

THE LOBBYIST MAYOR FOR THE CITIES

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Telos: Every time someone talks about the direct election of the Prime Minister, people use the very evocative expression "Mayor of Italy". So, is it true that a Mayor has, in the administration of his or her own city, more power than the Prime Minister has today?

Antonio Decaro: It's an interesting parallel, even though from a strictly legal and formal standpoint, it's rather bold. I can talk about the experience – which has been extremely gratifying – I've had and am still having in these years as Mayor. And, also based on the sharing of experiences I've been especially enriched by since I've also been President of the association of municipalities, I don't think it's right to say that we Mayors have the same powers as a Prime Minister. We do have, however, a lot of responsibilities. A lot and various kinds of responsibilities. So many that very often what we complain about is that such great responsibility doesn't correspond to the same discretion in choice. We even tried drafting a law that brings together all the streamlining we would need. And we explained it to the Presidents of the Parliamentary Groups and to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico. For instance: does it make sense to ask us to submit different versions of the same certifications to the various State Administrations, even as many as 150 times? Does it make sense for us to have to sign off on involuntary medical treatments, veterinary ordinances, dog registrations, for us to have to authenticate the registers of the psychotropic substances present in city hospitals? And then, does it make sense that this endless string of duties is identical both for those governing a regional capital and for those administering a community with a population of 200? We don't think it's normal for the Mayor of Rome to have to implement the same procedures as the municipality of Moncenisio, which has a population of 29. But I'm convinced that if you have the responsibility, you must also have adequate powers, each according to your role.

The breakdown in the party system has likely been the source of people's widespread anti-political sentiment. And yet this gap between citizens and politics is not nearly as wide when it comes to the Mayor. Are you still able to get your citizens passionate about politics?

Citizens see us as the first outpost of the institutions because they know our first name and our face. Because they see us on the street and they know where we live. Because we are with them when they have to pick up the rubble from an earthquake – and there have been a lot of hero-mayors in recent years, unfortunately, during many serious emergencies – and when we need to band together to keep that bond in each municipality, each town in a community, strong. Of course, I see the bond my fellow citizens have with me; just like I see lots of passion in the people I meet every day. A passion that is political in the deepest and most literal sense of the term: of participation in public life, of care for the common good. Recently, I had new proof of this. A candidate had publicly claimed they should loosen up a bit on the city police regarding the widespread problem of double parking. On social media, this was immediately addressed to those citizens who have no intention of giving in to this bad habit of parking illegally that was very common in the past. They are the same citizens who, in my years as Mayor, we've worked together with on the collective action *Bari per bene* (*Bari for the Common Good*): a widespread campaign aimed at fostering a sense of responsibility for taking care of our city. I believe, after five years of experience as Mayor, that I can say that this call to action worked lots of people from Bari decided to shoulder some of the responsibility that we all have towards our city. Without taking anything away from the laudable battle of ideals to support our values, for me this is the clearest representation of political passion.

"I want to start with the small things" were your first words when your election as Mayor of Bari in 2014 was confirmed. Moreover, since 2016 you've also been President of the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI). What are the small, yet big things you've achieved over these years, in each of these two roles?

As President of the ANCI I'm very proud to have discovered the value of an association whose fundamental principles are to create a network among administrators, share experiences and provide mutual support. It is these values that explain how an association of Italian Municipalities has managed to last so long and be so united. I believe I've given my contribution in this daily job, made up of battles where sometimes you even have to bang your fists on the table – what comes to mind is the breakdown in institutional relations with the Government to defend the funds allocated for invitations to tender in suburban areas – but they are only won by being united, everyone on the same side, big cities and small towns, Mayors from every political front or from any geographical location. As the Mayor of Bari, I think our most important accomplishment, all together, is that we have built a large community by strengthening large and small bonds. A community that stays together by caring for its public heritage, doing ordinary maintenance, by sharing moments of collective passion and attention towards

those who are experiencing a moment of difficulty. Learning to stay together and take care of each other is certainly the best accomplishment I've shared with my city.

The electoral campaign for your second term is in full swing, backed by 11 lists, in a centre-left coalition. What still hasn't been finished and what new challenges will you, and your Executive Committee, have to face if elected?

There are still a lot more things to do. The last public works plan launched during the Municipal Council just a few days ago includes over 400 million euros in investment in about 400 interventions. Interventions that over these years we've planned with hard work and a long-term outlook. We still have to finish the task of improving the efficiency of public companies, something that in these years we've managed to fix from an economic standpoint, in the following years we'll be concentrating on improving public services, starting with public transport and waste collection. Then there's the big dream of re-qualifying the south coast: five years ago I made a commitment to starting the planning phase, and we did that. Now it's time to give that large area of the city back to its rightful owners: the people of Bari.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

I decided – and I take full responsibility for it – to give to this interview for PRIMOPIANOSCALA on the Mayor of Bari, Antonio Decaro, the following headline “The lobbyist Mayor”.

I hope this isn't taken wrong. For us here at Telos A&S, and for me in particular, seeing as I've been working in this profession for more than 25 years, it's meant to be a compliment.

This idea wasn't a coincidence; rather it was inspired by the interview with Decaro, third in the series focussing on Italian and foreign Mayors. Decaro argues that for the Mayor “*such great responsibility doesn't correspond to the same discretion in choice.*” And this is indeed why the Mayors who are members of the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) have “*even tried drafting a law that brings together all the streamlining we would need.*” This Draft Bill was then submitted and explained “*to the Presidents of the Parliamentary Groups and to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico.*” And he goes on to talk about his job as President of the ANCI, “*I believe I've given my contribution in this daily job, made up of battles where sometimes you even have to bang your fists on the table – what comes to mind is the breakdown in institutional relations with the Government to defend the funds allocated for invitations to tender in suburban areas – but they are only won by being united, everyone on the same side, big cities and small towns, Mayors from every political front or from any geographical location.*” So, in a nutshell, in the first case, Decaro prepared a Draft Bill to find a regulatory solution to a regulatory problem, which is a telling description of lobbying, and in the second case, he got everyone's voice heard to defend an interest, a partisan interest, that however would contribute to the common good, an equally telling description of advocacy, which is nothing more than a fashionable way of describing lobbying. In 2016 with the project *Periferie Aperte* (Open Suburban Areas), the Metropolitan City of Bari, which Decaro has been Metropolitan Mayor of since 2015, arrived first in the ranking of the Invitation to Tender for Suburban Areas, announced by the Renzi government for urban re-qualification and was allocated 41 million euros for interventions in various municipalities. Five years after his election, Antonio Decaro has decided to run again for a second term. Even though, according to the rap song the Mayor posted on his Facebook page *Colpa di Decaro* (Decaro's Fault), the Mayor of the regional capital of Puglia is fully responsible for everything that happens: from the fact that after Sunday, there's Monday, to the fines given by the traffic police, to the smell of frying onions.

Our ritual comment on April issue cover. The image chosen for the interview with the Mayor of Bari is the octopus. Every city has its symbols. Churches, castles, amphitheatres, towers, theatres, etc. They aren't just tourist attractions; they embody the soul of a place. Even Bari has its symbols: the Basilica di San Nicola and the statue of its patron saint, the Cathedral, the Castle, the cockerel – the symbol of its football team, the streetlights along the boardwalk, the Petruzzelli Theatre... But of all these, what symbol best represents Bari and the spirit of its people? We could do a survey. But it's enough to go back in time and, by reading its history, we may just find a symbol that represents Bari more than any other, so much so that the ancients set it into the mosaic called di *Timoteo* (by Timothy), dating back to between the 5th and 6th centuries. This is what we find in the Bari Cathedral: an octopus. While the fish represents Christ, the octopus is unlike any other Christian symbol. Thus, the people of Bari have long known about the goodness of this cephalopod and wanted to hand this delicacy down to future generations. The cover features a passage from a poem in Bari dialect, by the poet *Vito Bellomo*, entitled *La malasort d'u pulp bares* (The Misfortune of an Octopus from Bari): *La chedd du pulp allor, iè na vit'amâr ma u' chiù sfrtnat iè cudd ca nascj a Bbâr*. How could we translate this passage? “Octopuses have a rather sad life, but the least lucky of them all is the one born in Bari.”

Mariella Palazzolo

Antonio Decaro has been the Mayor of Bari since 2014, of the Metropolitan City of Bari since 2015 and President of the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) since 2016.

His experience in politics began in 2004 when the Mayor of Bari, Michele Emiliano, appointed him *Assessore* (member of the City Executive Committee) for mobility and traffic, as an outside technical expert.

Thanks to his commitment to sustainable mobility, in March 2008 he received the award *Amico della bicicletta* (Friend of Cyclists) from the Italian Federation of Friends of Cyclists (FIAB) and was recognised as the 2008 Environmentalist of the Year by the Italian environmental association Legambiente.

Since then his goal has been to eliminate traffic from the city centre and re-qualify urban areas. In 2010 he was elected Regional Councillor of Puglia, in the Bari district, for the lists of the Democratic Party (PD), and was the group leader of the PD at the Regional Council from 2010 to April 2013.

In December 2012, for the 2013 national elections, he ran in the primaries of the PD and got the highest number of votes out of the men on the list of candidates from the Bari area. Then the PD had him run for the Chamber of Deputies for the Puglia district, and he was elected as MP.



But his term only lasted a year because on 11 January 2014 he officially announced – on Facebook – that he would be running for Mayor of Bari in the administrative elections the following spring.

During the 2014 administrative elections, backed by a centre-left coalition between the Democratic Party, Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (Left Ecology Freedom), Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values), Centro Democratico (Democratic Centre) and nine civic lists, he got 49.38% of the votes.

During the run-off on 8 June he was elected Mayor of Bari, beating the centre-right candidate Domenico di Paola by 65.40% of the votes.

As soon as he was elected Mayor he resigned as MP and was replaced by Federico Massa. In October 2018 he officially announced his intention to run for a second term.

Antonio Decaro holds a Degree in Civil engineering, transport department, from the Polytechnic University of Bari.

A personal touch? On his [Facebook](#) page it says: “Mayor of Bari. Engineer, expert in transport and mobility. Jealous father of Giorgia and Chiara. Aspiring professional karaoke singer.”

Marco Sonsini