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**The Green Deal, the Common Agricultural
Policy and the Free Market: Farmers'
Protests in Europe**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the origins of European integration, agriculture has been one of the cornerstones of the Community project, both economically and symbolically. From the establishment of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) at the 1958 Stresa Conference to today's European Green Deal, the governance of the primary sector has shaped territorial cohesion, food security, and environmental sustainability across the Union. This long-standing equilibrium is now being challenged by a convergence of factors, trade liberalisation, climate pressures, energy shocks, and shifts in EU budgetary priorities, that are redefining the role of agriculture within the single market and European society.

This thesis analyses that transformation from a historical and critical perspective, showing how the CAP and the Green Deal, designed to address different challenges, are converging on a contested terrain of environmental targets, economic sustainability, and democratic legitimacy. The first chapter retraces the evolution of European agriculture from post-war reconstruction to the current prominence of climate and sustainability objectives, highlighting the emergence of new farmers' movements contesting the pace and methods of the green transition. The second chapter examines the CAP in the context of the global market, focusing on trade agreements (such as CETA, Mercosur and relations with the United States) that have reshaped the competitiveness of European production and exposed issues of regulatory reciprocity and environmental dumping. The third chapter turns to the dialogue between farmers and consumers, proposing the foundations for a "new civilisation of relationships" capable of combining sustainability, product quality and social participation.

Taken together, these three sections demonstrate that recent farmers' mobilisations should not be read as a rejection of the European project but as a call for more inclusive policies, grounded in multilevel governance and genuine engagement with local realities. The challenge for the European Union is to reconcile the urgency of ecological transition with the competitiveness of the primary sector, while safeguarding the founding principles of the CAP; food security, territorial cohesion and fair remuneration for agricultural work, in an increasingly interdependent global context. By tracing these dynamics, the thesis offers analytical tools to understand not only the causes of today's protests and tensions

but also the opportunities to forge a new pact between institutions, farmers and European citizens, restoring the strategic centrality of agriculture in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 1: THE LONG PATHWAY OF AGRICULTURE IN EUROPE

An introduction to the topic

To fully understand the dynamics that have brought European agriculture to the center of the current political and social debate, it is necessary to retrace, even if only in general terms, the historical evolution of the agricultural sector within the framework of the European integration process. Agriculture, in fact, is not only a primary economic activity, but has been one of the cornerstones of the construction of a united Europe since its inception, assuming a strategic role both in terms of territorial cohesion and food sovereignty.

Over the past few decades, the European agricultural sector has undergone a profound transformation, moving from a model focused on increasing productivity and modernizing structures to a more complex and multifunctional approach focused on environmental sustainability, food security, land development, and biodiversity protection all at once intertwined. This transition, with differing opinions and positions depending on the actors, has been driven by multiple factors: the various reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the birth of new social and environmental awareness, the evolution of international markets and, more recently, the introduction of the European Green Deal as an overall political strategy for the Union's climate neutrality. This is part of the international commitments undertaken by the EU at the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and, in particular, with the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to keep the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, while pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C, considered as a goal in the Sustainable Development Agenda of the United Nations. (*The Paris Agreement* | United Nations, n.d.) (*Conference of the Parties (COP)*, n.d.) (United Nations, 2025).

The first chapter of this thesis therefore aims to analyze the long journey of European agriculture, starting from its historical roots up to the most recent regulatory and political developments. The key developments of the CAP will be examined, from the 1958 Stresa Conference to the vision of the Von der Leyen Commission, with particular attention to moments of disruption, structural reforms, and their effects on national agricultural models. In this context, the genesis and structure of the Green Deal will also be explored, as well as the reactions it has sparked in European agriculture, culminating in the widespread protests of recent years.

The chapter finally focuses on the growing tension between environmental objectives, economic sustainability, and social cohesion that has characterized the most recent agricultural mobilizations from a historical and critical perspective. These protests, while expressing a concrete and widespread discontent, do not constitute a denial of the European project, but rather a call for more inclusive, territorial governance, attentive to the specificities of the primary sector and rural communities.

1.1. The long journey of agricultural Europe, from Stresa to Von Der Leyen

The origins of modern agriculture can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution between the 19th and 20th centuries, when the primary sector still represented the backbone of the economies of individual European nations. Characterized by low productivity, the first signs of mechanization and a high rural employment with little protection, the agricultural sector throughout Europe, during the period between the two world wars, was governed by national policies aimed at safeguarding especially the landowners through measures to protect their interests and the status quo represented by the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few owners (*CAP at a Glance - European*, n.d.).

After the disasters of the Second World War, European agriculture faced the dual challenge of food insufficiency and the reconstruction of its productive and economic fabric. These challenges required, first and foremost, regenerating agricultural land

devastated by half a century of conflict on all fronts. Faced with these emergencies, European governments, using part of the Marshall Plan resources, prioritized achieving food self-sufficiency and rebuilding agricultural structures (*Marshall Plan (1948)*, 2022). These are some of the objectives that the Founding Fathers of the first six constituent nations of the united Europe (France, Italy, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) had deemed indispensable and which would lead to the definition of a common agricultural framework of reference, which became one of the founding pillars of the European Economic Community (EEC), established by the Treaty of Rome of 25 March 1957 (European Union, 2012).

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was born in 1958 with the Stresa Conference, which from 3 to 12 July brought together ministers from the six signatory countries of the Treaties of Rome, but above all, for the first time, representatives of the six nations' agricultural organizations. These categories sat around a table to explore issues regarding the future of European agriculture, starting from the orientation of national policies. In 1962, as a first effect of the important Stresa Conference, a package of European agricultural policy measures was implemented on cereals, pork, eggs, poultry, fruit and vegetables and wine (Stead, 2007).

The objectives of the measures that will be subsequently established were aimed at stabilising markets, guaranteeing a fair income for farmers and promoting productivity, but also meeting the food needs of a continent with a constantly growing population and harmonising national agricultural systems in a European context (*CAP at a Glance - European*, n.d.).

These objectives have been formally codified in Article 39 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which identifies five key objectives: increasing agricultural productivity through technical progress and the rational use of the factors of production, ensuring a fair standard of living for the agricultural community, stabilizing markets, ensuring the availability of supplies, and maintaining reasonable prices for consumers.

Article 39 also highlights the need to consider the unique nature of agricultural activity, the structural and natural disparities between regions, and the intrinsic link between agriculture and the entire economic system.

This formulation confirms that the CAP was conceived not only as a tool to support agricultural income, but also as a public policy aimed at the community as a whole, aimed at ensuring access to safe and affordable food, thus strengthening the link between farmers and European citizens (*Treaty on The Functioning of the European Union*, 2016).

However, after Stresa, over the years, with the evolution of the international economic and political scenarios and the agricultural situations of the Member States, the modulation of the CAP has clashed with overproduction which has made it necessary to review the terms of European policy for the primary sector with a view to containing production and paying attention to environmental issues (*CAP at a Glance - European*, n.d.).

In this context, the CAP has represented a historic instrument, addressing for the first time in a structured way the issue of agricultural product prices, an essential element for the stability of European farmers' incomes, while simultaneously promoting the improvement of infrastructure and production practices. However, the progressive enlargement of the European Community, initially from six to twelve members and subsequently to the current Union of twenty-seven states, has had ambivalent effects: on the one hand, it has contributed to a broader integration of agricultural markets, but on the other, it has encouraged overproduction, with consequent pressure on the Community budget. To these critical issues was added the worsening of environmental degradation, the result of multiple factors, including the expansion of intensive production models, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, deforestation, and the overexploitation of natural resources, often encouraged by market policies geared toward maximizing short-term yields rather than long-term sustainability (European Conservation Agriculture Federation, 2023) (*European Manufacturing in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape*, 2025).

During the 1980s and 1990s, several reforms, including the introduction of production quotas and the historic MacSharry reform of 1992, sought to contain overproduction that

created difficult market conditions and falling prices, to contain public spending and to encourage more environmentally responsible practices (General Secretariat of the Council) (Council of the European Union), 2016).

This reform process continued with Agenda 2000, the reforms led by Commissioner Franz Fischler, and the decoupling of agricultural production premiums, introduced in 2003. These payments were no longer tied to the quantity of production, but paid on the basis of different criteria, such as cultivated area and compliance with specific environmental and quality standards, the so-called cross-compliance. This approach aimed to reduce market distortions and encourage more sustainable production models. A further important element in the revision process was the multilateral context, particularly the regulatory framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The negotiations at the WTO have in fact pushed the European Union to progressively reallocate agricultural aid from the "red" and "amber boxes", considered forms of support distorting trade, towards the "green box", which includes measures compatible with free trade as they are not distorting (Rossi, 2025) (European Commission, 2025). This reconfiguration of public support has also had direct implications for the CAP's environmental priorities, facilitating the integration of climate and biodiversity protection objectives into support policies, in line with the demands of the international community. This approach, designed to harmonise the CAP with international commitments on trade liberalisation, remains relevant even in the current phase of crisis, if not progressive marginalisation, of the WTO, with the EU continuing to justify many of its strategic choices in light of the principles of trade multilateralism and the need to promote "climate-friendly" agriculture on a global scale (*CAP at a Glance - European*, n.d.).

In recent years, the CAP has increasingly embraced sustainability through measures such as greening, and eco-schemes. These reforms, particularly those aligned with the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy, reflect a transition towards a multifunctional and climate-resilient agricultural model (Accademia dei Georgofili & De Castro, 2024).

The Commission intends to progressively shift European agricultural policy from quantity-driven growth to a more integrated approach, balancing productivity,

environmental protection, and the vitality of rural areas. The Green Deal, in particular, was presented by the European Commission chaired by Ursula Von der Leyen with the declared aim of tackling climate change and environmental degradation, which constitute an enormous threat to Europe and the world, and of making the Old Continent the first climate-neutral area by 2050. A choice that, in the methods identified by the Commission, is not shared by European farmers who have contested the measures criminalizing agricultural production activities and which do not take into account the global context that highlights responsibilities for the pollution of the globe that must be sought outside European territory and the need to feed a growing global population with estimates of 10 billion people by 2050 (Fortuna, 2025) (United Nations, 2017).

The European Commission itself has acknowledged that the Green Deal cannot be achieved by Europe acting alone. In this sense, the European Union has lacked the political strength to leverage its influence with other nations around the world to achieve a world with lower polluting emissions. It was easier for European institutions to penalise farmers with harsh regulations that particularly affected quality production in the Mediterranean area (Gesmundo, 2025).

1.2. The European Green Deal: an intense political and social debate

Although the European Green Deal represents one of the European Union's most ambitious strategies to address the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation, it is at the center of intense political and social debate, particularly in the agricultural sector. This has led to fierce protests in EU institutions by the main farmers' organizations, which have intensified between 2024 and 2025: from the Italian Coldiretti, to the French FNSEA (National Federation of Agricultural Employers' Unions), to the Spanish ASAJA (Asociación Agraria De Jóvenes Agricultores), and to the German DBV (Deutscher Bauernverband), to name just a few of the main national agricultural organizations.

Presented by the European Commission on 11 December 2019, under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, with the contribution of the then Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans, the Green Deal aims to transform the Union into a net-zero emissions economy by 2050, decoupling economic growth from the use of natural resources and ensuring that no region or social group is left behind (*The European Green Deal - European Commission*, n.d.).

However, since its early stages of implementation, the Green Deal has encountered growing resistance from the agricultural sector, which has denounced the management of environmental transitions as excessively technocratic, centralized, and disconnected from the daily reality of farmers. In particular, many of the measures envisaged, such as the reduction in the use of pesticides and, without offering alternatives, fertilizers, the constraints on land use, and the obligation to respect ecological practices in the context of direct payments of the CAP, have been seen as a threat to the profitability and competitiveness of European agriculture, especially in the most fragile production contexts, such as the Mediterranean or mountainous ones (Collective, 2025). A similar reflection can be extended to the European production system as a whole: numerous economic actors, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises in the artisanal and manufacturing sectors, have perceived the Green Deal's regulatory logic as placing additional pressure on the costs and economic sustainability of their businesses. This perception fuels the idea that, despite pursuing shared climate objectives, the current configuration of the European strategy risks translating into a regressive impact on the real economy, affecting in a transversal way the most deeply rooted production sectors in the territories (*European Manufacturing in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape*, 2025).

European agricultural organizations such as Coldiretti, FNSEA, ASAJA, DBV, and other organizations, including through COPA-COGECA, the European Coordination of Agricultural Associations and Agricultural Cooperation, have challenged the Green Deal's top-down approach, which fails to adequately take into account the complexity of the primary sector and regional differences. Their main criticism concerns the risk that, in the absence of effective economic and regulatory tools to support the ecological

transition, the new environmental rules could lead to a reduction in domestic agricultural production, accompanied by an increase in imports from non-EU countries with less stringent environmental and social standards. This phenomenon, known as carbon leakage, could paradoxically undermine the Green Deal's climate objectives, simply by shifting emissions and negative environmental impacts elsewhere. It should be noted that these criticisms do not call into question the legitimacy and relevance of the climate-neutrality objectives set by the European Union, nor the strategic contribution that the agricultural sector is called upon to make to the ecological transition process. Instead, they focus on the implementation method adopted, which is perceived as excessively top-down and characterized by a punitive and ideological regulatory approach, which tends to attribute a disproportionate role in generating climate-altering emissions to agriculture. This approach, in addition to neglecting the multifunctional role of agriculture, which includes not only the production of food but also the sustainable management of natural resources, the protection of biodiversity, and the preservation of rural landscapes, risks marginalizing the primary sector within the economic equation of European food security, compromising its ability to guarantee stable, high-quality supplies (Copa Cogeca, n.d.).

Beginning in 2021, and particularly intense in the two-year period 2023–2025, farmer and agricultural worker protests have multiplied across Europe, with protests in major European capitals and at EU institutions, particularly in Brussels and Strasbourg. Farmers have expressed concern for the future of the sector, denouncing not only the economic unsustainability of certain measures but also the failure of institutions to listen to them. In this context, several journalistic investigations, including one published in January 2025 by the Dutch newspaper "De Telegraaf," have raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest in European policymaking, linked to Frans Timmermans, European Commissioner for Agriculture, and the role of certain environmental NGOs. These revelations have further fueled the perception, among some agricultural groups, of a decision-making process influenced by lobbies and vested interests, in which the needs of the primary sector are systematically marginalized ("Europarlementariërs Zijn Woest Over De Omstreden Subsidiecontracten Van De Europese Commissie Met Ngo's." 2025).

In the meantime, a broader debate has developed on the democratic legitimacy of the Green Deal, its social sustainability, and the need to rebalance environmental objectives with economic and production ones. From a multilevel governance perspective, many observers have emphasized that the success of the Green Deal cannot depend solely on EU decisions, but requires global coordination to avoid competitive distortions and ensure concrete results at the global level. Indeed, the Commission itself has recognized that Europe, acting alone, cannot achieve global climate goals. However, the delay in promoting effective multilateral agreements and the lack of protection tools for the most exposed sectors have fueled discontent among large segments of the agricultural community (Bienvenu et al., 2024).

From an economic perspective, some analyses have shown that the decline in European agricultural emissions, estimated at around 18.5% in recent years, has led to a 10% to 20% reduction in domestic agricultural production, with significant effects on rising prices and farm margins. Meanwhile, agricultural production has increased in countries such as Brazil, China, and the United States, where agricultural emissions have increased. This imbalance contributes to a form of ecological dumping to the detriment of European producers, who find themselves operating under more restrictive and less competitive conditions (Gesmundo et al., 2025, 35-36).

1.3. Recent farmers' protests: causes and dynamics

Between 2024 and 2025, the main organizations representing the European agricultural sector launched a wave of protests in response to two main events: on the one hand, the proposed post-2027 European Union multiannual budget, which was deemed detrimental to the CAP; on the other, the perception that the European Green Deal, in its implementation, was not sufficiently calibrated to the real needs of economic and productive sustainability of the primary sector. The protests took place in particular in front of the EU institutions, involving organizations such as the German DBV, the French FNSEA, the Spanish ASAJA, and the Italian Coldiretti (Copa Cogeca, 2025).

In Belgium, according to an article by VRT News on August 8, 2025, hundreds of farmers gathered in Brussels' European Quarter, coinciding with the European Commission's discussion of the proposed 2028-2034 multiannual budget. Farmer organizations fear a 20% cut in funding for the Common Agricultural Policy, at a time when a growing share of resources would be reallocated to defense. The Boerenbond called the proposed reduction "unacceptable," emphasizing that it contradicts the political recognition of agriculture as a strategic sector. Particular concern was also expressed over the Commission's proposal to merge the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development into a single financial instrument managed at the national level. This measure, according to COPA-COGECA, would risk triggering a renationalization of the CAP, weakening cohesion and a level playing field in the internal market. The protest took place without the extensive use of agricultural machinery, with a symbolic march from the European Parliament to the Commission headquarters in Place Schuman, where protesters deposited a pair of boots as a sign of their mobilization ("Farmers Protest in European District in Brussels," 2025).

In France, *Le Monde* (July 17, 2025) documented the FNSEA's reactions to the proposal to reduce CAP funding by 22%, which currently represents approximately 32% of French agricultural sector revenue. Christiane Lambert, former president of the FNSEA, called the proposal a "direct attack on the CAP," stating that such an approach would amount to a renationalization of agricultural policies, resulting in a loss of coherence and solidarity among member states. FNSEA president Arnaud Rousseau announced further mobilizations, reiterating the CAP's centrality to the stability of the European agricultural sector (*Le Monde* with AFP, 2025).

The debate has also heated up in Spain. In an interview published in *La Vanguardia* on July 27, 2025, Agriculture Minister Luis Planas expressed strong criticism of the Commission's proposal, which calls for a 20% cut in CAP funding in the 2028–2034 budget, falling below the €80 billion threshold for Spain. Planas called this approach "an unfair view of the rural world" and underscored the risk of breaking the "unwritten rural pact" that, since the Union's founding, has ensured agricultural cohesion and development. He also highlighted how the reduction in resources could be linked to the

need to finance new European political priorities, such as defense and competitiveness, but urged that the debate not be transformed into a conflict between sectors ("tanks versus tractors"), but rather that a balance be struck between food security, energy autonomy, and common defense (Masdeu & Navas, 2025).

Finally, in Italy, the debate has focused on the possible creation of a single European fund that would also encompass CAP resources. In an article published by *Il Sole 24 Ore* on July 6, 2025, Coldiretti Secretary General Vincenzo Gesmundo called this proposal "dangerous" and reiterated the importance of European "agricultural exceptionalism," which has helped avoid food crises and ensure high standards in terms of quality, health, and the environment. Gesmundo emphasized that such an approach would open the door to food imports from countries with lower standards, compromising both consumer safety and the sustainability of the European agri-food system. He also highlighted how the 20% cut in the CAP planned for the 2028–2034 period would drastically reduce agriculture's share of the European budget, from the previous 30–35% to approximately 14%, with serious repercussions for the profitability of agricultural businesses and the quality of food (Gesmundo, 2025).

The protests, therefore, are not just about defending farmers' economic interests, but raise a broader political question about the role of agriculture in the European Union. The associations demand that the CAP continue to be recognized as a fundamental structural policy and that budgetary decisions reflect this recognition. Central to the claims is also the demand for shared rules and respect for the principle of reciprocity in trade: what is required of European farmers in environmental, social, and health terms should also apply to imported products. In this sense, the discontent does not translate into a rejection of the Green Deal as such, but into a demand for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable transition (Hancock & Tamma, 2025).

1.4. The shattered European dream: between technocracy and the crisis of democratic representation

The original ideal of European integration, embodied by the 1957 Treaties of Rome, today appears to be under increasing strain. Various observers and social actors report a growing gap between the European Commission's decisions and the expectations of EU citizens. This gap is often attributed to governance perceived as technocratic, in which political decisions are disconnected from the will of the people and the democratic demands expressed by the European Parliament (Olimerca, 2025).

Recurring criticism has focused on the marginal role of the European Parliament in decision-making processes, despite it being the only EU institution directly elected by citizens. Some commentators point out that, particularly on budgetary policies, major decisions are adopted within the Commission, with little transparency and limited involvement of the relevant commissioners. This is the context of protests by various production groups, particularly young European farmers, who have publicly protested the reduction in funding for the CAP, highlighting the potential negative effects on food production, food security, and the vitality of rural areas (Moavero Milanesi, 2025).

The events organized by young Italian agricultural entrepreneurs in Brussels and other European cities were accompanied by numerous firsthand accounts that we collected directly from those involved. Among these, Lorenzo Ottoni, a farmer and livestock breeder in the province of Mantua, highlighted how European support was crucial to the launch and development of his business, particularly through funds earmarked for youth training and technological modernization. Similarly, Diego Foroni emphasized the importance of the CAP for the economic stability of his livestock farm and the operation of his biogas plant, drawing attention to the connection between agriculture and renewable energy production. Others, such as Irene Pavesi (a beekeeper in Cremona), emphasized the importance of European funds for the survival of agricultural activities in marginal and less productive areas (Coldiretti Press Office, 2025).

From Veneto, Ilaria Pizzolato emphasized the strategic role of dairy farming in mountainous areas, emphasizing how tools such as coupled payments and aid for disadvantaged areas are essential for territorial cohesion and food security. Finally, Daniele Paolucci, a young winemaker from Mantua, highlighted how the CAP represents an investment in the future of the sector, which must also be protected to foster the

diversification and multifunctionality of agricultural enterprises (Coldiretti Press Office, 2025).

In the public debate, strong concern has emerged over the progressive shift in European policies toward an overly deregulated interpretation of the free market, which could penalize quality European products and favor imports from third countries with less stringent standards. Coldiretti representatives have highlighted how eliminating a specific CAP allocation from the European budget and merging it into a single fund risks compromising food security and the sustainability of the continent's agri-food system (Coldiretti Press Office, 2025).

In particular, criticism has focused on the lack of a principle of reciprocity in trade agreements, meaning the failure of imported products to meet the same environmental, health, and social standards required of European farmers. The demands put forward by European farmers during the 2025 protests included the introduction of systematic border controls and ensuring that all incoming goods comply with European regulatory requirements (Coldiretti Press Office, 2025).

Despite the climate of growing discontent, the agricultural protests maintained a strong reference to the symbols of the European Union, with the constant presence of flags bearing the twelve stars, demonstrating a firm commitment to the European project. The demands expressed did not, in fact, take on an anti-European connotation, but rather called for EU institutions to be more attentive to democratic demands, social sustainability, and the protection of their strategic production chains (Cappellini, 2025).

1.5 The challenge of agricultural sustainability between the Green Deal and CAP cuts

Over the past few decades, European agriculture has undergone a profound transformation that has redefined its contours and functions, both productively and socially and environmentally. In particular, the Italian one can be considered as a

demonstration of the ability to combine economic, social, and environmental objectives. This is contextualized in this entirely European chapter. Two milestones are emblematic of this process: on the one hand, the historic agrarian reform of 1950, which, together with instruments such as the Small Cultivating Property Act, the Purchase of Rural Land, and Green Plans, redistributed more than 3.6 million hectares to over a million farmers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers (Mattarella, 2024); on the other, the Orientation Law of 2001 (Legislative Decree 18 May 2001, no. 228), which systematically introduced the principle of the multifunctionality of agricultural enterprises, laying the foundations for an integrated, sustainable, and modern agricultural development model (CAP Revision Approved • Legambiente, 2024).

Thanks to these legislative innovations, Italian agriculture has gradually evolved into a highly diversified productive activity, capable of reconciling food production with environmental protection, landscape enhancement, and the social cohesion of rural areas. The multifunctional model has allowed farms to expand their role, including educational, social, cultural, and environmental activities. Within this framework, the presence of women has become increasingly important: according to the Business Register, today there are over half a million women working in the countryside, with a strong presence in youth-run businesses and a marked propensity for organic, biodynamic, and local agriculture. The so-called "new agriculture" in Italy is based on several clearly recognizable pillars: environmental sustainability, the circular economy, the valorization of local products, social and labor inclusion, the promotion of biodiversity, social agriculture, and the care of inland rural areas. These dimensions translate, concretely, into a series of practices and innovations, from short supply chains to farmers' markets, from agro-detergents to agroc cosmetics, from educational gardens to agriculture projects for social reintegration, which have helped strengthen the resilience of the Italian agri-food system and made it a reference model at the European level. The Italian agricultural guidance law has served as a model for other European countries, such as France, which enacted the Agricultural Guidance Law, published in the French Official Journal on January 6, 2006, and other nations that have announced their intention to follow Italy and France's path (Moncalvo, 2017).

However, this virtuous path is now at risk of being compromised by a dual challenge: on the one hand, the complex implementation of the European Green Deal, which requires significant investments in sustainability from farms, without always providing adequate support tools; on the other, the concrete prospect of a significant reduction in resources allocated to the CAP in the 2028–2034 EU budget. According to estimates based on AGEA data, over 770,000 Italian farms would be affected by this reduction, with potentially serious consequences for the sector's ability to ensure competitiveness, food security, and employment (WWF Italy, 2025).

In this context, a broad debate has developed, questioning not so much the environmental objectives themselves, but the ways in which they are being pursued. Many observers have emphasized that the Green Deal, while ambitious and necessary, risks producing asymmetric effects if not incorporated into a global framework of multilateral coordination. While European agriculture has reduced its emissions by 18.5% in recent years, with an estimated impact of between 10% and 20% on domestic production, as previously stated, it is worth emphasizing again that countries such as China, the United States, and Brazil have seen an increase in agricultural emissions, in the absence of similar constraints. This imbalance is fueling forms of ecological dumping, which penalizes European producers subject to more stringent standards, exposing them to the risk of unfair competition (Roncella, 2024).

In addition to this is the lack of effective compensation tools and the progressive weakening of the CAP as a structural policy of the Union. The plan for a single European fund, which would pool agricultural resources alongside those for cohesion or defense, has been perceived by many farmers' associations as a worrying sign of disengagement by EU institutions towards the primary sector. This approach, according to Coldiretti, would jeopardize not only the profitability of agricultural businesses, but also the quality of European food, regional biodiversity, and citizens' food security (Copa Cogeca, 2025).

Ultimately, the challenge facing the European Union today is to reconcile the urgency of the just ecological and digital transition (JUST Digital Green Transition) with the need to preserve a sustainable and competitive agricultural model. This requires a review of governance tools and greater attention to the specific needs of local areas, through

structured dialogue with social partners, investments in research and innovation, and targeted support policies for the most vulnerable sectors.

Only in this way will it be possible to prevent the green transition from resulting in a structural crisis for European agriculture, undermining its economic, social, and environmental foundations, established by the 1957 Treaties of Rome and the Stresa Conference (“Rukwied: „EU Verabschiedet Sich Vom Kern Des Europäischen Gedankens“,” 2025) (*CAP at a Glance - European*, n.d.).

Concluding remarks

The evolutionary path of European agriculture, reconstructed in this first chapter, shows how the primary sector has been a cornerstone of European integration since the origins of the community project, not only economically but also politically and symbolically, safeguarding peace and harmony among peoples.

The Common Agricultural Policy, born as a response to the urgent need for food self-sufficiency in the post-World War II era, has gradually transformed into a policy capable of capturing the multifunctionality of agriculture and combining the needs of food security, territorial cohesion, and environmental protection.

The successive reforms over time, from the Stresa Conference of 1958 to the most recent developments with Agenda 2000, the decoupling of 2003, and the integration of environmental objectives through measures such as greening and eco-schemes, demonstrate the Union's constant effort to adapt the CAP to new challenges.

However, the introduction of the European Green Deal marked a particularly ambitious paradigm shift, orienting the community strategy towards climate neutrality and long-term ecological sustainability.

It is precisely in the implementation phase of this new green agenda that the most evident critical issues have emerged.

The mobilizations of European farmers and agricultural workers between 2024 and 2025, accompanied by formal positions from the main trade associations, have highlighted the

growing discontent within the sector with a strategy perceived as disconnected from the reality of production and insensitive to the economic and social sustainability of agricultural enterprises.

The convergence of two factors, the implementation of stringent environmental constraints on the one hand, and the prospect of a drastic reduction in the post-2027 CAP budget on the other, has heightened the sense of uncertainty and vulnerability currently pervading large sectors of the agricultural world. In particular, the risk of a transition from a CAP with autonomous funds to a single European fund that also includes resources for defense and cohesion has been interpreted as a weakening of agriculture's structural role within the European project.

At the same time, critical reflection has grown on the ways in which the Union pursues its climate objectives. The issue of international competition, exacerbated by ecological dumping and the lack of reciprocity in trade, raises questions about the internal and external coherence of European environmental policies. Reducing agricultural emissions on the continent, achieved even at the cost of a reduction in domestic production, risks being offset by increased agricultural emissions in third countries and the import of products manufactured with lower environmental standards.

Finally, the analysis highlighted how the sector's discontent is not Eurosceptic, but rather calls for a strengthening of the Union's role as a guarantor of fairness, transparency, and sustainability.

European farmers' demands focus on three main areas: maintaining the CAP as a structural policy with independent resources for income support; introducing measures to support the green transition; and establishing a principle of reciprocity in trade policies, capable of ensuring fair competition and respect for the founding values of European integration.

In this context, it is essential to rethink the governance of agricultural and environmental policies, with a role for the European Parliament that is not merely symbolic, but expresses the will of the citizens who elected it, promoting a structured dialogue between EU institutions, Member States, and representative organizations in the sector. Only through a multilevel, participatory, and scientifically evidence-based approach will it be

possible to reconcile the urgency of the ecological transition with the protection of food security, business competitiveness, and territorial and social cohesion.

Building on this historical and political background, the second chapter will shift the focus to the international dimension of the CAP, analysing its evolution in the context of free trade, global market pressures, and major trade agreements such as CETA and Mercosur. This next section will explore how liberalisation and new global challenges such as climate change, conflicts, and energy crises are reshaping the policy framework and redefining the competitiveness of European agriculture.

CHAPTER 2: THE CAP BETWEEN NEW SCENARIOS AND THE GLOBAL MARKET

An introduction to the topic

The second chapter focuses on the evolution of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the context of international trade and geopolitical transformations of recent decades, with particular attention to the relationship between trade liberalization, new global challenges, and structural changes in European politics.

Since its inception, the CAP has been a central instrument not only for supporting farmers' incomes and ensuring food security, but also for defining the economic and social identity of rural Europe. However, starting in the 1970s, the intertwining of production surpluses, oil crises, and the opening of global markets highlighted the need for a structural rethink. Negotiations within the GATT and, subsequently, the WTO revealed the limitations of a model based almost exclusively on domestic support, requiring the CAP to gradually adapt to the rules of free trade and global geopolitical balances.

The progressive internationalization of the agricultural sector has intensified its confrontation with non-European markets and the dynamics of global competition. Free trade agreements, particularly CETA with Canada and the agreement with Mercosur, have raised concerns and tensions due to the lack of reciprocity protection of Geographical Indications, regulatory asymmetries, and unfair competition from products manufactured with different quality and environmental standards than European ones. In this context, agricultural protests have highlighted the risk that market opening will progressively weaken the competitiveness of Made in Italy products and, more generally, European agriculture.

In addition to the trade dimension, new global challenges, from climate change to international conflicts to the energy crisis, have further complicated the situation. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the vulnerability of grain supplies, while extreme weather

events and the instability of the energy market have highlighted the need for resilient, sustainable agriculture capable of ensuring continuous production.

The proposal for the post-2028 CAP reform under President Ursula von der Leyen fits into this complex landscape, with an approach that aims to integrate the environmental priorities of the European Green Deal. However, as noted in the previous chapter, many agricultural organizations believe it risks sacrificing the economic and productive dimension. The debate focuses on the CAP's financial sustainability, the impact of budget cuts, and the challenges posed by new trade tensions, such as those with the United States, which have directly impacted European agri-food exports.

The following analysis traces the genesis and historical development of the CAP in relation to free trade, the impact of trade agreements with non-European countries, the redefinition of the role of agricultural policy in the global context, the new challenges posed by climate, energy, and conflicts in meeting food needs, and, finally, the implications of the recent CAP reform on the international scene. The aim is to highlight how this policy, while remaining a cornerstone of European integration, today finds itself having to reconcile divergent needs: supporting agricultural producers, responding to global market pressures, and contributing to the achievement of the social and environmental sustainability objectives set by the Union.

2.1. The CAP and free trade

The idea of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was thought up in a context of great economic development in EEC member countries, following the Second World War. During those years, the climate of economic hope made it admissible to redistribute resources in favor of agriculture, a sector considered less strong and weaker than other productive sectors. The implicit aim was to lead European agriculture towards progressive downsizing and internal restructuring, promoting specialization and competitiveness while simultaneously decreasing dependence on public support (Consiglio Nazionale dell'economia e del Lavoro, 1986).

Nevertheless, from the 1970s, shifting economic circumstances emphasized the growing differences between farmers' wages and those of workers in other sectors. This led to a CAP more and more focused on supporting agricultural prices, reaching up to about 10%, in order to narrow this disparity. In 1970, the issue of excess European production arose, making it challenging to sell on global markets, often characterized by strong food demand (think India) but lacking purchasing power. In this context, European agricultural exports assumed a crucial role in the GATT negotiations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, established in Geneva in 1947 with the aim of reducing tariffs and barriers to international trade (Guth et al., 2020) (*Timeline - History of the CAP - Consilium, 2025*).

During the GATT Tokyo Round (1973–1979), over one hundred countries participated and the Community proceeded with an initial rewriting of the CAP, which considered both the oil crisis and the expansion to nine member States. The main result for Europe was a decrease of approximately 33% in customs duties, along with an attempt to regulate the protectionist tactics conceived by tariff barriers. Simultaneously, farmers' protests in Italy highlighted the critical issues related to imports of low-priced agricultural products, specifically milk and cereals from other member states and third countries, like the United States, Canada, and the Soviet Union (McRae & Thomas, 2017).

Having said that, the main issue was that CAP measures came into existence with a focus on domestic support, without taking into account Europe's expanding export-oriented agricultural sector. This highlighted the need for reform, symbolically sanctioned by the adoption of the milk quota system in 1984, which in Italy led to social conflicts and protests that developed from 1996 until the end of the century. The milk quota system lasted until April 1, 2015, after which a free market was restored (Sadłowski, 2020).

At this stage, the so-called "Green Paper" of the European Commission (COM(85) 333) which has the guidelines described in COM(85) 750 represented a significant turning point in the discussion of the CAP: on the one hand, it reaffirmed the value of a European agricultural model based on small and medium-sized family businesses, as opposed to the US industrial model; on the other, it proposed to overcome the quota system and restore to prices a role closer to international market dynamics, while introducing direct support measures for agricultural incomes (European Commission, 1985).

During the 1980s, trade tensions between the European Economic Community (EEC) and the United States increased, particularly concerning exports of grain. These tensions were part of a wider pattern of trade disputes involving other countries, ranging from North Africa to the Soviet Union. In this situation agriculture often appeared to be easily sacrificed in favour of other economic interests. Agriculture per se is often used as a “bargaining chip” in international trade and negotiations ,accentuating the difficulty of defending its specificities in multilateral negotiations within the GATT and prioritizing to the industrial sector (“World Grain Trade,” 2021).

In 1995, GATT was replaced by the World Trade Organization (WTO), responsible for regulating international trade and supervising the numerous agreements among the member States. That same year, the Schengen Agreements entered into force in seven EU countries, banning systematic controls at internal borders and marking a further step towards European integration (Crowley, 2003) (*Schengen Agreement and Convention - EUR-Lex*, 1990).

The new international scenario emphasized the inadequacy of EU policies based on production quotas, which were now perceived as penalizing producers. 1995 was a critical time for Italian agriculture, characterized by a period of intense protest: thousands of farmers took to the streets to denounce the national government's decisions, accusing it of lacking strategic vision and of sacrificing the agricultural sector to short-term goals. Protests also extended to the EU level, with calls for European institutions to take more decisive action to prevent compromises and production quotas that did not reflect the reality of Italian agriculture. (Primavera, 2022).

There was an intense internal debate about the necessity for change: Coldiretti, on the one hand, urged farmers to respect the rules, in particular milk quotas, which represented a very prominent issue at the time. On the other, the national government was encouraged to alter its strategy, particularly during Italy's six-month EU presidency in 1996. The purpose was to bring agriculture back to the center of European and economic policies, after years of sacrifices imposed by mechanisms perceived as rigid and distant from the needs of agricultural businesses (Primavera, 2022).

At the end of the millennium, Italian agriculture saw significant efforts in securing meetings alongside the Government, and representative associations to resolve the sector's key issues. These organisations were called upon to be the mediator between the government and social partners, in order to ensure that agricultural entrepreneurs were given the same status as other sectors in the country. (Primavera, 2022).

In this context, the law for the orientation and modernization of the agricultural sector (Legislative Decree No. 228/2001) was passed, considered a third-millennium agrarian reform that introduced multifunctionality as a key principle, recognizing agriculture's role not only in production, but also for its environmental, social, and territorial dimension (Italian Parliament, 2001).

However, the beginning of the 21st century was also marked by dramatic emergencies, such as the "mad cow" (BSE) crisis, which mobilized Italian farmers in front of government headquarters in all provincial capitals in support of the proposed intervention to regenerate the national livestock sector. The Commission responded to farmers' requests, mandating origin labeling for beef starting January 1, 2002, and for fish starting April 10, 2002 (*Circolare Applicativa Del Decreto Ministeriale 30 Agosto 2000 Recante Modalità Applicative Del Regolamento (CE) N. 1760/2000 - Titolo II Sull'etichettatura Delle Carni Bovine. Categoria "Vitellone"*, 2008) (*Nariadenie Európskeho Parlamentu a Rady (EÚ) č. 1379/2013 Z 11. Decembra 2013 O Spoločnej Organizácii Trhov S Produktmi Ryb*, 2013).

Just a few months later, on November 9, 2001, the new WTO round of negotiations opened in Doha, aimed at expanding market access and integrating developing countries into the multilateral system. The proposals relating to agriculture included a progressive reduction in tariff and non-tariff barriers, culminating in the elimination of export subsidies starting in 2013. While developing countries demanded less protection for farmers in industrialized countries, Italy responded by focusing on enhancing the quality and origin of agri-food products (De Castro, 2015).

As previously mentioned, between 2001 and 2002, millions of signatures were collected in support of a legislative proposal on mandatory food labeling and traceability. This initiative led to national decrees introducing origin labels for beef (2002), fish (April

2002), and, from February 2003, fresh fruit and vegetables, with the obligation to indicate the origin, variety, and category (Masini, 2024).

Furthermore, in 2003 the Fischler reform introduced the decoupling of production aids in the Common Agricultural Policy. The reform consisted in the provision of a single payment to support agricultural income, independent of actual production. At the same time, in 2003, this reform became a central issue at the National Consultation Table between the Government and social partners, marking a turning point and becoming central to the country's political, economic, and social debate. In Luxembourg, partly as a result of Italy's position, the CAP was reoriented toward greater competitiveness, quality, and environmental sustainability, in line with new consumer demands. This framework led to the joint mobilization of Coldiretti and consumer associations for a popular initiative law in favor of clear and transparent food labeling, supported by over a million signatures collected nationwide (Primavera, 2022).

In 2005, the city of Parma was selected as the location of the European Food Safety Authority's headquarters (EFSA), a choice that represented a prestigious recognition for Italy but also a significant responsibility, as the country was called upon to assume a leading role in EU policies relating to food and environmental safety. In this context, on June 5, 2005, on the eve of the entry into force of mandatory origin labeling for fresh milk, to protect Made in Italy products, the "National Fresh Milk Day" was organized, with demonstrations that brought farmers and their livestock to the squares of Italy's main cities. The initiative focused on increasing consumer awareness of the new rules designed to stop imported dairy products from being sold as domestic. A few months later, with the decree of October 17, 2005, adopted in response to the avian flu emergency, the mandatory origin labeling was extended to chicken meat as well (Masini, 2024).

In the following years there was a noticeable increase in mobilization in the agricultural world in defense of the sector's transparency and competitiveness. On July 11, 2007, a demonstration was held in Bologna with over 100,000 participants, calling for the need to renew Italian agriculture by strengthening its production capacity, competitiveness, and strategic role within the national and European economic system. On that occasion, farmers asked the government to enhance the innovation inherent in the CAP and to defend Law No. 204/2004, which introduced the requirement to indicate the origin of

food on labels, against attempts to undermine it through the failure to adopt implementing decrees (Archivio Storico Coldiretti via XXIV Maggio 43, 2007) (“Coldiretti, 100 Mila in Piazza,” 2007).

On November 29, 2007, a new demonstration in defense of Italian milk took place in Brescia, urging the European Union, the government and the regions to intervene to protect honest farmers and the principle of transparency for consumers. The debate revolved around the issue of milk quotas, with Coldiretti arguing that the solution could not ignore the importance of maintaining the quality of domestic production and protecting farmers who have followed the rules. Laws no. 119/2003 and no. 33/2009 introduced tools that allowed the majority of the approximately 36,000 Italian farmers to regularize their position through the purchase or rental of quotas, marking an important step toward legality (Masini, 2024) (“Manifestazione a Brescia «Il Latte Italiano è Da Difendere»,” 2007).

In line with this approach, Italy continued its commitment to greater transparency regarding the origin of food products. On January 17, 2008, mandatory labeling for extra virgin olive oil came into force, preventing blends obtained from olives sourced from other Mediterranean countries, such as Spain, Greece, or Tunisia, from being marketed as Made in Italy. The adoption of this measure was symbolically celebrated in numerous Italian squares as a success in the civic mobilization for transparency (Masini, 2024).

However, the structural difficulties of the Italian agricultural sector did not ease. In September 2009, a new wave of protests erupted involving farmers along the main Alpine passes, from Frejus to Brenner. At the heart of the demands was the serious crisis in the dairy sector: recognized prices in Europe hovered around 24 cents per liter, while in Italy average production costs reached 40 cents, making the continuation of operations unsustainable for thousands of farms. The protests indicated that there was not only an economic crisis, but also the widespread perception of an agriculture penalized by market rules and EU policies incapable of ensuring fair remuneration for agricultural labor (Archivio Storico Coldiretti via XXIV Maggio 43, 2007) (Primavera, 2022).

2.2. Historical analysis of agricultural policies and free trade agreements: the agreements with Canada (CETA) and Mercosur

The European Union's involvement with the global market has been further complicated by the signing of new trade agreements with non-European partners, including Canada and Mercosur. CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement), a free trade agreement between the European Union and Canada, was provisionally enforced on September 21, 2017. It removed 99% of existing customs tariffs between the two parties and introduced, among the most controversial clauses, the recognition of 143 European Geographical Indications, 41 of which are Italian, considered an insufficient achievement by European agricultural organizations (Baroncini & Cunsolo, 2021) (Adinolfi et al., 2024).

Indeed, already in the first months following its entry into force, the agreement revealed serious problems. According to a Coldiretti analysis based on Canadian government data, in 2018, local production of imitation Italian cheeses grew exponentially: over 5.6 million kilos of "Parmesan," 4.5 million kilos of ricotta, 1.9 million kilos of provolone, 72 million kilos of mozzarella, and even 364,000 kilos of a "Friulano" with no ties to the Italian region. This phenomenon reduced the market space for authentic products, leading to a sharp decline in Italian exports: exports of Grana Padano and Parmigiano Reggiano to Canada, which had grown by 28.7% in the first half of 2017, only increased by 2.3% in the same period of 2018 (Primavera, 2022).

The issue extends beyond just cheese: According to ISTAT data for 2020, there was a 77% rise in imports of Canadian agri-food products into Italy, while Italian exports to Canada only saw a much smaller 14% increase. The import boom was driven primarily by cereals, which increased by 82%. Competition is unfair because Canadian wheat is often grown using practices prohibited in the EU, such as the use of glyphosate during pre-harvest, while in Italy, ripening occurs naturally. This trend has led to a collapse in domestic durum wheat prices, putting over 300,000 farms at risk, often located in inland areas already exposed to marginalization and depopulation. The meat sector has also been affected: Canadian meat imports increased by 91%, despite the fact that North America

allows feed containing animal derivatives, practices banned in Europe after the "mad cow" crisis, which had serious health, economic, and social consequences (Adinolfi et al., 2022).

A similar picture emerges from the agreement signed in 2019 (which was not approved later) between the EU and Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Negotiations led to the signature in 2024, with all its consequent protests (*EU-Mercosur Agreement*, 2024). This treaty has raised serious concerns because, of the 297 Italian PDO/PGI designations and 523 wines protected by the EU, only 57 are protected in South American markets, while the majority of products will have to coexist with already widespread local imitations (such as Parmesan, Reggianito, or Parmesao). In some cases, such as Prosecco, Marsala, Gorgonzola, or Prosciutto di Parma, a multi-year moratorium has been granted that allows them to be marketed under similar names, perpetuating the phenomenon of Italian-sounding products, which, as of June 2025, is worth €120 billion (Adinolfi et al., 2022).

In addition to the problem of unfair competition related to geographical indications, the agreements with Mercosur raise serious concerns about food safety and production conditions. According to Coldiretti's analysis of data from the European Rapid Alert System (RASFF), several Brazilian products—particularly beef and chicken—are on the "black list" of the most dangerous foods due to the number of health alerts recorded. The agreement provides, among other things, a quota of 99,000 tons of beef at a reduced duty, in addition to another 45,000 tons already authorized by the WTO, and an increase to 180,000 tons of zero-duty poultry imports. In addition, significant concessions are granted for sugar (180,000 tons at zero duty), rice (60,000), pork (25,000), honey (45,000), cheese (30,000), as well as powdered milk and sweetcorn (Ufficio stampa Coldiretti, 2020).

These elements highlight how the EU-CETA and EU-Mercosur trade agreements, while presented as tools for market opening and export growth, have raised serious concerns in Italy. In particular, there are fears of unfair competition to the detriment of domestic agricultural production, not only due to the use of practices prohibited in Europe, but also due to the poor protection of geographical indications and the asymmetry in production, environmental, and health standards. Hence the call, supported primarily by Coldiretti, to introduce three essential principles into future agreements: equal conditions, effective

controls, and reciprocity of regulations. Adhering to these criteria is the only way to guarantee that imported products uphold the same quality and safety standards as European products, thus protecting the competitiveness of Made in Italy and consumer trust (Adinolfi et al., 2022).

2.3 Where is the CAP going in the new global market context?

Agriculture has been part of human history since its origins. As early as the 8th century BC, Hesiod, in his poem "Works and Days," emphasized the value of agricultural labor and the need to adapt cultivation practices to the rhythm of the seasons. His vision, far from idealization, highlights the laborious yet essential nature of agricultural activity, which leads to gratification for the results of one's hard work. In Roman times, agriculture was so important that they developed a detailed administrative system called the *Annona*, which was established by Augustus and it guaranteed the food supply of the city of Rome and the Empire. Augustus himself held the office of Prefect of the *Annona* to ensure the accuracy of grain supplies (Hesiodus, 2018).

These historical references show how food security has been perceived as an integral part of national security and sovereignty. The same principle inspires, in contemporary times, the birth of the EEC, which in the Treaty of Rome (1957) recognized agriculture as a special sector. Similarly, other countries such as the United States have treated the agricultural sector differently from other economic sectors, a phenomenon that the scientific literature defines as "agricultural exceptionalism." (Gesmundo et al., 2025).

Since the 1980s, the concept of agricultural exceptionalism, which involves special exemptions, rules, and protections for the sector, has been under scrutiny due to the gradual opening of markets and the inclusion of agriculture in the Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations in 1994. Many observers saw this move as the start of the end of exceptionalism, signaling the potential for a gradual opening of the agricultural sector to free trade rules. Nevertheless, the multilateral discussions came to a halt, and Europe still upholds its own agricultural policy (Corazza, 1997).

In spite of facing criticism and calls for reform, the CAP has effectively redefined the idea of agricultural exceptionalism, adapting it to the evolving global circumstances. Since the MacSharry reform (1992-1994), there has been a gradual decrease in the financial importance of the CAP, with its share of the EU budget going from 65% in 1990 to 23% at present. Additionally, there has been a change in the types of support offered by the CAP, moving from price support to direct income assistance and rural development. The European Union has shifted its focus towards environmental goals, with more than 35% of rural development program funding now dedicated to sustainable practices like organic farming and integrated pest management. Additionally, 25% of the budget is set aside for eco-schemes (De Castro, 2015) (Cunha & Swinbank, 2011) (European Commission, 2025).

The multifunctionality approach, which assigns agriculture not only a productive but also an environmental and social role, represents one of the main outcomes of this process. Through requirements such as crop diversification, rotation, fallow land, and other agri-environmental measures, the EU has linked public support to the provision of public goods. Data shows that Europe, unlike other agricultural powers such as the United States, has succeeded in increasing food production while reducing environmental impact (Peleggi et al., 2022).

In this context, several studies highlight that the loss of European agricultural land will have negative effects not only on food production, but also on the environmental and social balance of rural areas. The events confirm the centrality of the issue of food security: from the agricultural price crises of 2007, to the "Arab Spring" of 2011, to the war in Ukraine and the blockade of Black Sea ports, geopolitical tensions have highlighted the vulnerability of Europe's food supply (La Sala et al., 2024).

Added to this are the challenges posed by climate change: drought, extreme weather events, and emerging plant and animal diseases are radically transforming European agricultural systems. In this context, the CAP must reconcile diverse and sometimes conflicting objectives: guaranteeing access to food, encouraging environmental sustainability, and safeguarding the competitiveness of European farmers in a global market with unfair regulations (Fargione et al., 2022).

The vision of agricultural exceptionalism is now also expressed through tools such as origin labeling, nutritional transparency standards, and, more generally, the rules governing international trade agreements. Many observers believe these tools should be used as levers to raise the environmental, health, and social standards of the EU's trading partners, preventing trade liberalization from resulting in unfair competition (Gesmundo et al., 2025).

The European strategy named “Farm to fork” has had the objective of rushing the change of the European food system turning it into one which: has a positive environmental impact, helps to control climate change, restores biodiversity, grants food security, nutrition and public health and preserve food for an affordable price. From this perspective, the European strategy was later updated. It was planned in a different historical and political context than today's and was strongly influenced by the logic of the Green Deal. The original belief that the EU could lead globally in the transition to climate neutrality has faced a decrease in progress or pushback from other international actors. This does not imply a retreat from sustainability objectives, but rather the need to strengthen policy coherence, improve implementation mechanisms, and ensure reciprocity in trade. Only in this way can European agricultural exceptionalism take on a modern meaning, consistent with the challenges of the new global context (De Castro, 2015) (*Farm to Fork Strategy - European Commission*, n.d.).

2.4. New global challenges: climate, energy, conflicts and food security

The European agricultural sector today faces global challenges that were unexpected in the outcome of World War II. Europe is struggling in a singular and particularly complex context, bringing with it new scenarios such as climate change, energy crises, armed conflicts and the growing need to ensure food security in terms of both demand and product quality (Ventura & Frascarelli, 2004).

The effects of climate change are now evident: temperatures are constantly rising, droughts are happening more often, rainfall is becoming more irregular but heavier, glaciers are melting and water scarcity is directly affecting agricultural output. In recent

times, environmental, economic, and social damage has been exacerbated by more frequent and severe extreme events. According to the World Meteorological Organization report, quoted by the Divulga research center (2023), more than 700 million people suffered from hunger in 2022, an increase of 122 million compared to 2019, or approximately 20% more following the pandemic (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, 2023). The most affected sectors are those highly dependent on natural resources, including agriculture (Adinolfi et al., 2023) (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an international scientific organisation established by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), wrote its Sixth Assessment Report (2023) which emphasizes the impact of more frequent and severe extreme weather events on agricultural productivity, leading to desertification and land degradation, and posing a simultaneous threat to fisheries productivity as a result of ocean warming and acidification. These factors are a component of a worldwide structure that raises doubts about the ability of agri-food supply chains to ensure consistent supplies.(Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023).

Alongside climate change, armed conflicts are worsening the situation. The war between Russia and Ukraine has had a significant impact on global agricultural supplies, given that Ukraine was strategically important for the production of cereals and oilseeds. The war has had a significant impact on important agricultural regions, leading to approximately one third of farmers having to stop farming in the most affected areas. (FAO, 2023). In 2024, FAO provided assistance to around 45,700 rural families and over 4,700 farmers. It is estimated that an extra \$150 million will be needed to support the sector in the upcoming years. The 2025-2026 emergency and recovery plan's goal is to engage around 550,000 rural residents and smallholder farmers, emphasizing that the conflict is not only a local problem but also a force disrupting the worldwide agricultural balance (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023).

Since the MacSharry reform (1992-1994), the CAP has been working to lessen the environmental effects of agricultural and livestock practices, but is now facing a situation where European producers are subject to strict regulations regarding the environment,

food safety, and workers' rights. This results in imbalances in international trade, as products from other countries, which are often produced without meeting the same standards, routinely enter European markets and create one-sided competition. At the political and institutional level, there is a need to support the role of farmers not only as food producers but also as central players in the energy transition and sustainability. As European Agriculture Commissioner Christophe Hansen emphasized at the Global Food Forum 2025, organized by Farm Europe, farmers must be considered part of the solution, not the problem, in the challenge of sustainability and food security. A strong CAP, with an adequate budget, therefore appears to be a necessary condition for ensuring investment and stability in the sector (Farm Europe, 2025).

At the same time, conflicts and restrictions on gas and oil supplies from countries like Russia have caused tensions in the energy market, leading to a greater focus on energy efficiency and renewable energy. Within this framework, the production of biogas and biomethane serves as a key strategic tool. In Italy, the Ecological Practices Decree (April 2025) introduced measures to incentivize agricultural investments aimed at spreading environmentally friendly practices in biogas production, reducing emissions from digestate, improving nutrient utilization, and replacing synthetic fertilizers with organic products. Furthermore, a portion of the funds will be designated for the replacement of outdated farm equipment with tractors powered by biomethane. From 2019 to 2025, the number of Italian agricultural biogas and biomethane plants doubled, from approximately 1,200 to over 2,400, representing over 70% of the sector's installed capacity. The production of renewable energy from agricultural sources, combined with the recovery of digestate as organic fertilizer, helps reduce dependence on chemical fertilizers and strengthen the overall resilience of the agricultural system. This approach, in addition to mitigating energy costs, integrates environmental, economic, and social dimensions, outlining a sustainability path that is now essential for the CAP (Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale, 2025).

2.5 The new CAP and the changing global scenario

The CAP reform of 2025 proposed during Ursula von der Leyen's second presidency marked a period of great uncertainty for European agriculture. The main highlights include: a reduction of around 20% in the CAP budget, along with the introduction of new mandatory environmental requirements; the integration of the CAP into a unified European fund; a stronger focus on promoting environmental sustainability through a performance system centered on environmental and social measures; and a partial transfer of policy control to member states, which is viewed as lacking a cohesive common mechanism by major European agricultural groups. (European Commission, 2025) (*The Next Chapter for the CAP - European Commission, 2025*).

The agricultural sector has strongly criticized these proposals, claiming that they could weaken the unity of the CAP and reduce its economic centrality. European trade associations have underlined that the total proposed budget of around €300 billion is considerably less than what is considered essential to sustain agricultural support. They have suggested a budget of €482.5 billion to maintain spending at the 2020 level, or €395 billion for 2027. The only positive aspect seen was the increase in the crisis reserve to €6.3 billion, but it was still considered inadequate considering the worldwide challenges (European Commission, 2025) (*The Next Chapter for the CAP - European Commission, 2025*).

The underlying logic appears to be to subordinate the CAP to a single framework for the effective implementation of European policies, based on 32 primarily environmental and social indicators. While aligned with the goals of the Green Deal, this method has sparked concerns about the CAP's capacity to uphold its economic and productive aspects in a global environment marked by increasing instability (European Commission, 2025) (*The Next Chapter for the CAP - European Commission, 2025*).

In Italy, in the spring of 2025, Coldiretti led the main protests against the proposal, highlighting the risks of structural disinvestment in agriculture in the face of global crises and geopolitical conflicts. According to the association, reducing funding represents a potentially dangerous option especially since China and the United States are increasing public investment in the agricultural and food industry. The concern raised is about a

decrease in competitiveness and job opportunities, which would have a direct impact on food security and social harmony (Cappellini, 2025).

The trade tensions with the United States further complicate the situation, adding to these concerns. The growth of European agri-food exports was slowed in 2025 due to the implementation of new tariffs by the US administration, with wine, olive oil, cheese and processed tomatoes being particularly affected. August 21, 2025 saw the release of the EU-US agreement, which officially established the framework agreement made in Scotland in late July. This confirmed that European agri-food products would now be subject to a 15% tariff, with no exceptions for wine and spirits. This outcome highlighted the negotiating imbalance favoring the United States, to the detriment of Europe. Italian and French agricultural organizations had strongly requested the exclusion of strategic products, particularly wine, from the tariff regime, but the failure to do so opened up competitive opportunities for other non-European exporters, such as Chile, Australia, and the United States itself, in a market historically dominated by Italy and France (Redazione online Il Sole 24 Ore, 2025).

This situation has fueled calls for compensatory measures to support the most disadvantaged supply chains, already characterized by structural fragility. The European agri-food sector is the main victim of a perceived overly submissive approach by the European Commission in negotiations, exacerbated by the simultaneous cuts in agricultural resources in the EU budget. In this situation, Coldiretti and other agricultural associations have accentuated the importance of meeting the EU's strict food safety and quality standards without making any changes that could put public health at risk. The access of US products to the market creates worries about unequal regulations, which could lead to unfair competition for European farmers and a decrease in consumer protection (Gesmundo et al., 2025).

In 2024, the United States is expected to be the biggest market outside the EU for Italian agri-food products, valued at almost €8 billion. The new tariffs are projected to cost around €1 billion. The hardest hit product will be wine, the leading export, which will face tariffs with an estimated impact of €600 million, a figure that risks rising further based on the dollar's strength. Next in line is extra virgin olive oil, where the tariffs will add more than €140 million. Semolina pasta will also be affected, with an increase of

almost €74 million. Cheese, however, will remain stable, already burdened by tariffs between 10% and 15% (Redazione online Il Sole 24 Ore, 2025).

Businesses are concerned, Coldiretti and Filiera Italia, an association born to give sustainment and value to Italian food, explain about the trend seen in the first three months of the additional 10% tariffs, which had already negatively impacted Italian agri-food exports to the US in the previous quarter. In June, sales of Made in Italy food to the US dropped 2.9% in value, according to a Coldiretti analysis of ISTAT foreign trade data. This is the first monthly decline in agri-food sales to the United States since September 2023, bucking the general trend for Italian exports to the US, which grew by 10.3% in June (Gesmundo et al., 2025) (Redazione Online di Industria Italiana, 2025).

After a first quarter of the year in which agri-food exports to the United States grew by an average of 11% in value, during the three months of application of the additional 10% tariffs, exports increased by 1.3% in April and 0.4% in May, before finally declining in June. Importers' uncertainty about US President Trump's strategy weighed heavily, as did the fact that the new tariffs were added to existing ones, particularly penalizing certain key supply chains. The new tariffs are expected to be detrimental to European exports to the US (Redazione Online di Industria Italiana, 2025).

Concluding remarks

The analysis highlighted how the CAP has been one of the most significant pillars of European integration since its inception. Created with the aim of ensuring food security and supporting farmers' incomes, the CAP has gradually had to confront structural changes of global significance: from the liberalization of trade under the GATT and then the WTO, to trade tensions with strategic partners such as the United States and Canada, up to the more recent agreements announced with Mercosur. While these treaties have expanded market openings, they have also highlighted profound critical issues, related to the insufficient protection of Geographical Indications, the asymmetry of health and environmental standards, and the risk of unfair competition for European producers.

Added to this are the challenges posed by increasingly extreme climate change, the energy crisis, and geopolitical conflicts, such as the Russian-Ukrainian one, which have accentuated the vulnerability of food supplies and demonstrated how irreplaceable agriculture is for Europe's strategic security. Recent measures adopted, from support for biogas and biomethane to strengthening agricultural multifunctionality, mark attempts at adaptation, but do not eliminate the tensions arising from a rapidly changing landscape.

In this context, the CAP reform proposed during the von der Leyen presidency has raised even deeper questions. The cuts in resources, the almost exclusive focus on environmental and social indicators, and the tendency to renationalize policies have raised concerns that the CAP will lose its original function of economic and social support for the agricultural sector, sacrificing its international competitiveness. Criticism from agricultural organizations, particularly Coldiretti, has focused on a perceived imbalance in transatlantic relations, with the European Union willing to make concessions in strategic areas such as defense and NATO, but incapable of obtaining adequate guarantees for the agri-food sector.

Faced with this scenario, the call for a CAP capable of combining environmental sustainability and economic stability, without weakening European production capacity and exports, is growing stronger. Agriculture cannot be reduced to a mere compensatory variable in global political dynamics: on the contrary, it remains an essential pillar for food security, social cohesion, the economic competitiveness and the sovereignty of the Union. Otherwise, the risk is that European agriculture will be progressively marginalized on the international stage, to the advantage of non-European powers that are investing heavily in the sector and without having the same standards as the ones of the farmers of the European Union.

In short, the future of the CAP will depend on its ability to preserve the delicate balance between the three dimensions that constitute its *raison d'être*: economic support for farmers, ensuring enough food quality and safety for citizens, and environmental protection. Only a truly integrated approach will ensure that the CAP continues to be not just a sectoral policy, but a key instrument for the European Union's identity and resilience in the new global context.

Building on this analysis, Chapter 3 will move from the macro level of EU policy and global trade to the micro level of social actors and civic engagement, examining how farmers and consumers interact, how protests have evolved into proposals, and how new alliances at the territorial level can help forge a more inclusive and sustainable European agricultural model. Particular attention will be devoted to the Italian case, which serves as a revealing example of both the tensions and the innovative practices shaping the relationship between agriculture, institutions and society. This next chapter will explore the foundations of a “new civilisation of relationships” capable of reconciling environmental goals, economic viability and citizen participation.

CHAPTER 3: DIALOGUE BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS: THE FOUNDATION OF A NEW CIVILIZATION OF RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIETY

An introduction to the topic

The transformations of the Common Agricultural Policy and the reforms implemented in recent decades have created a more open and integrated European market. The free movement of goods and the progressive elimination of internal barriers have fostered trade between northern and southern Europe, creating new opportunities but also strong competitive pressures. For Italian producers, characterized by relatively smaller farms than the average in other European countries and by high-value-added products, this has meant facing unprecedented challenges: on the one hand, competition with foreign products, often at lower costs, and on the other, the need to defend quality, uniqueness, and ties to the territory. This mirrors dynamics also observed under the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, where liberalisation has exposed smaller-scale farms worldwide to similar pressures.

At the same time, the introduction of the principle of multifunctionality with Legislative Decree 228/2001 marked a decisive step towards the emergence of a "new agriculture." Agricultural enterprises are no longer simply producers of raw materials, but actors capable of providing environmental, social and cultural services, managing the land, and building new relationships with society. This process has helped redefine the role of farmers within the community, strengthening their connection with consumers and paving the way for innovative experiences of representation and participation. This process also includes the development of farmers' markets, the expansion of short supply chains, and the spread of social agriculture, tools that have consolidated a direct and trusting relationship between producers and consumers and have helped make Italian agriculture not only a productive sector but also a bulwark of social cohesion and sustainability.

Comparable notions of multifunctionality are also present in OECD and FAO policy debates, linking agriculture with the provision of public goods.

This chapter focuses precisely on this evolution: from farmers' protests as a means of defending income and production, to the symbolic demonstrations at the Brenner Pass against unfair imports; from the birth of a new alliance with consumers, to the spread of farmers' markets and short supply chains; and finally to the development of the Filiera Italia project, which aims to integrate agriculture, industry, and distribution into an innovative model based on quality, transparency, and territorial distinctiveness.

The context is further complicated by the geopolitical and trade tensions affecting European agriculture. The 2025 transatlantic trade agreement between the EU and the United States, for example, with the introduction of 15% tariffs on Italian agri-food products without any exemptions, has shown how Europe can be penalized by poorly conducted negotiations, favoring non-European competitors like Chile and Australia in strategic sectors such as wine. Similarly, the FAO State of Food and Agriculture also stressed how the Ukraine war reshaped global supply chains and increased calls for self-sufficiency.

In this scenario, the reaction of the Italian agricultural world has taken many forms: from the protests at the Brenner Pass to the campaigns for mandatory origin labeling, which represent the concrete expression of the difficulties of a sector forced to face unfair international competition and a growing distance from national and European institutions, up to the excesses of the COBAS milk unions protesting the fines imposed by the European Community for exceeding production quotas.

The farmers' mobilizations at the Brenner Pass marked a progressive evolution: from the episodic and desperate protests of the 1970s and 1980s to the construction of a new model of representation capable of transforming conflict into action.

Coldiretti, in particular, has successfully interpreted this evolution by embarking on a journey that has led it to redefine its role: from a trade organization to a social force capable of engaging with consumers and society as a whole. This is demonstrated by initiatives such as the "Vertenza Europa" (Europe Dispute) of the 1980s, the national

mobilization days of the 1990s, and the subsequent consolidation of tools such as Campagna Amica (Friendly Countryside) and Filiera Italia (Italian ValueChain), which have strengthened the direct link between producers and consumers.

This chapter analyzes this transformation, highlighting how the dialogue between farmers and consumers has progressively consolidated to the point of forming the basis of a "new civilization of relationships" in society. From the protests at the Brenner Pass to the battles for label transparency, from the alliance with consumers to the construction of integrated national supply chains and the diffusion of innovative practices such as farmers' markets and social farming, Italian agriculture has developed tools to respond to the challenges posed by the CAP, globalization, and geopolitical crises, positioning itself as a central player not only in food production but also in environmental protection, health protection, and the building of social cohesion.

3.1. Farmers' demonstrations: from protests to proposals, from the Brenner Pass to the alliance with consumers

In the late 1960s, in a document dedicated to youth protests in Italian universities, in the midst of the 1968 uprising, the Coldiretti National Youth Committee emphasized that student protests were not unrelated to the agricultural world. Many university students came from farming families and transferred the issues discussed in academic circles to the rural context, fostering intergenerational dialogue. Young farmers, more educated and open-minded than previous generations, began to grapple with changes in consumption and markets during that period, seeking new strategies to secure adequate incomes and escape the social and territorial isolation that characterized life in the countryside (Primavera, 2022).

The new generation aspired to transform farming from a mere subsistence activity to a stable source of family income, transcending the logic of mere self-sufficiency. The central issue therefore, became the remuneration of agricultural prices, a necessary

condition to ensure the permanence of young people in the countryside and prevent them from abandoning rural areas (Primavera, 2022).

For farmers, however, protest was not a simple act. Unlike employed workers, whose right to strike is recognized by the Constitution in Article 40, which states:

“Il diritto di sciopero si esercita nell'ambito delle leggi che lo regolano.”

which literally means:

“The right to strike is exercised within the framework of the laws that regulate it”

A disruption to agricultural activities entailed immediate and irreversible risks: crop failure or animal death. For this reason, agricultural protests occurred only in exceptional and highly exasperated situations, sometimes involving extreme measures such as the highway blockades by COBAS Latte in the 1990s or the protests by Sardinian shepherds against the price of sheep and goat milk. Similar phenomena, often led by minority groups, are also seen in other European countries: in France, for example, winemakers staged sensational protests against cheap wine imports from Spain, perceived as a threat to the cultural identity and sustainability of small wineries (Primavera, 2022).

In this context, the Brenner Pass became the symbolic site of Italian protests against imports of agricultural products from Northern and Eastern Europe. Coldiretti identified this Alpine pass as a strategic point to denounce the unfair competition posed by milk, meat, and dairy products from abroad, often marketed as "Made in Italy" despite failing to meet the strict quality standards imposed on domestic production. The Brenner Pass thus took on the significance of a "political frontier" as well as a commercial one: through the demonstrations organized there, farmers called on European and national institutions to defend the quality and identity of Italian products, combating "Italian sounding" and safeguarding consumer trust. Today, there is support concerning new data. "In ten years, foreign food imports have increased by 60%, reaching a record 65 billion euros," according to a Coldiretti analysis based on Istat data and this value had never been reached before (Agenzia ANSA, 2024).

Coldiretti's decision to focus its demonstrations on European issues was clearly evident as early as 1980, with the "Agriculture Dispute" launched in Piazza San Giovanni in

Rome in front of 150,000 farmers. The following year, the mobilization expanded into the "Europe Dispute," which called for a more decisive role for the Italian government in EU negotiations and greater attention to the impact of European agricultural policies on the national economy. Coldiretti denounced the poor preparation and weak negotiating capacity of Italian institutions in European forums, which systematically penalized Italian agriculture compared to that of other member states, which was better protected by their respective governments. For example, during the 1992 MacSharry reform, the shift from market support to direct payments disadvantaged Mediterranean products such as fruit, vegetables, and olive oil, which were not fully covered by the new aid schemes. Similarly, the 2003 Fischler reform consolidated decoupling mechanisms that favoured large-scale cereal and livestock producers in Northern Europe, while leaving Italian small and diversified farms at a relative disadvantage (Archivio Storico Coldiretti, n.d.).

In the years that followed, the organization gradually transformed protest into action, positioning itself as a political and social partner capable of advancing concrete solutions. As Prime Minister Matteo Renzi acknowledged during Italian Agriculture Day at EXPO 2015, Coldiretti was the first Italian agricultural organization to understand the need to renew its role, moving "from grumbling, to protest, to action." With the slogan "Forza Amica del Paese," Coldiretti reaffirmed that agriculture is not a residual sector or tied to the past, but rather a strategic resource for Italy's future, capable of ensuring economic development, food security, and social cohesion (Archivio Storico Coldiretti, n.d.).

3.2 That two-way border at Brennero: mobilizations to defend the origin of quality Italian foods

Since the 1970s, the Brennero Pass has been the symbolic site where Coldiretti has chosen to focus its protests against agri-food imports, perceived as unfair competition. Indeed, milk, meat, and derivatives from Northern and Eastern Europe have increasingly transited through this border, often destined for the Italian agri-food industry and marketed as

"Made in Italy." The lack of effective controls and the weakness of Italian representation in EU negotiations have encouraged this phenomenon, particularly penalizing the domestic livestock sector (Archivio Storico Coldiretti, n.d.).

The demonstrations at the Brenner Pass had a dual purpose: on the one hand, they defended the quality and uniqueness of Italian products, and on the other, they demanded mandatory labeling of origin as a means of transparency for consumers. Coldiretti's campaign in support of a popular initiative law collected over a million signatures and led to the approval of Law No. 204/2004, which represents a milestone in labeling regulation in Italy. This national law anticipated broader EU measures later consolidated in Regulation (EU) 1169/2011 on food information to consumers, even if not yet at the level of detail that the national regulation has granted (Archivio Storico Coldiretti, n.d.).

The initiatives at the Brenner Pass have sparked the main complaints against the use of foreign raw materials for the production of protected designation of origin or strongly identifiable foods, such as dairy products and hams. Similarly, the Italian horticultural sector has also been under pressure from products from other European countries, characterized by lower production costs thanks to less stringent environmental and social regulations (Archivio Storico Coldiretti, n.d.).

Over time, pressure from agricultural organizations has contributed to a progressive extension of labeling requirements at the national and European level: from beef after the BSE crisis (2002), to fish (2002), fruit and vegetables (2003), eggs (2004), fresh milk (2005), tomato puree (2006) and extra virgin olive oil (2008). In more recent years, the obligation has been extended to numerous other products, including pasta, rice, processed pork, milk and dairy products, dried fruit and canned legumes. An important achievement in this direction is represented by Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/2429, which from 1 January 2025 further expands the number of fruit and vegetable and processed products subject to mandatory labeling (European Union, 2023).

The demonstrations at the Brenner Pass, from the milk dumping in the 1970s to the traffic blockades in the 1980s, up to the demonstrations of 2009, 2010, 2013, and 2024, have had a strong media and political impact, shedding light on unfair import practices and helping to strengthen the public debate on food transparency. They have also served an

educational purpose for consumers, strengthening the alliance between citizens and farmers in the defense of Made in Italy products (Primavera, 2022).

The Brennero Pass thus appears not only as a trade frontier, but also as a symbolic site of political and social debate, where Coldiretti has successfully transformed the protest into a concrete proposal for regulation and transparency. The battle for mandatory origin labeling, initiated by these protests, has yielded significant results, but remains incomplete: many consumer foods, in fact, still do not indicate the provenance of their raw materials, giving rise to opaque, misleading, and "Italian-sounding" products (Primavera, 2022).

3.3 A new way of representing: the alliance between farmers and consumers

The Brennero border was not only a symbolic site of protest, but also the starting point for a broader transformation in Coldiretti's representation strategy. The protests of the 1990s, particularly those related to the contested management of milk quotas, highlighted the profound difficulties faced by the Italian agricultural sector and the sense of marginalization felt by farmers (Primavera, 2022).

In 1997, a phase of intense national mobilization began, culminating in widespread initiatives in all provincial capitals and demonstrations in front of the main institutional buildings. These protests, which signaled dissatisfaction with European and national policies perceived as penalizing, translated into an explicit request for greater attention from the Italian government during its six-month EU Presidency. The goal was to achieve a change of direction in EU policies and the revitalization of the agricultural sector, burdened by years of sacrifice and constraints perceived as unfairly penalizing Italian agriculture (Primavera, 2022).

Beginning with this season of mobilization, Coldiretti took a further step, transforming the protest into a proposal. With the "National Consumer Meeting Day," held in 1997, the organization launched a new model of representation, aimed at building an alliance

between agricultural producers and citizen-consumers. The goal was to move beyond a corporatist vision of representation and promote an approach in which the concerns of the agricultural world were recognized as being in the general interest of society (Primavera, 2022).

This strategy led to the birth of the so-called "Consumer Pact," through which Coldiretti presented itself not just as a farmers' union, but as a collective actor committed to ensuring food quality, safety, and transparency. The agricultural mobilization thus gained unprecedented social legitimacy, thanks to the support of citizens who saw the organization as a partner capable of defending not only farmers' interests, but also health, the environment, and consumer trust (Primavera, 2022).

In this context, a new vision of Italian agriculture developed, no longer based solely on the production of raw materials, but on the valorization of food as an expression of quality, tradition, and territorial identity. Farmers were increasingly portrayed as custodians of the land and protectors of biodiversity, capable of contributing to environmental and social sustainability as well as food security. It's no coincidence that the slogans on posters circulated throughout Italy included "Mom, it's time to fight back" and "Mom, are you sure that what your children are eating is not junk?" (Coldiretti, 2024).

Another distinctive feature of the Italian model concerns the average size of agricultural businesses. According to Eurostat data, in 2016, the utilized agricultural area in Italy was approximately 11 hectares per farm, compared to significantly higher values in France (61 ha), Germany (60 ha), and the United Kingdom (90 ha). While this has often been interpreted as a structural limitation, it also represents a strength of the Italian agri-food system, characterized by high value-added products and a strong connection to local territories (Primavera, 2022).

This interpretation was also shared by external observers, such as Giuseppe De Rita (Censis), who emphasized the resilience of the Italian agricultural model, based on a network of small and medium-sized businesses capable of adapting better to economic crises. Coldiretti has capitalized on this uniqueness with initiatives such as the "Filiera Agricola Italiana," a project created to counter two phenomena deemed detrimental to the

sector: "value theft," due to the low prices imposed by industrial supply chains, and "identity theft," resulting from "Italian sounding" products (De Rita & Bonomi, 2014).

Average farm area of the main EU Member States (expressed in hectares)					
COUNTRY	2005	2007	2010	2013	2016
Spain	23.03	23.85	24.00	24.15	24.58
Germany	43.69	45.70	55.84	58.59	60.54
France	48.65	52.10	53.94	58.74	60.93
United Kingdom	55.65	72.15	91.15	94.66	90.10
Italy	7.35	7.59	7.93	11.98	11.00

Through this strategy, agricultural representatives assumed a new and proactive role, transforming the protest into a social alliance based on transparency and the defense of Made in Italy. This approach allowed Coldiretti to regenerate its political and cultural legitimacy, positioning itself as a "friendly force for the country" and a central player in the processes of building trust between farmers, consumers, and institutions (Primavera, 2022).

3.4 Farmers' markets: short supply chains and zero-mile products

Among the most significant innovations introduced by Coldiretti in recent decades is the Campagna Amica farmers' market project, which has boosted the spread of short supply chains and locally sourced products in Italy's major cities. Created with the aim of reducing the gap between producers and consumers, the markets have gradually become a symbol of sustainable and quality food, supported by Italy's record in food safety and environmental protection. Today, over thirty million Italians report regular purchases at

these markets, confirming the importance of direct sales as an alternative and complementary channel to large-scale retail (*World Farmers Markets Coalition*, n.d.).

The Campagna Amica network comprises more than 1,200 farmers' markets, 50 of which are covered, located in major urban centers, and generates an estimated annual turnover of approximately €4 billion. This network also includes agritourism businesses, farm sales outlets, and educational farms, which contribute to making Italy the European country with the most extensive organized direct sales network. The model is based on three pillars: seasonality of production, transparency of agricultural practices, and guaranteed origin, elements that strengthen consumer trust and enhance the distinctiveness of Italian agricultural products (*Campagna Amica*, n.d.).

The data confirm the solidity of this model: Italian agriculture boasts 328 recognized PDO/PGI/TSG specialties, 529 PDO/PGI wines, and over 5,500 traditional products, in addition to being the European country with the highest number of active organic farms (84,000). Furthermore, only 0.7% of Italian agri-food products contain irregular chemical residues, compared to an average of 5.6% for imported products (EFSA data). This difference underscores the competitive advantage of Italian agriculture, built on quality and sustainability, and justifies the success of a system founded on the proximity between producers and consumers (Qualivita, 2024).

Campagna Amica is not just a commercial experience, but also a cultural platform that promotes more sustainable lifestyles and multifunctional agriculture. Within this context, the phenomenon of social farming is embedded, involving over 300 member businesses and integrating production functions with inclusion, training, rehabilitation, and childcare activities. These initiatives, rooted in the values of solidarity and mutual aid traditionally present in the rural world, contribute to strengthening territorial cohesion and promoting the well-being of rural communities, confirming agriculture as an agent of social as well as economic development (*Campagna Amica*, n.d.).

The farmers' market model has also crossed national borders with the creation of the World Farmers Markets Coalition (WFMC), which brings together approximately 250,000 farmers and their families in countries across every continent, from the United States to Japan, from Australia to Ghana. The Coalition, supported by the FAO, aims to

spread short supply chain practices, promote family farming, and contribute to building more equitable and resilient food systems in developing countries. From this perspective, Italy, through Coldiretti, has presented the Campagna Amica model at key international forums, including the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS+4) in Ethiopia, proposing an integrated system that combines farmers' markets, national supply chains (Filiera Italia), and international agricultural cooperation projects (*World Farmers Markets Coalition*, n.d.).

Another aspect concerns the commitment to combating food waste. The collaboration launched with Too Good To Go, a leading European social-impact platform founded in 2016 and now operating in over 15 countries, is widely cited in the literature on “digital environmentalism” as an example of how app-based solutions can bridge producers and consumers to reduce food losses across the supply chain. Its model allows businesses and farmers to sell surplus products at reduced prices to nearby consumers, creating a circular system that combines economic incentives with environmental and educational benefits. This partnership has enabled, in just a few months, the recovery of thousands of meals and the reduction of CO₂ emissions, as well as raising awareness among millions of consumers through the digital platform. At the same time, the so-called Farmers' Villages, set up in the historic centers of major Italian cities, have helped transform agricultural events into cultural and participatory events, strengthening the image of agriculture as a common good and not just a productive sector (Fondazione Campagna Amica, n.d.).

In short, the farmers' markets and initiatives associated with Campagna Amica are a prime example of how Coldiretti has successfully innovated the forms of representation and legitimacy in the agricultural sector. Through short supply chains and direct contact between farmers and citizens, transparency, trust, and sustainability are strengthened, while international openness and social commitment give the model a political and cultural dimension that transcends national borders. These practices not only respond to market needs, but also contribute to redefining the role of agriculture in the 21st century, recognizing its integrated economic, social, and environmental function (Campagna Amica, n.d.).

3.5 Italian Supply Chain: The Italian Model for the Agriculture of the Future

The evolution of the Italian agri-food system, as well as the requirements imposed by various CAP reforms, over recent decades have highlighted the need for a new approach to farm activity, in response to economic, environmental, and geopolitical emergencies that have made entrepreneurial activity more complex. Agricultural businesses can no longer be considered merely producers of raw materials; they are increasingly becoming active players in the production of high-quality, authentic, and safe food, deeply rooted in the local area of origin and linked to specific cultural and food traditions. This new productive role is accompanied by an environmental protection function, as mandated by the new CAP: farmers become custodians of the landscape and guarantors of ecological sustainability in a context where soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change pose growing threats (Primavera, 2022).

It is against this backdrop that the Italian Agricultural Supply Chain project was born, promoted by Coldiretti as an operational tool to address two structural issues in the sector: "value theft" and "identity theft." The first concerns the growing gap between producer prices and consumer prices: while prices paid to farmers have progressively decreased, consumers have not benefited from equivalent reductions, resulting in a growing share of the value created along the supply chain being concentrated in the hands of intermediaries. Indeed, it is estimated that for every euro spent by citizens on food products, only 17 cents actually goes to farmers. The second problem is linked to the lack of product transparency and traceability, which fuels unfair competition and "Italian-sounding" practices: products made abroad, often with lower quality and environmental standards, are marketed as if they were Italian, exploiting the Made in Italy image without generating any benefit for domestic agricultural businesses (Filiera Italia, n.d.).

Filiera Italia aims to combat these injustices by building an integrated system that unites agriculture, the food industry, and distribution, focusing on values such as traceability, sustainability, biodiversity protection, and the fight against "Italian sounding" products. The network involves over 100 Italian companies, from agricultural producers to major agri-food industries, and is supported by established tools such as long-term supply chain

contracts that articulate an innovative framework for structuring relationships among stakeholders. These contracts begin with the recognition of farmers' actual production costs and their authentic connection to the territory with the aim of generating value at each stage of the chain and transferring this value transparently to the consumer. By institutionalising this approach, Filiera Italia not only strengthens trust and territorial identity but also promotes a more equitable redistribution of value along the supply chain, thereby enhancing both competitiveness and social responsibility within the agri-food sector (Filiera Italia, n.d.).

The new approach is based on a crucial distinction: the focus of the discussion is no longer just on agricultural products, but on food. If agriculture represents the origin of the process, food is its outcome, the result of a complex process that integrates production, processing, and distribution. The centrality of food, understood not only as an economic good but as a vehicle for culture, health, and sustainability, has led to a radical shift in the way the role of agriculture within society is conceived (Caselli & Masini, 2018).

The geopolitical and trade tensions affecting European agriculture were amplified by President Trump's Executive Order of 31 July 2025 ("Further Modifying the Reciprocal Tariff Rates"), which brought to 15% all EU tariffs that had previously been below that threshold, leaving unchanged those already above it. In practice, this measure expanded the scope of the initial transatlantic deal and hit not only agriculture but also other industrial sectors. In response, the EU and the United States signed a Joint Statement on 20 August 2025 accompanied by draft legislative proposals in Brussels to open further to American products, Vincenzo Gesmundo in *Il Sole 24 Ore* has described as a "debacle" for European diplomacy despite Commission President Von Der Leyen's repeated assurances that "the worst has been avoided." This combination of higher USA tariffs and additional EU concessions illustrates how fragile Europe's bargaining position has become and how the current trade framework exposes producers, especially Italian agri-food SMEs, to unprecedented competitive pressures (*Further Modifying the Reciprocal Tariff Rates – The White House, 2025*).

Recent crises have made this paradigm shift even more evident. In particular, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine had immediate effects on international agricultural markets,

causing a 22% increase in the world price of wheat and a 17% increase in the price of corn in the first two months of the war, according to data from the Chicago Board of Trade. The 20% reduction in Ukrainian harvests and the blockade of exports through Black Sea ports have directly impacted global food security. One of the key international responses to this disruption was the Black Sea Grain Initiative, brokered by the United Nations and Türkiye in July 2022. The agreement established a monitored humanitarian maritime corridor from the Ukrainian ports of Odesa, Chornomorsk and Yuzhny/Pivdennyi, enabling the resumption of grain and fertilizer exports that had been halted since the invasion. Within weeks of its implementation, over one million tonnes of agricultural commodities, including wheat, corn, sunflower products and rapeseed, began to flow again to global markets, with around a quarter of shipments going directly to low-income countries such as Egypt, Yemen and the Horn of Africa under World Food Programme contracts (*Black Sea Grain Initiative | Resources | United Nations, n.d.*).

Academic and policy assessments underline that the Initiative helped stabilise international food prices (the FAO Food Price Index fell nearly 14% from its March 2022 peak) and provided a lifeline to vulnerable import-dependent countries, though its long-term effectiveness depends on continued cooperation among the parties and on extending its mandate beyond the original 120-day term. Ukraine and Russia together control approximately 28% of international wheat trade (over 55 million tons), 16% of global corn trade (30 million tons, essential for animal feed), and 65% of sunflower oil (10 million tons). For Italy, which is highly dependent on imports, the situation has proven particularly critical: the country imports 64% of the soft wheat needed for bread and biscuits and 53% of the corn used for livestock farming, with Ukraine being the second largest supplier of corn (13% of the total) and the third largest for wheat (3%) (*Black Sea Grain Initiative | Resources | United Nations, n.d.*).

Coldiretti President Ettore Prandini emphasized that this Italian dependence is the result of years of low compensation paid to farmers, which has led to a reduction of nearly a third of national corn production over the past ten years, resulting in the loss of approximately 500,000 hectares of cultivated land. The war has thus highlighted the structural fragility of the Italian agricultural system, linked to the lack of adequate support

policies for agricultural income and the progressive abandonment of the countryside by younger generations (Coldiretti, 2025).

At the same time, Coldiretti highlighted the risks posed by financial speculation, which has transformed agricultural commodities into investment vehicles through futures derivatives. This has resulted in prices becoming less dependent on real supply and demand and increasingly dependent on speculative movements, with serious consequences for farmers and consumers (Filiera Italia, n.d.).

The answer comes from Coldiretti and World Farmers' Organization (WFO) which have structured it through a complex ecosystem that ranges from Campagna Amica (direct sales, farmers' markets), through Filiera Italia (expansion to the processing industry and distribution, supply chain contracts), and involves the Italian Agricultural Consortia (inputs, economic infrastructure), the Cooperatives, the POs, and other representative economic structures to complete the loop from producer to consumer. Meanwhile WFO, on short supply chains (SSCs), offers a contemporary perspective on the connection to food, as well as a specific outlook on the economic viability of agriculture and its social and environmental effectiveness. In addition to reducing the need for long-distance shipping and minimizing waste and losses, they also contribute to the growth of local economies and enable consumers to actively participate in the economic advancement of their community (World Farmers' Organization, 2019).

Filiera Italia was born as a project with a scope that is both economic and social. On the one hand, it restores the centrality of agriculture, no longer relegated to a marginal sector responsible for a small share of GDP (about 3%), but recognized as a strategic sector capable of impacting the quality of life, social cohesion, and the country's international competitiveness. On the other, it enhances the concept of territory, distinct from mere land as a productive factor: territory is culture, landscape, community, relationships, and it is precisely this intangible dimension that constitutes Italy's main competitive advantage in globalization (Primavera, 2022).

The perspective opened by Filiera Italia is not limited to the national context. Through collaborations with Bonifiche Ferraresi and in particular BF International, Coldiretti has launched agricultural cooperation projects in Africa, particularly in Congo and the Horn

of Africa, based on the transfer of skills, sustainable technologies, and innovative agricultural practices. The goal is to contribute to local food security and promote regenerative agricultural systems capable of strengthening rural communities. This approach forms part of what Italian commentators have described as a new “peasant diplomacy,” centred on an innovative model of agricultural cooperation designed to create opportunities for the world’s poorest countries, enhance local value chains, and ensure food and work for rural populations. Initiatives such as the Mediterranean and African Markets Initiative (MAMI-Farmers Markets), financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with CIHEAM Bari, the World Farmers Markets Coalition, and the Campagna Amica Foundation, aim to replicate the Italian farmers’ market model across the Mediterranean and Africa to reinforce the ties between producers and citizens, improve farm incomes, and democratise access to food. Parallel to this, BF International has launched a series of “BFuture Farms” and partnership agreements with governments and international NGOs such as Save the Children to combine agriculture, education, and community development. This model seeks not only to increase production but also to transmit know-how, provide training, create decent employment opportunities for young people and women, and respect local land ownership, thereby moving away from extractive or neo-colonial practices (Bonifiche Ferraresi, 2024).

Filiera Italia therefore represents an innovative model for the agriculture of the future, capable of combining economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. It is based on the uniqueness of Italian regions and the ability of agricultural businesses, especially young ones, to interpret traditional values such as quality, traceability, and cultural distinctiveness in a modern way, transforming them into development levers to address the challenges of globalization (Primavera, 2022).

Concluding remarks

From the protests of the 1970s to the more recent experiences of Campagna Amica and Filiera Italia, the analysis of the evolution of Italian agriculture highlights how agricultural businesses have undergone a profound transformation. Since the years of

mobilization linked to exasperation over unprofitable agricultural prices and competitive imports, the need for a new strategy for representing farming families has gradually developed. This strategy, based no longer on the mere corporate defense of sector interests but on a proactive and inclusive approach aimed at building a direct relationship with consumers and society as a whole, has emerged.

The demonstrations at the Brenner Pass, at the turn of the millennium, as well as the campaigns for mandatory labeling, demonstrated the centrality of the issues of origin and transparency, transforming a sectoral demand into a battle of general interest. This evolution gave rise, proposed by Coldiretti, to an unprecedented alliance between farmers and citizens, sanctioned by the “Consumer Pact” and embodied in short supply chain and farmers’ market projects. Through these tools, Italian agriculture strengthened its social legitimacy, presenting itself as a producer not only of food but also of quality of life, a safeguard for the environment, social cohesion, and cultural identity.

The Filiera Italia model represents the most advanced stage of this journey: an attempt to integrate agriculture, industry, and distribution in a competitive and sustainable manner, capable of addressing global challenges related to market volatility, geopolitical tensions, and climate change. The emerging agriculture sector no longer simply demands protection but takes an active role in shaping economic, social, and environmental policies, positioning itself as a strategic player in the country’s development.

At the same time, these dynamics cannot be read in isolation from the broader European and global context. The 2025 EU–US trade negotiations, the tariff realignments imposed by Washington, and the continuing disruptions of the Black Sea grain corridor all show how vulnerable agri-food systems remain to geopolitical shocks and to the limits of EU bargaining power. In this environment, the Italian model, rooted in multifunctionality, short supply chains, and an alliance between farmers and citizens, offers a distinctive policy response that reconciles market openness with territorial anchoring, transparency, and social responsibility. Moreover, Filiera Italia’s international outreach, from farmers’ market projects in the Mediterranean and Africa to “peasant diplomacy” and BFuture Farms partnerships with NGOs, signals a willingness to shape, not simply endure, the global food transition and to align with the European Green Deal’s objectives of sustainability, biodiversity protection, and food security.

In this sense, the dialogue between farmers and consumers, developed through experiences of protest, proposals, and innovation, forms the basis of a new civilization of relationships, in which Italian agriculture acts simultaneously as a local custodian and a global actor. Its capacity for resilience and forward-looking vision, rooted in the quality of its food, biodiversity, and the distinctiveness of its territories, allows Italian agriculture to contribute to the redefinition of European agricultural policy and to the broader debate on the future of global food systems.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has traced the evolution of European agriculture from its foundational role in post-war integration to its current position at the crossroads of ecological transition, global competition, and renewed social mobilization. Beginning with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its successive reforms, the analysis showed how the sector moved from an inward-looking model of self-sufficiency to one increasingly embedded in global markets and tasked with delivering environmental and social public goods. The European Green Deal represents the latest and most ambitious expression of this shift, setting climate neutrality and sustainability as guiding principles for the Union's agricultural policy. Yet, as demonstrated, the implementation of this agenda has revealed deep tensions between environmental objectives, economic viability, and territorial cohesion.

The second part of the thesis examined how liberalisation and trade agreements: CETA, Mercosur, and transatlantic negotiations, have accentuated these tensions. While opening markets and offering export opportunities, such agreements have also exposed European farmers to asymmetric competition and ecological dumping, underscoring the limits of EU bargaining power and the fragility of its agricultural base in a volatile geopolitical context. This global dimension reinforces the need for a CAP that not only supports farmers' incomes but also secures fair competition and reciprocity in international trade. The third part explored how Italian and European farmers have responded to these challenges by forging a new relationship with consumers and society. From the Brenner Pass protests to farmers' markets, from the "Consumer Pact" to the Filiera Italia model, the sector has sought to transform protest into proposal, repositioning agriculture as a producer of food, quality of life, and environmental stewardship. This evolving alliance points toward a "new civilisation of relationships" in which agriculture functions simultaneously as a local custodian and a global actor, integrating sustainability, social responsibility, and territorial distinctiveness.

Taken together, these findings suggest that European farmers' recent mobilisations are not a rejection of the European project but a call to recalibrate it. The future of the CAP, and by extension of European agriculture, will depend on its capacity to reconcile ecological and economic imperatives, strengthen reciprocity and transparency in trade, and preserve

the strategic role of agriculture as a pillar of food security, biodiversity, and rural vitality. If successful, this approach can transform the current tensions into an opportunity for renewal, enabling the Union to lead the global food transition on its own terms and to reaffirm agriculture's place at the heart of the European ideal.

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