



The Great Recession and the quest for Urban Political Innovations.

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From my perspective, the Great Recession has had two major negative outcomes: the sharp decline in available public financial resources and, subsequently, a growing political discontent which has paved the way for populist movements' success.

Budget cuts have unavoidably affected the quality of goods and services a municipality can provide to citizens, who were sometimes already experiencing economic challenges, if not heavy suffering and trouble. Ensuing citizens' dissatisfaction was complemented by a more diffuse and open demand for increased political participation and accountability of politicians. Widespread expectations that new forms of direct democracy could have been easily created by digital innovations immediately gave political room for social movements and anti-establishment protest parties. At the same time, traditional parties, first at local, then at national and transnational level, have not always been able to intercept the threat or to offer swift and satisfying solutions.

In addition, the Great Recession has transformed centre-periphery relations, because cuts in public expenditure have reinforced centralization, thus countering a previous, and popular, trend. Local administrations and municipalities had in fact benefited from decentralization processes whereas the new context, created by the recession, has interrupted that process and brought additional frustration to the negative economic consequences already suffered by citizens. Furthermore, the EU level has been perceived as part, if not the ultimate cause, of the problem and never a solution.

What can we do?

I have identified two main challenges: first, how can we provide goods and services with diminishing resources? Second, if dissatisfaction is widespread how do we re-legitimize traditional (and in our case left-wing) parties?

The first challenge has to do with economic efficiency. The second one is a matter of democracy, political vision and leadership.

A challenge of efficiency does not mean to implement, also at local level, abstract austerity policies. When this strategy has been implemented, negative outcomes, even from a sheer economic perspective, have been largely evident. Besides, and I will now bring in what I consider one of Florence's best practices, during my tenure the Municipality has increasingly resorted to subsidiarity, for instance by allowing non-profit organizations to manage or co-manage services to the elderly or childhood services. National measures are also welcome: I

recall the benefits brought to the city's economy by Mr Renzi's Government reforms of the labour market (Jobs Act) or the resources transferred to the local level thanks to the Piano Periferie (Suburbs Plan).

The second challenge is one of democracy, political vision and leadership.

We need to make full use of all technological tools existing in our digital era, while maintaining personal contacts and participation of citizens to some of the political processes.

In Florence we make extensive use of social media and open data system. Our city network is not only a source of information but it enables citizens to use, implement and reorganize data adjusting them to their needs.

We also need to increase citizens' political involvement. No doubt that left wing parties are suffering huge setbacks almost everywhere in Europe. In Florence, we have kept the focus on our main target: the people and their well-being. While we exploit the benefits of digital tools, we value personal interaction with our citizens, precisely because of that frustrated demand of participation that in our vision cannot be met only by digital direct democracy. That is why we regularly organize so called "Listening Marathons", workshops and debates on selected topics with the participation of administrators, experts and citizens. Citizens' participation has also been ensured in relevant decision-making processes, such as the Structural Plan of the City.

Investment in culture is another key tool: cultural activities help cities to regain common understanding, tolerance and sense of belonging to a community, all of them crucial elements of any political project. Plus, in a city with important cultural assets like Florence, they serve also as stimulus for the creative industry.

Finally, a remark on what I would like to call the "road junctions" of political processes in the EU.

As a local administrator I am determined to pursue the well-being of my citizens, as a left-wing party member I will spare no effort to make sure that populism and extremisms find no room in our political system, but, as a European Union Mayor I can't help noticing that, unfortunately, from the city, to the regional, to the State and finally to the EU level, urban solutions and citizens demands have been sort of lost in the way and seem not to have reached the transnational level. Mayors are the frontline workers of our politics: their assessments might prove very useful for decision makers at the EU level. I will therefore conclude my remarks by proposing a reflection on how to enhance the role of cities in EU politics and imagine new political forums for them: a conference of Mayors and EU institutions could be a good starting point.