

BUILDING TOMORROW TOGETHER: PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITIES FOR COHESION, DEMOCRACY AND QUALITY OF LIFE

**Political priorities of the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions for
the 2025-2030 mandate**

Our Progressive Priorities ‘from the bottom up’

As locally and regionally elected progressive representatives in the Party of European Socialists Group (PES Group) in the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), we believe in a stronger and fairer European Union built on understanding and responding to our citizens’ fears, expectations and needs and providing direction and hope to them. We want a Europe that protects our planet, our values, our cohesion and our citizens. We want to strengthen our citizens’ trust in our ability to improve their quality of life through our action in solidarity.

Our term of office begins at a very significant moment for Europe, which from various perspectives is an existential moment for the EU. On the one hand, the internal political situation of Europe is marked by forces of the extreme right being either directly involved in government in different Member States or which are threatening the democratic set-up of our countries by pushing conservative forces towards populist extremism that harms the well-being of the EU and its citizens. On the other hand, we see an international situation which is marked by virulent conflicts on the edges of our continent, on the shores of the Mediterranean in Gaza and in Ukraine, and the complete upset of the geopolitical balance by the blows dealt to international trade, development cooperation, the climate and taxes by the new Trump administration.

We live in a world where citizens and political leaders face complex and rapidly changing challenges and new threats that create anxiety among citizens, from climate change to transforming economies, from geopolitical instability and persistent or growing inequalities and unfairness in our societies. This is putting enormous pressure on our democratic system and challenging our values. We understand the unease this creates and we must respond.

As progressive local and regional leaders, we have to bring order to the chaos and show the progressive way forward to our citizens. Social democracy is needed more than ever to build cohesion, solidarity and democratic participation. We have to make our Europe more inclusive and resilient and to deliver gender equality and access to opportunities in the changing world, improving the quality of life for everyone.

The European Union must build on the unique success of the integration project and respond to citizens' expectations for themselves and future generations. In an increasingly unpredictable world where we are threatened from outside and from within, the EU must become stronger on security in all its aspects. This requires cooperation and trust between leaders at all levels, and political courage to show new ways of concentrating on the essentials to create cohesion and solidarity and build a sustainable and democratic future for our citizens.

In this EU legislature, with a Commission less influenced by social democratic leadership and an EPP that is dangerously aligning with the far right in many EU countries, as well as at the European level, the input of local progressive leaders is more crucial than ever. There is both an opportunity and a necessity for local and regional leaders to play a stronger role in shaping the European Union. Our group at the European Committee of the Regions must work even more closely with the broader progressive family to advance our agenda in a strategic and coordinated manner. With a new leadership at the European Council, there is an opportunity for the PES within the CoR to forge stronger synergies and build relationships.

Local and regional authorities in the EU, and especially progressive local and regional leaders in the CoR, must play a central role in meeting the challenges before us. We have to reinforce European multi-level democracy and therefore the role of local and regional authorities and of the European Committee of the Regions.

With 2030 being the target year for the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, and 2050 the year for the EU's own goal of carbon neutrality, time is pressing to propose our solutions for social, democratic, cultural and sustainable progress. This requires just and fair transitions.

The present PES Group political priorities are our guiding light for the CoR's 2025-2030 term of office and are the result of our joint experience and debates. These priorities define our action as PES members of the European Committee of the Regions and provide the basis for reinforced cooperation with the progressive family, notably the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D Group), as well as other progressive partners.

As socialist, social democratic and progressive representatives of the local and regional levels, we want a European Union that provides:

- > Cohesion
- > Democracy
- > Quality of Life

We understand cohesion in its broadest sense of forming a united whole, at all levels, bringing together people and territories. True cohesion which is both social and territorial, as the EU Treaties demand. For the European Union, this means working closely with local and regional authorities to provide a common vision and the political means and processes to take decisions jointly, to build social and territorial connections and partnerships. It means that convergence and the fight against inequalities within and between Member States must be at the heart of every action taken by the EU. To give priority to cohesion as the objective of our political action, we have to create the conditions for EU citizens to feel that sense of belonging which makes the whole stronger than the sum of its parts and to build a real spirit of union and

solidarity. This requires a strong focus on the instruments of cohesion such as the structural funds and the partnership principle; a strong investment policy in cohesion with clear goals and strong means, building on cooperation between all levels and rooted in the experience of the diverse territories and communities. Cohesion is crucial to maintaining the EU's success as a project for stability and peace that is more than just economic cooperation and that gives hope to its citizens.

We will work to improve the quality of life of our citizens in its broadest sense, legitimising our work by improving the common well-being and living standards and the working conditions of European citizens. This includes protecting disadvantaged groups in society and providing opportunities for everyone to grow; it requires strong and resilient local and regional authorities with the powers and the means to offer quality public services and to support local communities and businesses of our territories in the profound ecological and digital transitions, which must be synonymous with a better quality of life and new opportunities. It requires our strong focus on inclusion and promoting gender equality because there cannot be development without equality. In solidarity, we are much stronger to face the changes before us and make them work for everyone. Starting by giving concrete shape to the added value which Europe provides to its citizens in their everyday life is the way to create the sense of trust and solidarity that make Europe strong.

We understand democracy in its broadest sense as our European values on the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, strong multi-level governance and free, fair and open democratic processes at all levels. This means that the EU must be developed as the beacon of democracy and participation and show that democratic decisions and transparency are the best way to address the challenges that we face. It requires a determination to defend democracy and its institutions against those from inside and outside who try to undermine it, and this starts at the local and regional levels. It requires a strong commitment to inform our citizens and explain the choices we face and which they have to make, building a culture of democracy, mutual respect and trust through education and participation. Democracy and the rule of law need to be defended, in particular in the face of the digital transition, which presents new challenges to democratic participation and self-determination.

The European Union must be stronger as a political community built on common values and objectives, rooted in the historical success of peace and ready to stand up for it, and leading by example on a global scale in terms of rules-based cooperation in solidarity. The success of our European project is founded on the strength and diversity of Europe's territories, and we believe in shared responsibility, decentralisation and joint action across all levels. As the PES Group, we will continue to point out that progressive integration and policy decisions happen in and between our neighbourhoods, villages, municipalities, towns, cities, regions and countries, and across the globe.

We will therefore outline each of our three overarching priorities of Cohesion, Democracy and Quality of Life for everyone, everywhere.

What the EU must do

As members of the progressive family, and through our action at local and regional levels and in the CoR, we will continue to push EU and national decision-makers towards the European

Union that we believe is right. This means more and stronger Europe in many areas, including through a strong budget and more pooling of resources among Member States.

What local and regional authorities can do

In our daily work at local and regional levels, but also by exchanging our ideas and shaping EU programmes and policies, we as representatives of LRAs highlight the key contribution that villages, cities and regions can make to achieving the goals of European integration. We need to connect to local and regional leaders across the EU and encourage them to inform citizens about the European dimension of the policy choices we all have to make.

What we, PES members, will do to make it happen

As the second largest political group in the European Committee of the Regions, with strong ties and networks across the EU, we will shape the future work of the CoR and make sure that cities and regions will be heard with our key messages. The CoR's role must be strengthened in relation to the other EU institutions, based on our knowledge and experience of the situation on the ground, and on our legitimacy as elected representatives.

The PES Group and its members represent the wider family of progressive local and regional governments in the EU and our share of the 1.2 million representatives elected at local or regional levels. By working closely together with local and regional leaders across the EU, we are the voice for all progressive LRAs, building on their strengths and networks. In doing so, we will build stronger links between local and European levels.

Cohesion

What the EU must do

The promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among Member States is a central objective of the European Union and a precondition for its citizens' trust. To this end, the EU has created important instruments such as the free movement of persons, capital and goods without internal frontiers, the single market and EU cohesion policy. These are important achievements and we must develop them further in a rapidly changing world. This is true especially in the situation of the enormous transitions we are facing, which create enormous uncertainties. More efforts are needed to ensure that all members of our societies, regardless of where they live, can enjoy the benefits of European integration. This requires special support for weaker groups and close attention to the diversity of situations in cities and regions across the EU, in all EU action. We must strive for the EU's social, economic and territorial cohesion, which today also means the need to address the digital divide and make sure that everyone can have access to the benefits of the digital transition wherever they live. It also means that cohesion and upward convergence will remain pivotal objectives in the ecological transition while we defend the EU Green Deal, implement the clean industrial strategy for Europe and shape the just transition. The digital and ecological transitions should be perceived as opportunities to improve our territories through our political action.

The coming years will be crucial for the design of a new EU budget and the overall financial capability of the European Union. We have to make sure that the EU avoids a fundamental mistake: pitting different objectives against each other. Being more ambitious on competitiveness, industry and the digital transition should not come at the expense of funding for our agriculture and its transformation, or of Europe's commitment to cohesion. As Jacques Delors taught us: at a time when we are pushing to accelerate the internal market and competitiveness – as we must do now – that is precisely when we need cohesion the most. Not all businesses, not all regions and not all workers will emerge as winners from this acceleration towards a more digital, connected and ecological Europe. The EU budget must ensure that everyone, everywhere in Europe, has access to a secure future and a high quality of life.

The EU must be much more proactive in the coming five years in strengthening a decentralised and regionalised cohesion policy accessible to all local and regional authorities with the necessary budgetary means. The EU must propose and implement a comprehensive plan for sustainable and affordable housing for everyone. We need a better EU framework for state aid and to address the urban/rural divide and the problem of depopulation. This requires appropriate rules and legal certainty for public investments at every level, especially to reinforce public services. The EU also needs new own resources to make sure the EU budget has the means to respond to growing challenges. This will have to include the issuing of common debt for investment and new priorities such as defence. One of the key challenges will also be to address long-term unemployment and to propose a solid anti-poverty strategy at EU level. Last, but not least, the EU's role in ensuring fair taxation systems at the service of the common good needs to be reinforced.

The present EU term of office will also have a strong focus on issues of competitiveness and the re-launch of our industrial sectors, starting from the green economy and energy sectors, defence and new technologies. The question of how to ensure common growth which ensures convergence and territorial cohesion therefore has to be at the centre of our answers to these crucial challenges.

What LRAs can do

In all policy areas that are central to the success and legitimacy of European integration, local and regional authorities and their representatives know what is really needed on the ground. They are responsible for half of public investments and for the implementation of around 70% of EU legislation, and they know that the aims of cohesion in all its dimensions, and of solidarity for everyone, everywhere, can only be achieved by close cooperation across all levels of governance. They are the ones providing efficient public services to ensure that every European can have the same opportunities wherever they might live.

This is why the CoR must continue to insist that the knowledge, experience and innovative ideas that exist at the local and regional levels are fully acknowledged and utilised to shape EU policies and programmes that work for all citizens. Housing policy is integrally linked to local planning, public procurement is a key tool to steer local and regional economic development, and the ability to provide high quality and accessible public services in education, culture, sport, healthcare, inclusion or transport all take place within EU and national policy frameworks. This would also require a care-centric approach to different

governance levels. For this reason, EU action must take account of the specific situations of different territories.

What we, progressive local and regional politicians, will do to make it happen

As the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions, we will focus on:

- > mobilising regional and local stakeholders and civil society to build the political momentum for maintaining a strong cohesion policy, including through the Cohesion Alliance;
- > actively participating in shaping the European housing agenda, building partnerships with the European institutions in order to define instruments fit for housing investments at local and regional levels;
- > providing concrete examples of successful projects for a fair transition and pushing to simplify the implementation of cohesion policy programmes;
- > defining a set of quality public services that must be available and accessible everywhere, specifically in remote/rural areas, to address the geography of discontent;
- > fostering employment and the creation of good jobs with good income, as well as promoting 'zero long-term unemployment territories', built on the success of such initiatives in many parts of the EU;
- > promoting the development of a competitive EU economy and industry in general by strengthening the cooperative, social and public economy sectors;
- > mobilising to reinforce governance and strategic planning instruments which help to design economic and industrial models geared towards cohesion and convergence;
- > mainstreaming cohesion in the EU digital agenda to contrast the digital divide and make sure that tech infrastructure is designed in the interest of all citizens and areas of Europe.

Democracy

What the EU must do

The European Union is founded on the values of liberal democracy, the rule of law and respect of fundamental rights. It can only function and flourish if its constituent elements (the Member States and their regional and local structures) also adhere to these principles. This must apply both to countries already in the EU and to those wanting to join it. Clearly democracy is in crisis, being attacked by extremist parties which increasingly use antidemocratic means, threatened by autocratic regimes both inside and outside the EU which undermine the foundations of the separation of powers and violate civil liberties of the citizens, and undermined by oligarchs who use their economic power to destroy trust in public powers and democratic representation.

Facing all this, a vibrant democracy such as that of the EU needs a new push to develop its own mechanisms to promote its core values and principles, and to ensure that its decision-making and its institutions are transparent, accountable, effective and democratic. Progressive forces at all levels will fight to further empower EU citizens. Gender equality is our guiding principle in all our actions at all levels of government. Inter-generational justice across all policies needs to be ensured through appropriate decision-making mechanisms.

The next round of EU enlargement is a geopolitical and democratic responsibility and it needs the EU to reform through open and participatory processes, involving citizens as well as LRAs. The EU must continue its support for Ukraine and for rebuilding the country in preparation for its accession. Gender equality, non-discrimination, the fight against corruption and inclusion of everyone, everywhere, require active policies and innovation on how decisions are taken and how information is communicated. A crucial element of the EU's role as an example of rules-based cooperation with the highest standards of rights protection must also be a humane migration policy, as well as its relations with other parts of the world. The EU has to strengthen its resilience against disinformation and reinforce media pluralism in the digital era.

In these times in which democracy is under threat, it is imperative to rebuild trust in representative democracy. Progressives must re-focus and re-start from the local level, where our policies have tangible impact and electoral results in many Member States confirm great support for PES leadership. This grassroots credibility is the foundation for renewing faith in democracy and expanding progressive power at all levels.

What LRAs can do

Democracy in the EU must start at the local level and build on cooperation between and across all levels. Local and regional authorities are practising democracy close to citizens and have key responsibilities for organising collective decision-making in the most accessible and inclusive way. They are the places where new forms of participation can be developed and tested, and they must promote a democratic rule of law culture through practice and education.

LRAs have a key role in the integration of migrants and need to be given the means to fulfil this role, which is essential to ensure the protection of fundamental rights and building social cohesion.

This is why LRAs should continue to push for more influence in the EU's institutional structures and policy-making process, to fully reflect the diversity of European multi-level democracy.

What we, progressive local and regional politicians, will do to make it happen

As the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions, we will focus on:

- > continuing to demand a stronger role for the European Committee of the Regions as the political assembly of local and regional representatives in the EU decision-making system, including its representation at key trilogue meetings, increased participation in Council Working Groups, proposing to the European Parliament that CoR amendments could be voted on by EP Committees;
- > reinforcing our activities to connect with local and regional leaders in EU and non-EU countries to strengthen our joint commitment to democracy, fundamental rights and cooperation based on common values and mutual respect;
- > promoting social dialogue and the participation of civil society in the different areas of political action in order to reinforce transparency and the representation of all interested parties;

- > strengthening the protection of our democracy through a responsible use of digital space and platforms to limit fake news, addressing the threat of disinformation through support for independent fact-checking, and working against polarisation in the digital space which creates online hatred and allows for foreign or corporate interference in electoral processes;
- > fighting against all forms of violence against women and discrimination and continuing the Safe Place For Women campaign;
- > standing up against any discrimination of the LGBTIQ community;
- > requesting direct access for lower levels of government to EU funds supporting the integration of migrants;
- > insisting on clearer rules and more coherent EU migration policy, which is firmly founded in EU solidarity and respect of human rights and takes the concerns of LRAs fully into account;
- > promoting testing and adoption of participatory elements in democratic decision-making in our territories, and where appropriate at EU level, as a necessary complement to a modern representative democracy;
- > organising local and regional citizens' debates to better involve them in EU decision-making;
- > continuing our fight for equal representation of women in the European Committee of the Regions as well as in all other democratic institutions;
- > engaging with progressive forces at local and regional levels in the accession countries in order to assist them in their preparations for EU membership and to ensure their full integration into the EU structures as soon as the process allows.

Quality of Life

What the EU must do

The European Union needs to become stronger in providing security in all its forms to its citizens. This includes the need to rapidly develop a comprehensive European defence based on pooling resources and coordination among the Member States and shared responsibility. It also requires the revitalisation of a much broader concept of security, which includes long-term visions to achieve economic, financial and working-life well-being in the sense of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including social and environmental targets. Reaching carbon neutrality by 2050 requires massive transformations in the way we live, eat, work, produce and travel and these must be socially, economically and territorially fair based on the idea that these transformations have to bring added value to our citizens and improve their living standards. We need to support key industries in their processes of transformation and we have to help workers and employees to adapt and ensure that all territories and all communities can benefit from them. We have to address the cost-of-living crisis by providing for key needs on housing, energy, access to healthy food, healthcare and education. This means not only that the EU must be ambitious in the implementation of the Green Deal and reconcile it with its competitiveness goals, but also that we need much stronger instruments to ensure that the transitions will create new opportunities and bring social progress. We need to ensure the resilience of infrastructure and the autonomy of strategic production chains.

There are many types of initiative which we have to strengthen and steer to reach these objectives. Progressive forces need to pay special attention to the implementation of the European Pillar of social rights and we have to help all progressive forces and trade unions in Europe to better define the roadmap for high quality work, the initiatives to regulate algorithms in the workplace, the fight against poverty and the European Skills Union. Beyond strengthening the social *acquis* of the pillar, we will also actively develop two new areas of competency which are directly related to quality of life: housing and health.

A new Common Agricultural Policy must be more focused on supporting smaller scale sustainable farming. The European Pillar of Social Rights must be fully implemented and developed further. European energy policy must drive the transition to EU-based renewable energy and solidarity between energy systems, which ensures affordable energy prices and energy security and empowers citizens to interact with the energy market as prosumers.

A common industrial policy at EU level, based on regional innovation ecosystems, must focus on the creation of high-quality jobs and the acquisition of appropriate skills, accessible for everyone, as a basis for competitiveness. Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence continue to transform our lives and bring significant opportunities but also pose enormous challenges in terms of inclusiveness, accessibility and the protection of fundamental rights of users, but also of those whose jobs will change fundamentally. The EU has to keep up at the regulatory level with the unprecedented technological development and global pressures.

The European Health Union is an important element in ensuring that everyone, wherever they live, has access to high quality health services, based on top quality research and covered by the appropriate insurance schemes. It also encompasses the protection of our welfare system, improving care workers' working conditions and public infrastructures across the EU.

What LRAs can do

The transitions to sustainable well-being must be fair and safe and build on the diversity of the conditions in the different territories across the EU. Local and regional authorities are crucial providers of information both to their populations and to the EU level and are key actors to mobilise all of society around these processes. Addressing the need to reduce CO₂ emissions while adapting to the effects of climate change and protecting jobs has to go through the local and regional competencies in planning, building renovation, transport, waste management, education, investment and public procurement. Encouraging local innovation and industrial development and promoting education, research and skills are crucial to ensure social progress overall and that citizens can freely choose whether they want to be geographically mobile or stay where they are.

What we, progressive local and regional politicians, will do to make it happen

Europe must achieve the green transition in solidarity: this is as much a socio-economic imperative as a climate-saving one. We will continue to support an ambitious EU Green Deal with the full involvement of LRAs and we will resist attempts to water down commitments to carbon neutrality because our competitiveness depends on a long-term sustainable vision, not on keeping yesterday's technologies. The only way to ensure our long-term competitiveness is to shift away from fossil energy and towards a clean, competitive and circular economy based

on social cohesion. This also means that we have to address demographic change together and ensure inter-generational fairness.

As the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions, we will focus on:

- > strengthening the EU's social pillar and the fairness dimension of the transitions and protecting workers' and citizens' rights by insisting on the key role of local and regional authorities in policies which must reconcile sustainability with competitiveness. This also entails countering attempts to deregulate in the name of simplification and reduction of bureaucratic burden;
- > fighting for high quality public services and the capacity of local and regional authorities to provide them, as essential stabilisers of social and territorial cohesion and core elements of the European social model;
- > promoting active labour market policies as well as skills and qualifications support at local and regional levels, to increase labour market participation by everyone, including disadvantaged groups, and boost job security and employment opportunities;
- > keeping a watch on the implementation and enforcement at national levels of a number of important socialist achievements like the minimum wage, wage parity between women and men and the Digital Services Act;
- > supporting an inclusive circular economy by removing structural barriers to labour market access, driving the upskilling and reskilling as well as necessary social and technological innovation, and promoting sustainable modes of production and consumption, not least through greener public procurement rules;
- > demanding a stronger European industrial policy to facilitate the transition, in particular of energy-intensive industries and vulnerable regions while limiting the social and environmental impacts. This entails fighting for social and environmental conditionalities to be included in all forms of public EU and national direct and indirect funding and support to businesses, as well as environmental and tax conditionalities;
- > reinforcing interregional cooperation between European regions, including through the mainstream programmes of cohesion policy, in order to reinforce and create industrial value chains;
- > supporting research and innovation at local and regional levels as key drivers of just transitions and improved opportunities for the future, with appropriate EU level support including a future Framework Programme (FP10) with a strong territorial dimension;
- > promoting a decentralised, interconnected and democratic energy system which ensures sustainable, secure and affordable energy for everyone, including for key industrial sectors. This means increasing investments in renewable energy and clean technologies and developing initiatives such as Local Energy Communities as an instrument to fight energy poverty;
- > increasing the financial allocation to the Social Climate Fund in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to support vulnerable consumers and small businesses. The Social Climate Fund should be mainstreamed into cohesion policy and jointly managed with the regions, speeding up the deployment of the Zero Pollution Action Plan;
- > fighting for fair incomes for farmers, access to farming land and a sound EU-level framework to protect the rights of workers in the agri-food sector in the future, fairer and more localised Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for high-quality affordable food;
- > encouraging local production and food systems and making sustainable and healthy food available in schools, hospitals and other public canteens, in particular by adapting European public procurement rules;

- > strengthening health protection and our public health systems and advocating for the inclusion of the local perspective in the future EU Health Union programme, emphasising improved working conditions for care workers, especially in rural areas, to ensure equitable access to quality healthcare services;
- > promoting gender equality measures, especially via gender budgeting and urban planning, to ensure better representation of needs in terms of public services and infrastructure;
- > reinforcing local and regional resilience including strengthening the civil protection capabilities of our territories to respond to new and more complex threats.

Conclusions: The Way Forward

Cohesion, Democracy and Quality of Life for all, everywhere, are our political priorities for the coming five years. The European Committee of the Regions has just turned 30, and we are looking forward to shaping its political action for the years 2025-2030. The European Union started as a peace project and has been remarkably successful – and it must remain a peace project even if the world in which we live today requires new ways of responding to the challenges. We must gain the trust of our citizens that we, as PES representatives from the levels closest to them, can make the difference to achieve true cohesion in all dimensions, promote democratic decision-making and improve their quality of life.

We are joining our forces and knowledge in the CoR and beyond to make these priorities a reality for everyone, everywhere, through the actions of progressive local and regional authorities. European integration is a unique opportunity, and we must build on its strengths which lie in the diversity of democratic structures at all levels. By linking these levels through our progressive vision, we as the PES can build a stronger European Union closer to its people and that provides security in its broadest sense in their daily lives. Our vision of a secure Europe is based on more cohesion, stronger democracy and a better quality of life for all, wherever they live.