
ONES TO WATCH



Between young Italians looking for work, migrants trying to start a new life and women seeking equal opportunities, the demands on Catuscia Marini, President of the PES Group in the Committee of the Regions, are certainly wide-ranging. Her response is a call for change, from grassroots politics to the highest authorities of the EU.



by Trevor Huggins

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The fight for social justice in a global economy is not a challenge for the faint-hearted. But in Catiuscia Marini, President of the PES Group in the Committee of the

Regions, progressives have a very determined ally in an important European role. The CoR is a significant, but often low-profile player in the wider democratic process of the European Union. Bringing together 350 elected regional and local representatives, it provides a vital link between EU policy and its impact on ordinary citizens. As head of the PES Group, Marini's main objective is to achieve a re-launch of sustainable growth and job creation in EU cities and regions. However, she is equally aware of the need for the European Commission to propose incentive measures for achieving the social objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. Economic and social progress need to go hand in hand.

President of Italy's Umbria Region and a Democratic Party deputy in the national assembly, Marini was born into a family in the central Italian town of Todi where politics and workers' rights had an important role. "My father was a member of the CGIL trade union confederation and politics was always the centre of our discussions at home," she recalls. Her own political awakening began during high school and university in the late 1980s, where she became involved in student politics as a member of the Giovanile Sinistra national executive. "At the time, there was a lot of student activity in Italy, including the 'Pantera' movement which occupied faculty buildings in protest at planned reforms of universities. There were also international events such as Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Given my background, it all made me very motivated to get involved in politics." Right from the start, her core values have been clear: "Social justice and equality, which includes equal opportunities for young people and for women. Although my generation had more freedom and greater opportunities than in the past, young

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women still struggled to achieve their full potential at work. So I've always been committed to giving women their chance to succeed, and at a practical level to supporting welfare provision." Working as a researcher after graduating with a political science degree from the University of Perugia, Marini made her mark in local politics and eventually became mayor of her hometown from 1998-2007. During that time, her commitment to projects in support of children's rights led to her recognition by UNICEF as a 'Child Defender Mayor.'

ENCOURAGING YOUTH POLITICS

Marini's career continued to flourish, with her election in 2010 as president of the Umbria Region and membership of the CoR in the same year. In 2015, she was re-elected to her position in Umbria and became the Socialist group's president within the CoR. Despite her own rise through the ranks, Marini is well aware that many young people are indifferent to politics – and it's a source of genuine concern. "The fewer people who are involved in political life, the more it will be open to influence by powerful vested interests," she told Queries. A more immediate concern though is the rise of populist parties across Europe. "It's extremely worrying," Marini says. "Populism is just a way of giving short, simple answers to very complicated questions. And it can be dangerous. For today's major problems - the lack of work, large-scale immigration and climate change - there are no simple solutions. To deal with them, we need careful planning, dialogue, research and innovation. My concern is that despite 70 years of democracy in Europe, the appeal of a national strongman is

Key Points

- If young people want to see change in today's world, they need to get involved in politics.
- Complex, global problems cannot be solved by the simple answers of populist national politics.
- It's time for a United States of Europe, with a central governing body that has a real mandate from European citizens.

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beginning to return – albeit in different forms.* Though clearly a toxic form of nostalgia, populism is presented as an antidote to today's complex, globalised world, where power is often wielded from afar. "Twenty years ago, the political focus was at a national and a regional level, and then the European level," Marini recalls. "Today, we are increasingly dealing with the impact of global events. A small business in my region now relies a great deal on decisions taken at a global level – such as export possibilities to certain countries, the value of the euro or the state of stock exchanges. However, Marini also sees a positive side to the global economy in the new opportunities for sharing research and innovation, and for finding solutions in a wider, networked world.

A POSITIVE FUTURE

Clearly, there is no shortage of challenges facing a Europe that, for many of its citizens, has lost its way. "We need to get back a positive vision of Europe. We have to rediscover the passion and creativity of the founders. They had to deal with the bloodshed of World War II, and in a way, we've got the bloodletting of the economic crisis. We need reforms that deal with Europe's big issues – employment and our relationship with the rest of the world, and that means Africa and the Middle East if we are to address a complex phenomenon like immigration." Marini has been helping to build those relationships through her involvement with international cooperation projects in Burkina Faso, the Palestinian Territories and the Peres Centre for Peace in Tel Aviv; and as a member of the European Parliament delegation for the Maghreb during her mandate as an MEP from 2008-09. That said, Marini also believes that more has to be done closer to home. "We need a Europe that is less geared to the abstract rules of finance and the market, and can instead recover a central focus on politics and

social cohesion. In short, we need a Europe that's useful and relevant to the people who live here.* All of this begs a simple question: How? To meet these different challenges, what needs to happen to the EU and the way it operates? Marini has long seen politics as a way of driving reform, and she does not pull her punches. "For me, the EU's top priority should be to push for closer integration," she says. "We can't turn back. If the dream of the previous generation was of a united Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall, today's generation should have another dream: a confederation of European Union states and the birth of a genuine political government for Europe. It would involve national states ceding more sovereignty, and changes to the governing European institutions – who should have a clearer mandate from European citizens. That means a bigger role for the European Parliament, and also for the parliament and the governing body in Europe to have more confidence in each other. But I can envisage a United States of Europe, and I believe that progressives and reformists should be working towards this."



ABOUT

Born in 1987, Catuscia Marini has risen from student and local politics to being a regional president. A leading figure in the Committee of the Regions, she has been a member of the Democratic Party's national committee since 2013.