



CITY OF
ATHENS



Party of European
Socialists Group
European Committee of the Regions

DECLARATION OF ATHENS

A budget for democracy

11 September 2026



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We, the **Socialists and Progressives elected in local and regional governments**, declare that the proposals of the European Commission linked to the future EU long-term budget (Multiannual Financial Framework - MFF) pose a threat to European democracy in our municipalities, cities and regions and risk undermining the future of the European project.

We recognise that EU integration is at a critical juncture, shaped by the urgency of the ecological transition, geopolitical challenges, the need to regain competitiveness, persistent economic, social, gender and territorial disparities, demographic change, soaring housing and energy prices and unequal access to opportunities. **These challenges demand both bold and fair reforms.**

We reaffirm that the solution lies in strengthening the European model, not dismantling it. Our answer is clear: we need **more democracy, more participation and more social justice.**

However, the Commission's proposal for the next long-term budget turns its back on citizens. By dismantling truly European policies, like cohesion and agricultural policies, in favour of 27 different development and investment models, the Commission will weaken the internal market instead of reinforcing it. By sidelining municipalities and regions where the representatives closest to the people serve and where European policies take on real meaning or fail to do so, the Commission's approach risks fuelling anti-EU sentiment and the far right. Across Europe, authoritarian and anti-democratic forces are turning insecurity into fear, fear into division, and division into political gain. This is not the Europe we want. **'United in diversity' must mean more than words; it must mean robust multilevel governance where every voice counts.**

Security means protecting people

The European Union must use all its political and diplomatic weight to end wars, defend international law and resolve conflicts peacefully.

But security is not only about defence. **People also need to feel secure in their homes, their communities, their jobs and their everyday lives.** Affordable housing, protection from energy poverty, preparedness for natural disasters, women's rights accessible public health services, livable and safe cities, social cohesion and the protection of critical infrastructure are all essential to Europe's security.

This concept of security is not served by the new MFF, which provides EUR 131 billion for the 'European Defence Union', five times more than today, while resources for the



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common agricultural policy and cohesion are reduced from 68.5% in the current Financial Framework to 44% in the proposed one.

A secure Europe must protect both its borders and its people. We need a budget that strengthens our capacity to defend Europe while also investing in the resilient communities, public services and social cohesion that make Europe strong.

Europe starts where people live

Municipalities, regions and cities are not merely administrative mechanisms that implement decisions. They **are the democratic institutions closest to citizens' daily lives**. It is municipalities, cities and regions that address the challenge of affordable housing and rising energy costs for their citizens. It is municipalities, cities and regions that ensure every citizen has access to social services. And it is municipalities, cities and regions that are first in line to support our neighbourhoods withstanding heatwaves, floods and fires.

Strong local and regional democracy is the foundation of a strong European democracy. Decisions that affect people's daily lives must therefore be shaped with the communities they affect.

Our demands: A Budget that works for people and places

1. **The next Multiannual Financial Framework must be ambitious**, matching the scale of the challenges we face. We demand a budget of at least 1.38% of the EU's GDP, funded by genuine, progressive own resources to support the ecological and digital transitions, as well as defence.
2. **We reject a recentralised budget that favours the wealthiest and dismantles the European Union into a mere Europe of Nations.** Such an approach would deepen the perception of a distant, unresponsive EU, eroding trust and undermining integration.
3. **Cohesion policy and rural development must not face unjustified cuts.** The 20% reduction in shared management funds, including the European Social Fund (ESF+), is unacceptable. Instead, we call for the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle to be a binding horizontal priority, leading to a more robust and secure Europe.



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4. **Local and regional governments, as the level of governance closest to citizens, must have a seat at the table.** Municipalities, cities and regions, must be involved in shaping all European policies, from cohesion and agriculture to competitiveness. This is not just a question of efficiency; it is a democratic imperative.
5. **National plans proposed by the Commission must include at least one territorial chapter,** respecting the competences of cities and regions. A subsidiarity clause should prevent the adoption of any plan that disregards the rights of cities and regions.
6. To guarantee a place-based approach, at least 20% of national and regional plans must support integrated territorial development strategies, whether through urban investments, community-led initiatives, or rural tools like LEADER, ensuring these communities also have **direct access to cohesion funds alongside the directly managed European funds.**
7. Finally, **the MFF must place the ecological transition at its core.** Climate change will not wait, and neither can we. The green transition must be socially fair to build resilient societies where the fight against social inequalities, excluded neighbourhoods, energy poverty and housing insecurity remains the best weapon against populism.

A Europe that puts people first

Our vision is clear: **the European long-term budget must put people first, delivering not just economic growth but also solidarity, robust public services, and social justice.**

To achieve this, **municipalities, cities and regions must remain key partners of the EU in the future and not simply beneficiaries of policies,** as they are the bedrock of democratic engagement and effective policy delivery.

Citizens have the right to know what is at stake. We, **the Socialists and Progressives elected in local and regional governments,** will empower them to actively participate in shaping the future ahead of the EU decisions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework. Together, within the European Committee of the Regions, we are ready **to use all means at our disposal,** including recourse to the European Court of Justice, if the subsidiarity principle is breached by the European Commission's proposals.



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TAKE A STAND: Our Initiative for European Democracy

We will inform citizens, through every appropriate means, that decisions about the European budget are decisions about their future. We call on all citizens to **take a stand** and mobilize their local and regional politicians to join our cause.

On our newly created pan-European platform '**TAKE A STAND**', we will collect signatures of local and regional leaders, civil society representatives and citizens, which we will submit to the European institutions ahead of any important decisions on the new MFF.

Democracy starts with our communities.

Signatures: