climate governance while preserving an explicitly pro-environmental self-positioning. This suggests that an important contemporary form of climate-policy contestation concerns not only whether environmental action is legitimate, but who can define legitimate environmentalism.

Instagram is significant as a multimodal communicative environment in which captions, hashtags, spoken discourse, images, typography, memes, and video can be combined to construct multimodal political

positioning. The present study demonstrates how these resources contribute to the presentation and potential circulation of climate-policy contestation, but it does not infer persuasion or reception. Its purposive and relatively small dataset, together with the exclusion of comment-thread interaction, limits generalization. Future work could extend the comparison diachronically, incorporate audience uptake, and test whether the reappropriation of 'serious environmentalism' recurs across other European settings.

APPENDIX 1

Instagram items included in the English-language subset

	Instagram account	Link to post
1	@realmarjoriegreene	https://www.instagram.com/p/DA1mUtnSS8i/
2	@realmarjoriegreene	https://www.instagram.com/p/DA3atwqOxjX/
3	@realmarjoriegreene	https://www.instagram.com/p/DAtG-D8uLqo/
4	@secretarywright	https://www.instagram.com/secretarywright/p/DTv4926Devm/
5	@hmorgangriffith	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DLU6vliAhQr/
6	@whitehouse	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DV_Rth8ioRy/
7	@secretarywright	https://www.instagram.com/secretarywright/reel/DTs2_vyAP9l/
8	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DTx2dR7js2l/
9	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DUDpPebiRs4/
10	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DUB7WY8j-f7/
11	@senkatiebritt	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DMWkQWMNm53/
12	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFQOQwLNwLP/
13	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DSEKRg1DZgN/
14	@repguthrie	https://www.instagram.com/p/DOPI7u6kdEz
15	@whitehouse	https://www.instagram.com/p/DMX6Z-8tN7e/
16	@repguthrie	https://www.instagram.com/p/DRNTpfhkxuQ/
17	@ndtvprofit	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DTxvXNWAeDO/
18	@ani_trending	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQsIm2tE_FC/
19	@alarabiya_eng	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DUsseRgCI3K/
20	@repkatcammack	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DUq70ShDfAx/
21	@wethepeopleconv	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DVBHQbgE9IQ/
22	@chirpysfallout	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DVMpNonjYAg/
23	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DVjJDYcDoBP/
24	@farmerpride	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPz83rjD2zH/
25	@bottomlinefbn	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DFOlNyNtCdx/
26	@whitehouse	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTx-zp-E8un/
27	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/p/DGTzrcBy2c2/
28	@repbrecheen	https://www.instagram.com/p/DF8X8djvsNC/
29	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DO_t8uQiJQ7/
30	@energy	https://www.instagram.com/p/DHZIzvHSiEV/
31	@ani_trending	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DN6bVPQD-6m/
32	@repmtg	https://www.instagram.com/p/DKK1ehhPEQe

	Instagram account	Link to post
33	@flemingsenatecampaign	https://www.instagram.com/p/DVL1WE8joHU
34	@reptiffany	https://www.instagram.com/p/DNle6zzNV6b
35	@headlinesandquotes	https://www.instagram.com/p/DJmRziBtqPu
36	@economictimes	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTxqwXmkk-n/
37	@acc_action	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQcOQINgYMP
38	@senatormattera	https://www.instagram.com/p/DWCxHqXkaIZ
39	@reelectsteverhoads	https://www.instagram.com/p/DVhkArtjWDC
40	@tzippyfeldman	https://www.instagram.com/p/DV8wAi-kQug
41	@newrepublic	https://www.instagram.com/p/DRz4Zv8j4ne
42	@briansussmanshow	https://www.instagram.com/p/DU9yX3dEbrK/
43	@ickeohane	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTA5sxiDnok/
44	@lindellwilson	https://www.instagram.com/p/DVzUD4nDdN2
45	@oann + @repmattgaetz	https://www.instagram.com/p/DOwbJXVj1I9/
46	@bettsnation	https://www.instagram.com/p/DLz_vqYs0O8/
47	@mi_house_republicans	https://www.instagram.com/p/DV8nG5uDth4/
48	@repmtg	https://www.instagram.com/p/DDhfOpFOMRN/
49	@mschlapp	https://www.instagram.com/p/C9d87-MPtDy/
50	@tim4texas	https://www.instagram.com/p/CwS5ct5gtJZ/
51	@repmtg	https://www.instagram.com/p/DA12r1iNwFv/
52	@realmarjoriegreene	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAxE1OvNwhJ/
53	@carldemaioca + @reformcalifornia	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DDs2i_FMIH2
54	@diamondandsilk	https://www.instagram.com/p/C07ZeNpOX2-

APPENDIX 2

Instagram items included in the Italian subset

	Instagram account	Link to post
1	@legaofficial	https://www.instagram.com/p/DLAbfYixyQv
2	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSXOAsjDNNX/
3	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/p/C4G5_K6Nbgc
4	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/isabellatovaglieri/p/DTziomgj_Ty
5	@legaofficial	https://www.instagram.com/p/DK-J-TIRhhP/
6	@ylenjalucaselli	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DUjD9QWANg6/
7	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/p/DRb5ecdCchi/
8	@welcometofavelas	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTgLCYqjPCu/
9	@susannaceccardi	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DLpNcQsNWN6/
10	@matteosalviniofficial	https://www.instagram.com/p/C7dfhO_PcJk/
11	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQkBEUAgKKE/
12	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSKdC_FDAVC/
13	@matteosalviniofficial	https://www.instagram.com/p/DHvJLXhRc9w
14	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/p/DGwENgbtp_Z/
15	@paoloborchia	https://www.instagram.com/p/DBhHBNFo36M/
16	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/p/DUBQSEZDFWY
17	@antoniobaldelli	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQFCPACDUSP/
18	@paoloborchia	https://www.instagram.com/p/DV-9H-WCFH0/
19	@legagiovani_lombardia	https://www.instagram.com/p/DKxFD7yNIs_/
20	@mattferrarese	https://www.instagram.com/p/DMqVYhDMFQS
21	@paoloborchia	https://www.instagram.com/p/DA3iODOIjtx/
22	@vivalawiva	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DWAJ4F1iC-q/
23	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DT3Mtq4DF2t/
24	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DPjg49SDMKT/
25	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQt8V8yjDRM/
26	@vivalawiva	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DUYcrSSiP-s/
27	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DQ_kofgERPw/
28	@dcapezzone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DSZuVTqgTpJ/
29	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DV08UkuIIsO/
30	@totaleuproduction	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DUqqxY1DZZK/
31	@fdieuropa	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DVthkJaiGRB/
32	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DIBP4QCtG2U/

	Instagram account	Link to post
33	@alessandromorelliofficial	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DL5Rti1IkjL/
34	@ilmoderatore.it	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTzsdJPjLU4
35	@riccardopase	https://www.instagram.com/p/DT2Q_V2jDGa
36	@andrea_bernaudo	https://www.instagram.com/p/DT6APs3D1ZM
37	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSLH3H8D1jr
38	@erica.rivolta	https://www.instagram.com/p/DLppGsrPWGm/
39	@_.filippoguidi._	https://www.instagram.com/p/C4n7M_LIlsg
40	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/p/DOsmvEwjEuJ/
41	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ7J14YjLnr
42	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/p/DRcFVmMjqxK
43	@paoloborchia	https://www.instagram.com/p/DV0WRqmiA2r/
44	@tildeminasi	https://www.instagram.com/p/DDL6-i-tpxO/
45	@roberta_ferrero_	https://www.instagram.com/p/DGtkzasNthl/
46	@paoloborchia	https://www.instagram.com/p/DVbrkFICBh7
47	@carlo.fidanza	https://www.instagram.com/p/DS2NGg9DFDd
48	@legaofficial	https://www.instagram.com/p/DMA5ttwxVjq
49	@legagiovani_milano	https://www.instagram.com/p/C-GBfLtNJGf/
50	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/p/C_sXpN8tjvo/
51	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/p/DDKd7D9MZba/
52	@alepanzaoff	https://www.instagram.com/p/C7H-G25tvhU/
53	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/p/C4aC0DBM0i7/
54	@roberto.vannacci.68	https://www.instagram.com/p/C_234oeM2Yl/
55	@ilgiornale.it + @indini.andrea	https://www.instagram.com/p/C9zFP_kNzHd
56	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/p/C22D06qtruF/
57	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/p/C81YN8mMsO_/
58	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/CnXeOenI9uT/
59	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/C4ft8CEMqVe/
60	@lega.patriotiperleuropa	https://www.instagram.com/reels/CsDtQrRt4qa/
61	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DQ46pURgNT-/
62	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DQgfI16jNxB
63	@silviasardone	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCXPnF4gLsm/
64	@isabellatovaglieri	https://www.instagram.com/reels/DLDIKnrt13g/

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