

Nichi Vendola, Going Glocal with his Apulia

Letizia Airos (June 19, 2011)



We got together with the Governor before his trip to New York to present his region with a number of events at the oenogastronomic center Eataly. The interview includes forecasts and thoughts about the Italian political situation.

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Nichi Vendola is the leader of the Italian center-left coalition who has the strongest relationship with his electors. His commitment to translate his politics into words as President of Apulia is obvious every time he is around people.

His presence in the Italian political life of the past few years has been strongly linked to people. The results of the Apulian primaries, which Vendola won massively beyond the highest expectations, are now an important chapter of our history. Unlike the United States, primaries are still new for Italy.



i-Italy met with him previously during his New York visit in 2010. On that occasion we were impressed by the welcoming he received by Italians and Italian-Americans, especially the younger generations. The Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò auditorium was overfilled and many followed his speech from a distance, through a monitor set up outside.

This time we had an occasion to talk to him before his New York trip. This interview not only includes details about his upcoming visit but also about political life in Italy. Attempting to describe the difficult politics of Italy using simple words is not an easy task for us, but it is necessary if we want to let people who do not live in Italy understand its complicated politics.

President, why are you coming to New York?

Because this year the month of June is important for Apulia. The Big Apple has Eataly on Fifth Avenue, a mega-store built by Oscar Farinetti that collects the most important products of Italian gastronomy and oenology. Apulia will be Eataly's special guest for this month.

The tastes and scents of such a particular place of the Mediterranean that is my land, Apulia, will be exposed and presented in this period. I will attend some of the extraordinary events on schedule to let the gastronomic Apulia be better known here in the US. Many restaurants will serve Apulian extra-virgin olive oil and our wines, while our products will be exhibited in a sort of gastronomic jewelry store. It will be a moment dedicated to the palate and to the taste, but also to a cultural and commercial exchange between Apulians and Americans.

All of this has a great meaning, being the event under the patronage of Slow Food: in Apulia we are committed not only to relaunch the economies of the countryside and agriculture in general, but also to place quality products at the center of a new agricultural economy carried on by the weaving factories of innovation. We have leaped forth during the last five years and today, and today we we will be especially happy to show our jewels in the splendid New York showcase"

Promoting a region abroad is a great challenge. Especially - lets say it frankly - when one thinks about the un-intelligent way public funds have been spent in the past. Financially speaking, we cut all the wastes, the merry-go-round of appearances , of the ephemeral: an amusement park of the oligarchies. We cut it all: trips abroad, and in the US. They made no sense because they could not influence the region's economy.

We concentrated on certain activities that are bearing excellent fruits. We have received investments in our aerospace district by one of the major Canadian entrepreneurs. Recently we welcomed Wang Yang of Guangdong, one of the richest areas of China, and signed a protocol about the development of renewable energy, tourism, and scientific activities in various fields.

We tried to live every euro we spent in the process of internationalization as if it were a seed planted in the ground, and we were carefully trying to make it sprout. Now we see plenty of sprouts. The sough was tough but important for international cooperation.

I would like to remind to everybody that during the first trimester of 2011, Apulia, in the midst of the economic crisis, raised its export rates to 19,9%: an extraordinary result in the Italian context.

It is our commitment to become an important piece of the overall national economy.



Up until 2005, the word Apulia, was widely unknown to the world. The word Brindisi was known, not for the amenities of the city, but because it was the port of departure for the ferries to Greece. Today there is an "Apulian tendency," an Apulian brand, and we know it is a quality one. International tourism comes to my region more and more, unlike for the rest of the country. It means we are probably doing the right thing."

Local becomes ever more global and vice-versa. Would you define yourself a glocal politician?

"I was born glocal! I have always felt to be an Apulian in the world. I cared for my cradle, my roots, my affections, and for every stone of my land, but I have always been a citizen of the world.

Throughout my political career I served in different areas in the world, from Bosnia to Colombia, from Tagikistan to Nicaragua: wherever there was a battle to be fought, I never turned away. I did it thinking that one loves his own land when he loves the entire world.

The Neapolitans and Milanese people have been part of a rational as well as emotional change, you said recently. If you had to tell an American friend about Italy, where would you start?

The Italian political situation is complicated even ignoring left and right divisions and the many aggregates and extremes, not counting the extreme center.

Many words would be needed. However, I can start saying that it is just not acceptable that a politician with conduct issues like Berlusconi is still in power. It is inconceivable abroad, and should be in Italy too.

I feel observed when I'm abroad, as if I was carrying a sense of guilt in his place, and I feel the duty to explain why he's been there for 15 years.

The center-left, for many reasons such as cultural backwardness, rowdiness, or fragmentation, hasn't represented a credible alternative to the center-right. Somehow even the laziness of its cultural battles allowed the right to become very aggressive ideologically and conquer the hearts of the country.

Primaries had a very contrasted gestation, as in my case. The party was against them, I won twice and fought as much, first within the center-left coalition and then against the center-right.

Primaries represent the possibility for a very large audience of young voters to take effective decisional power, the scepter, and to not allow party oligarchies to make fundamental choices such as who will govern a territory.

In Italy they represented a shuffling of the cards, away from the old labels that sometimes seem more to be telling the past than to represent the present or the future.

It was a democratic shock and the center-left had to get some air, and gave back hope to plenty of disenchanted voters. As soon as we got it we started winning, and now we will have to win to govern Italy!

Are you optimistic?

I am pessimistic from the point of view of the center-right, because the scene is catastrophic. It wouldn't be that bad if this catastrophe weren't reverberating across the country. Italy is living a dramatic season and has bitter days ahead. The consequences of these right-wing politics will be heavy and will burden the mangled corpse of the country for a long period.

On the other hand, the center-left is gaining strength, also thanks to the recent wave of cultural



renewal brought by the referendums and the last elections. Finally we are speaking about life, environment and change.

What is your reaction when people talk about a Vendola-DeMagistris ticket?

Many talk about these tickets...Bindi-Vendola, Bersani-Vendola, Vendola-De Magistris.

I don't know what these tickets mean. They are personalities that have to co-operate and together build the structure of a new narration, a new flow to Italy and open an alternative building site.

Anyway, it will be the people who decide during the primaries.

Let's speak about emigration, an important topic for a newspaper like ours, which is addressed to readers who – directly or indirectly – lived through difficult emigrations here in the States. It is said that Italians are racists. There have certainly been episodes of intolerance. But how much of this depends on a kind of politics that wasn't able or purposely avoided to manage the phenomenon?

Racism is an oppressive instrument of government. I believe that in Italy racism didn't succeed in sending away the immigrants, but placed them, instead, in a submerged situation of illegal work.

Racism is also an instrument for scaring and impoverishing the lower-middle class. I think that Italy is last among the other European countries in reaching the inevitable enriching appointment with multiculturalism, giving birth to a multi-ethnic society.

In Italy, according to the Caritas organization, of every 5€ spent on immigration politics, 4€ were invested in repressive activities, while only 1€ on inclusive politics.

I think it would be enough to invert the proportion to face reality.

If immigrants disappeared from Italy we would have a billion Euros less per year in gross domestic product, which the whole country benefits from: almost 9% of the national GDP comes from immigrant work.

Two million families would lose their au pair people, nannies, helpers, who take care of their house, children or elderly relatives. We might lose the possibility of INPS being able to cover all the pensions. Immigrants contribute to the national coffers.

In our lives we have fought racism with general ethics. We should be able to tell the truth. Our elementary schools have children of different colors. Some use fear, but once the topic of Africans is set aside it begins again with Eastern Europeans, Romanians, etc. Racism spreads its tentacles over the whole society and bring back homophobia.

Unfortunately, our country had a regression under this center-right government, and now it is important to rebuild the vocabulary of knowledge, welcoming, and solidarity. Among cultures, nations, and people.

We say goodbye and remind him of his previous American trip. He takes the opportunity to reassert:



"I came for six days in November, which I spent between Sacramento, Washington and New York.

I worked about twelve hours a day, meeting with Schwarzenegger at the summit on renewable energies and green economy. In Washington I met with Senator Kerry and all the main foundations from Ford to Rockefeller, and saw many economic operators, as well as giving lectures in New York and Washington.

I did all of this, and went back to Apulia with an invoice of 6000€, all black on white. I think that this is pretty unprecedented. I think I am someone who manages the funds of his Region sensibly like the head of a household."

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