



Localising Europe



About Eurocities and Friends of Europe

Eurocities

... is the leading network of more than 140 major European cities, working together to improve the quality of urban life. We strive for a Europe where cities are genuine partners with the EU to create a better future. We put citizens at the heart of developments towards inclusive, prosperous and healthy cities with future-fit local governments. Our members all together govern over 130 million citizens across 39 countries.

Friends of Europe

... is a leading think tank that connects people, stimulates debate and triggers change to create a more inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking Europe. We aim to be catalysts for change and believe that real solutions come from transforming mindsets through the confrontation of ideas and breaking down silos between politicians, businesses and civil society.

Reproduction in whole or in part is permitted, provided that full credit is given to Friends of Europe, and that any such reproduction, whether in whole or in part, is not sold unless incorporated in other works.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

Publisher: Geert Cami

Authors: Dorthe Nielsen, Dharmendra Kanani

Programme Executive: Chahaiya Pilkington

Editor: Arnaud Bodet

Design: Elza Lów

© Friends of Europe - March 2020



The EU urgently needs to demonstrate that it is relevant to the concerns and day-to-day challenges of citizens. 60% of people living in Europe feel it would make no difference if the EU were no longer here tomorrow.¹ Europe is in crucial need of a systematic approach to engage more directly with citizens and ultimately close the trust gap.

For the past year, Friends of Europe and EURO CITIES have tried to identify how to make this happen. This paper is the culmination of this cooperation. It sets out the rationale, added value and ways in which to localise Europe. In the context of the European Commission's mission to "bring Europe closer to home" we set out how this might happen.

We argue the Commission should adopt the concept of a new European localism which would enliven, refresh and innovate the European Union's proposed 'Conference on the Future of Europe'. Strategically, the Commission should think and act locally by putting people and place at the heart of EU policymaking. It is about bringing citizens and cities to the core of the EU through a new power-sharing model. Our objectives are to:

- strengthen trust in and the credibility of the EU by developing possibilities for citizens to better connect and engage with EU developments;
- enhance mechanisms for working with city authorities in EU policymaking to harness local intelligence for better policies;
- contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe from the perspective of city authorities.



Context

The EU was founded to secure peace, establishing a collaboration of European states and creating prosperity for all EU citizens through a single market. This was achieved through a set of principles: democracy, human rights, the rule of law and freedom of movement. At their heart these principles are the basis of a social contract between the Union and the citizens it was set up to serve.

In its relatively short history, the EU has succeeded in becoming the world's largest economy and the fourth-largest trading bloc. It has produced world-leading research on climate and technology, and has proven that a fall in greenhouse gasses does not mean a fall in GDP growth. It has also invested in skills, training, and urban development in order to strengthen opportunities for citizens across Europe.

While the EU can point to areas in which it has improved the lives of its citizens, its policies have sometimes contributed to a wider malaise about the efficacy and value of the project. Politicians have found it easy to

scapegoat domestic failure on the EU. Worse still, it has become a political norm to say one thing in Brussels and another back home – forging a new type of doublespeak.

This has damaged trust and impeded Europe's citizens in understanding how the EU impacts their lives. In turn, it has also led to a widening gap between EU institutions and citizens, manifested in a rise in Euroscepticism. This crisis in trust is part of a wider global trend, its malevolence lies in the ability of the Far Right and populist politicians to exploit public disillusionment. Brexit is one poignant example, but we see this also in Italy, Poland and Hungary.

However, there are signs of change. The most recent European Parliament elections saw the highest turnout in two decades. Friends of Europe's poll of citizens conducted in September 2019 revealed that citizens want more Europe not less. But 'more Europe' comes with conditions such as more transparency, more accountability and more citizen involvement in the decision-making process.

On top of all of this, we have seen the emergence of a digital revolution, which has left many of our past models of governance outdated. Digitalisation has transformed access to information, awareness of corruption – especially amongst politicians – and created an opportunity for communities to organise themselves around issues that matter to them. Be it the Greta effect, the #MeToo campaign, the Gilets jaunes, the Arab Spring, a range of citizens have led bottom-up campaigns to transform politics.

In this context, it is clear that there needs to be a shift in traditional models of governance, democracy, and citizen engagement. A 20th century model based on nation states will fail to adequately respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

Existing EU mechanisms

The existing EU mechanisms which serve localities are the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee. While these advisory bodies are important in the institutional landscape, a renewed approach is needed in terms of how the EU can effectively engage with and capitalise on the knowledge and experience of communities on specific issues that are relevant to local and regional authorities. The vast majority of today's challenges cannot be tackled in isolation but require collaboration and a joint effort across all levels and sectors.

Ad hoc arrangements are on occasion implemented to address specific issues with stakeholders – the multi-stakeholder platforms on the SDGs or circular economy are examples of this. Through the urban agenda for the EU, cities collaborate with national governments and EU policymakers on specific thematic areas, improving knowledge sharing and testing new ideas.

But generally, the European Commission largely overlooks the potential of working with its cities. Urban development is often confined to regional policy, neglecting its relation to a much wider range of EU policies – including energy, mobility, environment, digital, social affairs, migration and integration. Closer cooperation with cities would provide a mechanism to bring people closer to the EU and to tackle the challenges which are both urban and European such as climate change, digital transformation, social inequalities and safety.

As a general rule, the pace of institutional transformation lags behind accelerating global changes. The EU is no exception. It has relied on administrative structures and institutional

working mechanisms that do not reach into communities.

Acknowledging such criticism, the new EU mandate has responded – the Conference of the Future of Europe provides a crucial opportunity and space for citizens to find their voices and share their ideas for the kind of EU they would like to see working for them.

However, this space must not only think about Europeans as individuals. The Conference should adopt a bottom-up mindset which unshackles itself from traditional norms of engagement. It must innovate in its processes and offer a dialogue to improve how the institution works. This means listening to and including citizens and communities as assets and problem-solvers in policy thinking and decision-making.

An effective Conference must see the value that cities – through their vibrant networks, local expertise and unique solutions – can play in enhancing policymaking at an EU level. This is why a new European localism will be key to bring people into the heart of the EU's decisions.

A new opportunity – place and people

A new dynamic is required. We need to shift how institutions think about their relevance and how they take account of the views, feelings, and solutions that communities can offer. It is about the EU being a pathfinder

in renewing and rejuvenating participatory democracy. The new political cycle provides the opportunity to future-proof democracy. This opportunity begins in Europe's cities.

Cities are the vehicle through which the EU can engage credibly with those that they serve. Many of Europe's most pressing challenges are concentrated on the local level, but this is also where we see the most opportunities. Cities offer a chance to develop first security responses and effective counter-terrorism measures. On the economy, they can also take the lead in upskilling citizens, creating jobs and constructing critical infrastructure. In health, they can help control epidemics and pandemics. On migration, they can provide a path to integration and pride in civic identity.

Our cities are international hubs where technological innovation thrives, where the fight against climate change becomes real, and where we can build equal and inclusive societies. Cities should be the vanguard of a new approach in Europe that puts place and people at the heart of political thinking – *a new European localism*.

New European localism is about improving EU policymaking by harnessing local intelligence to strengthen effectiveness, credibility and trust in the EU. When EU policy is informed with local intelligence it is better placed to solve modern problems: economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability and catalysing inclusive growth. Given that 70%² of legislation adopted at EU level is implemented by local authorities, they should be central in shaping that legislation.

This new approach promotes a shift in the locus of power, enabling our politics to be nimble and resilient to challenges. It looks beyond economic prosperity, to focus on increasing accountability and transparency so as to engender greater trust within society.

New European localism adopts structures of governance, policies and actions at the EU level that are based on power-sharing. In this context, power-sharing does not mean treaty change or asking for decisions of the EU Council and the Commission to be subject to the approval of cities. Rather, this is about embracing a new mindset of inclusive policymaking that responds to the growing absence of trust and confidence in political governance structures.

Power-sharing is about recognising that knowledge does not sit within institutions alone but also amongst the wider communities they seek to serve. Citizens can provide new insights into problem-solving and policy development. Engaging locally can provide a better sense of emerging issues and how policy might impact our communities directly.

While member states and their representatives may consider that they are the rightful conduits of this approach, public opinion suggests otherwise. New European localism would not undermine them but underpin them more effectively. This approach would support their endeavour with a different and timely approach. While, ultimately, institutions will make decisions according to their mandates, failure to engage more directly, differently and better could risk increasing the disconnect between citizens and institutions. New European localism has the potential to decrease this gap and increase the legitimacy of decision-making processes.

Localising Europe – how?

There is no need for new institutions or organisations. The EU has a ready-made infrastructure through network organisations representing European cities, such as EUROCITIES, to pursue an ambition for a new European localism. Such an organisation could facilitate and harness the capabilities of cities across Europe to engage in policy development and provide greater engagement of citizens. EUROCITIES provides a platform to leverage the experience of the 'local'. To localise Europe, there is a need for a three-pronged approach:





Develop a European civic dialogue with city authorities

City authorities are the closest level of government to people. Locally, there is a wealth of experience around co-creating policy solutions that meets local needs. This includes working with citizens' assemblies, as well as using civic dialogues and participatory budgeting.³ Many cities are committed to enhancing participatory tools for policy developments by directly involving citizens in shaping urban solutions that matches their needs.⁴ Various on-line and off-line tools allow city authorities to tap into the innovation potential of people.

Local experiences form a solid basis on how to engage people directly in formulating and achieving European goals. They are essential to the Commission's ambition of enabling European citizens to play a leading and active part in a Europe that is closer to citizens. A European civic dialogue must be a tool for the EU to listen to and engage with people on issues of EU-wide concern – including health, climate, mobility, security. However, the mere geographical distance between the EU institutions and most of the people living in Europe, is a clear challenge in terms of developing a meaningful civic dialogue.

The current EU citizens' dialogues, which are highlighted in the Commission Communication on the Future of Europe, are positive but inadequate when it comes to listening to and engaging citizens directly in EU policy design. The EU needs its cities to bridge the gap and close the distance to people.

To capitalise on local knowledge and experiences, the European Commission should:

- Meet with city experts to better understand state-of-the-art citizen engagement mechanisms at local level, including their challenges and the opportunities they offer for EU policy
- Develop a short set of guidelines for citizens engagement to set a baseline for EU policymakers. The EU can take inspiration from the shared set of principles developed by city authorities.⁵
- Design a European civic dialogue to be implemented with city authorities. This should include:
 - coordination of ambitions and road maps for citizens engagement activities between the EU and local level;
 - a capacity-building tool to strengthen participatory democracy locally, where it is needed, strengthening European democracy from the ground.



Establish a systematic exchange between policymakers at city and EU level

With more than 70% of EU laws being implemented at local level, EU policymaking must be informed by local needs to be successful and to overcome the current gaps in implementation. Best practices should be reviewed, strengthened and mainstreamed. This means examining processes that can join up all levels of government for better policymaking, better funding and better knowledge-sharing.⁶ Examples include the partnership approach implementing the urban agenda for the EU as well as other initiatives, such as the 'Join, Boost, Sustain' declaration and road map.⁷

Through network organisations, such as EUROCITIES, city authorities collaborate, share local challenges, discuss regulatory gaps which must be addressed at EU level and exchange on how to implement EU rules. These activities support capacity-building across Europe and the scaling up of effective local solutions across European cities.

Low hanging fruits for EU policymakers would be to capitalise to a much wider extent on those activities which already engage city experts across the EU on a regular basis. Through their network organisations, city authorities convene in different thematic formations and in different host cities following a productive annual work schedule. To make the most of existing activities and increasingly harness local intelligence, the European Commission should:

- Establish a culture of EU officials 'on the ground', ensuring that EU policymakers can systematically engage in exchanges related to EU policy developments with groups of city experts (e.g. related to environment, climate, sustainable mobility, digital transformation, financing, social inequalities etc.)
- Set up a working group of city experts to contribute to EU's strategic foresight on major challenges such as climate change, digital transformation and tackling social inequalities, which should feed into the Commission's annual work programme.
- Roll out a programme of urban impact assessments related to forthcoming EU legislation relevant to urban challenges. The urban impact assessments should be programmed on an annual basis in consultation with the relevant network organisations, allowing city experts to make the necessary arrangements to participate.
- Include city experts in the REFIT platform for better regulation to close the gap to the implementation at local level.



Start a genuine political dialogue between city mayors and EU leaders

A stronger political dialogue between city and EU leaders is necessary to establish shared priorities and set the basis for a new approach to sharing power between the different levels of governance in the EU. Such a dialogue should ensure joint responsibility for shared urban and European challenges. The European Commission should host annual political dialogues to engage city mayors and EU leaders in a debate about shared priorities, local implications of EU rules and how the local and EU level could join forces to tackle challenges.

The European Green Deal and the ambition of a climate neutral Europe by 2050 urgently needs a joint political leadership at all levels of government. Before the Commission even proposed the Green Deal, many of Europe's large cities had already committed to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. Some have even adopted more ambitious targets, aiming to reach neutrality before 2040.⁸ Equally important, the vast majority have already adopted climate adaptation strategies to adapt to the impact of climate change and to protect their citizens.

The success of these policies for Europe will depend on EU's ability to tap into this local leadership. The EU needs to develop new ways of working, joining up sectors, levels of government and breaking away from silo thinking. To kick off a new approach, the Commission should:

- Host a summit of mayors in 2020, which establishes shared ownership for the European Green Deal, the climate neutral target and a just transition. The summit should deliver a clear mandate for further joint collaboration between EU and city policymakers.

Endnotes

- 1 Outcome of Friends of Europe citizens survey, 2019
- 2 Committee of the Regions, *'A new treaty: a new role for regions and local authorities'*
- 3 See *'Cities4Europe, Europe for citizens'* campaign website for examples
<http://cities4europe.euocities.eu>
- 4 EUROCITIES declaration on citizens engagement:
http://nws.euocities.eu/MediaShell/media/2018_C4Europe-DeclarationCitizensEngagement-A4.pdf
- 5 EUROCITIES Principles for citizens engagement (forthcoming)
- 6 For example, the Urban agenda for the EU and its partnership approach involving all levels of government to achieve better regulation, better funding and better knowledge sharing.
- 7 European Commission - Join, Boost, Sustain: the European way of digital transformation in cities and communities
<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/join-boost-sustain-european-way-digital-transformation-cities-and-communities>
- 8 64% of EUROCITIES members have committed to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. Survey on climate action and climate pledges:
<https://bit.ly/2GOhQ4P>

