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# Can Austerity Lead to Recentralisation? Italian Local Government during the Economic Crisis

Silvia Bolgherini

*The relationship between the remarkable changes that have occurred at the local level and the overlapping crises affecting Italy in recent years has yet to be fully tackled by political scientists. This article aims to contribute to the debate by arguing that anti-crisis measures have also produced structural effects that may actually weaken Italian local autonomies, suggesting the existence of an ongoing recentralisation. Several major questions are addressed: is such a trend inversion (from decentralisation to recentralisation) really taking place? Which dimensions should be analysed to detect it? What outcomes and effects have these measures provoked in Italian local government?*

*Keywords: Italy; Local Government; Eurozone Crisis; Decentralisation; Recentralisation*

The global financial crisis that exploded in the United States (US) in 2007–08 and the Eurozone crisis affecting European Union (EU) member states since 2009–10 have prompted European countries to re-examine, among other major issues, the role of central states and of local autonomies. While there is no question that decentralisation has been one of the major trends in Europe since the 1960s, with a peak in the 1990s (Sharpe 1979; 1993; Bobbio 2002), some doubt may be cast on its enduring dominance in the current period, opening up the possibility that a different trend has begun. Due to the impact of the above-mentioned crises, the drive towards decentralisation seems in fact to have come to an end, paving the way for recentralisation in the hands of the central authorities, mainly realised through austerity measures. The shift towards this renewed role of the centre is often tied in with the debate about the global and Eurozone crises, as a stronger role of central governments may be justified by the need to tackle urgent issues rapidly and effectively (Hodson 2011, p. 9; Dyson 2012, p. 796; Fabbrini 2013, p. 1022). This new ‘central empowerment’ may also impact on local government. The aim of this article is to investigate whether this is occurring in the Italian case.

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45 Recentralisation may, on the one hand, be induced by the crises. Notably, the need to comply with EU agreements and the consequent austerity measures imposed by central governments inevitably affect sub-national levels as well. On the other hand, this phenomenon may not necessarily be related, or not uniquely so, to the crises: such a trend, especially in some countries, appears to have been already underway, implying it has other causes.<sup>1</sup> In the Italian case, several scholars have suggested that the crises  
50 induced a centralising direction in the sub-national government reforms in the middle of the last decade (Mangiameli 2013; Perulli 2010; Piperata 2012) and recall the recent binding EU agreements as crucial to understanding this course (Dickmann 2012).

55 Until now, the relationship between the crises and the recent local-level changes that have taken place in Italy has been investigated principally by legal scientists and, of course, by political economists. However, political-science-oriented research has yet to be conducted on this topic. This article aims to contribute to the debate on this issue within this discipline. The thesis proposed here is that, following a period of strong momentum for local authorities and a dominant pro-decentralisation approach, a trend inversion – that is to say, recentralisation – has been taking place since around  
60 the mid-2000s. Just as in previous decades Italy decentralised along with many other European countries (Bobbio 2002), so too it is not alone now in experiencing this trend inversion (Viver 2010). Nonetheless, some particular (and contradictory) conditions make Italy a particularly interesting case for examination.

65 During the earlier phase of decentralisation, Italy started a quasi-federalist programme (Lippi 2011), which led it to become a strongly regionalised and would-be federal country. When the trend inversion started, the quasi-federalist programme was still ongoing. The result was a phase of superimposed contradictory drives, resulting in a kind of ‘bridge period’, from 2007 to 2011, during which the effects counterbalanced each other and there was uncertainty what the outcomes were going to be. Party politics played a major part in this dynamic. The role and importance of party politics in territorial reforms (Toubeau & Massetti 2013) or constitutional change (Behnke & Benz 2009) has been extensively analysed, also in relation to Italy (Keating & Wilson 2010; Massetti & Toubeau 2013; Mazzoleni 2009), and it will not be our focus here.

75 It is nonetheless relevant to our perspective that the fiercest supporter of federalism and devolution among the Italian political parties, the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN), was in power during some of the crucial years of the trend inversion from decentralisation to recentralisation. If the role of LN has been recognised as crucial in pushing the Italian government towards a federalist path (Baldini & Baldi 2013), often by setting the agenda and forcing other parties to adapt their strategies to this issue (Massetti 2012), it is nonetheless also true that the demands of this party have moved  
80 from federalism to secession, and from devolution to fiscal federalism, with the result that it has become a case of simulative politics (Cento Bull 2009, p. 141) rather than adopting a strictly coherent strategy on this matter, as its regionalist nature might have led one to expect. In fact, during the recent fiscal federalism reform, the LN did not display a marked political determination to avoid recentralisation measures  
85 (Massetti 2012), resulting in a basic, and paradoxical, lack of importance of this party



in the de- or recentralisation issue. However, the LN's exit from government in 2011 probably eased the introduction of more pro-centralisation measures.

Against this intriguing background the questions addressed in this article concern the presence of a recentralisation trend at the local level and its effects: how and where can this trend be detected? How does this trend inversion actually affect Italian local government and which aspects does it mostly affect? To answer these questions, the article examines the evolution of Italian local government following the national measures introduced during the years of crises. After clarifying, in the following section, some theoretical issues and the consequent expectations concerning the above-posed questions, in section three an attempt is made to build up a picture of the peculiar systemic conditions characterising Italy in these years. Section four shows that Italy was implementing decentralisation measures at least until 2009, while in section five the recentralisation trend is assessed by analysing national provisions concerning the local level introduced between 2007 and 2013. The last section offers a further interpretation and some concluding remarks.

### Recentralisation at the Local Level

A certain oscillation between centre and periphery, that is, between localism and neo-centralism, is not a novelty in political-institutional arrangements, either in Italy (Diamanti 2003) or in general (Peters, Pierre & Randma-Liiv 2011). Following a widely recognised decentralisation trend in Italy (Bobbio 2002; Baldi 2003), debate has started in scholarly circles about whether a process of recentralisation – that is, a re-convergence of powers and resources in the hands of the central authorities – may now be underway.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon seems to affect all sub-national levels, including the regions, but the focus here will be on the local – municipal and second-tier – level only, and its possible retrenchment to the benefit of the central state.

Page and Goldsmith (1987) consider three dimensions in evaluating local government autonomy: the functional responsibilities of local governments (functions), the capacity of local levels to make decisions about the type of services they deliver and about how they should be provided and financed (discretion), and the way local interests are represented and lobbied at higher levels of government (access). These dimensions are partly echoed by Vandelli (2012a), who divides the features of autonomy into three categories: activity (the functions local governments have), organisation (the possibility of choosing the way administrative bodies are structured) and guarantees (protection from legislative or administrative intrusion on the part of other levels of government). Braun (2000) distinguishes between a sub-national government's right-to-decide (level and type of decision-making, i.e. what can be done) and right-to-act (policy-making and implementation, i.e. how to do it). The latter is very close to the discretion/organisation dimension and both are highly related to the guarantees aspect.

Drawing on this literature, an attempt will be made to detect signs of recentralisation in Italian local government. This will be done first of all by focusing

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130 on the *organisation/discretion dimension*, defined here as the capacity of local  
governments to use their right-to-act to choose or implement their priorities, and  
to use their resources according to their own preferences, which are not imposed by  
central government. If such a capacity also implies freedom to choose their internal  
135 administrative organisation, then the top-down introduction of prescriptive rules  
about the ordinary working of local autonomies may signal the empowerment of  
central levels. If, unlike in the past, the national government is now able to impose its  
choices on or have a say in the inner organisation and discretionary choices of local  
bodies, one can reasonably expect to find a recentralisation trend.

140 Admittedly, substantial changes have also occurred on a broader scale: the forms  
and types of Italian local government have been radically modified by recent  
provisions. Focusing on these changes as well, which mainly concern second-tier  
authorities, will enable us to ascertain whether the possibility for local governments to  
choose without being constrained or trespassed on by an upper level has remained  
unaltered or not (a sort of *discretion/guarantees dimension*). It can be argued that the  
145 more constraining the state rules determining which local authorities may exist and  
with which requirements, the higher the recentralisation. If in fact, through normative  
acts, higher-ranked authorities may now further invade self-government spaces  
and, in contrast to the past, impose more constraining non-negotiable institutional  
arrangements on local bodies, then we have a shrinking of the guarantees of local levels  
150 as well as of their right-to-act and a recentralisation trend can be said to be under way.

Although these two focuses are still somewhat rough and ready, and will  
undoubtedly need to be further refined in future research, a first tentative analysis may  
nonetheless be ventured in order to appreciate comprehensively the changes at stake in  
local government.

155 The systemic conditions where changes and recentralisation may be singled out are  
embedded in quite a complex environment. Italian local government changes are in  
fact proceeding in the crisis-induced austerity environment. The main goals of the  
austerity measures that have been decided on are to comply with EU economic  
governance agreements and to avoid the collapse of Italy's public finances. However,  
160 under the umbrella of austerity and the consequent resource cuts it entails, many  
other measures have affected local governments, all potentially leading toward a  
re-empowerment of the central authorities. These measures range from simple  
revisions of a particular local feature to broader attempts at territorial reform.

165 Among the various theoretical arguments concerning the initiation of territorial  
reforms, two will be advanced here to explain recent territorial reforms in Italy.  
The first argument is that, although there is a tendency not to attempt reforms in times  
of crisis (Pola 2010), due to their high costs and low rewards, this has not been the case  
in Italy. On the contrary, innovations have been introduced in periods of severe crises;  
the latter seem to have opened a sort of macro-policy window (Keeler 1993, p. 436) for  
170 territorial reforms, and to have created a sense of urgency to act, in order to avoid  
worse consequences caused by inaction (Keeler 1993, p. 441). The rapid succession of  
local government changes and reform attempts seems to confirm this. The second



argument claims that territorial reforms are initiated when local governments fail to provide effective public services (Wollmann 2008) or fragmentation is extremely high (Swianiewicz 2010a), resulting in a need for rationalisation. Italy may be a case in point, if one thinks of the small municipalities but also of the provinces and the decade-long debate about the need for their rationalisation.

Both arguments become stronger if framed in the context of the domestic crises that rendered territorial reform politically necessary for the prestige of the political class, as will be discussed later. Moreover, the strong austerity target has often cast a shadow over all other purposes of local government reforms, and the changes introduced thus seem to be disconnected from a genuinely comprehensive project (Gardini 2011, p. 458) that looks beyond expenditure cutbacks. The result is a series of syncopated territorial reform efforts and scattered innovations.

In the light of all these arguments, our expectation is that, along with the outcomes of austerity measures, other effects will nevertheless also emerge from the qualitative analysis of the 2007–13 provisions. It is expected that the latter will affect Italian local governments in a restrictive sense, to the advantage of a strengthened central power, thus proving or pointing towards the existence of a recentralisation trend in contrast to the previously dominant decentralisation approach.

### **Italy: More than a Single Crisis**

It is worth reiterating that the trend inversion from a decentralising to a recentralising approach should be understood in the context of a series of superimposed crises that have affected Italy in recent years. The global recession and the Eurozone crisis hit Italy hard. Combined with a 20-year-long decline in the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Di Quirico 2010; Simoni 2012), they inevitably had a deep impact on the real economy: a high rate of companies going bust, a sharp drop in the number of self-employed, increasing numbers of families on the verge of poverty, difficulties for the younger generations in finding a job and therefore in starting a family, buying a house and making a living. Needless to say, this triggered a severe social crisis, although it has not (yet) developed into open rebellion or street demonstrations, as in Spain and Greece (Zamponi 2012). Without a doubt, however, there was a strong expression of discontent with representative democracy (Della Porta & Andretta 2013). This discontent predictably spilled over into a governmental crisis, the troubled life of the Berlusconi IV government (inaugurated in 2008) reaching a peak in the summer of 2011, when the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund called for radical reforms, which the government failed to deliver (Jones 2012). Berlusconi's cabinet (and its supporting majority) survived a few more months, before resigning on 11 November.

This was not just a question of governmental turbulence: it appeared that the country's political system was in crisis and the very functioning of the Italian system was at stake. Firstly, political parties proved inadequate to tackling the crises (Bosco & McDonnell 2012; Ceccarini, Diamanti & Lazar 2012), as indicated by the inability of

Berlusconi's majority to govern and of the opposition forces to present a viable alternative. In the most dramatic months of 2011–12, parties were sidelined first by the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, who played the key role in the formation of the Monti government and then by the latter as the most technocratic administration Italy has ever had (Marangoni 2012). Secondly, the decision-making and crisis-resolver function of the President of the Republic (Grimaldi 2012) grew to such an extent that it may cast doubt on the very nature of parliamentary government in Italy. Thirdly, following the installation of the Monti government, some analysts argued that Italy – along with Greece, which had also installed a technocratic executive – had a limited sovereignty, as its government lacked electoral legitimacy and exogenous pressures had contributed to its creation. Disappointment with the poor performance of the technocratic government led to a further increase in social and political discontent as showed by the results of the February 2013 snap elections.<sup>3</sup>

It was in this complex context, resulting from an overlapping of several external and domestic crises, that recentralisation began to appear in local government policy. Apart from meeting the EU's balanced budget provisions, austerity measures also had a domestic purpose as the political class needed to regain credibility among citizens. But before embarking on an examination of the provisions implemented in these crisis years, it is worth presenting a picture of the preceding phase of decentralisation.

### 1990–2009: Growing Local Autonomies

In order to claim that a recentralisation trend is underway, it must necessarily be assumed that an opposite trend was previously dominant. This was precisely the case in Italy: from the early 1990s until the mid-2000s Italian sub-national government experienced an extraordinary degree of empowerment. From being quite weak (Baccetti 2011, pp. 164–165; Vandelli 2013, pp. 21–28), it gradually acquired considerable autonomy and a quasi-federalist structure (Lippi 2011). This empowerment resulted from both political and administrative innovations.

Italy's sub-national levels consist of 20 regions (*Regioni*), of which 15 have ordinary and five have special status, 110 provinces (*Province*) and over 8,000 municipalities (*Comuni*). The soon-to-be-created metropolitan cities (*Città metropolitane*) and the intermunicipalities, especially the municipal unions (*Unioni di comuni*) and the mountain communities (*Comunità montane, MCs*), form the intermediate or second-tier level together with the provinces. The municipalities and second-tier authorities form the local level. The provinces were created following Italian unification and steadily grew in number. However, they suffered a political decline between the 1960s and the 1980s, squeezed between the growing roles of the regions and the municipalities and deprived of many competences, which were transferred to these two other levels (Baccetti 2011, p. 168). They then enjoyed a revival during the reforms in the 1990s, when they were granted new competences, before entering a new critical period in the 2000s. The intermunicipalities, on the other hand, were first established

260 in Italy in the 1970s, but it was only during the late 1990s and early 2000s that they grew in importance and numbers (Bolgherini 2011). In the last few years they have been gathering a new momentum. They are usually regarded, as in most European countries, as a tool for tackling financial, organisational, dimensional and expertise deficits affecting (mostly small) municipalities.

265 The direct election of mayors and the provincial presidents was introduced in Italy in 1993 with the purpose of enhancing local government performance. In 1999 direct elections were also introduced for regional presidents, thus completing the direct legitimisation of the sub-national governing institutions. This instituted a major shift toward a neo-parliamentarian regime at the sub-national level (Fabbrini 2001; Di Virgilio 2010, p. 63), entailing the direct election of the chief of the executive and 270 establishing the principle of *simul stabunt simul cadent*. The latter means that the fall of the government entails the dissolution of the assembly and hence new elections, thus reducing the probability of a crisis.

For Italian local and regional governments, these reforms ensured greater 275 governability and the so-called mandate-long executives, that is, sub-national governments that remained in office for the whole four or five years of their mandate (Di Virgilio 2005; Baldini 2002). But the direct election of the executives also represented a strong impetus to strengthen sub-national authorities, in both their decision- and policy-making powers. Mayors and provincial and regional presidents gained a new visibility as well as a more accountable and responsible role towards their 280 fellow citizens and electors. They also secured greater autonomy from the influence of political parties in local political life. The 1993 and 1999 electoral laws introduced a majoritarian style in sub-national government, thereby shifting Italy from a consensual towards a majoritarian model of democracy as well as towards a more personalised and presidentialised (Calise 2006; 2010) pattern of local and regional 285 government.

Innovations of comparable magnitude also occurred in administration. At the beginning of the 1990s, a ground-breaking law (Law no. 142/1990) revised sub-national 290 authorities' competences, thus initiating the most far-reaching administrative reform ever undertaken in Italian republican history. For the first time, the statutory autonomy of municipalities and provinces was recognised, the functions of bureaucrats and politicians were separated and distinguished and a closer relationship was fostered between citizens and administrations.

Some years later, in 1997, so-called administrative federalism was launched, as the 295 core of the re-organisation of administrative inter-institutional relations. This was an ambitious reform aimed at functional decentralisation and procedural simplification from the central state to the local levels without changing the Constitution (Vandelli 2013; Baldi 2003; 2006).<sup>4</sup> The scope and number of areas affected by the devolution of powers towards regional and local government were unprecedented. Moreover, state controls over sub-national authorities were reduced, and 300 centre-periphery inter-institutional arenas were promoted instead. Decision-making and organisational autonomy were strengthened through norms that gave mayors

full responsibility for matters such as the management of human resources and administrative structures; local financial taxes were also toughened, thus shifting from a (mainly) state-transfer-dependent system to a (mostly) local-taxes-based system (Vandelli 2005).

In 2000, a major law on local authorities – called the TUEL (*Testo Unico sugli Enti Locali*) or Consolidated Act – summed up and coordinated the wide-ranging legislative reforms and provisions carried out in the previous decade, thus giving Italian local government the first composite, organic and systematic normative framework. The 2000s began in the same climate. In 2001 the reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution, the most large-scale constitutional reform in the country's history to date, was approved. This reform left a federalist and regionalist mark on the institutional configuration of the country, introducing a federal-like system. The main innovations (Vandelli 2013, pp. 41–49) concerned new powers for the regions (in particular by enumerating, in art. 117, the state's exclusive legislative powers and leaving all the rest to the regions, thus reversing the pre-existing principle of the state's residual powers), as well as the explicit statement, in art. 114, that the Italian Republic 'is composed of the Municipalities, the Provinces, the Metropolitan Cities, the Regions and the State', and that all these 'are autonomous entities endowed with their own statutes, powers and functions' (thus conferring on sub-national authorities a constitutionally guaranteed status as constituent parts of the Republic). Moreover, increased autonomy was also granted to local and regional government finances: art. 119 stated that all sub-national authorities 'have financial autonomy over revenues and expenditures', as well as autonomous resources in order to finance their public functions. In 2005, the centre-right government made an attempt to modify the constitution (the so-called devolution reform), but it was rejected the following year by a popular referendum.

In 2009, fiscal federalism was approved, that is, a form of financing territorial autonomies based on the correspondence between revenues and the financial resources available at (and raised by) the same territorial level, and on the principles of autonomy, responsibility, coordination, cohesion and solidarity (Bassanini 2010; Caravita 2011). From the outset, this law presented a number of flaws, focusing as it did mainly on public expenditure cuts without devolving significant fiscal powers (Baldi & Tronconi 2011); it was also the last major provision in the pro-decentralisation trend that can be clearly detected.<sup>5</sup>

Summing up, in this period Italian sub-national government became much stronger as regards autonomy, competences and relations with the citizens, acquiring greater freedom of manoeuvre in terms of organisation, decision-making and finance. The main innovations introduced in the period 1990–2009 are displayed in Table 1. Sub-national government was reshaped into a more flexible as well as a more managerial administrative organisation, thus becoming the forerunner of institutional change in Italy. In other words, this was the period, in Italy, of the shift from a centralised state to one based on local and regional autonomies (Baccetti 2008, p. 109).

**Table 1** Local Government Measures During the Growing Autonomy Period (1990–2009)

Year	Topic	Decree Law (DL) or Law (L) No.	Main Contents (concerning local government)
1990	Local government general reform	L 142/1990	New autonomy of financial, organisational and legal powers in local policies (including cooperation, partnership, liberalisation and contracting out to non-profit organisations); abolition of State compliance control
1993	Municipal and provincial electoral system	L 81/1993	Mayors and provincial presidents' direct election; majoritarian electoral system
1995	Ordinary regions' electoral law for regional councils	L 43/1995	Mixed electoral system for regional councils; simultaneous semi-direct election of regional president
1997	Public administration and local bodies reform	<del>L 59/1997</del> <del>Bassanini I Administrative federalism L 127/1997</del> <del>Bassanini II</del>	Reorganisation of local authorities, functions and competences transfer from state to regions; self-certification; simplification of administrative acts; empowerment of self-government
1998	Provisions on local bodies	L 191/1998 – Bassanini III	New rules for local civil servants and further regulation of local authorities
1999	Regional electoral system, Amendment of 142/1990 on local government bodies	Const. Law 1/1999 L 265/1999	Direct election of regional president
2000	Local government general reform	L 267/2000 – TUEL or consolidated Act	Updating of the 1990s local government reforms in a compounded text
2001	Title V Constitutional reform (arts 117–124), ratified by referendum	Const. Law 3/2001	Federalist shift: attribution of legal exclusive power to the regions
2003	Partial implementation of the 2001 constitutional reform	L 131/2003 – La Loggia	Federalist attribution of powers to the regions
2005	Const. reform proposal	Law proposal No. 2544-D	Devolution (arts 117–118); Federal Senate
2006	Referendum on devolution		Const. reform on devolution rejected through popular referendum (called due to the lack of the required two-thirds majority in parliament for immediate approval)
2009	Fiscal federalism – revision of art. 119 Const.	L 42/2009 – fiscal federalism	Settlement of fiscal federalism principles (correspondence between local revenues and available financial resources at the same local level; autonomy, responsibility, coordination, cohesion and solidarity)

Source: Author's compilation.



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### 2007–2013: The Step Back in Local Government – a Qualitative Assessment

390 The changes introduced since the peak of the international 2007–08 crisis, contrary to what had happened in the preceding period, seem to represent a backward step for sub-national governments, together with a parallel recentralisation. With regard to the local level, as noted in section two, the reforms of these years were strongly characterised by austerity and can thus be labelled cutback reforms. They increased in number and scope during the following years and throughout 2012, before coming to a halt for several months due to the resignation of the Monti government in December 395 2012 and the electoral campaign for the February 2013 legislative elections. In summer 2013 the Letta government, supported by a *Partito Democratico* (PD, Democratic Party)/*Popolo della Libertà* (PdL, People of Freedom) grand coalition, finally succeeded Monti after a long stalemate resulting from the 2013 elections, and started re-launching the territorial reform issue.

400 At first glance, the measures introduced in the period under consideration, and illustrated in detail in Table 2, display an incredible degree of normative fragmentation, which hinders a comprehensive understanding. Nonetheless, the insistence on public expenditure cutbacks is evident: throughout 2009 and 2010 tough financial cuts were made in state transfers to local bodies, calculated in proportion to their population.<sup>6</sup> In the following year this trend became even more marked. An emergency economic measure approved in the middle of the summer of 2011 further cut state financial transfers to local governments, particularly those for social policies and infrastructures (Gardini 2011, p. 458).

405 But, if the conjecture proposed here is valid, these very same provisions also severely impacted on the structural (and not only the financial) side of local government. Therefore, as anticipated in section two, an attempt will be made in the following pages to assess this impact by examining the major provisions of this period: their impact on the organisation/discretion dimension will be considered first; then an analysis will be made of the various attempts to modify forms and options for second-tier authorities.

#### 420 *Organisation/Discretion*

Since 2007, and particularly until 2010, most of the cutbacks have also affected the internal functioning of local governments. In 2007 the national budget law made provision for the reduction (or abolition) of all municipal agencies and bodies that performed basic municipal functions. Municipalities were no longer allowed to set up agencies to carry out functions, services or activities on their behalf, thus limiting their autonomy and self-organisation powers. A year later, the creation of municipal functional consortiums (bodies implementing administrative acts or pursuing public interests on behalf of municipalities) was forbidden as well. In 2009, again in the national budget law, there was a reduction of almost 20 per cent in the number of representatives and executive members of all municipalities and provinces. The same

Table 2 Local Government Measures During the Recentralisation Period (2007–13)

Year	Topic	Decree Law (DL) or Law (L) no.	Main Contents (concerning local government)
2007	National budget law for 2008	L 244/2007	Reorganisation and expenditure cutbacks of at least one-third for MCs; only a single intermunicipal membership allowed; suppression of all municipal agencies exercising basic municipal functions
2009	National budget law for 2010	L 191/2009	Reduction of provincial and municipal councillors; suppression of city district councils for cities of under 250,000 inhabitants; suppression of municipal director general and ombudsman; suppression of municipal functional consortiums; ultimate suppression of state funds for MCs
2010	Urgent measures concerning regional and local authorities	DL 2/2010 then converted into L 42/2010	Suppression of territorial areas authorities (ATOs); cutbacks to state transfers to local bodies
	Urgent measures for financial stabilisation and economic competitiveness	DL 78/2010 then modified and converted into L 122/2010	Municipal clerk controlled again by Ministry of the Interior and suppression of independent agency employing clerks; compulsory joint management of municipal basic functions for municipalities of under 5,000 inhabitants; no municipal agencies for municipalities of under 30,000 inhabitants
2011	Further measures for financial stabilisation and development	DL 138/2011 then modified and converted into L 148/2011 – <i>Summer measures</i>	Suppression of provinces of under 300,000 inhabitants and/or 3,000 km <sup>2</sup> (not converted); halving of provincial councillors and executive members; compulsory joint management of all administrative functions and public services through a special municipal union (of min. 5,000 inhabitants) for municipalities of under 1,000 inhabitants
	Urgent measures for growth, equity and public finance consolidation	DL 201/2011 – <i>Salva Italia</i> (Rescue Italy) – then modified and converted into L 214/2011	Reduction of province functions; provincial bodies limited to council and president (executive body suppressed); provincial council with max. 10 members elected among municipal representatives and mayors; provincial president elected by new provincial council among its members (indirect election); provincial functions to be transferred to municipalities (later suspended)

(continued)

Table 2 – Continued

Year	Topic	Decree Law (DL) or Law (L) no.	Main Contents (concerning local government)
2012	Urgent measures for spending review with unaltered services for citizens	DL 95/2012 – <i>spending review</i> – then modified and converted into L 135/2012	Minimum demographic–territorial requirements for provinces’ merging or suppression (when converted; provinces are to be revised); regions’ involvement in province revision proposals; deadline for implementation Dec. 2012 (then suspended until Dec. 2013); temporary (until revision) provincial functions on their territory are territorial development and environment care, roads and transport, school building; president and council are confirmed as provincial bodies; metropolitan cities are established starting Jan. 2014; 10 municipal basic functions determined; compulsory joint management of at least 3 basic functions by Jan. 2013 and of all by Jan. 2014 for municipalities of under 5,000 inhabitants; revision of art. 16 <i>summer measures</i> : municipalities of under 1,000 inhabitants not forced but invited to join functions and services management; incentives for municipal merging
	Urgent measures concerning provinces and metropolitan cities	DL 188/2012 never converted into Law	Minimal demographic–territorial requirements (350,000 inhabitants and 2,500 km <sup>2</sup> ) so that provinces in ordinary regions drop from 86 to 51 (included metropolitan cities); measures starting 1 Jan. 2014; regions must devolve provincial functions to municipalities or acquire them themselves
2013	National budget law for 2013 Measures for metropolitan cities, provinces, municipal unions and fusions; province suppression	L 228/2012 <i>Stability law</i> DL <i>Svuotapoteri</i> (Hollow powers) (in discussion) Const. DL (presented late Aug.)	Suspension of metropolitan cities and province merging Foreseen measures: Province functions transferred to metropolitan cities and municipal unions; indirect election and new provincial bodies confirmed; reorganisation of metropolitan cities, municipal unions, municipal fusions; all mention of provinces in Const. deleted (thus constitutionally allowing their ultimate suppression)

Source: Author’s compilation.



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law (no. 191/2009) also abolished city districts (decentralised municipal organisations called *circoscrizioni*) for cities with a population of under 250,000. In addition, it envisaged the abolition of several administrative positions introduced in the previous decade, which had contributed to the renovation of Italian local government described in the previous section.

These included the municipal ombudsman, an institution that now survives only at the provincial level. The post of director-general was suppressed as well. Created in the 1990s in order to achieve a more flexible and managerial approach to the management of human resources in local government, the position of director-general was an important instrument of differentiation and autonomy for mayors and municipalities (Vandelli 2012b, pp. 339–340). In 2010, the role of the municipal and provincial clerk (or secretary) was significantly revised. In the 1990s, the municipal clerk had gained more autonomy from the Ministry of the Interior (to which they had previously been answerable) through the creation of an independent agency employing these clerks, who could then be selected and appointed directly by the mayors. Instead, in 2010, the independent agency was abolished and the position was brought back under the Ministry (Vandelli 2012b, pp. 338–339). The Ministry of the Interior has therefore regained control of a key position in municipalities, in particular in smaller ones: in fact, the clerks are responsible for a wide range of functions, as they oversee or even directly execute all the activities of the municipality.

The combined effect of these provisions has tended to diminish local authorities' discretion and capacity for autonomous organisation by significantly reducing their room for manoeuvre and placing greater power in the hands of central authorities.

#### *Which Second-Tier Bodies?*

The reforms of 2007–13 also affect second-tier authorities, i.e. the provinces and intermunicipalities. The latter entail forms of intermunicipal cooperation that envisage the creation of new entities composed of more than one municipality. In the crisis years, this tier of local government has been targeted to an exceptional degree: on the one hand, through provisions that significantly fostered intermunicipality and, on the other, through a series of attempted reforms aimed at substantially modifying the provinces. The main goals of both types of interventions, besides the obvious expenditure savings, were: to tackle the problem of municipal fragmentation (that is, the large number of efficiency-lacking medium-small and very small municipalities); to reduce the number of local authorities, in particular the provinces; and to thin out local apparatuses. As has been noted in other national contexts, such goals usually entail the merging, suppression or reduction of local bodies in a rationalisation perspective (Hulst & Van Montfort 2007; Swianiewicz 2010b), likely to involve substantial changes to the rules and forms of local authorities.

In the Italian case, as far as the intermunicipalities are concerned, until the mid-2000s local authorities could freely choose the cooperation form that suited them best. But since 2007, and with a strong impetus since 2010, the national government has

560 been intervening directly. For instance, in order to tackle (at least partially) the  
inefficiencies of small municipalities, those with a population of less than 5,000 have  
been obliged to manage their compulsory basic tasks (administration, police, school,  
transport, territory management, social care) through a municipal union (MU).  
565 Furthermore, all municipalities with under 1,000 inhabitants have been compelled to  
do the same also for all their administrative functions and public services. Considering  
that currently 70.4 per cent of Italy's 8,094 municipalities have fewer than 5,000  
inhabitants – of which around 2,000 have less than 1,000 inhabitants – it is evident  
that this provision could significantly limit the autonomy of the majority of Italian  
local administrations. It may thus be considered a rough indicator of recentralisation.

570 Moreover, while several intermunicipal options were previously available, the  
number has effectively been reduced to just one, the municipal union. Consequently,  
the number of [MUs](#) rose sharply from 271 in 2006 to 370 in 2013, while the old  
cooperation form of the MCs – established in 1971 and foreseen for municipalities  
located in mountainous areas – began to be dismantled in 2008, when their drastic  
575 reduction was decided at a national level, and each region was forced to reduce their  
number: Italian MCs fell from 300 to 223. Currently, their very existence is at risk: state  
financial transfers to these intermunicipal forms have been totally cancelled and the  
regions tend simply to abolish them (Palazzi 2012, pp. 4–5). This is clearly the result of  
a centralised provision that has had a structural effect on the very existence of some  
580 local authorities, by promoting one form and hindering another.

Moving on to the provinces, this becomes even clearer. The provinces have been  
particularly affected by the cutback reforms, and their case is emblematic in showing  
how financial and structural issues are entangled. Targeted as one of the financial black  
holes of Italy's public administration, the provinces have been at the centre of a series  
585 of attempts at territorial-institutional change, all entailing their merging or even  
suppression. The suppression of the smaller provinces was explicitly envisaged during  
the last months of the Berlusconi IV government in 2011, but the provision in  
question was then dropped. Just a few months later, however, the newly installed  
Monti government intervened on this issue even more radically. Through the 'Rescue  
590 Italy' decree, the technocratic government suppressed the provinces' executive body  
(*Giunta*) and made provision for the transfer of many provincial functions to regions,  
municipalities or intermunicipal authorities. Moreover, the indirect election of the  
provincial president and council was introduced. The suppression of the smaller  
provinces was once again included in the subsequent spending review decrees, which  
595 also revised their competences: they were now to manage territorial planning and  
environmental issues (in particular waste disposal), transport and roads, while all  
other competences were devolved to municipalities. Provinces that did not meet  
certain population and territorial requirements were to merge with bigger adjoining  
ones. But the final decree law, which would have reduced the current 86 provinces  
600 (in the ordinary statute regions) to 51, was never converted into law. In December  
2012, a week before Monti announced the resignation of his government, the decree  
law was in fact dropped, due to the huge number of requested amendments and

widespread local government opposition. The ‘freezing’ of the reform and its ‘suspension’ until December 2013 were established in the financial stability law for 2013 (no. 228/2012). During 2013 the Letta government proposed both a draft decree law – that foresees a territorial articulation where provinces (with their functions) are replaced by other territorial bodies such as municipal unions – and a constitutional amendment that drops all mention of provinces from the Constitution, which would consequently permit their ultimate suppression as local authorities. But the controversies on this issue are still inflaming political debate and no clear development is discernible yet.

The evidence gathered and presented thus far, and summarised in [Table 3](#), confirms the claim that a recentralisation trend is underway. What has been presented above is a preliminary qualitative assessment of the structural effects of crises-led measures on Italian local government. Despite the need for better refinement and systematisation of the analysis, at this first stage the evidence provides solid grounds for affirming that a recentralisation trend has begun in Italian local government: the capacity for organisation/discretion has lessened, and the options for second-tier authorities have been altered by new and direct central intervention. Both are clearly in contrast with the trend over the previous decade.

Moreover the presence of a sort of bridge period can be detected in the years 2007–11, when an interesting intersection of trends took place. Decentralisation was still ongoing, as the last federalist measure was the approval of fiscal federalism in 2009, and its legislative decrees were slowly approved, mainly in 2010–11. At the same time, recentralisation was already beginning, if the first measures in this direction are considered to be those passed in 2007. Especially from 2010, they became increasingly dominant. In this limbo period, contradictory drives pushed in different directions and overlapped with each other, thus creating a sort of transition period from decentralisation to recentralisation. The uncertainty of this phase is even more marked if one considers that recentralisation was (and still is) not officially supported, and speeches are still made about the ongoing federalist project ([Gardini 2011, p. 457](#)).

**Table 3** Collected Evidence of Recentralisation Trend: An Overview

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635	<i>Concerning organisation/discretion</i>
	Suppression of municipal agencies
	Reduction of local councillors
	Suppression of inner city districts
	Suppression of several administrative key positions
	Revision of provincial bodies
640	<i>Concerning second-tier authorities' options</i>
	Compulsory intermunicipality for municipal basic tasks – under 5,000 inhabitants
	Compulsory intermunicipality for all municipal administrative tasks – under 1,000 inhabitants
	Only municipal unions fostered as intermunicipalities
	Disappearance of MCs
	Foreseen suppression/merging/suppression again (?) of the provinces

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645 *Source:* Author's compilation.

At the moment it seems to be more a *de facto* trend inversion, not yet recognised in political discourse, rather than an official position supported by the government or by some other political force.

650 **Local Government Changes in Italy in Times of Crisis: Goals, Outcomes  
and Side Effects**

It has been argued both that crisis-driven and austerity-related measures have had systemic effects and that they have combined with other reform goals pertaining to local government. It is worth focusing now on this aspect in more depth. Starting from what Lippi (2011) argued about the Italian quasi-federalist programme in the 1990s and taking some categories and concepts from his analysis, it is possible to single out, as shown in Table 4, two main purposes of the 2007–13 measures: on the one hand, the introduction of a savings-oriented budget discipline; on the other hand, the rationalisation of local government architecture.

660 Compliance with budgetary discipline by all local authorities concerned is widely expected: sharp cutbacks affecting all public administrations are in fact planned for the following years and financial allocations have also been reduced (Ragioneria Generale dello Stato [RGS] 2013, pp. 2–3), although it will only be possible to calculate the real savings, that is, the observed outcomes, at a later stage. The rationalisation goal may have at least three expected outcomes, ranging from a reduction (or at least reorganisation) of the number of local authorities (especially provinces but also intermunicipal cooperations), to a better distribution of powers and competences at all local levels, and a reshaping of the territorial borders of municipalities and second-tier authorities.

670 As described in the previous section, the observed outcomes of this second goal present a differentiated picture. In relation to the number of local authorities, there have been some attempts to reduce the number of provinces, though the figure is still stuck at 110. Meanwhile, the promotion of the intermunicipality has led to a steady increase in the number of municipal unions and to a parallel and interdependent decrease in the MCs. The ban on the multiplication of memberships in municipal unions, as well as on the creation of new functional consortiums, can also be counted among the observed effects of the goal of rationalisation.

680 The expected improvement in power distribution is more difficult to observe. As described previously, several normative acts in the last few years (2011–13 in particular) were designed to reallocate a certain number of competences among provinces, municipalities and intermunicipalities, but with uncertain outcomes: some of these reallocations have already been decided and others not; yet others depend on the final approval of the reform of the provinces. Consequently, the final reshaping of territorial borders between municipalities, metropolitan cities and provinces remains hypothetical, as the process has been suspended until the constitutional and legislative arrangements have been defined.

685 Besides the expected and observed outcomes, there are also indirect ones, namely results not explicitly foreseen or planned by governmental measures. One of these is

**Table 4** Goals, Outcomes and Side Effects of Local Government Measures in Italy (2007–13)

Measures' goals	Expected outcomes	Observed outcomes	Indirect outcomes	Side effects
Budget discipline	Expenditure cutbacks	Consistent implemented, executed or planned budget reduction and cost cutting	Reduction in municipal services; increase in local taxes;disappearance of MCs;competition among local levels (intermunicipalities vs. provinces and vs. each other) for financial resources and transfers	Decrease of proximity Increase of democratic legitimacy's deficit Threat to the federalist path
Local government rationalisation	Reduction of local authorities	(Planned) reduction/suppression of provinces;(planned) creation of metropolitan cities;increase in municipal unions;decrease in MCs;abolition of functional consortiums	Over-legislation and syncopated/disjointed normative acts → only parts of the reform have been implemented	
	Better distribution of powers and competences	Some powers reallocated, other still uncertain	Competition among local levels (inter-municipalities vs. provinces and vs. each other) for survival, competences and political power	
	Territorial borders' reshaping	Suspended		

Source: Author's compilation.

735 the reduction of municipal services that many local authorities were forced to  
implement: the harsh financial cuts first of all led local governments to reduce  
services in order to save money (Gardini 2011, p. 458), as well as to suspend, or even  
block, many already-planned territorial projects (Perulli 2010, p. 386). Furthermore,  
many local administrations have been forced to increase local taxes in order to  
maintain the same provision and/or standards of services (CGIA 2013). The  
forthcoming phasing out of the MCs, which is a direct effect of the end of state  
transfers for these intermunicipal forms, should also be mentioned here. While these  
740 indirect outcomes may mostly be related to the budgetary goal of institutional policy,  
the phenomenon of over-legislation and of a patchwork set of norms can paradoxically  
be associated mainly (though not exclusively) with the goal of rationalisation.  
The toing and froing over the revision of the provinces, and partially of the  
intermunicipalities as well, is striking. But the spending-review-oriented norms have  
745 also often turned out to be scattered, non-homogeneous and contradictory (Gardini  
2011, pp. 458–459).

Finally, another indirect outcome is rising competition among local authorities.  
This undoubtedly relates to economic and financial resources and transfers, but also  
involves competence allocation and power sharing. The existence of traditional  
750 rivalries between provinces, regions and municipalities on questions of respective  
competences is perhaps more solidly grounded now, and could focus on  
intermunicipal cooperation: this is openly promoted and sometimes imposed, thus  
endangering the room for manoeuvre and the powers of the historical intermediate  
level (the province). But such competition has now also started among local bodies of  
755 the same category. Which (if any) of the provinces that are borderline regarding the  
fulfilment of demographic–territorial requirements will survive, and thus maintain  
their own apparatus and denomination, is a key question and has already triggered  
ferocious lobbying and power struggles. The same may hold true for intermunicipal  
cooperation: the case of the MCs, which, besides competing with the municipal unions  
760 are now battling amongst themselves for survival, is emblematic.

The 2007–13 provisions on local government also produced side effects, that is,  
impacts outside the reform's target area (Lippi 2011, p. 497). Each and every one of  
them may pose a threat to current local autonomies, thus reinforcing the  
recentralisation trend. Three of these side effects will be briefly discussed here.

765 A first effect is the reduction of proximity. The recent reforms abolished the  
municipal ombudsman and cut the number of representatives in local assemblies. Both  
these provisions may have an impact on citizen–administration relationships, in this  
case making contact more difficult and indirect. Moreover, the compulsory joint  
management of services and functions for municipalities under 5,000 inhabitants, along  
770 with compulsory association into a municipal union for those under 1,000 – though  
somewhat tempered by subsequent acts (in 2010–12) – represents a move towards a  
reshaping of local government on an intermediate level. This leaves the municipal level,  
replaced by the intermunicipal bodies, marginal as regards functions and services  
provision.

775 This effect is linked in a complementary fashion to the second one: the increase in  
 the deficit in democratic legitimacy. The indirect election of provincial executive  
 bodies as well as the suppression of the provincial assembly clearly inhibits a  
 traditional channel of local representation, thus depriving citizens from having a direct  
 say in local democracy. Moreover, the municipal unions also have indirectly elected  
 780 steering and decision-making bodies. Their executive committee is in fact formed by  
 the mayors of the member municipalities and by some chosen councillors. This means  
 that citizens have their basic services provided (and decided) more and more by local  
 authorities whose decision-makers they cannot choose, thus creating an issue as far as  
 the indirect election of these bodies is concerned.

785 A third major and more comprehensive effect may be that of further threatening the  
 already uncertain path of Italian federalism. The federalist structure envisaged by the  
 2001 constitutional reform encountered implementation problems from the very  
 beginning (Vandelli 2013, pp. 49, 56), thereby condemning the country to a hybrid  
 situation: a federal-like outline with a blurred shape (Baldi & Baldini 2008; Cotta &  
 790 Verzichelli 2011, pp. 214–215), even more so after the introduction of fiscal federalism  
 in 2009 (Bassanini & Vandelli 2012; Caravita 2011; Baldi 2010). The point is that  
 expenditure cutbacks have been loaded on the local authorities' shoulders, while  
 state transfers towards them have almost completely stopped (Viesti 2010). As a  
 consequence, the very essence of the federal objective, that is, the autonomy of  
 795 sub-national levels, has effectively been hindered. In this perspective, there is a risk that  
 the reforms of the last few years, and the provisions concerning local government  
 in Italy, will give rise to an even more hybrid situation, with a never-suppressed  
 (and now returning) centralisation and an as-yet unborn federalism as the ultimate  
 step of decentralisation.

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### Notes

1. For example, the still evolving centre–periphery relationships, as in the case of Spain  
 (Maiz, Caamaño & Azpitarte 2010).
- 780 2. Unlike decentralisation, which is clearly a political issue in Italy, as shown by both research data  
 and literature, recentralisation is still a barely discernible trend. No political actor has openly  
 declared a policy strategy in this direction. Nonetheless, scientific literature on this topic, though  
 still limited almost exclusively to legal studies, considers that a process of recentralisation has  
 started.
3. On this topic, see the special issue of *Contemporary Italian Politics*, vol. 5, nos 1–2, 2013.
- 815 4. The administrative federalism laws, approved between 1997 and 1999 and known as the  
 'Bassanini Laws' after Franco Bassanini, the minister who proposed them. This set of laws is also  
 known as 'federalism with an unchanged Constitution'. The label 'administrative federalism' was  
 applied because sub-national governments were made responsible for all administrative functions





(with some exceptions), even regarding matters where legislative power remained in the hands of the state (Baldi & Baldini 2008, p. 88).

5. It is worth noting that various legislative decrees to implement the fiscal federalism law succeeded one another in 2010–11 (and even through until 2013). The effect is that decentralisation measures have also been applied very recently, leading to a contradictory bridge period (discussed later).
6. The national annual budget law for 2010 (Law no. 191/2009) and then Law no. 42/2010 established that for the years 2010, 2011 and 2012 the cuts should amount, respectively, to €12 million, €86 million and €118 million.

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