

PES GROUP POLITICAL PRIORITIES

updated for the 2nd half of the 2020-2025 term

**Cities and regions working together
for a progressive, solidary and
sustainable recovery!**

An opportunity to reinforce a progressive agenda

We are living in transformational times where Europe is called upon to act on the global challenges and changes that Covid-19 has brought about and in many ways, accelerated. On the one hand, the pandemic magnified social, economic, generational and ecological inequalities, on the other, it has led to an unprecedented leap in terms of European solidarity and response, notably with ambitious recovery and resilience programmes. From an emergency response, the EU is now moving towards recovery.

Against this backdrop also lies an opportunity, where the European progressive political family is being called upon to showcase that there is a different way for Europe, one that is green with a red heart, feminist and socially just. The political call by the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions (PES Group) therefore is: let's work together for a progressive, solidary and sustainable European recovery!

The present PES Group political priorities update has been drafted as a framing document that builds on the legacy of the PES Group, but that also takes a forward looking approach, in the context of the transformations brought about by Covid-19, Russia's unlawful military aggression to Ukraine and the perspective of the PES presidency of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) for the 2nd half of the 2020-2025 term.

The PES Group is planning its future political actions and activities in coherence with the programmatic approach of 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. We have in sight the 2024 European elections and more urgently, supporting Ukraine as our neighbour. As PES Group we reaffirm values of unity and solidarity for a strong and independent Europe! As PES Group we will relentlessly remind that progressive integration policies happen across Europe's neighbourhoods, cities, towns, municipalities and villages. These are the main actors that that show on a daily basis that it possible to build welcoming communities and that it is possible to realise successful integration of migrants and refugees.

Against the context of the political priorities of the CoR for the 2020-2025 term, and under the lens of the local and regional perspective, six overarching and cross-cutting priorities will guide and assert the political agenda of the PES Group in the upcoming months, with the required flexibility and adaptability according to the evolving political context.

A snapshot of our political priorities update

1) TERRITORIAL COHESION FOR A SUCCESSFUL EUROPEAN RECOVERY AND A PROSPEROUS FUTURE

Supporting a progressive, inclusive and sustainable recovery by ensuring a strong and robust cohesion policy as an investment tool for the future

2) MAKING SOCIAL EUROPE A REALITY

Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights starting from cities and regions

3) A PROGRESSIVE AND SOCIAL VISION FOR ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

A new approach to Europe's societal and growth model - empowering cities, regions and villages as catalysts of a society of well-being

4) A FAIR PATH TOWARDS THE GREEN TRANSITION

Delivering a socially just European Green Deal, by placing planet and people first

5) PREPARING FOR A SOCIALLY JUST DIGITAL AGE

Ensuring a socially just digital transition and cohesion

6) EMPOWERING CITIZENS FOR A MORE DEMOCRATIC AND POLITICAL EUROPE

Strengthening and deepening European democracy by promoting innovative ways of citizens' participation in the EU's decision making process

The way forward: building a progressive alliance of cities, villages and regions

The PES Group and its members have a mission to represent the wider family of progressive local and regional governments in the European Union (EU). By working closely with them, our ambition is to become the voice for all progressive local and regional authorities and to build on their strength and networks. In doing so, we will better connect the local and European level and build a more social a sustainable Europe from the bottom-up.

For the PES Group, it is fundamental to highlight that only with the work and engagement of local and regional authorities, and their representatives, will the EU bridge the widening gap between its institutions and citizens.

We intend to consolidate and expand our platform of progressive cities and regions to foster the exchange of best practices and put forward new ideas on how to build a more sustainable Europe from the ground-up. To realise this ambition, young progressive local and regional politicians have an important role to play, being the leaders of tomorrow.

Our ambition, will be to offer the space and opportunities to bring this young community together, by inviting them to take part in PES Group activities and hosting dedicated events, including our yearly flagship event the “#ProgressivesSpeakUp School”. The aim is to allow

them to familiarise themselves with the structure and working of the CoR and to enable them to keep closer ties with the institution and its members, but also with the progressive European political family.

The PES Group will continue to bring visibility to the many positive stories and best practices of progressive cities and regions across different fields. Cities and regions have become laboratories for innovative solutions and, through this campaign, the PES Group aims at connecting these stories and making them better known. In particular, the #ProgressiveLocalStories have also become an awareness-raising exercise, seeking to inform local authorities of the challenges and opportunities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to bring the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) to a wider public.

Apart from communication on the CoR's legislative work, the PES Group will continue to build political campaigns linked to its political priorities with a fresh approach to its overall communication. We will be in line with the news cycle and the wider EU inter-institutional relations and political framework, as well as adapting to new trends and evolving needs of our members.

Our political priorities update in more detail

1) TERRITORIAL COHESION FOR A SUCCESSFUL EUROPEAN RECOVERY AND A PROSPEROUS FUTURE

Supporting a progressive, inclusive and sustainable recovery by ensuring a strong and robust cohesion policy as an investment tool for the future

Territorial cohesion must be at the heart of Europe's recovery. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the risk of economic stagnation, social fragmentation and increasing regional inequalities within and across EU Member States. The pandemic also showed the high costs of insufficient investment in public services and infrastructure.

In many regards, cohesion supported policy actions by local and regional authorities and allowed a swift response to meet the most urgent needs at the start of the pandemic, avoiding a far worst impact. **Cohesion policy and cohesion as a principle**, however, should not be limited to being an emergency-response instrument, but **must be recognised as a fundamental value** and a principle that must be embedded in all EU policies.

Unity and convergence must be at the core of Europe as a political project. EU policies can effectively tackle **the divide between rural and urban areas, between city centres and neighbourhoods, as well as peripheral and outermost regions** by taking a territorial and place based approach. **Cohesion policy is indispensable to address that divide.** It

can also positively boost the EU's public perception and at the same time enable regions lagging behind to catch up, and for the more prosperous regions to move forward.

Next Generation EU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, though welcomed developments, signified a strategic re-orientation, to quickly address the health emergency. As it became the primary instrument to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, long-term investments have been put on hold and **the effectiveness and preparedness of cohesion policy to respond to future crises is currently under question**. Despite its successful use as an emergency-response tool, cohesion policy must remain the primary investment tool for Europe's cities, villages and regions to recover and set them on a path of convergence.

We believe that a holistic but also long-term perspective must guide the current implementation of the EU's cohesion policy and inform its potential future reform. The future cohesion policy needs to be re-thought, re-tooled and re-aligned in the next Multi Financial Framework negotiations along the treaty objectives of economic, social, territorial and of digital cohesion. In the context of Europe's governance framework, the PES Group recalls the importance of local and regional actors in the implementation of **cohesion policy programmes which need to remain closest to, and benefit all citizens**.

Regional and local authorities must therefore be key actors in the definition and design of development policies that aim to address regional inequalities. By empowering cities and regions, and by clearly linking EU cohesion policy with overarching objectives such as climate crisis and energy transition, digitalisation, social policy, network expansion in a perspective of citizens' proximity, the diversity of local and regional needs can be better captured and make the execution of cohesion policy more inclusive, progressive and sustainable.

The PES Group call is to **empower local and regional levels to play an active role in all the steps of the cohesion policy process, from setting the EU budget to its concrete implementation on the ground. To this end, we should work to ensure that the adoption of Community legislation on territorial cohesion and cross-border cooperation has received favourable opinions from the European Committee of the Regions. Local and regional authorities must have a more direct and flexible access to EU budget sources**. Firstly, because frictions between national, regional and local authorities in the disbursement of EU funds could be potentially reduced. Secondly, because the identified competition between the Recovery and Resilience Facility and cohesion policy must be addressed. Divergence between these two instruments must be prevented by re-positioning and re-vamping existing policies such as cohesion policy and promote convergence, synergies and complementarity with the RRF when a greater impact can be ensured.

2) MAKING SOCIAL EUROPE A REALITY

Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights starting from cities and regions

For the PES Group, achieving the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan is key. Decent work, but also minimum wages and a minimum income, social protection and a true debate on the European Health Union and European Care Strategy must be at the centre of our political action as a means to make a strong Social Europe a reality.

For a European Health and Care Union

Health and well-being must be at the core of a renewed Social Europe. There is a need to proactively promote the health and well-being of all Europeans by reflecting on how existing legal instruments or health institutions can be strengthened. **Reducing health inequalities by improving access to quality care at the local and regional level can be a very meaningful contribution in moving forward to make Europe's health care sector stronger, more responsive and accessible to all.** This is also crucial for the long-term care sector and medical desertification, not least in the light of the growing elderly care needs. The status and acute shortages of care workers is also a major challenge and deserves European responses. The PES Group will be a strong advocate for EU competence on the topic whilst preserving subsidiarity where relevant, whereas it will also be an engaged actor in the potential design of the European Health Union and in shaping the forthcoming EU Care Strategy.

Time for access to decent, sustainable and affordable housing

Access to decent, sustainable, affordable and inclusive housing remains a challenge at multiple levels. In the EU, 80 million people are affected due to the lack of affordable housing. Energy poverty is growing across the EU, whilst the number of homeless people is also on the rise. After the financial crisis, the gentrification and financialization of urban areas led to an exacerbation of spatial inequalities. It also made affordable housing a distant dream for many people, including those with middle-income or younger generations. The combined effect of the financial, climate and now health crises is even more salient: housing is inadequate or hardly affordable and the arrival of refugees from Ukraine requires progressive policy choices that contemplate a long term perspective.

Problems of access to housing in urban areas, owing to price increases, can be an opportunity for rural areas. Facilitating access to housing in small municipalities will help the recovery of the population in these areas by attracting new families and young people and identifying the population of those already in existence. This requires the establishment of a strategy for the development of social housing services in small municipalities.

Innovative solutions for decent housing can reduce social inequalities and social exclusion as some progressive cities and regions have shown. At the same time, the Housing First approach to address homelessness bears fruits and proves to be more efficient and effective in the long-run.

Bringing about a **European framework, inspired by the best practices on housing at the local and regional levels** would be a meaningful contribution for a socially just and sustainable recovery. Such a framework **could pave the way for decent, affordable and sustainable housing to be available for all**. The PES Group is deeply convinced that a European Deal for Housing is a necessary action in realising the European Pillar of Social Rights, achieving the objectives of both the EU-anti poverty law and the European Green Deal, while delivering on the EU commitment to eradicating homelessness by 2030.

For a European Child Union and an ambitious European Youth Policy

More than a quarter of Europe's children are experiencing or are at the risk of living through poverty or social exclusion. In this context, **it is crucial to ensure early access to childhood education and care, with a view to break the vicious circle of intergenerational transmission of inequalities by strengthening social cohesion and our collective resilience**. The concept of the Child Union was brought about in connection with the Child Guarantee policy, an initiative led by the S&D Group in the European Parliament as a progressive response to address inequalities early on. The local and regional perspective in this context can be of added value by highlighting best practices of child policies and social safety nets but also in terms of access to the post-Covid-19 EU financial instruments which can incentivize inclusion and equity in early childhood. The PES Group strongly believes that **the Child Union is pivotal in realising a truly Social Union. As millions of children are displaced or fleeing Ukraine, we join the call by the S&D Group in the European Parliament to establish an EU-Ukraine Child Protection Package in view of protecting and supporting children in and from Ukraine who are impacted by the ongoing conflict. Empowering and supporting young generations via the Youth Guarantee** will also complement and complete our vision of Social Europe. Of particular importance is the revision of European Social Fund allocations, where our ambition is to expand these by introducing a requirement of paid traineeships. Against the background of 2022 as the European Year of Youth and the involvement of young people in the Conference on the Future of Europe, the PES Group will support the EU's agenda to promote access to education, culture and sports to all young people and increase youth participation in democratic life, at all levels of governance.

For a Feminist and Gender Equality Agenda

Taking stock of the post pandemic reality, it is clear that women were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and exposed to increasing inequality gender-based violence, precarious jobs, poverty, unemployment, climate change, just to name a few. The erosion of the social protection of this cohort requires special attention and political **commitment to place gender equality and women's rights at the heart of the PES Group's line of action for social justice, for a Social Europe**.

With regard to the increasing digitization and implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI), we must ensure that AI systems reduce existing prejudices and structural discrimination and do not create or reproduce biases. AI has to serve more egalitarian societies.

Our political commitment must be the mainstreaming of feminist values into all our work and upholding our gender parity Code of Conduct in relation to PES Group membership in the CoR but also exerting pressure for greater gender parity in the CoR as an institution and its national delegations too. The PES Group also advocates for gender impact assessments to be carried out ahead of each new EU legislation.

Cities and municipalities - the game changers of migration and integration policy

The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum was expected to end the political impasse at European level with regard to a common migration policy. Unfortunately, it falls short of a genuine solidarity-based approach. It does not acknowledge the crucial role of regions and cities in dealing with migration on the ground and with the admission of refugees, as it maintains the country of first entry criterion. The overall proposal by and large keeps the *status quo* of the Dublin regulation as there are no incentives foreseen for the voluntary admission of refugees nor a reliable and solidarity-based decentralised distribution among EU Member States.

Against this backdrop, the PES Group intends to sustain the debate on ensuring an efficient and humane management of migration but also for adequate and inclusive integration policies. **Though a global challenge, the response to migration interplays locally, and local and regional authorities have an indispensable role in the management of the impacts of migration but also in positively communicating the benefits it brings.** Many migrants and refugees have become more vulnerable due to Covid-19 and with the conflict in Ukraine, highlighting how essential it is that integration policy is kept high on the political agenda. Cities and municipalities are the de facto game changers in the management of migration as they have also turned into important incubators of solidarity networks. In fact, this great sense of solidarity has strong but also moving in relation to Ukrainian refugees.

On migration management, municipalities in particular have been at the forefront of applying health measures, guaranteeing access to housing, education and work. For the PES Group, we welcome the CARE proposal regulation that aims to support national and regional budgets across the EU to deal with the unprecedented migratory pressure, resulting from the motiveless Russian aggression against Ukraine. Eradicating poverty among children and young people is one of the priorities of the PES Group. Our call is thus to strengthen the role of the Child Guarantee and the European Youth Guarantee in addressing the situation of unaccompanied children and minors arriving in Europe.

Access to funding and ensuring the meaningful involvement of local and regional authorities in the design of reception and integration policies has proven to bring greater efficiency, greater engagement of non-governmental actors and civil society, thus contributing to a sense of community and social inclusion. As PES Group we firmly believe that solidarity but also the positive handling of the situation in Ukraine must guide and inspire the organisation and funding in relation to migration flows in the future.

Time for LGBTIQA+ freedom cities and regions

Realising a Union of Equality for all, where everyone's fundamental rights are respected and protected is enshrined in the EU legal order. Nevertheless, discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQA+) persons persists in the EU as there is a backlash wave against LGBTIQA+ rights. In response to this, many cities and municipalities have made strong political statements against these trends by declaring their cities and regions as LGBTIQA+ freedom zones. Many positive examples and initiatives are springing about in Europe's regions and cities and the number of those declaring themselves LGBTIQA+ freedom zones continues to increase, particularly thanks to the campaign launched by the PES Group in this regard. We have been pivotal in the promotion and advocacy of this topic by showcasing the way in which these **actions at the local and regional level contribute to ambition of Europe being a place where no discrimination, no persecution and no prejudice have space**. At the same time, the PES Group applies a policy of zero tolerance to any discriminatory expressions in the conduct of its works, and this on all different grounds of discrimination, including on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation.

3) A PROGRESSIVE AND SOCIAL VISION FOR ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION **A new approach to Europe's societal and growth model - empowering cities, regions and villages as catalysts of a society of well-being**

The PES Group **must build on the social commitment put forward on the occasion of the May 2021 Social Summit in Porto**. Advocating cohesion policy as a fundamental value, as a means to reduce inequalities and improving living conditions after the Covid-19 pandemic is a way to reinforce our Social Europe. As PES Group we are convinced **that Europe's societal and growth model can capitalise on the green and digital transitions in a way that is fair and inclusive, empowering local and regional authorities as well as citizens to have a say**.

At European level, the PES Group will advocate for **the need of a strengthened EU own resources budget, built on a solidarity-based approach in the financial redistribution within the EU**. The first steps in this direction have been visible with the leap in European integration through instruments such as **the Next Generation EU package and SURE** (new instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency), **which should be made permanent and complementary to the EU's cohesion policy**. The positive impact of these instruments should not however, outshine the importance of cohesion policy in the recovery and its crucial role in the twin digital and green transitions.

The PES Group will actively participate in the discussions on the forthcoming **EU's economic governance review and the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact**. The PES Group sees an opportunity for our political family to overhaul the austerity mantra and introduce in the EU's economic framework golden rules on public investment in support of a social, just and place-based European Green Deal. To counter the centralisation and intergovernmental process of the European Semester, the PES Group will advocate for its

democratisation. To enable the involvement of local and regional authorities, the European Semester must abide by a Code of Conduct that guarantees the partnership and subsidiarity principles.

In this context, the PES Group will seek to be a mobilising force of progressive local and regional authorities across Europe **to advocate and contribute to make the single market a fair place for all, rather than the survival of the fittest**. That is why we deem important to contribute to the beyond GDP debate and the concept of well-being as a more adequate metric of growth.

4) A FAIR PATH TOWARDS THE GREEN TRANSITION

Delivering a socially just European Green Deal, by placing planet and people first

Protecting our environment and climate, fighting energy poverty

The EU's Green Deal has been positioned as the European Commission's top political priority and cross-cutting flagship initiative to bring about an alternative development model for our economy and society in a rapidly changing world. **The present Covid-19 crisis has shown how health and ecological emergencies are closely linked, and how crucial it is to pave the way in public policy making to ensure that our planet, our climate can be protected under the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). In the transition to this alternative model, no people and no place should be left behind.**

For the PES Group, particular attention must be given to the impact and adaptation costs of climate crisis for regions and especially those that face the double challenge of mitigating while bearing the costs of dealing with climate related impacts. The Just Transition must take into account the effects that climate crisis may have on aggravating inequalities in Europe. A special attention must be given as well to the gender perspective in the Just Transition in view of tapping into the potential of the greening of sectors of our economies as a means to ensure that women don't lag behind in the transformation.

Moving towards a climate neutral society is a radical transformation process that requires a strong, common global political will. Building trust with all parts of society and social consensus through social dialogue is key. In this shift, regional and local authorities have a key role to play in enabling the buy-in from local communities and in implementing locally the UNSDGs. The PES Group will also pay particular attention to energy and mobility poverty, which affect an increasing number of Europeans and that can be worsened by the green transition if no adequate measures are taken. Against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine it will be particularly important to ensure the EU energy at affordable prices as well. This also means promoting energy efficiency policies, encouraging investments in renewable and carbon neutral energy.

It is important to address the new challenges facing the EU's Single Market with shortages of supplies and developments in product, fuel and energy prices. Faced with these distortions, the EU must be able to offer new solutions that contribute to a more resilient and strengthened Single Market via Europe's Strategic Autonomy.

A progressive vision for rural areas

A robust policy approach to close the gaps for rural areas and harness their full potential is vital. At the same time, connecting rural areas and cities must be realised in an inclusive and sustainable way, bearing in mind the disparities and diversity of rural areas. In this context, the New European Bauhaus initiative, among others, can help closing the rural-urban gap.

For the PES Group, the EU's long term vision for rural areas must lead to the adoption of a European Rural Agenda. The latter must ensure that rural specificities are taken into account in all EU policies by bringing the necessary support for rural areas to recover in the aftermath of the pandemic. In this regard, it is essential that rural areas have a say and contribute to the rural proofing of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

For the PES Group, it is paramount that **the common agricultural policy supports rural areas going through the green transition.** Therefore, particular attention must be given to rural development policy and the capacity of rural areas to conform under the place-based policy principle to the Green Deal and Fit for 55 legislative package. A fair and Just Transition implies that rural areas cannot be left behind.

The agricultural sector is also suffering the consequences of the increase in fertilizer and fuel prices and the closure of hospitality for months due to the COVID crisis affected consumption on some of the sectors. The difficulties faced by agricultural producers must be addressed.

5) PREPARING FOR A SOCIALLY JUST DIGITAL AGE **Ensuring a socially just digital transition and cohesion**

Digital economy and society

Digitalisation is one of the mega trends shaping lives and livelihoods around the world. Europe's approach to the digital transition, in particular with regard to artificial intelligence, strives to be human-centric, as it is also seeking to pursue its own digital development model.

It is therefore important to assess the way in which the effects and nature of digitisation are impacting European economies and societies, especially in the area of public services and the work place. Against this backdrop, it is important that progressive regions and cities share best practices and contribute to the EU's own digitisation path that leads to more inclusive and sustainable outcome in terms of technological development, and one that can

serve broader societal and economic goal, one that can lead to better outcomes for workers', citizens and the environment.

For the PES Group, **digital education and lifelong learning must be reaffirmed in their crucial role in paving the way towards a sustainable and inclusive future for everyone.** A special attention must also be given to **bring all on board of this digital transition wave**, be it in terms of access to public services, cultural, civic or political activities online, digital skills and access to high quality broadband connections and digital services. These are all important pre-conditions **for digital equality and digital cohesion.**

As particularly some rural and remote areas are not yet equipped with high-speed connectivity, it should be clear that it should be a basic condition for everyone in the European Union and its provision should be considered a service of general interest.

Framing the gig economy and protecting platform workers

The digital revolution is changing the way we work, consume, produce and live. Platform workers are some of the most vulnerable people in today's gig economy who are experiencing the bad side of technological progress. For the latter to translate in social progress for all, **platform workers must be recognised as employees and be granted decent, fair, working conditions and social rights such as sick leave, social insurance and fair pay but also the right to collective bargaining.** For the PES Group, the digital economy and the world of work must be framed so as to benefit the many and not only the few.

Technological progress cannot undermine the standards set out in the European social *acquis* and most importantly, the traditional and platform economies need to co-exist under a level playing field.

6) EMPOWERING CITIZENS FOR A MORE DEMOCRATIC AND POLITICAL EUROPE

Strengthening and deepening European democracy by promoting innovative ways of citizens' participation in the EU's decision making process

The Conference on the Future of Europe seeks to make a compelling case for EU citizens to engage with Europe and to take initiative in re-adjusting, re-ordering and re-defining Europe as a political joint project. Its objective is to strengthen the relationship between EU citizens and the EU institutions governing them, in order to restore trust. The hope with the exercise is also to reinvigorate European identity and prepare the path for the next European elections in 2024.

Though, the Conference has not managed to provide a new political momentum in Europe yet, the PES Group firmly believes that it should not be a one off exercise. **The engagement and dialogue with citizens must be a permanent feature and mainstreamed in the**

EU's decision-making processes and in future iterations, whatever form they may take, local and regional authorities must be involved. It's important to craft a new approach and to think innovatively about how people can be represented, included and engaged in the European project and **reignite the political debate on a possible Treaty change** by calling for a Convention, **and by doing so, consolidate the CoR as an assertive political assembly.**

EU Enlargement

The CoR has currently three active Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) with Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia and two Working Groups (WGs) with the EU's enlargement countries, Turkey and Western Balkans. PES Members are actively participating in these bodies by sharing past experiences from their accession, best practice examples of local and regional authorities within the EU and by advocating the fundamental principles of the EU as a pre-condition to join the Union. By doing so, PES Members support the enlargement countries on their path towards the European Union, prepare them for a possible EU Membership and monitor the ongoing accession negotiations with a particular focus on the enlargement chapters, which are most relevant to local and regional authorities. As much as the PES Group is convinced that future EU Member States need to fulfil all accession criteria before joining the EU, it also believes that disputes should be solved bilaterally whereas EU enlargement countries deserve a realistic enlargement perspective once the necessary criteria are fulfilled.

For an even closer relationship with the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhood

The Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (**CORLEAP**) and the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (**ARLEM**) are two political forums established by the CoR, where cities and regions of Europe's neighbourhood countries come together to discuss, with their European partners, the ways in which local democracy, multi-level governance and decentralised cooperation can be promoted, and best practices, knowledge and technical experience in the areas for which local and regional authorities are responsible for is shared. PES Members are involved in these two political forums with the motivation to **strengthen cross-border cooperation and ensure continuous dialogue with Europe's neighbourhood countries.**

The EU's action in relation to CORLEAP and ARLEM countries must be guided by the ambition to strengthen political and economic ties, promote solidarity, decentralisation and institutional reforms, while respecting the values and rights enshrined within the EU treaties and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The European Committee of the Regions established a Working Group with Ukraine as the biggest country of the Eastern Partnership. Due to the Russian invasion in Ukraine and hence its geopolitical importance, the CoR Working Group Ukraine took up its political role of formulating CoR responses and supporting Ukrainian partners on the ground.

The PES Group intends to serve as an enabler, strengthening political cooperation and dialogue with progressive forces in ARLEM and CORLEAP countries in establishing the most pressing priorities going forward, in order to ensure, peace, stability and joint

prosperity within the three shores of the Mediterranean and within the countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Our encapsulating message:

It's high time to recognise and empower progressive villages, cities and regions as catalysts of a society of well-being and the role of cohesion policy in making it a reality!

Europe's current challenges are multiple and show that, in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the climate emergency, the Covid-19 pandemic and now with the war in Ukraine, there is an urgent need to re-assess the way our societies are organised, but also to reflect on the ways in which public policies can be designed to ensure a sustainable future and shared prosperity for all, where no people and no place is left behind. That is why the concept of well-being is the connecting thread of the political priorities of Socialists and Social Democrats at the European level, our political family, notably the path towards social and ecological progress, as put forward in the European Pillar of Social Rights and in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Strong welfare states, robust public services and our societal model as a whole must embrace well-being as a progressive, solidary and sustainable agenda for the future. Social justice, promotion of culture and social progress as fair and just transitions are at the core of our progressive policy agenda. With the support of a strong and robust cohesion policy, progressive villages, cities and regions stand ready to be catalysts of that vision: a society of well-being and of progress!