

THE MAYOR-NOMINEE

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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 Mayors have, in the administration of their own city, more power than the Prime Minister has today?

Antonella Argenti: Mayors have a million responsibilities, but their power to address them is definitely limited. We are on the frontline in everything and we have a direct, constant relationship with our citizens, to whom we owe our job and concrete initiatives. In light of this, one might think that Mayors can be proactive and take effective, wide-ranging action. And yet the distribution of Mayors' competences, which aren't very extensive, is evident in our Constitution, and in the later **Testo Unico degli Enti Locali** (Consolidated Act on Local Governments). That said, I base my conduct on the principle of being a "good mother (or father)", and if working for the good of my children-citizens means making bold, strong decisions, I am more than ready and able to use all the powers granted to me. Always with the sole aim of safeguarding and protecting my citizens, considered as individuals, and the common good. The first thing in a mother's mind is the good of her children, and she safeguards them against all danger, always. From this, arise prevention measures and her careful, unique way of "taking care" of her citizens.

The breakdown in the party system has very 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 your citizens still passionate about politics?

Mayors are the expression of the majority of the voting public, of the electors of their area. And mainly in smaller demographic areas, like the small town I administer, it is highly unlikely that a citizen's preference for a specific party influences how they vote in administrative elections.

Although it's true, because administrative elections are sometimes held at the same time as other elections (like in May 2019 when also the European Elections took place), this has indeed led some electors to have a political affiliation. However, I believe that, when making their choice both the mayoral candidate and the team backing them are decisive for citizens'.

So, my answer to this question is that I am convinced that political ideals and passion are the lifeblood of my citizens, and that these coincide with the awareness and belief that candidates must be able to ensure administration is equal, honest and secure. Citizens want and choose people, not flags.

You have been Mayor of Villa del Conte for just over a year. The first woman to be elected Mayor in the history of this small Municipality in the Province of Padua. Your close relationship with your citizens in how you run the Municipality was immediately clear when you created the "Loneliness Councillor". What is it? Are there any other examples from a Mayor's daily life that you can share with us?

It's true, I have the pleasure of being the first female Mayor in the history of my Municipality.

I definitely began running this administration with the awareness and dedication of a woman who, before being the Mayor, is a mother, and with a past history of volunteering and working with associations. I have a strong team of Administrators who have close ties with and deep knowledge of the local area, and this has enabled me to immediately establish direct, human relationships with many of the 5,700 citizens of Villa del Conte.

In the many conversations I have had starting just after I was elected, I discovered that the concerns and problems the people talked to me about often stemmed from a sense of disorientation they felt in their daily life, from big or small decisions in their personal family life and the obstacles of a society that is ever more technological, of dehumanised bureaucracy, almost like little living robots. What came to mind was just how precious the family network of parents, grandparents and teachers was in the past, even just to share their hardship and responsibilities, and I realised that nowadays people are really ALONE.

Not just the physical loneliness that marginalises us, even the loneliness of those who don't have time to share, delegate, listen and do things together.

I asked *Assessore* (a sort of City Minister) Graziella Vigri, a woman with a long history of volunteering, if she would be willing to really BE THERE for anybody who seemed to be in need, with my collaboration, even just to listen.

Graziella, formerly the *Assessore* for social policies, enthusiastically agreed.

Then, with the arrival of Covid-19, this sense of disorientation turned into fear and isolation, and the idea of creating a Loneliness Councillor (one week before the famous 21 February) proved to be an essential support for everyone.

We delivered groceries, meals, medicine, newspapers to people's homes and talked to people everyday on the phone to provide

support and care for people and families, paying special attention to our Wise Ones (our elderly) and children. For the kids, we had presents, competitions, readings, kid-sized masks and much more. Every day we let our *grandparents* know we were there for them and offered our help. For families, we provided economic support and many other services.

You were praised in the news because of your well-earned nomination as a candidate for the best mayor in the world. You are competing, for Italy, against Beppe Sala, Mayor of Milan, and Giorgio Gori, Mayor of Bergamo. How did you react to this news and why did the World Mayor Prize 2020 committee make this choice?

I was truly amazed by this nomination, the only woman along with another two of my male colleagues from Italy.

I guess they nominated me because I truly am CLOSE to my citizens and because I have the awareness and knowledge of someone who works in healthcare (where I work), even through the new Loneliness Councillor. The UK became very interested in this Councillor, and it even featured in a long article in [The Guardian](#) on 14 February. A journalist gave me the news, and at first, I honestly thought it was a joke.

As soon as I realised what good news this was and that it is a really great initiative, I admit I even shed a few tears of joy.

However, just to be clear, I proudly hang this medal around the neck of my dream team and of each *Comitense* (as the people of Villa del Conte are called), because we have already won, just because we are one of the 37 nominees worldwide, but most of all we have already won because we truly are a community, that moves ahead together. Then if we win, we'll really celebrate, in the hope that our celebration coincides with the end of this terrible pandemic that has struck the entire world.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

Once again, the person featured in this issue of PRIMOPIANOSCALA's series of interviews with mayors comes as a huge surprise.

Who would have ever thought that the Mayor of a small town in northern Italy, with a population of just 5,700, could become the star of the international news?

And yet it happened, and Antonella Argenti, Mayor of Villa del Conte in the province of Padua, managed to do it twice in just a few months.

The first time was when she instituted a very *unique* seat on the City Executive: the Loneliness Councillor.

Enzo Bianchi, the founder of a Christian monastic community in Bose, northern Italy, once said: "*Loneliness is unbearable not when you are alone but when you feel like you don't mean anything to anyone.*"

Are people better off alone? No way! Loneliness is the deadliest disease of the century, claiming more victims than obesity, and almost as many as absolute poverty.

So loneliness shortens your life span. The diagnosis is right here in black and white in a [study](#) published on the scientific journal *Perspectives in Psychological Sciences*: the risk of death for people who live alone increases by 14% compared to the average.

These conclusions by American scientists from Brigham Young University are alarming, and only seemingly unique in the age of digital natives, of the explosion of "friends" made on social networks and in a society where if you aren't tech savvy, you don't exist.

Argenti understands this perfectly and explains to us that "*I discovered that the concerns and problems the people talked to me about often stemmed from a sense of disorientation they felt in their daily life, from big or small decisions in their personal family life and the obstacles of a society that is ever more technological, of dehumanised bureaucracy, almost like little living robots.*" And the Loneliness Councillor, a seat entrusted to another woman in her executive, Graziella Vigri, has been handling these issues since the beginning of this year.

The first thing they did was give citizens their phone numbers. Since then they have received a lot of phone calls. We can talk about this in terms of what happened before and after the coronavirus. Before, most of the requests were for services at home like signing ID cards and helping resolve family and logistical problems. After the coronavirus, however, the needs expressed by citizens began to change. There were numerous requests for information and for home delivery of groceries or to purchase medicines, because many people were afraid to leave their homes. So what did they do? They delivered these necessities and citizens found the items they had requested on their doorstep. Concrete assistance, which is not however meant to replace the professional help of physicians or psychologists.

Mayor Argenti points out that "*We are just a go-between: people who listen to citizens' needs and help them find the right service.*" In a small municipality where everybody knows each other it is obviously easier. Then Vigri is lucky because, since she is retired, she has enough free time. Mayor Argenti is convinced this model could be exported to other small municipalities. However, in large municipalities it would need to be structured differently, without letting it become an automatic process, something mechanical or bureaucratic. So this enterprising, passionate mayor has drawn up a series of initiatives to close the gap with citizens and safeguard them which not only her community but the [World Mayor Prize 2020](#) committee liked as well. So much so that they even put her on the [list](#) for best Mayor on the planet!

22 countries will be participating in World Mayor Prize 2020 and there are 37 candidates. For Italy, the other candidates include [Beppe Sala](#) and [Giorgio Gori](#), the Mayors of the two cities most impacted by Covid-19: Milan and Bergamo.

In Villa del Conte, naturally everybody is rooting for Mayor Argenti.

The image we have chosen for the cover of this month's issue is a bit different. As Argenti would say: It isn't the coat of arms that's important, it's the heart.

Inspired by the Loneliness Councillor, we have decided to portray a couple of meerkats.

You might remember this small African mongoose that was popularised in the animated Disney rendition of *The Lion King* as the carefree Timon, who played a major supporting role alongside the warthog Pumbaa. Meerkats - Swahili for "rock cats" - are social animals. They live in groups of 3 to 40 individuals and have a well-defined social structure where each meerkat has a job: there are diggers who build and maintain the burrows; lookouts, generally older, stronger males who watch for enemies

and, if necessary, alert the other meerkats; babysitters, males and females about 10 months old who help the alpha males and females to care for young; mentors, older individuals who raise meerkat young and teach them how to get food, fight and protect themselves from danger.

In a nutshell, these little critters could indeed never live alone!

Mariella Palazzolo



Antonella Argenti has been Mayor of Villa del Conte, Abbazia Pisani and Borghetto in the Padua province since 2019. She was elected with the centre-right civic list “CON VOI” (WITH YOU). She started getting involved in politics at University. However, she first held a public office in 2014, when she was elected to the Villa del Conte City Council.

She has worked for over twenty years in the social-healthcare sector as a communications specialist for the Local Health Unit - ULSS 6 Euganea, which includes 101 Padua Municipalities.

In 2003 she got a degree in Legal Sciences from the University of Padua as a working student. In fact, at the time she was already employed by, the bank, Cassa di Risparmio di Padova e Rovigo.

Antonella is passionate about sports, which she considers a “*vehicle for loyalty and friendship*” and has swum and done triathlons and classical dance competitively. She is also a federal instructor of water and aerobic sports. She is the second of four siblings, with whom she is very close and “*grew up nourishing each other with our mother and father’s love, lulled by their infinite wisdom and the affectionate scolding of our grandparents.*”

A candidate for the **World Mayor Prize 2020**, Antonella was born in Padua in 1968 and is married with two daughters.

Marco Sonsini