A PLACE FOR REGIONS AND CITIES IN THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS DEBATE
Cities and regions have played a fundamental role in implementing EU’s policies, particularly through the use of Cohesion Funds, which represent the main investment policy of the Union.

However, they feel their voices are not being sufficiently heard. As the European elections in May approach, local and regional authorities claim their place at the heart of the debate on the run-up to polls.
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- Why the EU needs to take a local shift
Representatives of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) met with aspiring MEPs in Brussels on Tuesday (9 April) to discuss their priorities ahead of the upcoming European elections.

“This coming European election is very important for us because we believe in a local and regional Europe. We believe Europe needs to take a local direction,” CEMR Secretary General Frédéric Vallier said.

As the EU faces a crucial vote on its future, local leaders called for the localisation of Europe to bring it closer to citizens.

“We believe that trust in the institutions will be growing if we have confidence in strong local governments to reach out to the citizens,” Vallier stressed.

Better collaboration between institutions, an open dialogue between governments, more transparency and accountability as well as stronger participation of citizens would be at the heart of that shift, said local leaders.

“Never forget the local governments!”, Carlos Martínez, Mayor of Soria, in Spain, demanded. In times of growing scepticism, “if we want to change this dynamic, we need to change the approach and the way in which we govern,” he said.

A FAIRER EUROPE

According to the manifesto CEMR launched on Wednesday, regional and local leaders believe the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be the guiding principles of EU action in the future.

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"The 2030 agenda is an opportunity for small and medium municipalities to develop and for the EU to fight Euroscepticism and populism,” Martínez said. Belgian MEP Maria Arena (S&D) proposed for the SDGs to be mainstreamed in all the committees to ensure they shape all Parliament work.

The EU has been funding regional development and territorial cohesion in Europe through structural funds for thirty years. The European Parliament recently voted to maintain its cohesion budget after Brexit.

The commitment of the Parliament in preserving structural funds was warmly welcomed by local and regional leaders. “It is important that no one and no region is left behind. That is why we think that Cohesion Policy is so important,” Carola Gunnarsson, Mayor of Sala, in Sweden, said.

Although the EU has new priorities, “cohesion policy can be the answer for some of these new challenges,” Iskra Mihaylova (ALDE), chair of the Committee for Regional Development at the Parliament, explained.

Maria Arena defended the development of the European Pillar for Social Rights as a tool for inclusive growth. “If all member states would have been working with the regional and local level to ensure social rights, cohesion policy wouldn’t be necessary,” Arena argued.

“If we do not take into account the social Europe, it will be the end of Europe,” Arena warned.

**LOCAL AND REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

“(In) these elections there are issues that Europe can only solve by working together,” EPP vice-president Dara Murphy said.

Climate change is a good example. Although environmental policies are often decided at European and national level, regional and local governments are those dealing with the consequences of climate change, such as floods, droughts or health problems.

“It is a huge challenge to empower local and regional governments because they are on the ground, really close to the citizens,” Saskia Bricmont, a Green candidate for the European elections admitted.

MEP Jan Olbrycht (EPP) highlighted the importance of a strong relationship between local leaders and members of the Parliament. “We need the contact with the practitioners,” Olbrycht acknowledged.

The long-time European parliamentarian and former vice-president of the organization said that organizations such as the CEMR make their job easier, reaching out to European representatives, while the mayors take care of their businesses back home. “We cannot expect from every single mayor to be active at the EU level,” Olbrycht said.

As the elections approach, Marc Cools, municipal councillor of Belgium’s Uccle called on the future European Parliament to strengthen the participation of local and regional politicians in the decision-making process.

“I believe there is no real democracy without strong local democracy,” Cools warned.
If the EU wants to regain citizens' trust after the European elections, it has to strengthen links with cities and regions, Stefano Bonaccini told EURACTIV.com.

Stefano Bonaccini is president of the Emilia-Romagna region and chair of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). He spoke to EURACTIV’s Beatriz Ríos.

We are only a few weeks away from the European elections. For some, these are the most crucial in the history of the EU. Do you share this view?

I wouldn’t dare say that these are the most crucial elections in the EU’s history. But it’s true that they will take place in a completely unprecedented political context. We still do not know how things are going to evolve, but it...
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seems that the UK is moving closer to leaving the EU without a deal, with devastating economic impacts for all. Populism is growing everywhere. New types of protests, like the ‘Gilets Jaunes’, are appearing and making distrust towards politics come to light.

But on the ground, we can see that citizens are calling for a change. They are calling to end ‘business as usual’. This is what they did a few weeks ago when thousands of youngsters took to the streets to ask us to increase our efforts to fight climate change. It’s our duty to listen to them.

What do you think are going to be the main issues in this campaign?

Migration, security, nationalism, climate, sustainability, cohesion, employment and Europe in the world.

What should be the role of local and regional leaders in this campaign? Should they join the campaign?

Local and regional leaders have to play an active role in this campaign. People experience Europe in towns and regions, and that is where we can regain their trust.

This is why throughout the year we are campaigning to call for Europe to take a local shift. To achieve it, we have outlined a series of proposals, which include increasing transparency in EU decision-making, maintaining the cohesion policy budget, creating an Erasmus programme for towns and regions or promoting local dialogues with citizens.

With our #Power2Her campaign, we are calling on political parties to include more women as candidates in prominent positions. We are outraged with the fact that although women represent more than half of the EU’s population, they only represent one-third of MEPs.

How to reconcile local and European affairs in the campaign?

Europeans no longer want ‘politics as usual’. This sentiment has long been expressed by the population. The EU needs to rethink how it does politics and this can only happen by strengthening links with the grassroots level.

We know that the idea of setting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the guiding principles of all policies is gaining weight. Taking into account that 65% of the SDGs cannot be fully achieved without the involvement of cities and regions, the EU and national governments need to team up with us.

The Paris Agreement forces us to go to a zero-emissions economy. But EU policies in this area will never be functional if they do not take into account the needs and capacities of towns, cities and regions, and their capacity to deliver to their citizens.

The EU needs to strengthen its links with the ground and also between elected representatives. For instance, by creating an Erasmus programme for towns and regions to allow elected officials and civil servants to understand the functioning of the European institutions and to exchange with their peers on local and European governance.

The EU needs to take this into account that 65% of the SDGs are under the direct influence of European policy. It is clear that they have to play an essential role not only when implementing EU policies, but also when designing future policies.

By their very nature, mayors and local councillors are in a unique position to understand citizens’ needs and make EU legislation rooted in reality. This is essential to ensure that EU policies are effectively delivered to citizens.

What would you suggest to the next European Commission to increase the role of local and regional leaders in the EU decision-making process?

First of all, I would encourage them to be more ambitious than the Juncker Commission. Indeed, the current Commission has recognised the need to better involve towns and regions in the EU governance, for instance, through the urban agenda for the EU. But we definitely need to go beyond that to respond to the challenges that the EU is currently facing.

This can be done, for instance, by reviewing the modalities of the European Civil Dialogue, by introducing a specific status for organisations that represent local and regional governments and civil society.

We expect that the European Parliament’s 2018 recommendation will become reality, recognising CEMR as a key partner of the EU institutions and proposing a permanent structured dialogue mechanism, in particular at the pre-legislative stage.

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Faced with the rise of Euroscepticism, nationalism and populism... Are cities becoming a shelter for progressive forces in Europe as some might suggest?

When states talk, local governments act. The refugee crisis in 2015 illustrated how difficult it was for the EU Member States to come up with shared solutions.

Yet, mayors and local and regional leaders pursued their mission to host refugees with full determination. And since then, they have engaged in integrating refugees in their cities, towns and municipalities in cooperation with local business, civil society organisations and many volunteers.

This is only one among many examples of how cities are, by nature, pragmatic, and far from the dominant populist trend. But Mayors can’t be left alone.

How do you think regions and cities can contribute to European integration, in a crucial moment for the EU?

Nothing can replace face to face contact with people and involve them in what we do. They get the feeling they are being heard and meet political protagonists with whom they may agree.

We know that local and regional elected representatives are viewed as being in the best position to explain the impact of European policies on citizens’ lives. That’s why we are strongly in favour of organising annual citizens’ debate in every town and city to debate topics linking their communities and the EU.

And we cannot forget our future generations. We should guarantee to the next generations a future of peace, sustainability and prosperity. For them, Europe is part of their day-to-day life, (they grew up with the euro) but it is also very far away. We need to talk more about Europe with them.

Local and regional leaders could contribute by promoting the European Charter for Fundamental Rights and the history of the European Union in schools in all EU member states, to facilitate better knowledge of how the EU institutions work.
In exactly three months, Europeans will decide upon which future they want. They will elect their representatives at the European Parliament. During these three months, political parties and candidates will present their programmes and answer the many questions concerning the future of our Union, writes Frédéric Vallier.

Frédéric Vallier is the secretary general of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR).

This election is taking place in a completely unprecedented political context: the United Kingdom might leave the EU without a deal. Populism is growing. New types of protests such as the gilets jaunes in France are appearing. There is also a rise in violence in demonstrations.

On top of this, our elected representatives are experiencing a lot of distrust, and even attacks, which sometimes take the shape of murder. We remember Jo Cox in the UK or Paweł Adamowicz in Poland, for instance.

Europe needs a breath of fresh air. A new ambition to raise its citizens’ enthusiasm once again.

As we see it, at the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Europe will find this new, optimistic breath of fresh air within its towns, cities and regions. They are the soul and culture of our continent. And that is what we seek to express in our Manifesto for the European elections.

The message Europe’s local and regional leaders wish to convey to MEP candidates is crystal clear. We believe in a strong and united Europe, founded on common values: democracy, human rights, solidarity, gender equality and the rule of law; which make up the unalterable foundation of the European Union.

This approach is based on the principle of mutual engagement, according to which members do not choose what is in their individual interest, but agree on policies that...
serve the Union as a whole.
We know with certainty that stronger towns and regions would mean a stronger Europe. If only for this: 60% of local and regional policies are under the direct influence of European policy.

The crisis of distrust towards those who govern us must make us question the European project to build a Europe which is closer to citizens’ concerns. Who is in a better spot than local and regional leaders to become the link between European institutions and citizens?

EUROPE CAN NO LONGER WORK ONLY THROUGH THE PRISM OF NATION STATES

We must remember that Europe should not and cannot be limited to a partnership between nation states. The EU is a union of peoples, above all else. It will only continue to exist if Europeans believe in it, and we must therefore build it with them.

That’s why we suggest that each year on 9 May – Europe day – a citizens’ debate could take place in every town and city. According to a Eurobarometer survey, local and regional elected representatives are viewed as the best placed to explain the impact of European policies on citizens’ lives.

The 60 local dialogues we organised with our associations on the future of the EU's cohesion policy demonstrate quite well that nothing can replace face-to-face contact with citizens to understand their hopes and needs.

Nevertheless, strengthening links with the grassroots level also requires building solid links between elected representatives. That’s why we suggest a new exchange between European local and regional governments, via an Erasmus programme for towns and regions, for instance.

We call upon the present and future European decision-makers to build a true partnership with the territories, and to establish a more participative, open and transparent governance model.

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

In order to mobilise young generations, we call for programmes such as Erasmus to be more open: young professionals should be able to take part, as well as those who feel marginalised from the evolutions of our continent and our world.

To boost the development of our towns, cities and regions, and to fight climate change, we call for a new attribution method for public procurement: when possible, local purchases should be preferred.

Given the global dimension of current challenges such as climate change, we want Europe to be open to the world, and to listen to the peoples who see in Europe a beacon of hope for more peace and prosperity in the world. We want the Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted by all 193 member states of the United Nations, to become the guiding principles of all policies, whether they are local, national or European.

The message of Europe’s mayors, local and regional leaders is a call for unity. It is a call against isolationism, and against seemingly easy solutions that do not bring the answers that our fellow citizens expect. We invite you to read our proposals, to make them your own, and to build a local and regional Europe with us.
Whether it’s Brexit, the climate strikes or the ‘gilets jaunes’: Europeans no longer want ‘politics as usual’. This sentiment, which is being expressed by the European population, should send a shockwave through EU Member States.

With the European elections just around the corner, local and regional leaders are suggesting one way forward: the EU needs a local shift.

This is in substance what they lay down in their Manifesto for a local and regional Europe, channelled by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR).

The Manifesto outlines solutions to make Europe more citizen-inclusive, locally driven and anchored in its communities. The proposals include creating an Erasmus programme for towns and regions, or a yearly local citizens’ debate on EU issues, as well as a focus on women’s political empowerment.

Watch our collection of messages from mayors, local and regional leaders gathered in this two-minute video. Get comfortable in your chair and hit the PLAY button.

Further information:

The Manifesto for a local & regional Europe is available in a dozen languages. You can find all versions here: http://ccre.org/en/actualites/view/3839.