EUROPE’S MAYORS: SPEEDING UP THE ENERGY TRANSITION

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While the EU hammers out its continent-wide energy and climate policy for the next decade, steps are being taken at local level to fight climate change and make a low-carbon European economy a reality.

The Covenant of Mayors is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2018 and a flagship event this week is set to commemorate its decade of pushing for better cooperation at local level, more energy efficiency and increased renewable energy use.

But how does the work of the Covenant of Mayors fit into the wider picture? And how effective can smaller scale action be in fighting climate change and meeting the targets of the Paris Agreement?
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Europe’s cities are on the frontline of climate action and the drive to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. At the 10th anniversary celebrations of the EU’s Covenant of Mayors, some of its 9,000+ members revealed what is being done to fight climate change.

The late American political scientist Benjamin Barber wrote in his book If Mayors Ruled the World that cities, and the mayors who run them, are the best agents to tackle challenges like climate change and poverty, due to the dysfunctional nature of nation states.

While the message of the Covenant of Mayors 10th anniversary on Thursday (22 February) was not quite as revolutionary as Barber’s way of thinking, city and EU leaders all agreed that Europe’s metropolises have a crucial role to play in facing up to today’s main issues.

The importance of the Covenant was highlighted by the speakers and panellists who attended the event in the European Parliament, with EU Commissioners Carlos Moedas, Miguel Arias Cañete and Maroš Šefčovič, Parliament boss Antonio Tajani and DG Energy’s Dominique Ristori among the attendees.

Speeding up Europe’s energy transition was the main theme of the 2018 get-together and the EU’s main energy and climate leaders all agreed that local level action will be essential in meeting environmental targets.

Climate boss Cañete praised the cities that have so far signed up to the Covenant’s 2030 objectives and the “impressive” efforts that have been made so far, adding that mayors can influence member state governments,

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which are in the process of drafting national plans that will be used in setting targets for the next decade. He also urged the Covenant of Mayors to support their American counterparts, who are currently leading the United States’ environmental drive after President Donald Trump announced the US would leave the Paris agreement, and passed a number of backwards-looking laws.

The Covenant can boast of a number of achievements in its decade of activity, including a 23% reduction in emissions, a 90% increase in local energy production and a five-fold increase in renewable energy generation.

**NO NEED FOR SCI-FI**

French entrepreneur and activist Bertrand Piccard, who last year piloted a solar-powered aircraft around the world, described how his flight made him realise that “the rest of the world is living in the past, prisoners to the old ways of doing things, some of which are over 100 years old”. Piccard insisted that there are already hundreds if not thousands of existing pieces of technology that could cut emissions and energy demand in half but which have not yet been brought onto the market.

To that end, he announced the launch of the ‘1000 solutions’ initiative, which aims to bring those technologies and patents into the public eye. Piccard called on the numerous mayors at the ceremony to take an interest in the scheme, citing the enormous potential for jobs and growth.

“Growth and jobs and profit motivate even climate deniers and those who have no care for looking after the environment,” Piccard, the first person to complete a non-stop balloon flight around the world, told the Parliament’s packed hemicycle.

**PEOPLE ON THE GROUND**

Some of the thousands of mayors who are members of the Covenant revealed during the ceremony what measures they have implemented to work towards Europe’s environmental targets, including emissions reduction and energy efficiency improvements.

Mayor of Florence Dario Nardella explained how his city is tackling air pollution by increasing electromobility and using car and bike sharing schemes. Italy has some of the worst air quality in Europe and the European Commission is currently deciding whether or not to launch a legal case.

Jukka Mäkelä, the mayor of the Finnish city of Espoo, recounted how his city has been named the most sustainable city in Europe, “maybe in the world”, and how his administration hopes to achieve a plan for Espoo to go completely carbon neutral by 2030.

**NO OTHER OPTION**

Aside from the jobs, growth and health issues at stake through climate action, a number of speakers also pointed out that meeting the Covenant’s 2030 goals should be a self-preservation instinct for Europe’s cities.

Mayor of Savona Ilaria Caprioglio explained that her city is located in a fragile area that is “susceptible to extreme weather events like floods and landslides” in Italy’s northwest.

The United Nations’ Ovais Sarmad, one of the organisation’s top people on climate change, warned that “2017 was a climate disaster” and that “weather does not discriminate”. On the same day, the Commission announced more than €100 million in support for France, Greece, Portugal and Spain, which were all hit by natural disasters last year.

A study conducted by the UK’s Newcastle University recently concluded that European cities could be “pushed to breaking point” by climate change, after analysing data from across the continent. Researchers found that Dublin, Helsinki, Riga, Vilnius and Zagreb could be worst affected.
The city of Wrocław is one of Poland’s success stories, where job creation has hit record highs and environmental objectives are taken seriously. Wrocław’s long-serving mayor revealed his city’s future-leaning path and the advantages of being part of a Europe-wide network of mayors.

Rafał Dutkiewicz has been the mayor of Wrocław since 2002. He was voted Poland’s best mayor four years running. He spoke with EURACTIV’s Sam Morgan on the sidelines of the Covenant of Mayors 10th-anniversary celebrations, held in Brussels on 22 February.

**Your city signed up to the Covenant of Mayors in 2016. What impact has that had since?**

As civilisation is now more and more concentrated in big cities, there is a global tendency to connect culture with mayors. What we are trying to do is go more in this direction. But cities in Eastern and Central Europe, like those in Poland, are only on the first level. We have to deal more with air quality than energy issues.

Energy should be the next step but, at the beginning, we have to tackle smog as it is our biggest problem. Air quality in Wrocław has improved twofold over the last decade. We still have work to do but we have spent

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EU money trying to reduce energy demand.

What is really interesting though is a shift towards increasing public participation and really utilising direct democracy.

**Does EU money arrive where it is actually needed or does the procedure need improving?**

There is a certain problem, which is always connected to public money, because it creates a lot of bureaucracy. On the one hand, yes it is needed because we’re talking about taxpayer money but, on the other, it is so difficult to describe how money has actually been spent. Add to that the fact that Polish bureaucracy is perhaps even more unwieldy than its European counterpart, and you see how complex the process is.

But EU funds are an additional resource only. Money is crucial, yes, but its main impact has been to broaden our horizons and imagination. Just having money on the table to work towards certain goals made us think more about the goals themselves, which has raised standards. Joining the EU was obviously crucial in that regard.

**So an instrument like the Covenant of Mayors is a way for you to explore that broadened imagination further?**

Yes. But still, there are challenges. For our country, the economy and energy mix is still based on coal. It’s mainly an issue connected with the government but local authorities can try to push them in the right direction. Coal was nice but it belongs in the past.

**Job generation in Lower Silesia, whose capital is your city, is very strong. But we often hear that coal has to remain a factor in Poland’s energy mix because of the employment it generates. How do those two things stack up?**

It’s number one Europe-wide in generating jobs. A few years after joining the EU, Wroclaw had about 700,000 people and a wider population of about 1 million. We have managed to generate a massive 400,000 new jobs since then due to a huge boom in the economy.

Leaving coal behind is going to take time. But we have no doubts that this change has to be made. Frankly speaking, there are two narratives here. Firstly, there is really strong and positive support for electro-mobility. But there is also the still powerful coal lobby, which has always had a place at the table.

In my opinion, what we need is time.

**You’ve been mayor for nearly 16 years. What have been your main challenges in that time?**

We used to have too many heating systems that are fuelled by coal and it’s something we have to eliminate. We’ve had a lot of success in this challenge though, reducing the number from 90,000 individual heating points to the current level of 20,000. We’ve got to get rid of those too of course by introducing alternatives like electricity or gas.

**You mentioned the strong support for electro-mobility in Poland. Is that true in Wroclaw too?**

The very first car-sharing system based solely on electric cars was introduced in Wroclaw. We sweetened the deal by introducing certain privileges like access to the city centre. There is a strong tram service but we still need a better bus connection.

But the car-sharing scheme has been a huge success. Poland has far too many cars: in Wroclaw, it is about 600 per 1,000 people, which is far too many. Car-sharing and using electric cars is a really positive way of getting that number down.

**Do you have much in common with other cities on issues like this or is it cross-border, with your Covenant of Mayors colleagues, where you have better communication?**

Polish cities are very competitive with one another and public opinion is very much in favour of modernisation. This plays a positive role because we are pushing each other and that leads to progress.

**Does what happens in Brussels matter at the city level? EU lawmaking is sometimes accused of not taking into account local level issues, even though it is at that very level where the benefits, and sometimes disadvantages, are most felt.**

Generally speaking, there is a problem in Europe now with national states becoming more assertive. This is dangerous for the EU. The way of thinking in the EU used to be a regional one but now it is understood that cities are sexy.

A network of cities, like this one, is only going to become more important, so I really welcome the cooperation between the European Commission and the Covenant. Worldwide, the future is going to belong to cities. There will be advantages and disadvantages to that, so overcoming the gap put in place by national governments will be crucial.

**Innovation Commissioner Carlos Moedas has put up €1 million for the winner of the Innovation Capital 2018 award. Will Wroclaw be entering?**

Well, we’re bidding for the European Green Capital. When José Manuel Barroso said many years ago that Europe needs to be innovative...
and that the EU would be setting up a technology institute, I immediately said that it should be in Wrocław. We only fell at the final hurdle, losing out to Budapest.

Universities, academia and open society are needed for innovation. That latter point needs an international society, which has only just started happening in Poland. Now, we have more and more people from more and more countries. I’m trying to support this, because by investing in culture and academia is only going to pay off in conjunction with that. Innovation soon follows after when you do.

**COP24 will be held in Poland at the end of the year. It’s fair to say that your country does not have the best image at the moment…**

Because of stupid people!

**Could such a high-level event boost Poland’s image by showing that it should not be judged solely on what your national government does?**

I must say that I am embarrassed by what is happening in Poland. The door to the country must be kept open and Katowice is a door through which world leaders will walk. Generally, I hope and am confident that our country will end up on the right track though.
Covenant of Mayors: A key instrument for the future EU budget

By Various authors | Covenant of Mayors

In its 10 year-existence, the European Covenant of Mayors has mobilised thousands of local governments to voluntarily implement and exceed EU climate and energy objectives. In order to further embed the initiative in EU policies, it has to become a key instrument for the future EU budget, write the local and regional leaders of the European Covenant of Mayors board.

This opinion piece was authored by the members of the European Covenant of Mayors board. A full list can be found below.

The EU is currently undergoing a reflection process on its future priorities, in the midst of a debate about the fundamental nature towards which the European Union should evolve to. The redesign of the EU budget, which happens every seven years, raises now more than ever questions about where Europe should act and how it can deliver on its objectives.

Achieving social and territorial cohesion is a fundamental EU pillar, embedded in the Treaty and key to Europe’s stability and sense of Union. The EU budget has played a key role for this objective, through the European Structural and Cohesion funds.

Cohesion policy in particular has enabled many local and regional authorities across the EU to develop the wealth and societal fabric of their communities through inclusive green growth, an improved quality of life and a healthier environment.

Thanks to Cohesion Funding, many EU cities and regions have been able to increase and accelerate their action on tackling climate change and catalysing the energy transition.

The 9,000+ local and regional authorities that are part of the European Covenant of Mayors understand the added value of European funding. In the Italian Covenant region of Marche for example, regional development funds have laid the foundation for decarbonising urban transport by building new multimodal transport hubs for citizens to commute more efficiently by train, bus and bicycle.

The Polish Covenant city of Wroclaw, is one of hundreds of local authorities across Europe which have been entrusted with directly managing EU regional development funds, in order to develop and implement sustainable development strategies in partnership with all stakeholders.

Thanks to European funding, Wroclaw can invest in its low-carbon transition by building high-efficiency co-generation plants and modernising its rail network.

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By 2020, European Covenant cities will have reduced their CO2 emissions by 27%, decreased their energy use by one fifth and increased local energy production by 90%, thereby exceeding the European Union’s 2020 milestone of cutting emissions by 20%.

Projections also show that the European Covenant of Mayors municipalities will have contributed nearly a third of the EU’s 2020 GHG emission reduction target.

This Thursday, at the European Covenant of Mayors 2018 Ceremony in the European Parliament in Brussels, we will take stock of these results achieved and commemorate the 10th anniversary of the initiative.

But more importantly, this gathering will be the opportunity to reflect on how success of the European Covenant of Mayors can be further embedded in EU policies, in order to support the EU at a turning point of its history.

The EU budget policy will guide the future direction of Europe. Achieving social and territorial cohesion through European funding, not only between member states and but also within them, is vital for ensuring that the EU remains an anchor of stability and sense of union for its citizens.

The bottom-up, multi-level governance model of the European Covenant initiative, in which European cities, regions, member states and EU institutions are engaged in a positive partnership characterised by dialogue, mutual interest and a win-win cooperation, is the political framework which should serve as key tool for the EU budget.

This continuous exchange between different governance levels enables Covenant cities, as governance level closest to citizens, to raise awareness about local needs amongst European and national decision-makers, and allows to tailor the initiative to fit local expectations.

It is this multi-level partnership model which should inspire the governance of the future European budget. By doing this, the distribution of European funding to foster social and territorial cohesion between and within EU member states could become more inclusive, coordinated and effective, by departing from and meeting local needs first.

This would also result in increasing local ownership and support for the EU, thereby giving new impetus to the European project and strengthening cohesion between the EU and its citizens.

In the last 10 years, the European Covenant of Mayors has been key in delivering on the EU’s climate and energy objectives. In light of supporting the EU in meeting the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement, European Covenant cities will continue to engage in and accelerate their climate and energy action.

But in order to take the initiative to the next level and assist the EU in achieving its objectives, it has to become a key instrument for the future European budget.

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