Ukrainian local leaders back creation of alliance of EU cities and regions to support reconstruction

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Ukrainian local leaders believe EU cities and regions could help Ukraine's reconstruction efforts even before the war with Russia ends.

Ukrainian local leaders have voiced strong support for the involvement of European cities and regions in the reconstruction of Ukraine. They have also urged them to help with rebuilding key infrastructure even while the war continues, highlighting that the war has also brought destruction to parts of the country far from the current lines of contact between Ukrainian and Russian troops.

Their call for swift action, which was backed by a leading representative of the incoming Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union, came at a meeting organised by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), whose president on 18 May said there was a need for "an Alliance to provide Ukraine’s regional and local authorities with the practical support that they will need over the coming years to rebuild Ukraine in Europe". Ukraine's President Volodmyr Zelenskyy on 29 April asked EU regions and cities to establish twinning agreements with Ukrainian counterparts, a suggestion then taken up by the president of the European Council, and by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The European Commission on 18 May presented a communication setting out the direction of reconstruction work, proposing that EU cities and regions could play a role through peer-to-peer partnerships.

Sergyi Chernov , member of Kharkiv Regional Council and President of the Ukrainian Association of Regional and District Councils, said "we need to start re-building quickly", starting with "the regions now liberated" and to ensure basic supplies – such as water and electricity – are assured before winter. An alliance of cities and regions could be

a "very efficient tool of cross-border cooperation", he said.

Oleksandr Slobozhan , executive director of the Association of Ukrainian Cities, said Ukraine would "need to incorporate the best international expertise", adding: "We cannot allow ourselves to rebuild with a Soviet approach". Current figures provided by Mr Slobozhan suggest that 68,585 facilities have been destroyed or damaged, including 1,835 education institutions, 616 medical institutions, and 330 bridges.

Similar comments were made by the Ukrainian government and Ukraine's ambassador to the European Union. Anatolii Kutsevol, Deputy State Secretary of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, said that "cities and regions in Europe are best placed to understand the needs" of Ukrainian municipalities, while Ivan Lukeria, Deputy Minister of Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, said that the government was "collecting needs as well as practices in urban policy from across the EU". "European regions and cities can assist in rebuilding communities right now," he said.

Ambassador Vsevolod Chentsov emphasised the need for swift action. "We think that the so-called 'small reconstruction' of the areas that have already been liberated should start without delay," he said, citing the situation of Irpin, a municipality close to Kyiv, where 3,000 buildings had been destroyed or damaged, 4,000 families had completely lost their homes, and 95% of "communal equipment" was destroyed.

There was also a call for early action from Jaroslav Kurfürst, the Czech Republic's special envoy for the Eastern Partnership. "I believe we cannot wait until the end of the war, because the war may be long and rebuilding should be started earlier," he said. He also highlighted the potential for action by cities, saying that there are "examples of good cooperation already in place" and that "some Czech cities have fantastic programmes".

The meeting of the CoR's Working Group on Ukraine was chaired by Aleksandra Dulkiewicz , mayor of Gdańsk, a city that is a leading example of city partnerships, including with the Ukrainian cities of Mariupol, Odessa and Lviv.

Apostolos Tzitzikostas (EL/EPP), President of the CoR and Governor of Central Macedonia, said: "Over the coming weeks, we need: to pool

the good will of all European stakeholders; Ukraine's local and regional authorities need to map needs; cities and regions of the EU need to have access to a dedicated facility and gather available funds; to tap European know-how; and to convene within the CoR a conference to match up what is needed with what is available."

He continued: "The time has now come to start working together to build the future of Ukraine in Europe, from the bottom up."

Katarína Mathernová , head of the European Commission's Support Group for Ukraine, described city-to-city and region-to-region support as "absolutely critical" and praised the transformation in local government in Ukraine over the past eight years. Decentralisation reforms has been "visionary" and "the success of decentralisation is one of the cornerstones of the resilience" of Ukraine. Decentralisation reform has been heavily supported by the European Commission's U-LEAD with Europe programme. The activities of the programme were repurposed after the invasion on 24 February, to help meet the emergency needs of local communities in all 24 regions of Ukraine.

Roderick Parkes of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) said the idea of reconstruction beginning only after the war assumes that there is a clear ending. "I think we need to move faster and to expect a contested environment. There will be an ongoing conflict," he said, adding that "for European cities to move into highly contested areas" would be "new".

Other speakers at the meeting included: Richard Tibbels of the European External Action Service (EEAS); Jean-Erik De Zagon, head of the European Investment Bank's representation for Ukraine; Bastian Veigel of the ULEAD for Europe programme; Dorothée Allain-Dupré of the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities; and Janez Šušteršič of the consultancy RE-FORMA.

The meeting of the Working Group on Ukraine, held on 23 May in the European Committee of the Regions and online, can be re-watched here.

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