

EDITORIAL: LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL – THE THIRD DIMENSION OF THE EU

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Local and regional authorities have always been the backbone of European democracy. They are the building blocks not only of each member state, but also of the EU itself, as they are responsible for managing hundreds of thousands of projects funded (at least in part) by EU programmes. According to official figures,² two-thirds of the 550 programmes funded under EU cohesion policy are managed at the regional level. Every day, new projects are adopted under these programmes, which aim to make regions and municipalities better places to live and work. By creating links between them, regions forge social, economic and cultural bonds that connect Europeans. There is no doubt that municipalities and regions make an important contribution to the development of the European Union. Local development policies have become increasingly important in recent years as governments around the world seek to address the persistent problems of disadvantaged and underdeveloped areas by supporting local, bottom-up approaches that complement mainstream national programmes. The increasing globalisation of the economy and technological change have opened up new markets and competition to which local development policies should respond. The EU has also become active in the field of local development by including the concept of local development in the new long-term EU budget (2021–2027), for which the European Commission has proposed a more modern, simple and flexible cohesion policy as the main investment policy and, at the same time, as a tangible expression of EU solidarity aimed at the sustainable development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives. Moreover, the EU's regional and cohesion policies are often considered core policies with an impact on the EU and an essential component of the EU.

When considering local development, we must not forget to emphasise that more than one million EU politicians are elected at local and regional level in all EU Member States. Moreover, empirical research shows that local and regional authorities enjoy greater trust than national governments in all Member States, and greater trust than the EU in most countries. It turns out that municipalities and regions are a way to regain trust in politics, not only in the EU but also at the national level. More than 120,000 municipalities and regions in EU member states are led by progressive mayors and presidents. As key political actors, they must therefore be highly adaptable and develop the skills that the increasingly dynamic working environment demands of them. On the other hand, they must maintain an authentic connection with citizens and listen to their needs and

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² See European Committee of the Regions 2019; available at: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/brochures/Documents/Working%20together%20to%20bring%20the%20EU%20closer%20to%20its%20citizens/3975%20blueprint%20brochure%20FIN.PDF>.

desires. Local leaders must not only focus on the present, but also turn their gaze to the future and therefore adapt to the dynamics of the challenges and changes to come.

However, local and regional leaders alone are not enough. In all EU member states, active citizens are needed who are willing to participate in decision-making processes and, in particular, to contribute to the common goals of a better quality of life. Local and regional authorities are in close contact with local businesses, social partners, civil society and citizens, and have valuable first-hand experience of the needs and aspirations that arise in society. Listening to the concerns of citizens and local and regional authorities and meeting their expectations is crucial to strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the EU and bringing Europe closer to its citizens. Active citizens and their democratic participation are fundamental for both the European Union and the regions and municipalities to shape their common future.

This thematic issue of the Journal of Comparative Politics is produced in the framework of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Chair entitled "Leadership for European Local Development 2040"³. The issue is dedicated to the development and different forms of participation and involvement of citizens at local and regional levels in different EU Member States. It contains seven articles that contribute to the above discussion. In the first article, **Markus Reiners** focuses on the comparison between representative and direct (participatory) democracy and shows the implications for the comprehensive Stuttgart 21 project. **Silvia Ručinská, Miroslav Fečko, Ondrej Mital'** and **Michal Jesenko** identify and analyse bottom-up response activities of municipalities and cities in crisis situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic in the Slovak Republic. **Pavel Maškarinec**'s paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the quality of regional democracy in the post-communist Czech Republic and Poland, focusing on two theoretically constitutive dimensions of democracy - participation and competition. **István Hoffman**'s contribution analyses the local administrative systems of the Visegrád countries and local development policies in light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Political participation at the local level is analysed in **Miro Haček**'s contribution, in which the author highlights the main features of the most recent local elections in Slovenia. In addition, **Peter Bláha** sheds light on another form of local democracy by focusing on the use of the local referendum instrument in the Czech Republic between 2000 and 2020. Last but not least, **Martin Plešivčák** addresses the issue of far-right support in Slovakia in light of the socioeconomic situation at the regional (district) level.

³ Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Chair »Leadership for European Local Development 2040 (LELD2040)«, ID: 101047424.