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## Commentary \ **“Military barracks for profit? A critical reflection on conversion in Italy”**

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**Dr Andrea Licata, political scientist from Italy and Associate Researcher of BICC, comments on the Italian politics of base conversion. His criticism of only state budget driven approaches to bases closures is that they “disregard the potential of former military sites at the local level” and “deny the long lasting work of local committees working on the public re-use of military sites”. Instead he argues for base conversion in accordance with sustainability principles: “this would include a thorough clean-up of the areas, the conservation of places and buildings of historical and cultural value but also of green areas”.**

In 2014, the Italian government announced the closure and conversion of more than one thousand military sites within the state territory. A key aim of the government is to generate profit from the sale of these sites, which could be put towards improving the state budget during the current economic crisis.<sup>1</sup> To enable the sale, the government introduced several changes to the Italian legislation on the re-use and re-development of military sites.

So far, the priority of the Italian government is on its finances. Following the political declaration to reduce Italy’s huge public debt, the Italian government has declared that it will sell state territory and properties, such as military sites and even lighthouses, to generate new revenue. Considering the relatively small cash receipts from these sales, this strategy is shortsighted. It disregards the potential of former military sites at the local level; ignores existing cases of good practice on the conversion and re-use of military sites in other countries in Europe; and denies the long lasting work of local committees working on the public re-use of military sites.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.camera.it/leg17/1050?appro=578&Dismissione+degli+immobili+del+ministro+della+difesa;>  
[http://www.difesa.it/Primo\\_Piano/Pagine/Immobili\\_Difesa\\_task\\_force.aspx](http://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Pagine/Immobili_Difesa_task_force.aspx)

### **An enormous number of small and medium size sites to be converted**

In February 2014, the Italian Minister of Defence<sup>2</sup> announced the division and sale of hundreds of military sites, namely barracks (*caserme*) and garrisons (*presidi*).<sup>3</sup> In a public meeting with the National Association of Town Halls (ANCI - Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani) in November 2014, the Ministry concretised the decommissioning of potentially 1,500 barracks and other military sites. The closures are a late result of the 2005 transformation of the Italian army from a conscript army (*esercito di leva*) to a professional army 15 years after the end of the Cold War. At the same time, they are part of the Italian government's effort to cut the state budget as recommended by international institutions such as the European Commission.

The announcements resulted in a new discourse on conversion in the media and at some Italian institutes and universities, e.g. the Università Iuav of Venice or Politecnico of Turin and Milan. It has opened a window of opportunity for public debate on conversion issues, such as the various potentials of the conversion areas and the necessities of conversion projects. This debate is all the more necessary given that the Italian government is trying to move ahead as quickly as possible without a careful evaluation of the proposals and observations of the citizens, which would require public consultation.

### **Delay in conversion in Italy**

The impact of the Cold War on the Italian political system was, as for Germany, very significant. Considering the geo-political context, the militarisation of Italy's eastern borders was very high. After the end of the Cold War in 1989, at least 400 military sites of different kinds in the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in the northeast of the country alone (a region formerly bordering Yugoslavia and now bordering Slovenia) were abandoned without being converted to civilian use. These sites include barracks,

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<sup>2</sup> Roberta Pinotti (*Governo Renzi*, in government since February 2014)

<sup>3</sup> For more information, please read [http://www.inu.it/wp-content/uploads/Sole\\_Difesa\\_3\\_febbraio\\_2014.pdf](http://www.inu.it/wp-content/uploads/Sole_Difesa_3_febbraio_2014.pdf).

arsenals, depots, gunpowder depots, military hospitals, housing and more than 1,200 bunkers. All over Italy, the number of unused military sites is still much higher—an exact mapping of the sites to be converted all over Italy does still not exist. Italian politics has long underestimated the importance of the conversion and reuse of former military sites which is a complex, long-term process. As a result, a sizeable number of military installations, including brownfields, which became state property after the withdrawal of the military forces have been left largely in decay.

One of the reasons for the delay in conversion – apart from an absence of political attention, the excessive bureaucracy and current financial resource shortages – is a lack of knowledge and field studies on conversion projects. This situation can be particularly problematic for the small municipalities (*Comuni*) that have recently obtained or in the past bought former military sites from the state. In general, the transfer of military sites to the municipalities is an opportunity but also a challenge. This depends on the local competencies and decision-making processes. Legislative changes over the last years (2011-2014)<sup>4</sup> have not helped the process of conversion in Italy.

### **Relevant cases to study exist**

Italy is a country particularly rich in art and history. It has the largest number of World Heritage (UNESCO) sites in Europe with 50 locations listed as places of outstanding cultural and historical significance. Accordingly, some of the former military sites that will now undergo conversion are not only of financial but also of historic and cultural value. Adding to this is the sites' environmental impact. Situated in the South of Europe and extending into the central Mediterranean Sea, Italy is characterized by a fragile environmental system. Good practice scenarios for the reuse of former Italian military sites should therefore take into consideration both the artistic / historical value of some of the former military sites as well as environmental problems and needs.

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<sup>4</sup> Francesco Gastaldi, Federico Camerin *Novità per la dismissione e valorizzazione dei beni ex militari negli anni 2012-2014 in Urbanistica Informazioni*, no. 256, 2014, pp. 67 - 68, ISSN 0392 -5005

The list of Italian cases to study is very long. The cities of Rome, Milan and Torino will soon regain the control over one million square meters of former military sites. Other cities like Florence, Padua, Piacenza, Trieste or Vittorio Veneto<sup>5</sup> are currently getting involved in the conversion process promoted by the government. It is already clear that the process of conversion of military sites in cities is easier than in small towns and more difficult in the North East of Italy than in the rest of the country.

Some examples worth mentioning include the small town of Cormons in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, where a vast military site (Caserma Amadio) is turning into an urban park following a public debate (Prendi posto, 2009); also in the town of Piacenza (Emilia Romagna) a former military site (Pertite) is hopefully going to be converted in a green park thanks to the engagement of a local committee; since 2014 there is a solar park in a former military barrack (Caserma De Gasperi) in Spilimbergo; the historic military town of Palmanova which is being converted into a touristic and conference location after years of military presence<sup>6</sup> the case of Nora in Sardinia, where a military site was closed in order to allow further archeological excavations.

### **Ferrara and Ancona as good practices of the recent past**

In the interesting case of Ferrara, a former fire brigade barrack<sup>7</sup> was transformed into a “home for creatives”: the first “cultural factory” in the Emilia-Romagna region based on the concepts of creativity, productivity, sharing, with a strong focus on sustainability and the social sector. In August 2012, the Province of Ferrara entrusted the spaces of the former fire brigade (which were abandoned already in 2005) to the non-profit association Grisù (Spazio Grisù). Since then, the association Grisù has been responsible

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<sup>5</sup> Source [www.millenniourbano.it/ex-caserme-piccoli-passi-in-avanti-fra-difficolta-e-inerzie/](http://www.millenniourbano.it/ex-caserme-piccoli-passi-in-avanti-fra-difficolta-e-inerzie/)

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Martines, Palmanova, la smilitarizzazione di una città fortezza. Visioni ed azioni per un nuovo Rinascimento in Moreno Baccichet (ed.), “Fortezza Fvg. Dalla guerra fredda alle aree militari dismesse”, Edizioni Edicom 2015, pp. 231 - 240, ISBN 978-88-96386-41-5

<sup>7</sup> The fire brigades were de facto part of the military sector during fascism.

not only for the management of the space (4,000 square meters) but also for the recovery of the buildings and the clean-up of the site.

The positive effects of the involvement of the association Grisù were twofold: on the one hand, the Province of Ferrara helped to conserve the local architecture—the former fire brigade barracks represent a significant example of eclectic architecture from the 1930s. On the other hand, the handover to the association Grisù led to the creation of a space that has since contributed to the development of cultural and creative entrepreneurship. All in all, the outcome of the project in terms of visibility and—above all—economic development for the city of Ferrara (and the Emilia-Romagna region) is very positive. Currently, the former military site hosts more than ten small enterprises that are working in different creative fields: the design and manufacture of innovative products, graphic and web design, rapid modelling and 3D prototyping, online business counselling, creative architectural reconversions, creative staging and installations with the use of recycled materials, architecture and photography, innovative wood constructions or comic strips editing. The spaces for the activities are awarded temporarily and free of charge to creative start-ups that have been chosen by the association. Each assignee gives periodic accounts of his work; for this reason the association organizes monthly openings for the assignees as well as for the citizens.<sup>8</sup>

The case of Ancona concerns the urban Cardeto Park (Parco del Cardeto), a former military site of 350,000 square meters located in the hills between the city of Ancona and the sea. Following the initiative of a local committee of citizens (Comitato per il Parco del Cardeto), the city council of Ancona acquired the former military site and turned it into a public park by restoring impressive historical monuments such as the bastion St. Paul (San Paolo) by Antonio da Sangallo il giovane, the nineteenth-century lighthouse and the old Jewish cemetery. The park project, which opened in 2005, was run by the municipal

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<sup>8</sup> For further information see <http://spaziogrisu.org/>.

offices with the collaboration of a group of external experts as well as members of the local committee.

Although some restoration work must still be completed, the park project is already regarded as a success for the city and the region. The Cardeto Park is the largest city park in Ancona. It is a green lung in the heart of the city, attracts tourist not least because it hosts the Diffused Urban Museum (Museo Diffuso Urbano), and even includes the University of Ancona which is now based in a former nineteenth-century military building (Caserma Villarey) on the compound. Original plans included the transformation of the military site into a new urban residential neighborhood. Thanks to the work of the committee and the local institutions, the area of Cardeto Park is preserved.<sup>9</sup>

### **A new effort is necessary**

The procedures under the legislation of Sblocca Italia (2014) regarding conversion are quick, seemingly effective, but controversial from the environmental point of view and one-sided as they focus mainly on financial motives. For conversion in Italy to be successful, the conversion of former military sites in Italy requires immediate action on the side of the Italian government and the Italian regions. Starting from an in-depth analysis of successful cases of conversion in Italy, the Italian government should publish a detailed map of the sites to be closed and converted while the regions should encourage public initiatives to raise awareness among civilians (e.g. by forming working groups – *Tavoli per la conversione dal militare al civile*). The ongoing conversion process can be improved in accordance with sustainability principles: this would include a thorough clean-up of the areas, the conservation of places and buildings of historical and cultural value but also of green areas.

*Andrea Licata*

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<sup>9</sup> For more information, see [www.parcodelcardeto.it](http://www.parcodelcardeto.it).

Andrea Licata has a PhD in Transborder Policies (2007, Institute International University Institute for European Studies IUISE, Italy) and is Associate Researcher of BICC. He has worked as researcher and has devoted many years to sustainability and conversion research, visiting former military sites, giving university classes and public conferences in North America, Europe and Japan.

#### **FURTHER READING**

Moreno Baccichet (ed.), “Fortezza Fvg. Dalla guerra fredda alle aree militari dismesse”, Edizioni Edicom 2015, ISBN 978-88-96386-41-5

Francesco Gastaldi, Federico Camerin, “Immobili pubblici e aree militari dismesse: “occasioni” per le città italiane, fra ritardi e incertezze”, in Quaderni Regionali n. 3, 2012, pp. 441-460, ISSN 1593-862X

Andrea Licata, Il caso dell’area militare di Visco e il valore della memoria, in Urbanistica Informazioni, numero, 2011, pp 239-240, ISSN 0392-5005

#### **RELATED LINKS**

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