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Interview with Francesco Vignarca

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Summary:

Francesco Vignarca describes his journey into advocacy as part of Italy's largest peace and disarmament network, merging activism with scientific rigor to address arms trade, military spending, and nuclear disarmament. He believes nuclear weapons threaten global democracy by disproportionately empowering a few nations, and he advocates for a multilateral, cooperative approach to security. His organization, closely allied with ICAN, pursues both normative and practical steps toward disarmament, including mobilizing Italian municipalities to support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Despite the challenges, he remains optimistic about achieving global nuclear disarmament through grassroots efforts and sustained political engagement.This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Michal Onderco: Good morning, and thank you very much for your willingness to talk to me about your work. In the course of these interviews, we usually start by asking people: how do they get to the job where they are at the moment? So, could you give me a little bit of a summary of your path to the position where you are at the moment?

Francesco Vignarca: Basically, I was one of the few that established this network. I work for the Italian national network on peace and disarmament. That before was the National Network on Disarmament, and then we merged with the Peace network in 2020, becoming the biggest and the most important Italian organization on peace issues, disarmament issues in general. We started working on this in 2004, establishing the network, which encompasses now more than 60 national organizations, i.e the biggest associations in Italy, some trade unions, the most important research institute in the field of disarmament in Italy. We started that specifically at the beginning on the arms trade and arms export issue, and then we tried to broaden our field of interest. Basically, we can say we are the Italian branch of the main international campaigns on humanitarian disarmament in general. So my personal background is an interest in politics, the mondialization and globalization aside, I was part of the movement that at the start of the century was against globalization, or against an unjust globalization, which is better for me to say.

Michal Onderco: So were you at Genova?

Francesco Vignarca: I was one of the part of the organizations that went to Genoa, I was in charge of the communication duties for our regional organization. And that is because I grew up in Catholic movements, with missionaries. When I was 18, I spent the whole summer working in Brazil, and then the other two summers working in Brazil, with missionaries building recoveries for hungry, young people and so on. So my perspective is from the, you can say, left wing of the Catholic Church, the theology of liberation and all these perspectives.

Michal Onderco: You have a PhD in natural science, right?

Francesco Vignarca: I have a master's degree in astrophysics, and then a master's degree in sociological issues, in local development . I worked within this master, which is a bi-annual master, on the approach by local governments and local authorities working for the international cooperation. It is called "decentralized cooperation". My thesis was on the intervention by Lombardy local authorities in Cuba. Then, of course, I became a bit of an expert on arms exports, on military expenditures, and, of course, nuclear disarmament and other issues. I was trying to put my approach, my scientific approach, because, you know, physics is a hard science, and as this kind of approach into the campaign of the civil society. Because Italian peace civil society has always been very strong, because of the presence of the Catholic Church and the Communist Party, which was one of the main Communist parties within the Western countries, but more on an ethical and moral approach, without the expertise or the scientific approach that maybe NGOs on the northern part of the Europe have.

So we try to combine this, we try to put not only the largest support we have in the public opinion on this issue in general, but also put in numbers, data and something like that. I remember the first time I was heard in the parliament, they say: "okay, you are in the defense committee, but you are talking about disarmament, you don't belong here." And that was the only time that they tried to undermine our work. Because after that, when it was really clear that I knew the issue far better than the MPs,

nobody said to me: "okay, you don't belong here." Of course, they criticize my position, they are not agreeing with everything I say and it is… I think it's a democratic debate.

But I think that we were able in the last couple of decades to establish our standing as one of the main bodies in Italy that can talk about these issues. You can see that in the coverage we have. We don't only have coverage for our political position, maybe our criticism of the government or an MP, but also for the data. I just saw the numbers for 2022, which, of course, was a very particular year, because of the Ukraine war, we received more than 1100 citations in the media, in one year. So, it's like three citations a day, which is huge for something that usually is not seen as a reliable source.

Michal Onderco: I want to come back a little to the question of nuclear weapons. How do you personally view the role of nuclear weapons in the world today?

Francesco Vignarca: I think that the Ukraine war has opened a lot of eyes on the fact that nuclear weapons are not a solved problem. While for the majority of public opinion, but unfortunately, also for the majority of politicians and policymakers, I think that before the invasion of Russia in Ukraine, they felt like nuclear weapons are solved. Not a problem. They Are there but just a bit of sleeping problem that we don't have to care about. Our groups, and within ICAN in general, but not only for ICAN but also before, because Italy has a strong anti-nuclear movement, not only for the military one but also for the civilian purposes of the nuclear power, we've always seen that this was not a solved problem, and that we have to tackle this globally. Within the international campaign, but also locally, asking the Italian government, the Italian politician, and the political forces, to think about the fact that Italy is involved in the nuclear structure of the international relations. Of course, we are not one of the main actors. Now, we are not USA, or even the UK or France. But we are involved because of the nuclear sharing, because of our partnership within NATO.

So, for us, that was really an important issue in two senses. One, because the threat of nuclear weapons is too big to be forgotten. Of course, when you talk about weapons, war and peace, it is not a hard science, there's always something that you cannot control, or you can only sketch the situation. But with nuclear weapons, even a very small percentage of possible problems is unacceptable, because of the big impact that they have. So, this on one hand. On the other hand, I think that nuclear weapons play a key role in an international or global system, which is unjust, which is not really multilateral, and with nuclear weapons, a bunch of countries are establishing themselves above all the others. And since we think that we really believe in a multilateral democratic process… at least … not now, we cannot have this. I think that nuclear weapons… notwithstanding who possesses them, okay? But imminently, you know, structurally, are playing a key role in not having a real democratic global world.

So those are the two different reasons for which we think that we have to work on nuclear disarmament.

Michal Onderco: Do you think nuclear weapons have an impact on the world politics, even if they are not used?

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah, I truly believe so. You can start naming the fact that the five countries that sit permanently in this Security Council in the UN, are there because they have, legally, nuclear weapons. You must not forget the fact that a lot of emerging powers or regional powers are trying to establish the same as real powers, trying to get to nuclear weapons. Think about Iran, think about North Korea, of course. But also think about, you know, something that was in some ways said in the

last few years, Saudi Arabia is trying to obtain some nuclear sharing from Pakistan or something like that. So, I think they play a role, they play a symbolic role, but also a very concrete role in trying for some countries trying to establish themselves, like a global or, you know, really important countries. And this is something that all the P5…but also I think that not so clearly but in oblique way, also the other not official nuclear powers said that they are security relies on nuclear weapons. So, when someone like the US or China says, “We are secure because of nuclear weapons”, of course, they play a role, even if they're not used.

Michal Onderco: So, if I understand correctly, you see nuclear weapons as a fundamentally destabilizing force in international politics?

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah.

Michal Onderco: Okay, when it comes to nuclear weapons, where do you think the focus of civil society should be? Should it be on sort of devising practical steps and solutions towards abolition and elimination or should it be more in creating normative pressure and political pressure?

Francesco Vignarca: I think they're both linked, you cannot have one, if you really want to build a concrete path towards nuclear disarmament, you have to take into account both.

Because of course, norms are very powerful, because they say things, they you know, it's not like… this is something interesting on my studies on medieval history, because also, I like to read, like to examine things. For the Lombards, or for the ancient Celtic or barbarian people, the norms were naturally there, and so when you say something, a judge says something, then it emerges in a natural way, this is the the Anglo-Saxon approach.

While the Latin the idea is that you can set up the world, by normative meanings, when you establish some laws. I believe more in the second part because of my cultural heritage. So, I think that norms are quite important, even when they lack implementation. You can say that the human rights declaration is quite important, because even if they only declared something… and you can see that also in the independence legislation in the US, or the French Revolution declaration, they're quite important. So, building some norms, or establishing some norms, and having more countries, or more people, the more communities in general, saying: "this is what we should aim to (do)", it's fundamental.

But of course, if you think: "okay, we are done, when we have the law written down", you're not really doing the job completely, because of course, then you have to establish practical means to reach what the norm says. And nuclear weapons, it’s like having a real project on actual disarmament, how to do that, how to use the dismissed warheads, where to store them, how to control reciprocally, what we are doing… this is crucial, because otherwise you're only doing a really moral, an ethical declaration, and we don't want to only reach this. So, we need both of them.

And we need, and maybe this is another question, we need to work both globally and locally. You cannot try to, you know, wait for the global world to be on the same page, all of a sudden, to reach nuclear disarmament. You have maybe also to work at your country level, to try and to build some steps. For Italy it should be like, you know, deciding not to be part anymore of the nuclear sharing. That is not global disarmament, but it's a good piece of global disarmament that we can directly work on, because we are here, of course.

Michal Onderco: I'll get to that in a second, but I want to ask a sort of broader question. From your point of view, personally, what do you see as the biggest failure in the nuclear field since the end of the Cold War?

Francesco Vignarca: I think that, you know, not having the job done. Because, of course, I believe in multilateralism, but we have to recognize that it was the US-USSR deals, and then Russia deals, that were really fundamental to get… You know, when I do events, or when I talk to people... Yesterday, I was in the central Italian region to talk to students. And I really say to them, "you cannot believe but they, they, you know, dismiss like 60,000 warheads. It was huge, was really like a miracle". So, sometimes we do not recognize what was really done, which was really incredible. But then at some points, you know, someone says: "okay, but let's keep that because of the political status the nuclear weapons can give you." And the world has changed, because we have this decade in the 90s. But really, there was the feeling of "okay, now we want to build peace." And then things have changed, there was the war on terror, there was the new form of, you know, not doing military and so on. So that was a moment, not only for nuclear weapons, but also on other issues, in which I think that a real good political class with a vision should have pushed more to obtain, you know, really the final disarmament. (bangs the table)

Michal Onderco: And why do you think it didn't happen?

Francesco Vignarca: There are two reasons, the pressure from the population was not the same. I remember when the Berlin Wall fell, I was 16. So, there was really a pressure to say "okay, let's get rid of the stuff. Let's get rid of these threats, this fear we had in the Cold War, let's really build a world in which we can work together." I don't know if it's the same for other parts of Europe, but for Western Europe was also the time in which really, you can feel that, the European Union was starting to work. So, there was the sense of urgency, and the sense of "okay, let's do what now we can really do." And that before was prohibited, because of the balance of power between the US and the Soviet Union.

After 10 years, there was not the same sense of urgency. There was change. Culturally, politically, economically also, there was the globalization wave coming up. And this was one thing.

The other thing is that, you know, of course, it's easier to stay in power, when you have something that can say: "you're the good one, the others are the bad ones." or you can say that you are better, or you're stronger than the other one. So you really need a vision for politicians to work on a more horizontal level. I think that nuclear weapons are really a tool of vertical policies, vertical power dynamics, and it's easier.

Michal Onderco: Do you think there is someone who can be blamed for this failure?

Francesco Vignarca: Not one… I think it was a structural failure. Everyone has a part in the failure. The public opinion not pressuring the politicians in this way, politicians to you know, say, Okay, let's say have a…

Michal Onderco: Do people like you for example in civil society, do they have any share of blame?

Francesco Vignarca: Yes, of course. I think that like the politician, like the public opinion, also the organizations or the civil society thought it was over. They thought: "Let's work on other issues. We don't need to work on this anymore." That was a failure in the Italian landscape, also on other things. We obtained in in [19]72 and then in the 90s, we obtain the conscientious objection to the military

service, which in the 90s was recognized not only as a concession by the government, but a right of a citizen. "I have the right not to take up arms to defend my country". But then we say: "okay, so we obtained that."

And we failed, for instance, to obtain a department in which you can really develop nonviolent peace and defense, because we thought it's done. AndI can feel the same dynamics and the same failure on nuclear weapons as well. "Okay, it's done? Good. They will take care of it, it's a mere technical problem, it is not a political one." So we failed to work on this specific, you know, timing, and then we have to recognize in the new century that things are not working the right way.

And then we have to rebuild a new global movement, with the humanitarian initiative, we will celebrate 10 years of the Humanitarian Initiative in March, in Oslo. And this is quite important, you know, we failed to use this time, we were late on this. In Italy, there was plastically and explicitly, because in the 90s everybody was taught about the fact that we do not have any more warheads in Italy. Everybody, civil society, politicians, of course, who's in the government was in charge of it, they knew. But everybody was aware of the fact that "okay, the Americans took all the warheads away." And there are a lot of documents that say that the Pentagon wanted to do that.

And there was the Italian government who said: "no, no, no, let's keep them here, because we are more allied than the other ones." And when in 2003, I remember, a former senator, a friend of us, was able to obtain some documents that connected with the work of Hans Kristensen and, you know, said, oh, no, they are still here. The first reaction was like: "what?" So we failed to work on these in the last few years because… and then we had to restart everything. We started a campaign in 2007, if I remember correctly. In Italy it is possible to place a bill in the parliament, collecting more than 50,000 signatories. It's called a popular proposal of law. It was a popular proposal to declare Italy, nuclear-free zone, failed in the parliament. But you know, we had to wait 10 years, or like, eight years before rethinking our work on the issues, restarting our work on the issues. And also because we were aware only in 2003, that, you know, still in Aviano and Ghedi, you have the warheads. So that is a failure, of course of politicians, but also ask also of civil society.

Michal Onderco: And if you look at the so we discussed that there, there was a failure to sort of get the job done, especially in the 90s. What are the other main moments that you think are key in the nuclear field since the 90s, up until today? Where you think that for example, things could have gone differently and they didn't?

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah. At the international level, after the Prague speech of Obama. I think that in that moment, if president, or the prime minister of a European country had supported more the idea of Obama saying: "okay, we have to get rid of nuclear weapons", then things could have, you know, gone differently. But then I see that in some ways, UK and France in one way, but also Italy and Germany in other ways, wanted to stay in the nuclear umbrella because they feel they are more like friends of the US than the other ones. I don't know.

Michal Onderco: It gives them a special status.

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah. So at that time, of course, I'm not saying that with more support the thing will be easy. You have too… Russia, China, what they're doing. But at least there could have been a better try. Yeah, a more concrete possibility. At that time, I felt that and that's why also, folk started in

establishing the humanitarian initative and ICAN and so, I felt that all the people will say "okay, he's mad, is a dreamer. We cannot say out loud, but let's not support him." I felt this was a failure.

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to a different set of questions. So, one of the purposes of these interviews is also to give sources to future scholars who are going to study civil society. So, imagine someone who is, let's say, a PhD student in the United States who reads this interview, what do you think they need to know about your network, Rete Pace e Disarmo? What do you think is the most important thing that they need to know about it?

Francesco Vignarca: I think that they have to know that we really do all the actions we are doing. So, research, meetings with local groups, with students, in the perspective of advocacy. We do not think that *only* putting the information outside, or *only* trying to educate people on disarmament issues, then maybe magically, in some decades, something will change.

We have, of course, to do that, make people more aware of the issues, we have to tell the students and the young people that there is not only the perspective of military intervention or international relations, in the classical sense. But at the same time, we have to talk to our politicians, talk to our government, pressure them, criticize them, or say "bravo" when they deserve to have an applause. This is key, you know, I think that is not shared by everybody within the Italian civil society, but also internationally. I feel that there's a lot of groups, I think the older groups, not only in the sense of the establishment of the group, but also on the age of people, that says "we fail, it's impossible to do anything, let's only keep doing what we're doing and maybe…" No, I don't think that. I think that we have always a shot in trying to change things in a better way.

Michal Onderco: And how does the nuclear portfolio fit in that mission?

Francesco Vignarca: Of course, like I said, as soon as we realized that there was this issue, and it was problematic, we tried to put instruments and tools to try to obtain that. The popular law in 2007, you know, of course, all the action to support ICAN in the asking for a negotiation of the treaty, in obtaining the treaty.

I think that is quite important. Because, you know, you can feel that nuclear disarmament, it's like, you know, the hardest thing you can obtain in the humanitarian disarmament field, but like I said before, since I think that nuclear weapons are very important, they are a pillar of this unjust global system, of course, we have to tackle them as an issue. You cannot work on all the other issues on which we work without forgetting nuclear disarmament.

Michal Onderco: If you look at the civil society in Italy, how do you evaluate your…not only in Italy, but also internationally, how do you evaluate the relative position of your organization vis-a-vis others in civil society?

Francesco Vignarca: Like I said, in the course of this few years, really, we became the biggest Italian organization on this. And I think that there are some other groups working on these. But the most the biggest ones like Senza Atomica, which is a part of Soka Gokkai international, they are working with us. So the campaign is made with them. And there are only a few you know, old groups, *vetero*, we say in Italy. You know, former Marxist or former 70s movements, that are not working with us, but they do not really have a good approach. We know, we don't want to work with them. They made some mess

inside even in the international campaign. But they are really, you know, forgettable. There are only a few people with no possibility of real advocacy, no possibility to get to the media.

So, the fact that we are working in a larger network that works not only with nuclear disarmament is key. Because we were able to take all the people at the same table, maybe not all the groups work on nuclear disarmament, but since the deal is that all the groups support all the campaigns, maybe one works more in one issue,then we have the support of everybody, even if they wouldn't work on nuclear disarmament. And when they can have the support, for instance of ACLI en ARCI. ACLI and ARCI are the biggest associations in Italy, with hundreds of thousands of people inside with hundreds if not thousands of local, *circoli*, like, you know.

Michal Onderco: I used to go to *a circolo Arci* have to for a lunch in Firenze...

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah, okay, then it's powerful for us, because we have only to, you know, establish the campaign, put information in this. And visually, we can, you know, put on everywhere in Italy. And it's not like, you know, immediately this, but this is very powerful. So, what we were able to obtain, was… I don't want to seem like egocentric or so, but really, we *are the* nuclear disarmament campaign in Italy.

Michal Onderco: So one of the things and we discussed this also earlier, in another meeting that we had, one of the things where your network is quite successful, in is getting different Italian *communes* to sign the *Cities Pledge*, right? So to call of cities to sign and ratify the TPNW. And can you tell me something about how you go about getting additional cities to sign the *Cities Pledge*, and why and how you sort of mobilize your network for that.

Francesco Vignarca: Because it's something that really is a heritage of the peace movement in Italy. Working with the cities, working with local authorities, it is something that our groups do since the 60s. Also, because of a very prominent political figure in the past, like Giorgio La Pira, former mayor of Florence, that set up the idea, which is quite, you know, really a common sense in Italy, that cities have some sort of responsibility, also for international things. They do not deal only with local issues, the streets, or maybe the house or the… but there is really this approach.

And like I said before, first of all international cooperation, the tradition of international, local, Italian local authorities working with, you know, Africa, South America, you can say: "why? Is it not a state issue?" No, for Italy it is normal, that the cities also think about the global problems, and even international politics. Okay. We don't have time to say why… culturally, politically. But it is a starting point. So, it was natural for the whole peace movement to work with the cities, in all the phases we had in the past.

And we are working with them on all our issues. We are putting, you know, when we ask for non-violent defense, we made them vote for the resolution. When we are talking about arms export, we make them vote for…. for us it is natural, even before the city's appeal of ICAN, to work with them. We collected more than 400 resolutions during the process that led to the negotiation of the treaty. And then the first phase is ratifying. So the problem is quite strange. The fact that we have only a few cities in the Cities Appeal now, because they already passed a resolution. They're not saying they are part of the Cities Appeal, because it was not even established. And now we're trying to transform all these old resolutions into new ones that specifically can say we are part of the Cities Appeal. So, for us it was

easier than in other countries to get to the public local authorities because it was something that was already going on.

Michal Onderco: Yeah. So, do you find this initiative.. overall, if you were to evaluate it, would you see it as “it's successful because 400 municipalities supported it and so many signed the Cities Appeal”? Or would you say it's a failure because despite all of this effort, Italy has no signed the TPNW.

Francesco Vignarca: No, I see it from the positive side. First, because I'm an optimistic person. In general, okay? But also, because we knew that, you know, it was not something automatic that if you if we get 500 municipalities, then ...

First, when you make the local authorities talk and discuss about these things, the real target, and the real goal, it is not to obtain the votes, but to make them discuss. Because that then means that local groups, political groups talk about the issues, and local newspapers talk about the issues. So, it's a way to get to the general public, also. That even if I place an interview on the Italian daily newspaper, national one, or I have been interviewed in the TV, it's difficult to reach out the normal people because they don't read these newspapers, or they don't listen to political news, TV shows. But when their own city is discussing something, they pay attention. There are really ,in Italy, a lot of local newspapers, maybe some 1000s of copies, but there are read more than the national ones, because you find the local team results, or the school that is doing some project, or the discussion about the streets where it's to go, this or that. So it's really crucial for us to use this approach. We knew from the beginning that the national government wouldn't listen to the cities. I would do the same, I will still do this kind of approach, because it's important to make the pressure from below to grow.

Michal Onderco: Whom do you see as your closest partners in your work? And that work can be in Italy, but also internationally, which organizations would you say, are the closest partners that you work with?

Francesco Vignarca: Globally, of course, the international campaign [ICAN], that was huge, because of course, working on the issue, in general, but without having a goal, is more difficult. When there was a decision, “okay, we want to have a treaty”, of course, every other action and activities we are doing, or we were doing on nuclear disarmament was, you know, organized in this perspective. And this puts, of course, a lot of new energy on the table.

The media are following you, if you're saying "we are doing this, in Milano, because there's also an international process going on”. That was important. So having the international campaign also to produce information, reports, giving us a global framework was crucial and important.

In the specific situation of Italy, of course, like I said, all the organizations of our networks… but we were also very supported, and we were supported and lucky to have Pope Francis in these years, because of course, he is really a staunch supporter of nuclear disarmament in general. [He] also changed the moral approach of the Catholic Church on this, which for Italy is crucial. Because I don't think that foreigners understand the impact of the Vatican in Italian politics. You don't understand this, because you're not accustomed to the fact that a foreign country… basically, you know... what the Pope says, is, on every newspaper, is in every church, every weekend. It's on the TV.

There was a problem in the past, of course, because you can see like an intermission or trying to manipulate Italian politics from the outside. But even if it's not done this way, directly, like the church

has done in the past. The fact that the Pope said: "we need nuclear disarmament, even the possession of nuclear weapons is a sin" etc. That is of course, fundamental for us. More attention by the media. Nobody could say to us "you're the Marxist ones", no, it's the pope saying this. Even if a lot of people think that Francis is a Marxist Leninist, but this is only a joke. Of course, that was huge. Also, because the Catholic Church is one of the most, in some way, spread organizations, not only in Italy. And in some ways, it is very hierarchical. So, if something comes up from the Vatican that comes to the Italian church, and if the heads of the Italian Church says, “we must do that” every parish, every church, sooner or later, will arrive t…. So we were able to put our op-eds into the, the newspapers of the dioceses; Avenire, the Italian national one, but also the local magazines of the single diocese. That was huge, of course.

Michal Onderco: So, whenever I talk to people about civil society and nuclear weapons in Italy, one of the organizations that always pops up and people know about it all over the world is ISODARCO. And if this graduate student in America reads this interview, how would you say what's the main difference between ISODARCO and you?

Francesco Vignarca: First of all, the organization that you know, put his ISODARCO into place is a part also of our groups. USPID, split which is the Italian Union scientists for disarmament, Unione degli Scienziati Per Il Disarmo, they organize things in Castiglioncello, invite us, we are always part of this, we use their expertise. With Paolo Cotta Ramusino, or Francesco Lenci, we always use those resources. So, there is a connection.

Now, the difference is that they are not doing advocacy… correction, they are doing a form of advocacy because of course, they meet also with the official MFA, but they don't have the power or the strength to do campaigns at the public opinion level. So, I think that their expertise… and also, they are, you know, older in age. There's not a renewal of people, or not as I expected, or as I hoped. So, I don't think that we are part of two different camps or paths. I think that they provide a lot of important information. They provided in the past, really, the people talking about the issue, even when the more general civil society, who was not paying attention to the issue. So it was really instrumental, fundamental that it was there. And we are working together, even if maybe we don't do meetings every week, but there's an exchange, there has [exchange] of perspectives. The difference is maybe the tools. There are more researchers, they are able to provide information at the scholarly level, we are more able to provide information at the general public level, but I don't see like, you know, alternative of…

Michal Onderco: So, there are also some think tanks that are active on nuclear things like is I*nstituto Affari Internazzionali*. There are universities that work on nuclear questions. So, for example, Roma Tre, or at the University of Florence, there are researchers working there on these issues. In your work, do you work with any of them? Or do you see them sort of outside of your orbit of action?

Francesco Vignarca: In general, the problem is that academia in Italy is not listened to by the politicians, and that is a problem. Like, you know, with Fabrizio [Coticchia], we always talk about this that in the parliament they give hearings to people that have not read or know anything about an issue. And then they didn't listen to the actual people that do a lot of good research on this issue. So, this is a structural problem, not dependent on us. So, in the past, there was no collaboration, because I think also thought that there was no big research on these issues. In recent years, this changed on both sides. We learned to work more with universities, maybe not specifically on nuclear disarmament, but

on international relations, on policies, on defense. And there were a lot of students, grad students, PhD students, that asked us to provide information for a thesis on ICAN, or the civil society, or on nuclear disarmament. So, there was more than a change in this perspective.

Michal Onderco: In many countries, when I talk to civil society representatives, they say that the rise of ICAN and the sort of TPNW and all the publicity around it, also means that there's a lot more young people interested in the question of nuclear weapons. Can you see this pattern also in Italy?

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah. For sure. The problem was different with the think-tanks. Because with the think tanks, there's I think a sort… also for personal and reasons from the past,a mutual distrust between us and specific with some specific think tanks. IAI, I can say that. I think there are good researchers over there. But I feel there are too much in the orbit of the military industry? Maybe not on nuclear disarmament, but on other issues. And I think that they think about us, like too politically sided, which we are not because, you know, we criticized every government.

Michal Onderco: So was it, for example, easier for civil society to get their points across when there was, for example, a more sort of Social Democratic, left wing foreign ministers? So for example, when Federica Mogherini was minister, was it easier for civil society to get the point across?

Francesco Vignarca: I think that the dynamics that went in the last 15 years on the interaction between us and the government is not caused by political things, but like it always happens in Italy, it is more on the personal part. You know, we knew Federica, before she was a minister. Then her approach to us changed, because we had… we call each other and now suddenly, she became minister. So she started to, you know, separate herself, maybe for her career? I don't know. But really, the fact that we are engaged in advocacy was helpful for us. You know, because we can really get to the people. Not because we write the formal letters, okay? But because we can really get engaged. We were able to talk with junior minister, foreign affairs ministers, defense ministers, I have a personal direct relationship with Crosetto for instance, because he was former Junior Minister, when there was the F 35 issue, we had the exchange.

And I think that the fact thatI like most is that in the last few years, even when we disagreed, and there was a was a lot of critique from our side, and the response back from the politicians… there is a recognition of our role. People says that we are the serious one, we are really committed to what we want to do. Maybe they don't agree with us, but they recognized our seriousness, our thinking about this. The only political dynamics I see is that the major social democratic party in Italy, which is the Partito Democratico, they changed the approach when they are in the government or not, this is a problem. Because when they are in the government, they try to separate themselves from us in general civil society, not only on disarmament issues, because they feel they have to establish themselves like the reliable ones at the international level.

So, the fun fact is that I was not able to meet the former defense minister of the PD, Roberta Pinotti and Lorenzo Guerini while I was able to meet all the other ones, even from the right. La Russa, I was able to meet him. Crosetto, we will meet him, and this, why? You don't understand that even if you change your role, you can still interact with us.

While when they came to the opposition, and these changes, also the approach of some media, there are links to them, they start to, you know, criticize the government maybe for military expenditure. Now it's changed with the Ukraine war, but you could see thatin 15 years… when Berlusconi was in

power, they were on our side saying too "much money on the military, too much money for weapons." Then they come to power and say “we cannot say this”. So this is the only real political pattern I see in the relationship between us and the government. For getting to get in touch with them, it changes nothing because we were able, in the last few years to really establish ourselves like, you know, an important part of the political discussion and political debate in Italy. So wherever we ask to be heard about one thing or another, we are always able to get to an interaction with the politician and also with the diplomats, or the civil servants within the relevant ministries. And also with the parliament, we met presidents of parliament, political groups, the president of a political group. This is something that if 15 years ago was difficult for us when we were starting to do that, and I'm not thinking only about nuclear disarmament, but all issues now... really, I don't want to boast, but if I want a meeting with the relevant politician next week, I can get that.

Michal Onderco: Before we go and talk about other things, how do you choose your staff? How do you choose people that work for you, and what kind of qualities or knowledge or expertise do you find valuable?

Francesco Vignarca: We don’t choose, because for our specific and particular system, the network is only a facilitator for all the other organizations, so it is the organization that chooses the staff. I'm the coordinator of the campaign, but I don't have a say. Let's say if ARCI just change the president. They have changed the person in charge of peace and disarmament within the national presidency, I don't have a say in that.

My job, my role is to work with all the people that the specific organization chooses to represent them in the political role, and try to establish with them connection and make the other organization work within the framework of our campaign. And that has happened. And also for nuclear disarmament. What I can do is to find people within the organization that have maybe a special attention for nuclear disarmament, or special expertise, like Lisa Clark, she was also the co-president of the International Peace Bureau. She is American-born, but lives in Italy since a long time, she from the beginning said was “we keep going on these, we need to do that”. So Lisa would be part of the coordination of the campaign on nuclear armament, notwithstanding the role, okay? So, those kinds of people, maybe within also the Archivio disarmo, which is a research institute, that work on this speciality, and we can form them and get them to make more gaining of expertise, this is something I can do, okay?

But within these different organizations, I cannot have a say. You can see this as problematic, but no, because the merging role of all groups that I talked to you before for politicians, the same process has been with the impact to the civil society. So I don't have now, after 15 years working in the field after, 15 year with ICAN and everything we said, nobody can question us like the “go-to guys for the issue”. So, we keep receiving questions from the local groups of our organization, say, we want to organize something in my town, could you come? Could you send someone? Give us all the information, they keep going on the website for information. So, the work we have done in establishing ourselves like serious people with an approach and research, has worked both for the political landscape, but also for the civil society landscape. So, I don't have to choose anybody. They are coming at us in some way. I don’t know if I made myself understandable.

Michal Onderco: I think this is clear. I want to move on to the next part. How would you define impact in your work?

Francesco Vignarca: More people within the organization, because also we [should not assume that] the fact that we have 60 names in the network, and thinking that all the people within all these organizations know about nuclear disarmament, because it's not like this.

We have a continuous formation, continues work on making even the small group in, you know, Alto Adige or in Sicily, of our organization, to understand that there's a campaign going on. You have to work on these, we need you wouldn't you to work on the local groups, but also you need us to collect information. So, the impact is: more people aware of the importance of the issue within our organization, and of course, in the public opinion.

Because the polls we conducted with the ICAN in the last few years, keep saying that a lot of the majority of Italian people is for the nuclear disarmament, and for TPNW, but only, let's say 50% of Italian people, according to the polls, knew about the fact that we have warheads in Ghedi and Aviano. So first impact, get to more people directly when meetings organization. Senza Atomica, they are establishing a new exhibition, the first version, they get to 300,000 people. Now the new one, we aim to get to more people that goes to an exhibition explaining what is nuclear disarmament, that is fundamental. Directly with these actions, but also indirectly. So putting more articles in the media and more presence in the TV and radio. This is the first impact.

Second impact more policymakers on our side. So we will relaunch this week, because Sunday is the anniversary of the entry into force, a new letter to the new parliament just set up asking them to sign the parliamentary pledge of ICAN ask him that for maybe, you know, joint parliamentarian group on nuclear disarmament, and so on. In 2017, we had more than 214 MPs signatories pledge, then with the next parliament, nobody, perfectly. And now we aim to get more because, of course, political personality changes and the landscape changes. So the second impact is to obtain more attention by the MPs at the national level.

Third impact, to transform the hundreds of resolutions we had before in the local authorities to new, you know, signatories of the Cities Appeal of ICAN.

Michal Onderco: And so we talked about how you would define impact. How would you define success? And can you tell me about an instance where you would say that something that your organization did was a success.

Francesco Vignarca: In general, or on nuclear disarmament?

Michal Onderco: On nuclear disarmament.

Francesco Vignarca: For now, the only succes we have, we can say that we have obtained is to help to reach the TPNW, and to get more attention in the media, and in the public opinion about the issue. The only real success will be getting rid of the warheads from Italy, first step, but I think that this won't be a thing only in Italy. I'm really convinced that nuclear sharing in Europe when it will bend, when not if, you will, and emit in the same time for all the countries involved. This is a first success. The second one is global nuclear disarmament established.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that the war in Ukraine makes either the first or the second goal easier or more difficult?

Francesco Vignarca: More difficult. More difficult in general, because for the Western countries and for the Western public opinion, the Ukraine war has changed everything on military issues. Until

February 2022, politicians in Italy tried to hide the fact that they were putting more money on weapons, because they knew there was something not acceptable or not, you know, supported by them.

Michal Onderco: It was not a vote winner.

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah. Well, now they're boosted by the fact that we're putting more money, we're selling weapons. So that changed everything. The only good impact, but of course, it's a tragedy. So, we cannot talk about good impact, but the only thing is that, that Ukraine war made, is that more people now understand that when we thought about the nuclear threats, and the problem of nuclear weapons, we are not mad people, but there was really an existential threat made by nuclear weapons.

Michal Onderco: So do you think that the war in Ukraine is an example of success of nuclear deterrence, or is it the failure of nuclear deterrence?

Francesco Vignarca: I think it's a failure of nuclear deterrence, because the fact that Putin is doing what he's doing because he is using the nuclear weapons like a sort of of mobster with a gun, you know. This menace, this threat that he is using, allows him to do more than the international community would permit to anyone else. And so, on one hand, these nuclear threats by Russia made people aware of the fact that there's a problem. But it is more difficult to transform these into… we need to do something, because people will say, nobody will do anything now. It is too dangerous. So let's stick to our guns now. So this is something ambivalent in some ways, the fact that the increased awareness of this problem doesn't transform itself immediately in the necessity to do something, because people are afraid that we cannot do something right now. We have to wait for it to be over in Ukraine.

Michal Onderco: I want to finish this interview with three questions. The first one is: what are your expectations for the future of the nuclear field in the next five to 50 years? Some people find it easier to answer this question by thinking about: will there be nuclear weapons in 50 years?

Francesco Vignarca: I think there won't be any. Because if they are still around, they will be used. So, we will have more problems, very dangerous problems. So, at some point, I think that sanity will prevail in the heads of the world leaders in understanding that it's too big a threat, too dangerous to keep them.

So, either there won't be, because we decided to get rid of them, or because they will be used. And this is something that really shakes me. I'm not able to say if there will be good positive outcome in 5, 10 or 15 years. I expect that in five years the vast majority of the countries will be part of TPNW. That some proposal in the Vienna Action Plan will be in place. And really a high hope that in 10 years, we can really… if we are able to stop other form of nuclear sharing, even the US nuclear sharing will be over. In Europe. So if there will be like India given warheads to Indonesia, or Pakistan to Saudi Arabia that they want, or Russia to Belarus, that will stop any form of ending the nuclear sharing in Europe. If that is not happening, then I think that we can be able to start some process that make the US understand that they don't need to put tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Michal Onderco: Imagine there is a world without nuclear weapons. What does security in such a world look like?

Francesco Vignarca: We are a strong support of the idea of a global multilateral security. Only with really an interchange in a cooperative form within between countries, you can really have security. We strongly support the idea behind, for instance, the common security report that was issued last year by the Olaf Palme Foundation. This is our perspective. The real security is when everybody is safe because they feel safe with the other ones, like in national situation. I feel safe around Milano, because I know that the vast majority of other people going around will not attack me, will not try to kill me. So, this is a real form of security we think about. Not being stronger than the other, because even if you are stronger in this phase, then you can be a target. And so, your people would not really be safe.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that the world without nuclear weapons will be a world where the concept of deterrence makes no sense?

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah, but not only for nuclear weapons, because, really, at the philosophical level, like I was trying to say before, only shared security, only cooperation will lead to real security. The other forms are not security, or not real defense, are only a menace, are threats. And either you are the side of the one stronger, or of the weaker, but in both ways, I don't think you're really secure.

So, deterrence, not only with nuclear weapons, but on any other kind of forms, is like, you know, I don't want to be really hard on this... but it's the difference between a community in which you live by the law, this is real security, and the mafia, that provides you security, but with violence, and that can change. And you can feel secure, because maybe now you are on the side of the real boss, but this could change. So, violence cannot provide security.

We are not only a peace movement, we are non-violent movement, non-violent in the political approach of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Capitini in Italy, and so on. So, this is quite important for us to say that, for us international relations as well, the interpersonal relation must rely on non-violence.

Michal Onderco: So if someone says we can reach a nuclear weapon free world, if we, for example, have global prompt strike, or you know, conventional precise missile capabilities and these sorts of things, if I hear you correctly, your answer will be this is not a solution.

Francesco Vignarca: Yes, this is not a solution if you put the problem in terms of security. But I would accept that as an intermediate step. Because I think that nuclear weapons are too big a menace, too big a threat. So, if we can reach in some way, a way to get rid of nuclear weapons, that will be a success. I don't think that it will be the final stage of real security for the world, if we base this on getting rid of nuclear weapons or other forms of deterrence. But I would have said that.

Michal Onderco: So if I hear what you're saying about the world without nuclear weapons correctly, it sounds actually to me very close to the idea of Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament. So Chris Ford's idea for you know, like, there needs to be a fundamental transformation of relations between states before we can reach a moment where we can talk about nuclear disarmament.

Francesco Vignarca: Can be. That's one way of course. You know, my first choice is changing the global perspective, change the global system, really get to what the UN Charter envisions, and then of course, a natural consequence would be getting rid of nuclear weapons. So, this is the main road for me, the real democracy, world democracy, and then of course you can… but if this is too far, and we can find a way meanwhile, to getting rid of nuclear weapons, I will attempt that. I don't know if it's possible. I don't know.

Of course, I think that you have to solve the whole problem. But since we feel nuclear weapons are such a big issue, and such a problem, really an existential threat, like the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists keep saying, I really feel that this is too big to wait for all the other things to be set up before approaching the problem.

Michal Onderco: The last question that I always ask people is there something I should have asked about and I didn't? Is there something that you think you want to add that it didn't ask about?

Francesco Vignarca: No, I think that more or less, I tried to explain myself. I think it's not easy to understand the Italian situation because we are, I think, we are really special, not in the fact that we are better, but are really particular situation. Because of the Vatican because of the history of Italy, in public opinion, and the civil society, because of our form, which is very different from any other partners we have on ICAN or on other campaigns.

Michal Onderco: So what would you say is the biggest difference between how you work and how, for example, ICAN affiliates in Germany, or Netherlands, or Belgium, how they work?

Francesco Vignarca: Because I think that we work on a lot of issues. Other groups do the same, but not everything we do. For instance, PAX in the Netherlands, they work on nuclear weapons, they work on with us also on killer robots, on Yemen. So, we are not the only ones that are doing a lot of things. But I think we are the only ones that do every campaign. And also with the focus, not only on disarmament, but also on global security, and political landscape, interventions with the trade unions. So, we are very peculiar and we are strange, because if you look at us, we don't have staff, we don't have resources, but we are trying to use the organization resources.

Michal Onderco: If you say you don't have resources, where does the financing for the whole network come from? Is it sort of membership contributions to individual organizations? Or do you work with funders, like foundations or…

Francesco Vignarca: We work with the foundation and global campaigns. But, *really*, the budget of the network is 50,000 Euros a year...

Michal Onderco: That's your salary, basically.

Francesco Vignarca: Yeah. Half of that is my salary. But because we decided from the beginning, not to establish another organization, another structure, then would have been seen by the members like, “okay, they're doing but it's not our business”. No, no, I want them to work. I want them to put you know, at everybody’s disposal, competencies, capacities to organize, capacity to do mobilization...of course, Archivio Disarmo can provide research that may be CGIL, which is a trade union, you know, they cannot provide.

CGIL can provide, you know, we need to do the mobilization in Bologna? Okay, we organize that. Okay, when we decided to do the big rally in Rome, more than one 100,000 people, CGIL said okay, we organize, we rent the stage, you getthe permission, you have the… all the things that will be needed to such a large crowd. And they say, “We can do that, because we are able to do this. And we put this at disposal of this idea that we discuss jointly within the network.” And that's why Italy was only on one of the few countries in which you have such a big rallies on Ukraine. We were able also to have, you know, humanitarian people in Ukraine. We made a lot of missions to give people, you know, relief, to take the refugees outside and host them in Italy. We are struggling now to make other peace

movements in other parts of Europe to do the same, because they are more… we are structurally a network, while they may be joined forces only for one campaign or another campaign. And this takes time to join forces.

We are working together since a long time. And when we do our meetings, one per month, we talk about ICAN, we talk about killer robots, we talk about everything. So, everybody knows what's going on. And this is a valuable when you have to, you know, mobilize in a short period of time. And so, we're really peculiar with strength, and you know, because I dream of having the staff of Pax with like 90 people. And we are really myself and another person in Verona for the Secretariat, and of course, you know, the steering group, but they are also people working for their own organization.

But I prefer to have this kind of system than to establish another super-association like this, because in the end, you know, the organization would not pay attention to what another organization will say. And we need that their strength at the local level.