

RECOVERY, RESILIENCE, AND ANTIFRAGILITY: THE CASE OF BOLOGNA AND ITS WAY THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF “TERRITORIALISING” THE ITALIAN NATIONAL RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN

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1. Introduction: can the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan help the country to be anti-fragile? Presenting an open debate

The Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) is the most extensive recovery plan in Europe: €191bn and an additional €30bn thanks to the Complementary National Plan (CNP) 2021-2026 offer the country a unique opportunity to recover from the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, based upon the objectives of Next Generation EU.

Two years after its formulation and approval at the EU level, the plan remains central in the political debate and a highly contested issue.

On the one hand, it is de facto one of the most significant public policies the country has ever adopted. It offers Italy the chance to recover from the effects of an unexpected event like the pandemic, but also from structural problems in terms of both economic development and institutional capacities. It is a programme of modernisation and public works based on some crucial public administration reforms (66 reforms, OpenPolis¹), as well as on measures (358 measures, OpenPolis, *ibidem*) due to support the recovery by providing material and immaterial welfare and infrastructures. Regarding significant investments, infrastructure projects received €54.7bn, while ecological transition and jobs and businesses received €33.1bn and €29.9bn, respectively (OpenPolis, *ibidem*).

On the other hand, the plan has been criticised since its original approval for being quite a risky debt trap for the country (almost two-thirds of the resources are loans²) as well as highly centralised in nature and based upon a model and approach to public policy that fails to consider the specificity of the country. For decades, Italy has been characterised by a high institutional fragility, generated by a mix of unaccomplished reforms, continuous reduction of public expenditures and strong disinvestment in the public sphere: all factors which have largely eroded the capacities of the public administration to cope with ordinary issues and make the probability of success challenging in the face of such an extraordinary situation. While the plan aims to address these problems, it has limited

1. <https://www.openpolis.it/parole/cose-il-pnrr-piano-nazionale-ripresa-e-resilienza/>

2. <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/it/il-piano/Risorse/le-risorse-per-la-crescita/il-quadro-finanziario-del-pnrr.html>

It is de facto one of the most significant public policies the country has ever adopted.

capacity due to the limited timeframe within which it has been formulated and the dramatic conditions under which it was designed. The lack of a vision for the country's future, for one thing, and the limited role of local authorities during its design phase, for another, have been arguments of discussion, particularly in the first year after its approval.

In the implementation phase, the mechanisms of the plan, based mainly on procedures involving local authorities as primary beneficiaries of funding, have generated a strong de facto involvement and commitment at the local level, especially from city mayors who have become protagonists of a complicated and time-consuming system of proposal design, project application and implementation. While this articulated implementation process is producing a high level of stress in the public administration, it has however become a diffuse, sometimes fragmented, yet engaging and challenging, cradle of innovation in the management of the process of transition the country has to face. In this framework, metropolitan and large cities, together with small and medium-size municipalities, have become the real protagonists of the plan, which assigns them relevant resources and makes them co-responsible for the recovery. As a result, the country is deeply engaged at different scales in its implementation, despite the public debate having remained relatively passive, generic or highly politicised.

During 2022 and 2023, some delays and problems contributed to putting the plan in an uncomfortable position: the rising costs of energy and raw materials produced by the conflict in Ukraine, as the difficulties in implementing reforms, as well as a new political coalition which has a different understanding and orientation towards the recovery, are redefining the landscape and framework for action of the plan. The result is that a plan mainly drawn up by a technical government in an exceptional period supported by a broad political coalition (including almost all the main political parties), is now regarded within a highly politicised and conflictual environment (Viesti, 2023). The new government led by a centre-right coalition has not only revised its governance by producing an even more centralised control of the plan; it has also announced significant cuts to some of its missions, some of them closely related to the urban sphere, in favour of others, more oriented to support private businesses.

However, despite this new phase, the NRRP remains a significant challenge for Italy to go through insofar as it reactivates a country which has long given up its capacity for planning, programming, and thinking about the future to recover from a condition of institutional, political, societal and economic fragility (Viesti, 2023; Urban@it 2024, forthcoming). The challenge is considerable, articulated and relevant: the stakes are related to the capacity (and need) to elaborate and adopt a vision and policies inspired consistently by principles of territorial cohesion and integrated action towards sustainable development to rethink the role of public and private sectors, as well as to shape and implement a clear and sound model of federalism able to address the complexity of the contemporary world. In this respect, to be successful, the plan should be an opportunity to reflect in the light of a strategic and proactive idea of resilience, or rather "antifragility" (Taleb, 2012), which is the capacity not only to help people and places to react to crisis and bounce back, but also to enable people and places to build the conditions for flourishing and doing better in a context of "polycrisis"³ (Taleb, 2012).

3. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/03/polycrisis-adam-tooze-historian-explains/>

Looking into the general mechanism of operationalisation of the plan formulated for cities and local public authorities, as well as through its implementation in the city of Bologna, in the following paragraphs we will try to provide a contrasting picture of the state of play concerning its urban dimension. Secondly, we will argue to what extent the plan supports institutions' capacity to enable rather than "fragilise" (Blecic and Cecchini, 2021) in the post-pandemic period and we will conclude by offering elements to feed the general debate.

2. Territorialising the NRRP: a trap or an opportunity for cities?

Since 2020-2021, the plan's implementation phase has been described and referred to by politicians with an interesting Italian expression: *messa a terra*. A tricky idiom, as we have argued in the most recent report of Urban@it, dedicated to exploring the urban dimension of the NRRP (Urban@it, forthcoming, 2024). It alludes, more or less explicitly, to a *grounding* of the objectives of the plan from its top-down nature by way of implementing them operatively at the local level. In this perspective, the plan's implementation is based mainly upon the role of local authorities, its "beneficiaries", being the recipients of a very substantial part of the resources. According to the available figures, municipalities are the implementing bodies for more than 53% of projects and 47% of resources;⁴ almost all of them are involved in the plan, including small ones of less than 10,000 inhabitants, where, thanks to the investments of the plan, public expenditures will reach more than 60% of the previous values. This situation makes it a great opportunity but also a considerable trap for cities of all sizes, which have very different capacities and expertise available to cope with the complex mechanisms of the plan, its logic and rules, as well as its timing, milestones, and objectives. At the same time, the nature of the funding makes it necessary to use resources for investing in capital account expenses rather than current account expenses, which forces measures to invest in material projects while leaving behind other investments in the future management of the infrastructures funded by the plan (Viesti, 2023). Both these facts contribute to consistently moving the idiom *messa a terra* from operationalisation to different spheres of meanings, dealing with, on the one hand, *atterrare* (translation "landing") and *atterrire* ("scaring"). While money falls from the sky and lands (or impacts) on places, it also stresses and scares those places which are due to intercept and use it as they can and as much as they can (Urban@it, forthcoming, 2024).

The result is a dramatic reduction of the more general idea of "territorialisation" consisting of a multiscale perspective of action, but not based on a territorial vision of its impacts. Resources have either been directly transferred, top-down, at the central level to strategic projects; assigned to managing authorities/bodies, due to work and allocate resources at the local level; or assigned through competitive calls to local authorities or other actors. This mechanism has been criticised for several reasons: the pre-selection of strategic projects at the national level has been done by a government of technicians and not of politicians, thus making the decisions quite questionable from all political sides, but also because it lacks a political vision and project for the country (Viesti, 2023). Second, the mechanism of calls and applications (and its multiplication) produces massive fragmentation of interventions and projects. Moreover, the rush in applying

4. <https://www.lavoripubblici.it/documenti2023/lvpb2/relazione-semestrale-pnrr-31052023.pdf> , June 2023

The decision to include metropolitan cities as managing authorities in the NRRP has given new life to these institutions.

for projects has sometimes reduced the quality of projects, especially in contexts which could not count on good available projects and strategic frameworks. Finally, it has been argued, the logic of incentives and calls can result in rewarding the usual “winners”, thus amplifying inequalities and disparities (Viesti, 2023; Urban@it, forthcoming, 2024).

As a result, especially in the first phase, rather than being able to contribute to a strategic action of territorialisation of the plan, local authorities have been overwhelmed and intimidated by the plan. Indeed, after an initial concerned and negative reaction to the complexity of its top-down designed mechanism, they tried to adapt to it, gradually organising to voice the need for a simplified, more transparent and strategic territorialisation of the plan. In particular, the National Association of Municipalities (ANCI) has taken a leading role. It has requested and obtained the revision of rules and procedures in the light of simplification, activated a vital function of support to local authorities⁵ and, finally, has taken on a proactive role towards the plan by supporting its implementation also against the more recent change in orientation of the new political coalitions governing the country.

Similar considerations can be made regarding the process of monitoring the implementation of the plan. The web platform, *Italia Domani* has been designed to present the whole framework and its objectives simply and clearly. Since April 2023, it has provided updated datasets on the projects funded by the NRRP to facilitate public information and debate. A second important tool, the ReGIS platform, collects all the data provided by the beneficiaries of the funding according to common rules in order to produce the monitoring of the plan⁶. Despite technical problems which have characterised its integration with other systems, both tools have the potential to produce shared public knowledge on the plan. However, several critiques have been presented by experts and scholars, as well as public opinion, to ask for a clearer and more sound publication of all available data in the form of open data. Moreover, the platform has been criticised for its complexity, which generates an additional burden for the local administration when they must certify that projects meet the targets to receive the resources assigned, rather than supporting its operationalisation.

These first elements describe a situation where the plan acts as both a “fragiliser” and an “enabler”. The effort to act locally has significantly invested local administrations; however, the reaction generated shows, as we will see in the following paragraphs, elements of interest, if not for some *prospect* for cities and their role in contributing to the antifragility of the country.

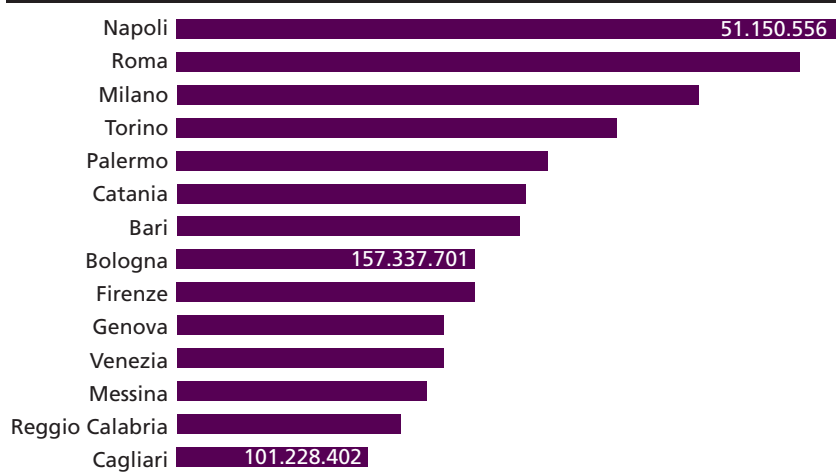
3. Cities and/or metropolitan cities: the Bologna NRRP case within a persisting dualism

The city and metropolitan city of Bologna are the focus of the second part of this chapter.⁷ The selection of the case is the result of a broader observatory on the implementation of the plan in the most significant metropolitan cities in Italy, also supported by the IX Urban@it Report, one section of which is dedicated to exploring the implementation of the NRRP in Milan, Turin, Bologna, Naples and Bari (Urban@it, 2024, forthcoming). It is worth noting that the plan identifies a specific role for metropolitan cities as managing authorities of *Piani Integrati di Intervento*,

5. It is the case of the periodic report issued by ANCI on the state of the play of the plan which provides both a guide and a representation of its impact at the municipal level and the platform for municipalities dedicated to the plan managed by ANCI (Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani) and IFEL (Istituto per la Finanza e l'Economia Locale).
6. ReGIS is the digital platform that all public bodies must use in order to comply with the monitoring and control of the implementation and the financial plans of the NRRP resources, in relation to milestones, targets and projects. <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/it/Interventi/regis--il-sistema-gestionale-unico-del-pnrr.html>
7. More detailed information can be found in IX Urban@it Report, 2024, forthcoming, see in particular Chapter III dedicated to Bologna and the following background papers: Bonetti T. “Itinerari collaborativi nell’area metropolitana di Bologna”, Boni A. L. “Il PNRR e Bologna”; Capasso E. and Corbia R. “PNRR e partecipazione dei Comuni: il caso di Bologna”; Orioli V. and Carlini C., “Il PNRR e la nuova mobilità di Bologna”.

an initiative already available before the plan was approved, which has received special funds from the NRRP, allocated to integrated projects for urban regeneration (around €3bn euros, according to OpenPolis data⁸).

Table 1- NRRP resources (millions of euros) for Integrated Urban Regeneration Plans in metropolitan cities



Source: OpenPolis (<https://www.openpolis.it/il-pnrr-e-il-recupero-delle-periferie-urbane/>)

The case of Bologna clearly offers elements to understand how a city with a strong tradition of metropolitan vision and governance...has been able to...interpret the plan as a resource and an opportunity.

As reconstructed by Baldi *et al.* (2023), the decision to identify metropolitan cities as managing authorities of this mission is particularly interesting since it offered them an opportunity to interpret strategically some of the tasks assigned by law with the “Delrio Reform”, dating back to 2014 and currently under revision – a law which succeeded in instituting metropolitan cities in Italy after decades of stalemate and discussion but which has also given them only limited powers. However, the decision to include metropolitan cities as managing authorities in the NRRP has given new life to these institutions, which the national operational programme under the 2014-2020 cohesion policies had already infused.

In general terms, the NRRP identified metropolitan cities as beneficiaries of resources. It was quite an important decision, one could argue, but this has generally meant that cities (municipal authorities) and metropolitan cities (metropolitan authorities) have been working more in parallel than in synergy, with a more decisive role for cities in terms of resources received and tasks to accomplish. A quantitative reconstruction of the funding received shows that municipalities have had the most significant part of the cake and that the slice assigned to metropolitan cities has often landed on the capital city within the metropolitan city. One should not forget that, by law, the mayor of the capital city of a metropolitan city is also the *de facto* mayor (but not directly elected) of the metropolitan city. Moreover, a look at the process from the governance side shows that synergies and coordination between metropolitan authorities and the capital cities have been light, if not negligible, except in a few cases, and that the two actors are working in parallel with little coordination and vision.

The case of Bologna clearly offers elements to understand how a city with a strong tradition of metropolitan vision and governance, dating back before the law instituting metropolitan cities at the national level,

8. <https://www.openpolis.it/il-pnrr-e-il-recupero-delle-periferie-urbane/>

has been able to reinforce its longstanding investment in fostering metropolitan governance and interpret the plan as a resource and an opportunity. The case is also interesting from a second perspective; the long history and tradition in spatial planning at both urban and metropolitan levels, as well as a robust socioeconomic cohesion history, enabled Bologna to frame the extraordinary NRRP opportunity within a long-term strategy and use it as a lever to revise and reinforce its vision. As we will argue in the following paragraphs, unlike other cities, the projects selected and funded with the NRRP are coherent with the pre-Covid vision and planning processes and try to build on them. A final element of interest is related to the peculiarity of a context in which a unique civic observatory on the NRRP has been established, showing the necessity of public debate on and public engagement with one of the country's most essential and relevant public policies since the Second World War.

As a metropolitan city and municipal government, Bologna will be beneficiary of around €1bn (€1.1bn), one of the few cities in Italy, together with Rome, with such a significant sum available, especially at municipal level (€1.03bn). This can be considered the result of the decisive action of political and technical coordination between the city and the metropolitan authority: a board for the joint governance of the NRRP at the metropolitan level, as well as a joint secretariat working both in explorative and management functions, has been crucial to obtaining this success in the phase of applying for funding and is now also the lever for the implementation phase. Half of the financing is concentrated in the capital city, the remaining half in the metropolitan areas and mainly dedicated to mobility policies, urban regeneration initiatives and the renewal of material welfare.

More generally, it is helpful to remember that, according to recent data issued by ANCI (2023), the metropolitan authorities are responsible for around €4.5bn in resources, with a strong focus on urban regeneration, reforestation, schools and education.⁹ On the other side, according to ANCI data (based on figures from the National Anti-Corruption Authority, ANAC), municipalities and all regional and provincial capitals are following the schedule foreseen by the plan, despite the complexity of procedures for applying, which have been partially overcome thanks to collaboration between the different layers of the state administration. It is, however, worth noting that only in a few cases has the coordination between metropolitan cities and the capital city been established in a solid and clear manner, with clear intentionality and political and institutional investment, as in the case of Bologna. In most experiences, the coordination is relatively informal, and the two administrations proceed on parallel tracks.

Finally, the last official update on the NRRP prepared by the national government¹⁰ reminds us that the complexity of the procedures is a significant obstacle, as is the lack of human and knowledge resources in local administration, especially in medium-sized and small cities. In the light of this, on the one hand, some of the procedures required to apply are based on already available and advanced projects; on the other, unique resources have been allocated to cities to hire experts to support the design and management of the process. However, difficulties in hiring and managing these new resources have emerged. Some changes

9. <https://www.anci.it/presentati-i-risultati-del-progetto-anci-metropoli-strategiche-sulle-citta-metropolitane/>

10. <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/it/strumenti/documenti/archivio-documenti/terza-relazione-al-parlamento-sullo-stato-di-attuazione-del-pian.html>

were made to make it a more straightforward procedure and offer the opportunity to reinforce the public servants' role.

4. Can exceptionality dialogue with a long-term vision be dealt with within a public debate: can Bologna be a reference point?

The case of Bologna is relevant, from at least two other perspectives.

The first has to do with the capacity of local administrations to deal with the exceptional resources granted by the NRRP within a long-term and strategic vision of the future. How can such an extraordinary amount of money be used in a country where municipalities have not been able to work on long-term visions or structural projects for decades? Cuts in public expenditures, limitations on public debt, lack of human resources and expertise, and political fragmentation are standard features of the local administration experience in Italy in recent decades. The NRRP provides a unique opportunity to reverse these conditions for a limited period but also to impact the country's transition trajectory. However, its procedures and mechanism have seriously stressed municipalities when asked to compete for funding and select projects and policies that could be critical, urgent and strategic but also mature enough to be implemented and generate impact. Not all cities have managed to strike a balance between urgency, feasibility and the strategic dimension. Too comprehensive a list of urgencies, too little and narrow the time for formulating a vision have probably not contributed everywhere to match the requirements of the NRRP with local needs. However, some cities have been exceptionally able to cope with this dilemma based on their local resources and longstanding tradition of planning and programming.

This is particularly the case of Bologna, where the NRRP projects have a strong coherence with some of the strategic pillars of the urban and metropolitan plans elaborated before and during the pandemic and showed the capacity and will to achieve synergies between different resources. In this light, it is helpful to notice, first, that a keyword for Bologna in managing NRRP is the integration between this and other EU resources. NRRP is the largest resource available, with €650m, basically on Mission 2, "Green Revolution and Ecologic Transition", and Mission 5 "Inclusion and Social Cohesion", but the choice has been made to institute a deputy mayor in charge of both the management of the NRRP and other EU funds. In other words, there was a clear investment and capacity to activate a multi-fund strategy, as shown by the following tables, which illustrate the consistency of different fundings and their integrated use.

Moreover, the projects funded by the NRRP are part of the broader strategy of the current mayor and operate in close connection with and in the framework of both the Strategic Plan 2.0 and the objectives of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2.0, as well as on a strategy of sustainable mobility as a fundamental foundation shared between the city and the metropolitan city. The three most significant and most strategic projects are, in fact, related both to the historical mission of the city in the field of knowledge and its well-established attention to and engagement with sustainable development.

The case of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Italy offers spaces for institutions to be "enablers" rather than "fragilisers"; but not all cities are in a condition to open these spaces.

Table 2: PON METRO 2014-2020 – Main Projects funded in the city of Bologna

CITY OF BOLOGNA- MAIN PROJECTS FUNDED UNDER PON METRO 2014-2020	FESR	FSE
Schools energy efficiency	13.695.895,64 €	
Urban regeneration- Urban Farm Pilastro	600.000,00 €	
Urban regeneration - Treno della Barca	441.438,19 €	115.384,81 €
Bycycle station	600.000,00 €	
Public lightening	19.337.521,80 €	
Sport center - Barca	1.196.266,69 €	
Cultural facilities - Liquid Lab	315.000,00 €	135.000,00 €
Polifunctional center - Popolonia	1.534.018,62 €	
TOTAL AMOUNT	37.720.140,94 €	250.384,81 €

Source: Annalisa Boni, Bologna Deputy Mayor in charge of PNRR

Table 3: PON METRO 2014-2020 –Total resources, integrated by React EU, Metropolitan city of Bologna

PON METRO 2014-2020 (integrated by REACT EU)- Metropolitan City of Bologna	FUNDINGS
Axis 1 -Metropolitan Digital Agenda	5.720.142,00 €
Axis 2 - Public services and urban mobility sustainability	10.379.126,83 €
Axis 3 - Social inclusions - Services	10.070.611,31 €
Axis 4 -Social Inclusion- Infrastructures	9.571.276,08 €
Axis 5 -Technical Assistance	1.055.485,71 €
Axis 6 - Green, digital, resilient recovery	68.142.857,14 €
Axis 7 - Social, economic and job recovery	6.857.142,86 €
Axis 8 - Technical Assistance REACT-EU	6.759.319,88 €
TOTAL AMOUNT	118.555.961,81 €

Source: Annalisa Boni, Bologna Deputy Mayor in charge of PNRR

The first project, *Impronta Verde*, contributes to building the new green infrastructure that supports the goal of becoming a carbon-neutral city; the second, *Città della Conoscenza*, invests in the regeneration and development of urban areas dedicated to further investment in the knowledge-based economy; the third deals with constructing two new tramway lines, which are part of the sustainable metropolitan mobility strategy. All of them impact both the capital and the metropolitan city. In particular, the project *Programma Integrato di Intervento Città della Conoscenza*, managed by the metropolitan authority, has been built upon a more comprehensive consultation at the metro level based on proposals from all the municipalities. Among the 67 proposals received, four projects have been chosen, one focusing on the capital city, while the others are based on other municipalities.

The second perspective concerns the peculiarity of a context cultivating and feeding a tradition of public participation and debate. Despite the limits imposed by the procedures of the NRRP that require the completion of the projects funded by 2026 and that have “suspended” the ordinary procedures for public debate, the case of Bologna shows the possibility of reactivating public debate even under exceptional conditions (Agamben, 2003). The manifold channels of direct, engaged, critical involvement the city has experimented with and built in the past decades have fed the design of the projects funded by the NRRP, making it part of more inclusive planning processes; at the same time, some of the projects have followed participatory processes by being

complemented by ordinary resources. Finally, the Bologna case is one of the few in which three civic society associations have promoted a civic observatory to contribute to critically monitoring the plan and its implementation.¹¹

In conclusion, this short reconstruction of the case shows, first, that despite its exceptional nature the NRRP can be a lever for the capacity of cities to work towards recovery and resilience in a sound, strategic and integrated perspective. Second, it also clearly shows the conditions under which institutions can contribute to enabling rather than “fragilising”. Institutions produce “fragilisation” when they work too much in the short term, providing little space for vision, focusing on prescriptions rather than perspectives, not taking a place-based approach and a relational perspective seriously, not considering the intelligence of society, and applying a linear and rational approach to planning (Blecic and Cecchini, 2021). The case of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Italy offers spaces for institutions to be “enablers” rather than “fragilisers”; but not all cities are in a condition to open these spaces. Many are trying to seize this opportunity, especially those inspired by these principles for decades, like Bologna. Others need support and help to follow. However, the challenge requires capacity, vision, people, resources, time and attention. Bologna reveals the complexity of the effort, but also that there are trajectories of transition that can help the country not only recover from “polycrisis”, but also be less fragile, if not antifragile. “Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better” (Taleb, 2012).

As a final conclusion, the case offers the opportunity to reflect on the contradiction of the Next Generation EU initiatives in figuring out a reaction to the pandemic. In a context of great uncertainty some of the basic principles of the EU integration project have been suspended and, what is more, the integration between cohesion policies and the recovery has not been truly cultivated in a strategic direction. On the other hand, the lever of public expenditure has been reactivated, offering opportunities to reconsider it as a value (see chapter 14, in Urban@it, 2024, forthcoming). However, the rather limited investment in cities as scale-spanning hubs of resources able to generate recovery remains quite a constant all over Europe. The case of Bologna offers elements to reflect on how the EU integration project can better invest in them in order to capacitate European societies against crises and uncertainty.

Some of the basic principles of the EU integration project have been suspended and, what is more, the integration between cohesion policies and the recovery has not been truly cultivated in a strategic direction.

11. <http://www.osservatoriocivicopnrr-bologna.it/chi-siamo/>

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