'It's time for the EU to be closer to its people' – greater role for local and regional government can help restore trust in the EU

PUBLISHED MAY 8, 2022
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The brutal invasion of Ukraine has been a reminder that, despite their differences, the EU's 27 member states are closely bound by a commitment to peace, common fundamental values, democracy and solidarity. Yet public trust in the EU remains low: the recent French Presidential election results are a moment of relief not celebration, with 41% voting for the far right. Today, on Europe Day, after a year of discussions held through the Conference on the Future of Europe, it is time to have an honest reflection on how to reform the way the EU works so it is more effective, more responsive and closer to the people it serves.

The pandemic and the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine have shown that during times of crisis the EU depends on its regions, cities and villages. Brave mayors have stood with their people in Ukraine, while the Polish, Romanian and Hungarian border regions provide aid and shelter to the large majority of the over 5 million Ukrainian refugees. Cities and regions across the European Union are collecting food, medicine and first aid supplies and sending them to Ukraine.

EU local and regional authorities support millions of Ukrainian refugees in other ways as well, providing them with access to the labour market, housing, education and other social services. The EU has been swift to support these local and regional authorities, allowing them to use unspent EU funds to help tackle the new emergency. The European Commission has used EU cohesion policy – regional funds – to support the regions welcoming refugees. The need for cohesion, as an investment and value, has never been clearer.

The war in Ukraine has also put the EU's energy security under

severe strain and is increasing energy poverty, which already affects more than 30 million Europeans. The decision to continue to buy Russia gas and oil to maintain stability has failed. With citizens and young people in particular worried about the climate emergency, there can be no turning back to fossil fuels. The EU must accelerate the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Local and regional authorities are playing a role in decentralising energy production, boosting investment in clean energy and financing the renovation of buildings.

For more than a decade, opinion polls have shown that local and regional governments are the most trusted level of government. The reason for this is simple: local government is part of people's daily life, listening and responding to their needs and acting on their wishes. Local and regional elected representatives also deliver 70% of EU laws in our territories. Yet this key role is not properly reflected in process that makes those laws at the EU level.

It is time for this vital role to be upgraded, through the European Committee of the Regions, which should move beyond its current consultative function towards a binding role in areas with a clear territorial dimension. This will lead to better regulation and greater democratic legitimacy in the EU. It will give the 1.2 million local and regional leaders a reason to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens.

After a year of debate and good intentions, the Conference on the Future of Europe has shown that citizens are demanding more transparency, more inclusion, more sustainability and more security. The institutional debate has been held in Brussels and Strasbourg, but the process has reinforced the notion that local and regional elected leaders are the link between citizens and national governments and Europe. It is time to speak and act outside the EU and national capitals if European democracy is to survive. To allow sceptics and those who feel left behind to have a voice.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has also proven that many improvements are possible within the existing EU treaty. For instance, the Treaty Article 20 states that "Citizens of the Union have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections to the European Parliament and in municipal elections in their Member State of residence, under the same conditions as nationals of that State." Through the hundreds of local and regional elections we can address

the European matters given that 70% of EU legislation is implemented by regional and local authorities. Although this right is foreseen in the treaties for many years, the EU institutions have failed to invest in people's trust at the grassroots level. The EU citizenship means rights and responsibilities. One of them is to elect and to be elected. Therefore, this treaty provision represents a yet untapped opportunity that citizens could expect the EU to better invest in, especially, in between EU elections. This must also be solved now if we do not want to allow extremists and populists to become even more powerful.

For essential needs like health, defence or making the EU decision-making more effective, Treaty changes should not be taboo. Therefore the proposal for a new Convention on the future of the Europe, proposed by the European Parliament is a welcome chance for this fundamental shift in the role of local and regional government, and the European Committee of the Regions, to become a reality. In contrast, if the Conference brings no change, it will be perceived as more Brussels window-dressing with no added value for citizens. It must act on the many proposals for reform or risk being seen as another meaningless propaganda tool.

Europe needs to change, putting its regions and cities at its centre, or run the risk of change being imposed upon it by citizens at the polls. How the EU responds in protecting refugees, tackling the climate emergency and the economic recovery after the pandemic will shape citizens' views for 2024. With the European elections approaching, the next 12 months will be crucial in reinforcing the feeling among people that the European Union actually matters to them, their families and their lives. It's time for the EU be closer to its people.

Press release distributed by Wire Association on behalf of Europa, on May 8, 2022. For more information subscribe and follow us.

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