

4 July 2018

POLITICAL PRIORITIES

**of the CoR PES Group in 2018-2019 ahead of the
European Elections**

The PES Group adopted its political priorities for the period 2015-2020 at the beginning of the CoR's term of office, on 30 January 2015. This document updates these priorities For the remaining two years of the term of office, ahead of the European elections, and in order to also allow for a better programming of political activities in 2018-2019 (Group meetings and seminars, citizens' or lunchtime debates, events co-organised with other bodies of the wider PES family), as well as the structuring and long-term planning of the communication activities. The PES Group also accompanies the political milestones in the agenda of the CoR President until early 2020.

2018 is the last year of real legislative activity before the 2019 electoral year (European elections in May 2019, installation of the new Commission on 1 November 2019). Politically speaking, 2019 will be prepared by a PES Congress in late 2018 (probably in November-December, place tbc), which will set the procedure for selecting the PES Spitzenkandidat to the Presidency of the European Commission. In early 2019, an Electoral Congress (place tbc) will elect the PES Spitzenkandidat and adopt the Common Manifesto for the May elections.

Against this background, the task of the PES Group in the CoR is to contribute to a campaign of clear differentiation from the main competing political parties at European level and to help the PES position itself as the most cohesive and largest political pro-European political family. The priorities of the PES Group in the CoR would therefore also feed into to the PES Congress resolutions in autumn 2018, for which the drafting process is under way.

Therefore, this paper focuses on political priorities and leaves aside issues which may well be highly topical in EU affairs but are rather of an institutional nature and do not allow for a real differentiation in terms of political discourses (such as Brexit or Subsidiarity).

The priorities for the PES Group in the CoR reflect in part those of the PES Resolution adopted by the Lisbon Council on 1-2 December 2017^[1] and build on our Group's input into the CoR's resolutions on the European Commission's annual work programmes. The priorities could be built on the following 5 pillars.

- 1. An EU economic strategy focused on long-term sustainable investment and cohesion**

- 2. An agenda for solidarity and social justice**

- 3. An ambitious EU climate strategy which provides leverage for local and regional authorities**

- 4. A comprehensive, humane and solidarity-based EU migration and integration policy**

- 5. Fighting for strong European values and a more democratic EU**

[1] https://www.pes.eu/export/sites/default/_galleries/Documents-gallery/PES-Council-Resolution-Adopted-by-the-PES-Council-on-1-December-2017-in-Lisbon.pdf_2063069299.pdf

1. An EU economic strategy focused on long-term sustainable investment and cohesion

The EU's overarching current economic strategy - the Europe 2020 Strategy - is being phased out. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and their EU implementation are likely to become the new reference framework.

In order to achieve the targets set in the Paris climate agreement, and to reach the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, the European Union will need to make considerable investments into specific infrastructure, sectors and technologies. By the European Commission's account, around €180 billion in additional investment will be needed each year¹. The European Commission intends to issue a reflection paper "**Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030**" to this end in the autumn of 2018. Building on the CoR opinion on "European action for sustainability" drafted by the PES colleague Franco Iacop (IT) and adopted by the plenary on July 2017, the CoR is part of the high-level multi-stakeholder platform which provides support and advice to the European Commission in view of this paper, and more broadly on delivering the SDGs in the EU. Out of the 3 CoR members involved in the high-level multi-stakeholder platform, which drafts recommendations for the aforementioned reflection paper, 2 are PES members with observer status, i.e. PES CIVEX coordinator Peter Bossman (SI) and PES ENVE Vice-President Roby Biwer (LU). The PES Group also liaises on this issue with the S&D Group in the European Parliament, which has launched a new initiative called "Progressive Society". Building on its Independent Commission for Sustainable Equality, chaired by former PES President Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (DK) and Louka T. Katseli, former Greek Minister of Labour, the initiative aims at issuing policy recommendations on how to address inequalities and their consequences across Europe - including on how ecological transformations can be a source of social progress - to be finalised well ahead of the political preparations leading up to the next European elections.

Leaving a local and regional footprint in the EU strategy for 2030 is essential because this strategy will also reshape the European Semester, could become a new parameter for the earmarking of up to 75% of the EU's Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and possibly frame the EU support for "structural reforms". In two opinions by PES Group Vice-President **Olga Zrihen on the Structural Reform Support Programme (2015, 2017), the CoR already made it clear that the notion of "structural reforms" must be more clearly defined and that EU support is only to be envisaged** for structural reforms at national level in areas of EU competence, focusing on measures with EU added value and a significant positive European impact. In the same vein, the PES Group should make sure that the CoR opinion on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) by Mr Dobroslavic (EPP/HR) remains cautious towards the proposed Structural Reform Delivery Tool of 22 bn € as long as the scope of structural reforms is not specified and as long as the scheme follows a first-come-first-served approach.

Still on the issue of translating the SDG strategy into European policies and programmes, it is worth highlighting two key CoR reports: the one dealing with the new European Fund for Strategic Investment ("InvestEU" – to be allocated at the ECON meeting of 22 June 2018 in Bucharest) – where

¹ For reference, total investment (public and private) in the EU28 was approximately €3,000 billion in 2017, i.e. 20% of GDP. Public investment represents roughly one seventh of this total, or 2.7% of GDP

a concern for the PES Group will be setting targets for climate and social policy-related projects; and the ongoing PES rapporteurship by Tilo Gundlack (PES/DE) on the Action Plan for Financing Sustainable Growth².

In relation to investment, the overall situation remains gloomy. According to Eurostat, overall public investment in the EU fell from 3.4 % of GDP in 2008 to 2.7 % in 2016. At the same time, investment by local authorities also fell, from 1.5% of GDP in 2008 to 1.1% in 2016, with the situation being much more serious in some Member States³. Public investments are often the most affected by fiscal consolidation policies, including at local and regional level, despite local and regional authorities being responsible for more than half of public investment in the EU and their investments having a direct impact on local economies and on the daily lives of ordinary people. At the same time, the growing centralisation of public investment and the share of investment made by local and regional authorities having noticeably fallen compared to the level of 60% seen in the 1990s⁴, are also a source of considerable concern. What is more, these figures do not translate the under-investment by public authorities of all levels into infrastructures of all types.

Therefore, building in particular on the opinion on the **Reform proposals for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)**, to be presented to the CoR plenary on 4 July 2018 by PES 1st Vice-President Christophe Rouillon, the PES Group will argue for a more flexible application of the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) in order to promote the public investments needed to boost growth, in particular by reiterating our demand for the national co-financing of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to be excluded from the SGP. The CoR is also expected to take up the PES-initiated call on the European Commission to present a White Paper setting out an EU-level typology for the quality of public investment and for an indicator relating to the investment rate to be included in the macroeconomic scoreboard. Specifically, the CoR should also reiterate its concerns regarding Eurostat's accounting framework, ESA 2010, implemented as of September 2014, which makes no distinction between expenditure and investment. In certain Member States, these standards are being transposed into national law in a way that results in local and regional authorities being obliged to apply maximum investment ceilings per year and per inhabitant. These ceilings prevent in particular local and regional authorities from providing the co-financing needed for ESIF projects. They also hamper those LRAs which have financial means in reserve from launching significant investment projects not related to ESIF.

Obviously, the margins for public investment are also dependent on the efficiency of the EU's taxation policy. We will therefore be unequivocally supportive of EU measures to step up the fight against tax fraud, tax evasion, tax avoidance and aggressive tax planning within the EU and at global level.

Cohesion policy is the EU's largest investment instrument and the most tangible expression of European solidarity to overcome the economic, social and territorial divide. Only during the period 2007-2013, EU Cohesion Policy (i.e. the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF)) created one million jobs, corresponding to one-third of all new jobs in the EU in that period of time.

Cohesion policy created a strong economic multiplier effect, generating almost €3 of additional GDP for every euro invested, which will give an estimated return of €1 trillion of additional wealth by 2023.

² COM(2018) 97 final
Eurostat: General government gross fixed capital formation. Provisional data for 2016.
<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=tec00022&language=en>.

⁴ European Commission (EU), *Seventh report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*. September 2017. p.168: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/cohesion7/7cr.pdf

Along the lines of the #Cohesion Alliance⁵, the PES Group will fight for a cohesion policy post 2020 as a long-term investment policy for all regions in Europe to support growth and jobs at local and regional level by promoting innovative solutions for issues such as climate change and energy transition, social inclusion, as well as for cross-border, transnational and interregional co-operation. In budgetary terms, the objective is for cohesion policy to be provided with sufficient resources for at least one-third of the future EU budget to be delivered via grants and only in limited cases via financial instruments. The PES Group in the CoR will also strongly oppose the envisaged serious cuts (approx. 20%) to European Territorial Cooperation in the draft Multi-Annual Financial Framework, despite increased needs due to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.

A particular concern will be the new ESIF funding towards **rural areas**, i.e. those areas where populist and / or eurosceptic parties develop in terms of number of voters and which clearly do not benefit from globalization. To the contrary, these areas seem to bear only its negative consequences (relocation, depopulation, reduction of public services, unemployment ...). Our political family should encourage the combination of different funds related to nonagricultural regional development for rural areas. Such areas often represent a non-urban-population with urban-living-style expectations and it is conceptually wrong to systematically equate them to agricultural areas! Europe can still turn the challenges of these areas into opportunities by encouraging repopulation, investing in innovation and relevant training, modernising and adapting public services etc. and thus combat the feeling of being 'left-behind' of the real or perceived peripheries.

In terms of governance, the PES Group will insist on strengthening the partnership principle and the place-based approach and the related shared management throughout all cohesion policy funds. The PES Group also supports the view that cohesion policy must not be subject at European level to conditionalities that cannot be influenced by local and regional authorities and other beneficiaries.

Last but not least, the PES Group stands for a simplified cohesion policy which allows for a more flexible and differentiated approach (opinion by Petr Osvald (PES/CZ), October 2016) and wants the future cohesion policy to diversify its reference indicators and go "beyond GDP" (opinion by President Catuscia Marini (PES/IT), February 2016).

Milestones on priority 1:

already completed:

- 12 July 2017: opinion by Franco Iacop (PES/IT) on "Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability"
- 22 March 2018: Adoption of the own-initiative opinion by Catuscia Marini (PES/IT) on the "Mid-term review of the ESF preparing the post-2020 proposal";

⁵ The #CohesionAlliance is a coalition of those who believe that EU cohesion policy must continue to be a pillar of the EU's future. The Alliance was created through cooperation between the leading European associations of cities and regions and the European Committee of the Regions. It demands that the EU budget after 2020 makes cohesion policy stronger, more effective, visible and available for every region in the European Union. <http://cor.europa.eu/en/takepart/Pages/cohesion-alliance.aspx>

- 22 March 2018: Adoption of the opinion by Olga Zrihen (PES/BE) on the amendment of the Structural Reform Support Programme and on new budgetary instruments for the euro area

scheduled:

- 4 July 2018: Adoption of the opinion by Christophe Rouillon (PES/FR) on the Reform proposals for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) to be presented to the CoR plenary
- PES rapporteurship on the Common Provisions regulation for European Structural and Investment Funds post-2020
- Possibly: PES rapporteurship on ESF + post-2020 (COTER or SEDEC) and PES rapporteurship on InvestEU (ECON)
- PES Group workshop in the framework of the European Week of Regions and Cities on 'Still time to shape the European Social Fund post-2020'

2. An agenda for solidarity and social justice

The Juncker Commission has remained much below the expectations raised at the beginning of its term of office when taking the commitment to achieve a "Triple Social A" for the European Union. However, the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights on 17 November 2017 in Gothenburg created a welcome momentum (see also related CoR opinion by Heijo Höfer (PES/DE)) on which we should build.

To restore citizens' trust in the EU as part of their future, we have to strengthen the social dimension of European integration in order to minimise the risk of a race to the bottom between social models, which is currently exacerbated by a misguided focus on austerity and restrictive fiscal policies. We will therefore continue to put pressure for having social objectives at the highest priority level in the EU's overarching strategies, in particular by including key employment and social indicators for their follow-up, and for having social investment prioritised in the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and the future InvestEU fund. We also consider that an EU unemployment insurance scheme and an EU-wide minimum wage remain key PES priority demands.

In relation to labour mobility and following on from the agreement on the Revision of the Posting of Workers Directive (CoR opinion by Yoomi Renström (PES/SE) adopted in December 2016), the PES will focus on shaping the future European Labour Authority through an opinion drafted by Doris Kampus (PES/AT) and due to be presented in plenary by the end of the year.

In the light of sweeping digitalisation and the resulting fundamental changes in the area of labour rights, decent working conditions are coming to the fore as a new challenge: health and safety at work (working time, right to disconnect), precariousness of employment (e.g. zero-hour contracts) and of income (low wages), limited access to social protection with the quasi-exclusion of some forms of employment (e.g. zero-hour contracts), workers' mobility that leads to social dumping. The revision of the Written Statement Directive establishing the employer's obligation to inform employees of the conditions applicable to the contract or employment relationship is of a significant importance in this regard and is followed up by the CoR opinion drafted by Isolde Ries (PES/DE).

At the same time, there is urgent need to effectively align educational and vocational training systems with the needs of modern labour markets, characterised by emerging technology breakthroughs that require new skills and substitute human presence in many traditional low-skilled tasks, not just at the low-skills level. Access to, and equality in education that properly prepares people for the 4th industrial revolution is another challenge.

Access to information through adequate broadband infrastructure that closes geographical digital divides is key to empowering people to withstand and thrive in this 4th industrial revolution.

Moreover, access to high quality and affordable public services is another expression of the same broad theme of social fairness (access to healthcare, childcare, elderly care, housing etc.).

The PES Group will in this regard and in the continuity of Hicham Imane's opinion on a "European agenda on housing" (December 2017) continue to insist that EU competition policy should not limit social housing to the poorest or less advantaged social groups. Cities and regions should be free to plan, deliver and finance their social housing in order to also help those who live in substandard housing or who have to spend most of their income to be able to afford decent housing. We must ensure that housing policies work as a tool to promote a social mix in our cities and decent living standards for all.

The financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures that have dramatically curtailed public investments in social welfare have created the pressing need for social innovation.

By social innovation, we mean new ideas that meet social needs, create social networks and test new policy frameworks. These innovations can be policy actions, products, services or models addressing unmet needs more effectively. They can also be inspired by the new potentials of the collaborative economy, which in turn requires a clear legal and political framework.

Social innovation can address poverty and generate sustainable wealth and well-being while promoting a learning and participative society. With this in mind, the role of local and regional authorities is crucial in the effective governance of social innovation, which cannot thrive if constricted by a top-down, heavily centralised model.

In order for social innovation to reach its objectives, it is important to ensure effective information sharing across the EU, the support to innovative entrepreneurs and the mobilisation of investors and public organisations so as to encourage market uptake of innovative solutions and stimulate employment.

With this in mind, the PES Group will - at the invitation of PES Group member André Viola, President of the Aude département, and of Occitanie region President Carole Delga - dedicate to the topic of social innovation its extraordinary meeting in Carcassonne on 7 September 2018. The meeting will be complemented by a "Together" public debate jointly organised with the S&D Group in the European Parliament on the topic "Social Europe – what 's in it for me?".

Meanwhile, the PES Group has launched in partnership with Solidar a photo competition on 'My social city'. The competition runs until 30 June 2018 and is open to all EU residents aged 18 and over. Both amateur and professional photographers are invited to capture in a photo social projects and/or social relationships in their towns and cities.

Milestones on priority 2:

already completed:

- October 2016: CoR opinion by Heijo Höfer (PES/DE) on The European Pillar of Social Rights
- December 2016: CoR opinion by Yoomi Renström (PES/SE) on the Revision of the Posting of Workers Directive
- July 2017: CoR opinion by Ulrike Hiller (PES/DE) on the Coordination of Social Security Systems
- 22 March 2018: Adoption of the own-initiative opinion by Catuscia Marini (PES/IT) on the "Mid-term review of the ESF preparing the post-2020 proposal";
- 22 March 2018: Adoption of the opinion by Olga Zrihen (PES/BE) on the amendment of the Structural Reform Support Programme and on new budgetary instruments for the euro area

Ongoing:

- Photo competition on 'My social city'
- interaction with the PES Social Europe Network
- for adoption in July 2018: CoR opinion by Isolde Ries (PES/DE) on the directive on Transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union
- for adoption in October 2018: CoR opinion by Doris Kampus (PES/AT) on A European Labour Authority

scheduled:

- 7 September 2018: Extraordinary Group meeting in Carcassonne on Social Innovation and Together meeting on "Social Europe – what is in for me"?

3. An ambitious EU climate policy and low-carbon transition

Climate change is a global problem but in order to address it in the most effective way possible a multi-level, multi-stakeholder governance approach is needed. As stressed in the CoR opinion by Marco Dus (PES/IT) on "Climate finance: an essential tool for the implementation of the Paris Agreement" (October 2017), local and regional bodies are essential, in particular in involving the general public and raising awareness of climate change issues, in attracting investments and in implementing specific projects. The PES Group will for its part persevere, notably in the context of the CoR opinion on Climate governance after 2020: a contribution to the UNFCCC COP24 by Andrew Cooper (EA/UK), with its demand for ambitious climate targets, that is, binding targets of 50% CO² reduction, 40% renewable energy and 40% energy efficiency by 2030. Likewise, the CoR calls on the European Commission to make sure that the role of local and regional governments be recognised and enhanced with a view to achieving the objectives of the Paris Agreement more effectively, including under the UNFCCC.

In that sense, we will continue to defend the idea that a system of "locally determined contributions" (LDCs) to the reduction of CO2 emissions should be developed in order to complement the system of "nationally defined contributions" (NDCs) foreseen by the Paris agreement. We also want the Commission to strengthen the Covenant of Mayors initiative.

Ahead of the CoR Opinion on the Future EU Energy and Climate policy, which would be drafted by the end of 2018, the PES Group calls for a revision and strengthening of the energy efficiency directive, which should take into account the need for decentralised energy solutions in order to reduce Europe's dependency on fossil fuels and to meet our ambitious climate change targets. Moreover, , together with the S&D group in the European Parliament, we will continue to put pressure on the European Commission to present an Action Plan against energy poverty, which should propose measures at European, national and regional/local level to improve the situation of the most vulnerable consumers in the EU.

Furthermore, Mariana Gaju's (PES/RO) own-initiative opinion on "Models of local energy ownership and the role of local energy communities in energy transition in Europe" (due for adoption in December 2018) will be an opportunity for the CoR to address the key strengths and limitations of existing local energy models, for example participatory ownership of stakes in renewable energy projects by citizens. In this context, the CoR could underline how decentrally produced energy creates economic flows that benefit the local territories. In this context, 'energy communities', as recognised in the EU's Energy Union governance, should be highlighted and analysed as one type of such models which see the potential of involving citizens in the implementation of the energy transition and sustainable economy.

In relation to the necessary transition towards a circular economy, André Van de Nadort (PES/NL) will seek to highlight the milestones for involving local and regional authorities through an opinion on the European Strategy for Plastics⁶, while Roby Biber (PES/LU) will outline the contribution of EU local and regional authorities to the 14th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 14).

Milestones on priority 3:

already completed:

- October 2017: opinion by Marco Dus (PES/IT) on "Climate finance: an essential tool for the implementation of the Paris Agreement"

Ongoing:

- interaction with the PES Network on Climate & Environment
- for adoption in in October 2018: opinion by André Van de Nadoort (PES/NL) on the European Strategy for Plastics
- for adoption in December 2018: opinion by Mariana Gaju (PES/RO) on "Models of local energy ownership and the role of local energy communities in energy transition in Europe"

⁶ COM(2018) 28

- for adoption in October 2018: opinion by Roby Biwer (PES/LUX) on the contribution of EU local and regional authorities to the 14th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 14)

scheduled:

- by the end of 2018: Opinion on the Future EU Energy and Climate

4. A comprehensive, humane and solidarity-based EU migration and integration policy

According to the latest Eurobarometer Survey (December 2017), immigration is the top challenge that the EU is currently facing (mentioned by 39% of respondents), and this is obviously reflected in the European Commission's proposal for the future Financial Framework (2 May 2018) to practically triple spending on the management of the external borders, migration and asylum (a total of €33 billion, compared to €13 billion at the moment) and the idea to give the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) 10,000 operational agents by 2027. However, for the PES Group, the EU needs a real and comprehensive migration policy which does not address the issue primarily as a security threat. In the CoR opinion on the mid-term review of the European Agenda on Migration (rapporteur Dimitrios Kalogeropoulos, EPP/GR), the PES made sure that the right balance between the need for migration management and addressing legitimate security concerns on the one hand, and the overarching need for an open and welcoming European Union respecting its own values and international obligations on the other, is struck.

The still ongoing crises in the EU neighbourhood mean that we need a fair asylum policy which offers protection to those who need it, prevents the unacceptable loss of lives in trying to reach the EU and is based on solidarity between EU Member States and regions in receiving refugees and asylum seekers.

At the same time, we need to build a European migration policy which offers safe, legal channels for immigration. The EU needs a coherent vision on legal migration, including both intra-EU and extra-EU migration, which should not be limited to just highly skilled workers. In both cases, we have to be vigilant to avoid brain-drain and social dumping.

A thorough overhaul of the Dublin regulation is urgently needed. Solidarity amongst Member States and regions requires a system for a fair distribution of asylum seekers between Member States, based on a number of objective criteria such as the size of the country and its population, GDP or unemployment rates. PES member Enzo Bianco (IT) made proposals in this direction in his two opinions on the Reform of the Dublin Regulation (December 2016/February 2017), but the negotiations are still blocked at the level of the member states. Together with our friends in the PES Migration and Asylum network, we will continue to put pressure on the EU member states to move forward on the proposed reforms, and beyond. As well as safe and legal access to the EU, we need to actively support dialogue and cooperation with third countries of origin and transit of migratory movements, as outlined in the opinion by PES CIVEX Coordinator Peter Bossman (SI) on the Partnership Framework with Third Countries on the European Agenda for Migration (February 2017).

As cities and regions are in the front-row when it comes to integration of migrants, a special Eurobarometer survey on "Integration of immigrants in the European Union" published on 13 April

2018 illustrates the expectations and challenges they still have to address. Indeed, according to the results, only a minority (37%) of Europeans think that they are well informed about immigration and integration related matters and just over half (54%) of Europeans think that integration of immigrants is successful even if the figures vary widely between countries. There seems to be an interesting link to the actual share of immigrants in a country's total population: in countries which have a low proportion of non-EU immigrants in their population, respondents are less likely to see integration as a success or to feel that immigrants have had a positive impact on their society.

Against this backdrop, the European Commission proposal for the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2 May 2018) announces major changes in relation to migration and cohesion policy.

The Commission proposes also to include the Asylum Migration and Immigration Fund (AMIF) and funds related to the European Integrated Border Management under the Common Provisions Regulation, which has so far been used only for other parts of EU regional / cohesion funding. Moreover, the allocation of funds will, in addition to the per capita GDP indicator, unemployment rates (particularly youth unemployment), and climate change, also integrate criteria relating to the reception and integration of migrants in the long-term. Finally, all Structural and Investment Funds will include a section focusing on migration and long-term integration, while the AMIF will focus on short-term integration. For the PES Group, it is an obvious priority to ensure that the policies of cohesion and of migration are not put into competition against each other.

Ahead of the presentation by the Commission before mid-June 2018 of the detailed proposals particularly for the AMIF, a certain number of other fundamental questions have to be already raised:

- > Should local and regional authorities be partly responsible for the management of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund?
- > Could one envisage the establishment of a separate European fund to which local authorities could apply directly, on a voluntary basis, to finance projects in infrastructure and services that benefit both the host and refugee communities?
- > Could hotspots at the external EU borders serve as decentralised relocation hubs? How could the Dublin Regulation be reformed in this regard?

Milestones on priority 4:

already completed:

- December 2016/February 2017: Opinions by Enzo Bianco (PES/IT) on the Reform of the Common European Asylum System (Dublin), Packages I and II
- February 2017 Opinion by Peter Bossman (PES/SI) on the Partnership Framework with Third Countries on the European Agenda for Migration

Scheduled:

- CoR opinion on the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) (to be allocated on 10 July 2018)

5. Fighting for strong European values and a more democratic EU

For our Socialist family, the motto of the European Union "United in diversity" translates into the ambition to make the European Union a cornerstone for societies that are diverse, open, and free of any type of discrimination, where all identities are respected and welcomed, and where fundamental rights and duties are the same for all. This ambition encompasses the strengthening of democracy at all levels throughout the European Union.

But strengthening democracy and increasing citizens' participation requires trust. In view of growing Euroscepticism, the CoR adopted in December 2014 an opinion by Christophe Rouillon (PES/F) on how to re-connect Europe with its citizens, in which it suggested *inter alia* Increased efforts in terms of local, regional and national social media, closer cooperation with "Europe Direct" information centres and the organisation by all EU institutions of '500 citizens' dialogues over a five-year period' in all EU member states and 'not only in capital cities'.

Since 2015, the CoR has organised more than 140 such events and will reach 200 by the end of this year, involving more than 200 of its members and 20,000 citizens in 27 Member States. As of September 2017, the CoR launched an online survey with more than 17,000 replies so far, which focuses on citizens' concerns and their views on which level of government (EU, national, regional/local) is possibly the best placed to respond to such concerns. The results of the CoR dialogues will feed into the CoR opinion on "Reflecting on Europe: the voice of local and regional authorities to rebuild trust in the European Union", currently drafted by CoR President Karl-Heinz Lambertz and First Vice-President Markku Markkula and due for adoption by the CoR plenary on 8-10 October 2018. It remains to be seen to what extent this opinion will also address possible institutional reform proposals for the post-Brexit period.

Meanwhile, the European citizens' opinion on the future of Europe is being sought after with growing intensity and through different channels. On 9 May 2018, the European Commission launched a public online survey⁷, which is meant to feed into several events: (a) Commission President Juncker's "State of the Union" address on 12 September 2018; (b) the debate about the results of the citizens' consultations/dialogues, on which 26 of the 27 heads of state and government had agreed to discuss on 13/14 December 2018; and (c) the so-called "Leaders' Summit" to be held in Sibiu, Romania, on 9 May 2019.

In this context, the PES Group should however intensify its reflection on how the CoR could contribute to the the continuation of citizens' dialogues after the Summer 2019. The following questions should be considered: Should the CoR keep the current format of CoR dialogues including a free choice of topics, possibly increased cooperation with EU institutions, and an annual reporting-back exercise? Could the involvement of CoR members in the organisation of citizens' dialogues be further stepped up? Should such dialogues be either framed thematically along the EU agenda or be completely open (or a combination of both)?

The issue of European values is of ever more pressing importance as central elements of the EU's common foundation such as division of powers, freedom of the press, association and speech, and non-discrimination are increasingly challenged even within and by EU member states.

The PES Group in the CoR will continue to take a determined stance on any violation of the EU's fundamental rights and freedoms, and will take political action where these concern directly local and regional authorities and their ability to uphold European values.

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/consultation-future-europe_en

This issue will also have to be addressed in relation to cohesion policy as the European Commission proposed to have in the future financial framework a budgetary heading dedicated to "Cohesion & Values". Beyond the question of how to label budgetary headings, the Commission considers that compliance with the rule of law is a prerequisite for proper financial management and the effective financing of the EU. Therefore, the Commission has also proposed a new mechanism aiming to protect the EU budget from financial risks due to general deficiencies in the rule of law in the Member States. That mechanism will allow the EU to suspend, reduce or restrict access to EU funds in proportion to the nature, gravity and scale of the deficiencies observed.

These values that are at the core of the European project should be also a priority in the CoR activities with its neighbours, be it through the Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) and Working Groups (WGs) with the candidate and potential candidate countries to join the EU or through the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) and the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) with the countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Milestones on priority 5:

already completed:

- 30 November 2017 opinion by Guillermo Martínez Suárez (PES/ES) on the EU Citizenship Report 2017

on-going

- interaction with the PES High Level Working group on the future of Europe
- 2nd State of the Union from the Local and Regional Perspective-speech by CoR President Karl-Heinz Lambertz, October 2018
- 8-10 October 2018 adoption by the CoR plenary of the opinion on "Reflecting on Europe: the voice of local and regional authorities to rebuild trust in the European Union" by CoR President Karl-Heinz Lambertz and first vice-president Markku Markkula.

scheduled:

- possibly PES Group Seminar in Brussels at the invitation of Alain Hutchinson (PES/BE) (Maison du Peuple, Saint-Gilles) on the topic of European cultural identity/-ies
- 13 to 15 March 2019 in Bucharest: 8th European Summit of Regions and Cities organised by the CoR with the support of the future Romanian EU Council Presidency: input of cities and regions to the European Council meeting in Sibiu/Romania on 9 May 2019 and the post-Brexit 2019-2024 institutional agenda.