



RESOLUTION

For a Europe with a human face: Consolidating the foundation and cohesion of Europe with strong local authorities

The Socialist Local Representatives in Europe welcome the Conference on the Future of Europe initiated by the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament. This conference must render the European Union more capable of taking action. It must draw the lessons from the crises of recent years and find ways for better joint action by the European Union and, where the Member States have competence, enable more effective coordination of national measures at European level. Because of its proximity to citizens, its outstanding importance for many forward-looking EU policies and its important role as an anchor of stability in crises, PES Local calls for a stronger and direct involvement of the local level in setting the course for our common future in the European Union.

Due to a series of developments and challenges, our European Union needs to recalibrate itself. With the enlargements of 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013, the European Union has grown to 27 members and decision-making processes have become more complex. At the same time, reform processes that have been introduced have not been able to decisively improve this situation. Many people have lost confidence in politics and in the European Union. Populists, nationalists and anti-European parties stoke fears and seduce people with supposedly simple solutions to complex challenges. In some countries, such forces are in government and question fundamental democratic values.

In January 2020, the United Kingdom, the third most populous member state and the second largest economy, left the European Union. This is a great loss for our community. The economic situation, following the financial and sovereign debt crisis and the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, remains tense in many regions. In many places in Europe, the gap between rich and poor has widened. The level of youth unemployment and the number of people living in poverty are totally unacceptable for one of the richest parts of the world. **Many people in Europe feel that their prosperity and security are threatened.** In the last decade, the unstable situation in eastern Ukraine, political developments in Turkey and terrorist attacks in European cities have also contributed to this. The warlike conflicts, as well as poverty and lack of prospects in many regions in Europe's neighbourhood, have triggered a refugee movement that reached its peak so far in 2015, but which continues. Since the beginning of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has threatened people's health in Europe and the rest of the world, with far-reaching consequences for their daily lives, as well as profound social and economic consequences. **The effects of the crises of the past years are particularly noticeable in our local authorities.**

We, Socialist Local Representatives in Europe, affirm that Europe is and remains the answer to the challenges of our time. There are many things that we cannot solve nationally: from climate protection to asylum and immigration, to security and peace policy. In many areas, we can achieve better results together, such as with respect to economic policy, health policy and digitalisation.

European integration is a model of success: it is the basis for a life of peace, security, prosperity and progress in Europe. Only with a strong and united European Union can we master the challenges of our time together with our European neighbours. However, the European Union must focus even more strongly on its fundamental values and goals, strengthen European cohesion, become more efficient and make better use of its potential.

1. Europe's foundation must be reinforced with strong local authorities

A Europe of democracy and with a human face

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." (Article 2 TEU). **The values enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, to which all Member States have explicitly committed themselves, constitute the basis of the European Union.** The European Commission must pay even closer attention to ensuring that these values are respected in all member states. Any form of discrimination against minorities, social exclusion and xenophobia are unacceptable in our community of values. Blatant violations of the fundamental values of the European Union, such as, for example, by the over 100 Polish local authorities that have declared themselves so-called "LGBTIQ-free zones", must not be tolerated in our community of values! **The European Union must also take more firm steps to advance gender equality. Furthermore, the European Commission and the Council should promote EU-wide ratification of the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe in all member states, as binding legal standards against violence against women. An important contribution to strengthening democracy in the European Union would be to give the European Parliament the right of legislative initiative.**

The European Union urgently needs a humanitarian and solidarity-based asylum and refugee policy that works in practice and meets the challenges of our time. The reception of refugees in need of protection is an imperative of humanity and solidarity. Local authorities have an important role to play in the care and accommodation of refugees on the ground, as well as in the integration of refugees who remain permanently in the EU. European cities and municipalities must be supported by the EU in their humanitarian and integration efforts. Local authorities that are prepared to make a special commitment in this area should receive additional funding.

Towns and municipalities are Europe's foundation

Through their proximity to citizens, local authorities represent the foundation of European democracy and are the key place where European society is shaped. At the local level, foreign citizens of the Union can exert direct influence on shaping their immediate living environment through the right to vote in local elections. In this way, the local level makes an essential contribution to integration and to Europe growing together.

Crises have shown time and again: The local level ensures stability. Without effective and efficient cities and municipalities, we will not be able to cope with the current and future crises. The European Union and nation states must therefore secure and strengthen the performance of local authorities and their services, administration and local institutions. Only with strong local authorities can Europe's resilience be improved.

An essential basis for a resilient Europe based on the principles of solidarity, proximity to citizens and subsidiarity is safeguarding and improving services of general interest, as well as maintaining and improving infrastructure. These services of general interest are mostly provided by local authorities and are a crucial factor in ensuring people's social participation and ensuring the functioning of public life, the competitiveness of the economy, as well as the natural foundations of life for future generations. They represent an essential basis for development of the social and territorial cohesion of the EU and for job creation. Particularly in structurally-weak rural areas, the basic services to the population, i.e. a minimum level of infrastructure and a minimum offer of goods and services, must be ensured. The excellent role of services of general interest should always be taken into account when designing European Union policies.

2. Strengthening Europe's cohesion - better involvement of local authorities as the voice of citizens

Greater local participation in European decision-making processes is a fundamental prerequisite for the often-proclaimed "Europe of citizens".

Through its knowledge of local conditions and problems, the local level can make an important contribution to the preparation and implementation of European legislation and measures. Its expertise makes it an indispensable partner in shaping policies that are close to citizens, but also, for example, in preparing and implementing structural policy measures. It can make a more accurate assessment of the extent to which proposed legislation and projects meet the needs of people in their immediate environment. **The right of local self-government in Europe must be respected and strengthened, as provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon and the Council of Europe's European Charter of Local Self-Government. Europe's great strength lies in the diversity of its cities and municipalities.**

In the Committee of the Regions (CoR), local and regional authorities have an institution in the European Union which must be consulted on legislative projects affecting local and regional authorities as part of the legislative process. **The CoR's opportunities for participation must be further improved so that the concerns of local and regional authorities are taken into account more effectively in the European legislative process.** Moreover, subsidiarity monitoring must be improved, including for national parliaments.

The Urban Agenda for the EU (Amsterdam Pact) with its objectives of "better legislation", "better funding conditions" and "better exchange and development of expertise" is a promising approach to involving cities more closely in shaping EU policies. This path must be pursued consistently. **Similarly, the objectives and principles of the EU's New Leipzig Charter and the EU Territorial Agenda must be consistently implemented** in order to further an integrated and sustainable urban development policy and to promote "balanced and harmonious territorial development between and within countries, regions, cities and municipalities, as well as ensuring a future for all places and people in Europe, building on the diversity of places and subsidiarity. It enables more equal opportunities, including access to public services for people and enterprises, wherever they are located" [TAEU, I Preamble (6)].

Strengthening Europe's cohesion

In the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union commits itself to a social market economy. The social dimension in the European Union must therefore be further strengthened. The aim must be to ensure greater social protection for people in Europe and social justice in the internal market. We need defined minimum social standards in the EU for good working conditions and safety at work, with minimum living wages in all EU Member States and adequate social security for all people living in poverty. **Improving social standards in EU member states with less well-developed social security systems promotes the harmonisation of living conditions within the EU and thus strengthens social and economic cohesion.** In a Europe based on solidarity and social cohesion, where social justice and gender equality are essential pillars, European policies and programmes must also always contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights. **Fair wages and good working conditions, as well as equal pay and equal pensions, are an important step towards greater social justice and equality.**

Solidarity-based and sustainable EU support for structurally-weak urban districts and rural areas strengthens Europe's territorial and social cohesion and shows people the added value of our European Union. Poorer and disadvantaged regions and cities need the solidarity of the European family. With funds from cohesion policy, the EU supports, for example, the development of infrastructure, the structural transformation in former industrial regions, the creation of new jobs and the qualification of the unemployed, the redevelopment of urban districts or projects in rural areas. In future, too, we will need sustainable EU support for structurally-weak cities and neighbourhoods and rural areas. As currently envisaged, all regions in the EU must continue to be eligible for support. Cohesion policy must always be adequately funded, less bureaucratic and more flexible, and must involve local and regional partners more closely.

Greater use must be made of local partnerships and cross-border and transnational cooperation in order to further the integration of Europe. Especially at a time when many citizens are questioning the European integration project, more funds should be made available for people to meet within the EU, so as to make Europe more tangible and to promote understanding of living conditions in other parts of Europe. In this way, school exchanges, citizens' meetings and many other forms of local partnership work in Europe can be given greater support and make a very concrete contribution to creating a European awareness.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been many examples of solidarity-based assistance from local authorities across borders, as well as from national authorities in the case of forest fires. Such **practical cross-border assistance is of great value during crises and promotes European cohesion.** The European Union should therefore create measures and instruments to support such actions financially and, if necessary, also support the coordination of aid.

3. Facing challenges together: Local authorities make a decisive contribution to tackling issues of the future

A climate protection policy that ensures sustainable mobility and the conversion of the energy supply to renewable energy sources is a priority. Local authorities are crucial actors in the implementation of the Green Deal. Measures taken by local authorities include, above all, the generation and use of renewable energies, energy-efficient building refurbishment and the promotion of environmentally-friendly vehicles. Further measures consist of sustainable regional housing and transport development. These include mobility concepts that promote traffic avoidance and the switch to more environmentally-friendly means of transport, such as local public transport. Moreover, local authorities promote climate resilience, for example by creating climate-proof water infrastructure or unsealing projects. Local authorities know best how to reconcile necessary climate protection measures and sustainable

environmental policies with local conditions. Climate protection requires an integrated approach, which must be based on cooperation and the coordination of policies and measures at EU and national, regional and local levels.

Accelerating digitalisation is one of the most important tasks of our time. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, deficits in this area have become even more apparent in many EU countries. **Digitalisation is a decisive factor for the successful modernisation of the economy and administration, and a basic prerequisite for a successful socio-ecological transformation. Local authorities play an important role in this transformation process.** In addition to being responsible for the digitalisation of public administration, they are also responsible for modernising future-relevant areas such as the digital transformation of services of general interest in the areas of mobility, energy, health and education. The digital transformation of local authorities into smart cities and smart regions is also a key contribution to climate protection. Digitalisation is also of great importance in the area of citizen participation and for the provision of public services for citizens and local businesses. **Local authorities must ensure that no one is left behind in this process and promote digital literacy. The European Union and the member states must support and adequately finance local authorities with regard to the implementation of the digitalisation tasks within their competence, as well as ensure improvement in the infrastructure of mobile and data networks, the legal framework and the security of the data network.**

Immigration and migration is one of the major issues of our time. The demand for labour will increase in the coming years due to demographic change. The successful integration of immigrants offers an opportunity to enrich our society and secure our economic development in the long term. The integration of immigrants takes place locally in the local authorities. In this context, the decisive framework conditions lie outside the power of local authorities. Integration must therefore be understood and supported as a pan-European task. The conditions must be created to ensure that integration can begin immediately at the local level and that the necessary resources are available. **The European Union and the member states must develop a common immigration policy that meets the demands and realities of our time. In doing so, they also have a responsibility to support local authorities so that cities and municipalities can fulfil their important task in terms of economic and integration policy.**

Local development cooperation can support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and thus make an important European contribution to international solidarity. Moreover, development cooperation is also an effective instrument for combating the causes of why people flee. Numerous European local authorities are engaged in development cooperation and thus contribute to improving the livelihoods of people in developing countries. Local partnerships play an important role in this respect. In order to make even better use of the potential of local authorities for development cooperation, the European Union and the member states should give even greater consideration to local authorities as actors in effective development cooperation and make further programmes and funds available.