

Progressive Person of the Year

2021 seemed to be a year when progressive politics in Europe turned a corner, with positive trends being observed – at national level in some countries, at regional or municipal level in others.

A key country in which this changing tide can be observed is Italy, where important municipal elections were held in autumn, with the centre-left making clear progress. Such results should not be underestimated given that the leading progressive party in Italy, the Democratic Party (PD), had experienced splits and been confronted first with a populist surge and then with various manifestations of far-right nationalism. The first *Progressive Yearbook* two years ago provided an analysis of this challenging situation, in a chapter entitled “The Great Escape”.

And it was also in the first *Progressive Yearbook* that the tradition of nominating a progressive person of the year was introduced. This person can be a politician, an academic, or an activist – but they must have delivered an outstanding achievement (in politics, publication or otherwise) and be able to serve as a source of inspiration for our readers, and a source of motivation for Progressives, young and old, to renew and strengthen their commitment to our common cause.

One of the architects of the progressive change in Italy, and a well-known champion of it, is Roberto Gualtieri, the newly elected mayor of Rome, who in recent years as finance minister played a major role in fighting the Covid-19 recession in his country. Before that, he made his name as a member of the European Parliament, leading a constructive debate and policymaking process on critical issues like investment policy and fiscal rules, as well as Brexit. He is, in the judgement of FEPS, the 2021 person of the year.

LÁSZLÓ ANDOR
interviews ROBERTO GUALTIERI

“The reconstruction of the PD will be decisive for the future of the nation and of Europe”

Since 21 October 2021, Roberto Gualtieri is the new mayor of Rome. In the second round of the elections just three days before, he defeated the centre-right candidate, Enrico Michetti, with 60.2 per cent of the votes. The incumbent mayor, Virginia Raggi from the 5 Star Movement, had been eliminated in the first round, earlier in October, where she only came fourth. Gualtieri’s victory is part of a larger trend that sees the Democratic Party (PD) winning power in most big Italian cities. Gualtieri has been a former member of the European Parliament (2009-19), and as minister of economy and finance (2019-21) and convinced Keynesian, he was crucial in laying the foundations of the ongoing recovery in Italy. According to him, the municipal successes of the PD could, under certain circumstances, announce a similar reconstruction on the national level.

László Andor: *Congratulations on becoming mayor of Rome. Winning the election in Rome required a new strategy and fresh messages from yourself and the party. We would like to hear more about it. Please share your summary with our readers.*

Roberto Gualtieri: Our key message was that Rome does not just need to regain efficiency in public services – which is of course fundamental – but that we need to encourage a profound change in the city, working towards sustainable, inclusive development. Within this context, our policy agenda stood out for three elements: first, to make Rome a lead player in ecological and digital transition – starting from the challenge of innovation that has the potential to create good jobs – and reducing inequalities; second, to structure this vision around the idea of the 15-minute city, namely a polycentric model of urban development based on grassroots services, care and connections between people; and third, to focus on actively engaging citizens and the city’s rich fabric of voluntary associations. In addition to these three aspects, we must salvage and enhance Rome’s European and

international role. This message was welcomed by the people of Rome, as was the fact we formed a broad coalition featuring a strong civic component, which is now present in our council too.

LA: Municipal victories can be a sign of PD recovery in Italy. Is this happening, and what are the key ingredients of a centre-left reconstruction?

RG: The Italian Democratic Party is going through a phase of reconstruction and revival that will be decisive for the future of the nation and of Europe. We came to the October elections with a strong, credible political offering. An authoritative, tight-knit team of mayoral candidates and a national leadership group – led with intelligence and balance by Enrico Letta – that promoted unity on the centre left. I think voters rewarded not just the credibility of our candidates, but also the fact that in recent years, the PD has managed to counteract the populist and nationalist right-wing by building a new relationship between Europe and the people. That is, by taking a line that safeguards Italy's place in Europe, while simultaneously contributing to a change in European and national policies that puts behind the traditional line of austerity, linking together growth, equality, welfare, rights, the environment. In this sense, a paradigm shift occurred when the fight against the pandemic was accompanied by expansive policies to address the interests of the weakest members of society, and the launch of the NextGenerationEU recovery package.

Now we must consolidate the relaunch of the party, building on its ability to organise a broad centre-left field, and to embrace the new experiences and energies present in contemporary society. I firmly believe that the strategy we have followed in this round of local elections could be the key to success in the next national elections.

LA: Before entering the race for Rome, you were finance minister. How do you look back on this experience? Tell us your assessment of the economic recovery of Italy.

RG: I'm proud to have been able to serve my country at such a truly difficult time. Under our leadership, Italy weathered the devastating impact of the pandemic by supporting workers, families, businesses and the most vulnerable people, and laying the foundations for the robust recovery that is now underway. We must give credit to the joint efforts of the socialist and democratic Finance Ministers and the positive role played by the European Commission and the ECB, which allowed us to avoid the mistakes of the previous financial crisis, and to launch an unprecedented, coordinated counter-cyclical intervention (in 2020 worth 6 per cent of GDP plus 30 per cent of GDP in guarantees) which saved the economy, the social fabric of the country, and Europe itself. We witnessed a dual coordination at play, namely between nations, and between fiscal policy and monetary policy. Added to this, after a memorable negotiation process, came the launch of NextGenerationEU, with loans but above all grants financed by Eurobonds. I would like to stress that thanks to fiscal expansion, redundancy funds for all, and the collateral framework, we have saved millions of jobs. We have prevented the growth of non-performing loans (NPLs) and the triggering of a financial crisis, while empirically proving the efficacy of robust counter-cyclical policies for public finance too.

Indeed, thanks to the rebound in GDP and the rise in tax revenues, the deficit for 2020 ended up to be more than 3.5 per cent lower than the level that would have resulted from the fiscal stimulus and the output gap.

Now, Italy's prospects for growth are positive, and the Draghi government is working very well. In order for the current vigorous upturn to consolidate and turn into a structural increase in potential growth, we must continue our investment strategy and dynamically tackle the issue of reducing social and regional inequalities with a strong focus on young people, women and the south of Italy.

LA: What is the specific role of municipalities in the recovery strategy? How will you build back better in Rome?

RG: Cities' abilities to plan and implement investments will be decisive for the success of the NGEU and the recovery strategy for Italy and Europe. We are staking a great deal on the digitalisation of public administration and new-generation networks, sustainable mobility, energy communities and making buildings more energy efficient, research and technology transfer, and on the vast culture and knowledge sector – which is crucial to Rome – as well as on a new, proximity welfare services and social infrastructures.

LA: Italy has been a country with typically high unemployment and inactivity among young people. What can municipalities do to address such social problems?

RG: We're working on a pact with social partners for high-quality development and employment, to create jobs for young people and combat undeclared work and precarious employment. Our policy plan also includes introducing a specific scheme called 'Roma creativa', aimed mainly at young people. Another crucial factor is that of housing policies, with rent and mortgage incentives. Lastly, reducing school drop-out rates and improving active labour market policies will be decisive.

LA: Is there a functioning network of European capital cities? Tell us about how major cities work together and support each other.

RG: I'd start from an important figure: according to all forecasts, by 2050, around 70 per cent of the global population will be living in cities. The future of the world is the future of its cities. While they do not have a clear mandate at international level, or legal instruments, in networks such as the C40 climate group, Eurocities or the U20, urban agglomerates can leverage their closeness to citizens to build international strategies that integrate their values and interests. Even now, in tackling cross-national challenges such as climate change, migrations, cultural integration and last but not least, the pandemic, cities are gaining considerable prestige; this is primarily due to their ability to combine universal values with a solid pragmatism and the engagement of the population and local communities.

LA: Major cities and regions are represented at EU level in the Committee of the Regions (CoR). Do you see a clear added value here? What else could the CoR be used for in your view?

RG: The European Committee of the Regions, in which Rome intends to play an active role in the coming years, can contribute to steer European choices on environmental, social and, where possible, economic issues. Local administrators can help bridge the gap between citizens and European institutions. I have already met with the CoR president, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, to work together on key sectors for the future. These include the fight against climate change, the challenge of demographic growth, which is seeing a negative trend in Europe, or mobility. Cities in Europe have a clear role, which is of course to unite against the centrifugal forces of nationalist and sovereign movements. Aside from us administrators, it is above all our citizens, starting with young people, who feel that Europe is their homeland where they can study, travel, live and work.

LA: *At EU level you are well known as a former MEP, having played a leading role on economic, fiscal and investment policies during the recovery period. Can your new mission benefit from your experience as a member of the European Parliament?*

RG: My experience at the European parliament was fundamental for me in political and human terms. It taught me many things; not just in a technical sense but above all about the importance and potential for building advanced synergies and good compromises, starting from different cultures and interests. The European Parliament really is the most concrete, fascinating example of the phrase ‘united in diversity’.

LA: *Earlier this year a conference was launched about the Future of Europe. In your view, in which areas does the EU need to further develop in the next five years?*

RG: We are working to set up a meeting in Rome within the framework of the conference. The vital development that the EU needs hinges upon an adequate budget capability, financed by European debt and its own resources based upon Europe-wide taxes. That’s why the first step should be to make permanent the innovations introduced with the NextGenerationEU programme.

LA: *Your original profession is as a historian. Is there a specific chapter of history you would recommend for our younger readers to study?*

RG: The main lesson we learn from studying history and the historical method is that history never repeats itself, and that we should avoid our innate tendency to look to the future through the eyes of the past and seek facile analogies. Many social and economic sciences, on the contrary, tend to consider the present and its alleged ‘immutable laws’ in absolute terms, which can be misleading. Political processes are always rooted in historical processes, the origins, nature, and transformative impact of which one must make an effort to understand. Putting history to good use should help us avert the dual risk of voluntarism and determinism and identify the actual space of political action. That’s why any chapter from history can be useful. That said, I think the tension that arose in the first half of the 20th century between the growing ‘cosmopolitanism’ of the economy and the nationalism of politics, and the processes, tragedies and battles that led to the development of the European social model and the welfare state, is a chapter that is particularly enlightening for younger readers.