



### **Cities: the stuff that Europe is made of**

#### **Why the European Union should better exploit the potential of its cities**

Yes, Europe is in crisis, the four politicians said. But there is a solution.

It was an unusual appearance by the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw. They had come to Brussels in February to recommend themselves to the European Union as the better alternative to their national governments. While in Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland European values and democratic rights were restricted, the capitals of these countries would continue to stand on the side of the EU – and should therefore also have direct access to funding, for example.

The »Pact of Free Cities« is the latest example of a growing self-confidence in European cities. It is also the logical consequence of the fact that Europe's success depends to a large extent on its cities: around 75 percent of the population lives here, generates around 85 percent of economic output and is responsible for 70 percent of CO2 emissions. »Cities are part of the problem«, says therefore Stockholm's Mayor Anna König Jerlmyr. »But they are also the key to the solutions.«

The Swede is president of the Eurocities network of cities, which represents 144 major cities with more than 250,000 inhabitants – a total of around 130 million people.

#### **Cities as pioneers in climate protection and citizen participation**

Especially in the field of climate protection, it is evident that cities are often more ambitious than their national governments. Around two-thirds of the members of Eurocities have set themselves the goal of becoming climate neutral by 2050 at the latest – a goal that the new EU Commission is now also pursuing, but by no means all member states. As early as spring 2019, representatives of more than two hundred cities therefore called on the European heads of state to step up their climate protection efforts.

Citizens are often directly involved in the ambitious plans of cities. In Leeds in the north of England, for example, the so-called »Climate Change Citizens' Jury« was established in 2019. Over a period of eight weeks, the citizens' panel drew up concrete recommendations for a more climate-friendly city, from changing traffic patterns and creating more green spaces to banning disposable plastic packaging. Now Leeds City Council is working on the implementation.

Public participation is an integral part of local politics in many cities. In Ghent, Belgium, a »Food Council« is developing and monitoring the city's food strategy; Nantes, France, is using the »Grand débat« instrument to let people have a say on issues such as future energy supply; cities such as Lausanne, Switzerland, Madrid, Spain, and Braga, Portugal, are testing participatory budgets.

Cities are thus in an »ideal position to bridge the gap between European and national decision-makers and their citizens in times of increasing political fragmentation in Europe«, according to the »City Leaders Agenda for Europe« of Eurocities.

### **Bringing Europe and Europeans closer together**

The new EU Commission also has this gap in mind. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has instructed her college in personal letters on taking office, the so-called »mission letters«, to strengthen the links between people and the European institutions and to »narrow the gap between expectations and reality.«

To this end, the European Commission is planning a »Conference on the Future of Europe«, which will run for two years from Europe Day, 9 May 2020, and aims to help to ensure that »the voice of Europeans is better heard.« Eurocities has offered to use the experience of cities with citizen participation for this conference – after all, cities are »the level of government closest to the citizens.«

Involving citizens directly, beyond elections and public consultations that normally only reach certain groups, is »difficult for the EU«, says Anna Lisa Boni, secretary-general of Eurocities. »People tend to get involved more at the local level, partly because city councils often need to go beyond political ideologies and find pragmatic solutions that serve people's needs.«

### **»Brexit or not, we remain a member«**

Pragmatism is now also in demand in Great Britain. After Brexit, the country's withdrawal from the EU, London, Leeds and other cities are looking for ways to stay in the European family. 19 British cities are part of the Eurocities network.

»Brexit or not, we remain a member of Eurocities«, the Mayor of Edinburgh, Frank Ross, confirmed shortly before the British House of Commons elections in December. The exchange of experience and cooperation with other cities on the continent is just too valuable.

Eurocities supports the British cities and has adapted its own statutes so that in future members from non-EU countries can also have a seat on the network's executive board. Even before the Brexit, Eurocities' Europe was already larger than the EU: the member and partner cities represent 39 countries.

## **The »century of cities«**

Cities hold Europe together, even where the nation states do not (or no longer) do so. Cities implement European projects such as the Green Deal, take in refugees and integrate migrants, create jobs and prosperity, drive digital transformation, create cultural inspiration and enable direct citizen participation.

Nevertheless, cities have so far only appeared in the small print of the European Commission. Responsibility for urban issues is not mentioned in any of the titles of the 27 members of the college, but only as a sub-item in the job description of the Commissioner for »Cohesion and Reforms«. Eurocities had promoted the idea of putting the issue of cities at the top of the agenda and appointing a vice-president of the Commission, in line with the central role of cities in Europe.

A »century of cities« was proclaimed by Wellington Webb, former mayor of Denver, after the 20th century had been that of nation states. The European Union nevertheless relies mainly on the member states when it comes to decision-making.

Europe should make better use of the potential of its cities – that was the message of the four mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw who came to Brussels in February. And that is also the message of the Eurocities network, which is calling for cities to get a seat at the table of decisions – for a better Europe.

### **Author**

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