

THE RED MAYOR

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Telos: In Italy the Prime Minister is indicated by the Parliament. However, every time there are talks about changing the Constitution and go for a direct popular election, people use the expression 'The Mayor of Italy'. This shows that Mayors have more power to impact on their citizens' everyday life even than the Head of the Government. Does this apply also to Austria?

Michael Ludwig : In Austria, federalism is one of the main pillars of the Republic and voters make a clear distinction between national, provincial and municipal politics. As a result, the role of cities cannot be underestimated: Vienna is not only the economic powerhouse of the Country but also an important driver of societal development. Mayors, more than any other politicians, have their finger on the pulse of the local community, they listen to people's concerns and usually have concrete solutions to concrete problems. What is more, we are currently celebrating '100 years of Red Vienna'. For one hundred years, Vienna's citizens have always chosen Social Democratic mayors. The dark years of Austro-Fascist and National Socialist rule were the only exception in the last century. Social Democratic ideas have shaped the identity of this city on the Danube in a lasting way, and have made it the most liveable city in the world.

Municipal provision of services of general interest (SGIs) is a key part of this. Affordable housing has always been one of the best-practice examples of Social Democratic Vienna. Today, 60% of the local population live in municipal or subsidised housing. That is why international newspapers such as 'Le Monde', 'Berliner Tagesspiegel' or 'Süddeutsche Zeitung' have called our city a "tenants' paradise". Just recently, I issued a ban on evictions from municipal apartments in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, and asked private landlords to follow our example. After all, Vienna is a city where no-one is left behind, a city that supports those who are currently most affected by the challenges of the pandemic. And unlike other cities, Vienna will never sell or privatise its services of general interest! Our city serves as a good example for others. Other large cities have found out the hard way that the neo-liberal privatisation of the energy sector, of drinking water, or of housing was a mistake. By now we have already seen 700 cases of re-communalisation of SGIs in Europe. To put it plainly: municipal services are the backbone of social cohesion in our cities and municipalities – particularly in times of crisis.

The crisis of the political parties is probably the origin of the globally spread anti-political sentiment. However, this theory seems to be less true in the relationship between citizens and Mayors. Do you agree?

The political landscape has changed fundamentally in many Countries around the world. The worries and fears of people in the face of changes, not least the digital revolution, are fertile ground for the rise of populist movements that often call into question the credibility of 'traditional' politics. Add to that the "great irritability" – a term coined by media expert **Bernhard Pörksen** in his book 'Die Große Gereiztheit' – that is being spread by the tabloids and social media. As a consequence, many people feel disoriented, as the great Italian philosopher and author Umberto Eco often wrote. In this situation, it seems to me particularly important to maintain personal contact with the citizens. As Mayor of Vienna, I want to interact with people, have an open ear for them, and be there for them. In Vienna, we say 'talking brings people together'. And as I listen to the Viennese sharing their issues and worries with me, they become my very own issues and concerns. No matter if it is about transport, health, or housing – the people of Vienna know just who to turn to: Mayor and the City Government. Only recently, almost one hundred artists came to City Hall to tell us about their worries in the current crisis. The Austrian Federal Government had only added to their confusion rather than providing clear guidance. Together with experts, we were able to answer many questions and developed guidelines that offer concrete solutions. This just goes to show how much it matters to treat others with respect.

Vienna has been voted the most liveable city in the world for 10 years in a row. The City has gained leadership in Roland Berger's Smart City Study for the second time: it is the smartest city in the world. What is your key to success?

Population growth, traffic congestion, air pollution and climate change pose enormous challenges for cities worldwide. Digital technologies, embedded in a comprehensive Smart City strategy, offer solutions to these problems. The renowned consulting firm Roland Berger has confirmed that we are on the right track by naming Vienna the smartest city in the world for the second time, ahead of London and Singapore. Particularly our progressive e-health system and the Open Government Data initiative were lauded as exemplary. But I do want to highlight that this ambitious project is guided by a fundamental tenet: we do not want a 'two-speed society'. I have already stressed that Vienna leaves no-one behind. According to this principle, we are committed to ensuring that not only businesses get to enjoy the new smart technologies, but also schools, where we are expanding Wi-Fi, and senior citizens, whose quality of life is improved through neighbourhood networks. It is also thanks to these smart measures that our city has been ranked the most liveable city in the world in the Mercer Study for the tenth time running, and has twice topped the city ranking published by "The Economist". At the same time, we are number 1 out of over 100 cities in "The World's 10 Greenest Cities 2020" study – and not just thanks to our clean parks and clean air, but also

because of our smart public transport solutions.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has affected Vienna too. The City adopted support measures worth more than 140 million euros to save jobs and business and to mitigate the effects of the crisis. Important measures were taken to support schools, health and social care, housing and homelessness, and so on. In March you decided to stand against the central government decision to close parks, and all parks owned by the City remained open and accessible. Among others, shops, restaurants, hotels, church services, outdoor pools, that were closed since mid-March, reopened in May. Is this economic policy and the one of lifting restrictions working?

This situation has once again shown how crucial the role of cities can be: as Mayor of Vienna, there was no question for me even at the climax of the Covid-19 crisis that the city's parks had to remain open. I also successfully demanded that the Federal Government reopen the parks that are administered federally, like the Schönbrunn Palace Gardens. I could well imagine that many people in Vienna were going 'stir crazy' being holed up at home during the lockdown. In mid-May, we started our countdown to reopening many of the institutions that contribute to our city's quality of life: shops, restaurants, Vienna's famous local cafés and pubs, as well as museums, zoos, pools and hotels. We developed guidelines for all of them, tailored to their specific circumstances to ensure maximum safety for the guests. We knew, of course, that the 'revival' would not be automatic and that the city would have to provide targeted support for some businesses. To give you one example: to help the restaurant industry, I decided to give every household a restaurant voucher between EUR 25 and 50 so that everyone can go out to their favourite restaurant or corner bistro again and boost their business. That's what I call sticking together. Let me also add that Vienna isn't only supporting its population in overcoming the crisis as best possible, but also strengthening its profile as a research location. After all, Vienna has over 555 businesses in the life sciences sector, whose combined turnover far exceeds even that of tourism. And several city-funded projects are currently researching today's most burning issue: the virus behind Covid-19.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

In 2019 we launched our series of interviews with Mayors. We've gone from Latin America to Europe, naturally focussing in particular on Italian Mayors. They are all skilled administrators and fine politicians, even those who waved aside and said they weren't. Though, after several months, we have yet to receive an answer that was as permeated with political belief, as bursting with ideals and ideological references – in the very best sense of the word – as those of Michael Ludwig, Mayor of Vienna for almost two years.

The leitmotif of the interview is Ludwig's total espousal of his political belief in social democracy, and every single choice he has made in governing the city has been inspired by these ideals. His old-school zest almost brought tears to our eyes. He starts off by saying that *"For one hundred years, Vienna's citizens have always chosen Social Democratic mayors."*

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And he gives a nod to the celebrations for the 100-year anniversary of "Red Vienna", the city's season of social democratic reform.

In May 1919 during the first free elections under universal suffrage for the Vienna town council the workers' social democratic party obtained the absolute majority of votes and seats. The administration addressed the biggest issue straightaway: the shortage of housing. In the outskirts, people were living in illegally built shantytowns in conditions that were hardly liveable. Ten years later, the Burgomaster of the time, **Karl Seitz**, inaugurated the most well known public housing project in the world, **Karl-Marx-Hof**, in the Heiligenstadt district, a historic example of social housing inspired by the works of architect Otto Wagner.

"One day these stones will talk for us," prophesied Mayor Seitz at the inauguration of this complex that unfurls for more than a kilometre and that with its towers and imposing bay windows tells the story of Red Vienna.

The topic of housing continues to be a key issue in Vienna, and Ludwig rightly points out that *"today, 60% of the local population live in municipal or subsidised housing"*, which is rather surprising for a Capital and has earned it its definition *"a renter's paradise"* the international press. Still on the topic of politics, Ludwig provides a perfect analysis of the current situation, where society seems to be living in a never-ending state of *outrage* and where traditional politics risks losing its credibility. This erudite observation comes from the latest study by scholar Bernhard Pörksen, professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen, who has focussed on studying the interaction between the media, politics and society.

In his book, *Die grosse Gereiztheit*, he writes: *"Everything that happens that reaches the nerves of other people somewhere in the world, that moves them, unsettles them, frightens them, is able to reach and unsettle us too. [...] Everyone who posts and comments, who shares news and stories, who posts a mobile phone video online, [...] plays a part in permanently dissolving the boundaries between the areas of excitation in the networked world."*

What does Ludwig propose as a remedy? Personal contact with citizens: "I want to interact with people, have an open ear for them, and be there for them". Does it get any more old-school than this? A gorgeous, grey Lipizzaner horse gallops towards the V in Vienna on our June cover. The Lipizzaner is the symbol of the Spanish Riding School (the *Spanische Hofreitschule*) in Vienna. It is the oldest riding school in the world, specialised in the art of **classical dressage**. This school is so important that it was included in 2015 on UNESCO's list of **Intangible Cultural Heritage**. The history of this equine race stretches way back into the distant past. The original nucleus of Lipizzaner horses stems from solid genetic stock: 30 brood mares and 6 stallions from Andalusia directly imported from Spain (from which the name of the school derives). At the end of the 16th century, Archduke Charles II founded the stables in Lipizza, the namesake of this breed of horse. The image of these magnificent baroque horses, and of their academy, is inseparably linked to the city of Vienna. There couldn't be a better way to represent it.

Mariella Palazzolo



Michael Ludwig has been the Mayor, and Governor, of Vienna since 2018, elected with the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ). Until 2018, he chaired the Vienna Social Democratic Party.

Before being elected, from 2007 to 2018, he served as City Councillor for Housing, Housing Construction and Urban Renewal. Between 2009 and 2010, he was Deputy Mayor and Deputy Governor of Vienna. Previously, from 1999 to 2007, he served as Member of the Vienna Provincial Parliament and Vienna City Council.

He is currently the President of the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns, Chairman of the **Kreisky Archive** and Member of the Federal Board of **Social Democratic freedom fighters, victims of fascism and active anti-fascists**.

He received his PhD in Political Sciences and History at the University of Vienna in 1992. Until 2007, he was the Head of the Vienna Office of the **Karl Renner Institute**, the political academy of the Austrian Social Democratic movement. Currently, he is the Chairman of the Federal Educational Organisation of the Social Democratic Party. His original field of professional expertise was education policy.

Ludwig likes to go hiking in the woods and vineyards around Vienna, as well as in the Waldviertel or Mühlviertel regions of Upper Austria. Conciliatory by nature, he thoroughly enjoyed reading "**The Aesthetics of Resistance**", a novel by Peter Weiss on the political insights of the workers' movement during the years of resistance to

Fascism. "*Reading is one of my favourite pastimes*", Ludwig points out.

Born in Vienna 59 years ago, he married his long-time partner, Irmtraud, in 2018.

Marco Sonsini