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# Europe's locally elected representatives, key players in the ecological transition

Firstly to understand how, through the European prism, it is possible to combine ecological transition and the empowerment of local elected representatives based on subsidiarity, it would be useful to reflect on the foundations of European integration. According to this approach, a central authority can only take on tasks if they cannot be carried out at a lower level. It is a fundamental principle of European law that could, in ecological terms, become the spearhead of a better environmental understanding by European citizens and a tool for our leaders.

In practical terms, subsidiarity is a philosophical principle based on Aristotle's view that society is made up of interlocking groups, each of which performs specific tasks and provides for its own needs. As Chantal Delsol, a member of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*, puts it, "according to Aristotle, each group works to meet the unfulfilled requirements of the sphere immediately below it in importance". This vision is perpetuated in the Christian heritage with the vision of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for whom the life of the *City* must be organised on the basis of subsidiarity. In the same vein, the construction of Europe by Christian democrats such as Robert Schuman, founding father and President of the European Parliament from 1958 to 1960, can be understood in terms of this rule. In the European Union, the [principle of subsidiarity](#) is cardinal, as specified in Article 5-3 TEU.

## THE FUTURE OF THE PLANET CENTRAL TO EUROPEAN ISSUES

The future of the planet is central to the major challenges facing Europe and the world. Europe wants to be a pioneer in this field. European environmental policy is based on four principles: caution, prevention, remedying environmental damage and the "polluter pays" principle. The "[energy-climate](#)", package adopted in December 2008, aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase the use of renewable energies and save 20% of energy consumption by 2020. In 2014, the [second "energy-climate" package](#) set the European objectives for 2030: a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions compared to 1990; a minimum proportion of 27% for renewable energies; and an improvement of at least 27% in energy efficiency. In addition, there are measures such as [the 2019 ban on single-use plastic](#), also taken by the European Union.

The European ambition is set out in the [Green Deal](#), launched in 2019 by the European Commission, which aims to achieve at least a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, making the European Union the first climate-neutral continent. This highly ambitious pact introduces new provisions in a number of areas, including the circular economy, building renovation, biodiversity, agriculture and innovation. Based on carbon taxes, its biodiversity component has been the focus of discussions. On 10 November,

Parliament and the Council reached agreement on the draft "[EU nature restoration law](#)" whose objective is to restore at least 20% of the European Union's land and sea areas by 2030. The scheme will be extended to all ecosystems suffering damage by 2050, with a gradual scaling. Ultimately, these measures will concern at least 30% of damaged land and marine ecosystems by 2030, then 60% by 2040 and 90% by 2050. It is important to note that this text does not just concern the countryside, but also cities: the surface area of green spaces and urban tree cover may not be reduced, unless this proportion is already greater than 45%. The Member States have undertaken to prevent any deterioration in areas in good condition or those subject to protection measures, such as the [Natura 2000 network](#), without any obligation to achieve results however. The States have also added exceptions for renewable energy and defence infrastructure projects.

The European Green Deal is causing a stir and exacerbating political divisions. Many MEPs from the European People's Party (EPP) opposed certain aspects of the draft, which threatened food sovereignty by reducing the amount of land devoted to agriculture. The European Greens have condemned "*climate sceptic forces*". This could leave its mark on the run-up to the European elections in June 2024, as shown by [Roberta Metsola's, president of the European Parliament, declaration](#).

This is where the challenge and the dilemma lie. Europe has a duty to be a driving force for tomorrow's environment, which is being planned now. And yet, never before have European decisions been so poorly perceived by our fellow citizens. According to an IPSOS study in 2022, 37% of French people are climate sceptics, an increase of 10% in one year. These figures are comparable to those in other European countries: there has been an increase of 3% in Italy and 6% in Poland.

What can be said about the polls on the eve of the European elections, giving a significant score of voting intentions to eurosceptic parties? What can be said about the rise of parties like the BBB, a farmers' party in the Netherlands, in the provincial elections last March? In 1989, François Mitterrand said "*France is our homeland, Europe is our future*". Faced with uncertainty,

the European Union should not ignore this and must reinvent itself. Why not go back to the fundamentals of Europe, such as the principle of subsidiarity, and provide the territories and local areas with more weight, likewise locally elected representatives, particularly mayors? It is time for real, subsidiarity-based decentralization across Europe.

### LEADING THE WAY IN BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

A good policy is one that combines effectiveness, a convincing result and a sufficient degree of consensus. In some areas, Europe manages to strike this delicate balance. In fact, Europe must be a place where environmental policies are harmonised, but above all where Europeans are protected from third countries. The border carbon tax is a perfect example of this. The [carbon border adjustment mechanism \(MCAF\)](#) was adopted by the European Union in May 2023; its gradual implementation started on 1st October 2023. This provision from the European regulatory toolkit imposes strict carbon pricing on certain products imported into the European Union, equivalent to that applied to European manufacturers. This scheme will initially target the following imported commodities: steel, cement, aluminium, nitrogen fertilisers and hydrogen.

### MAYORS, THE BRIDGEHEADS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN EUROPE

The strength of our institutions will come from choosing to trust locally elected representatives. At European level, mayors have powers based on different legal foundations: they are in the front line when it comes to dealing with various climatic events (avalanches, floods, fires, pollution, etc.), and they have real power. They also have authority over household waste collection, the restoration of areas polluted by waste, and traffic regulations. They are also responsible for public lighting, the development and/or operation of renewable energy production, the implementation of energy management measures and the development of heating networks. Local authorities really are the key players when it comes

to reducing energy consumption in a sustainable way, with the aim of meeting European targets.

Local authorities can take action with regard to their property assets (schools, gymnasiums, swimming pools, etc.) to reduce their energy bills with an ambitious plan to renovate their buildings. These local initiatives can be found in many European cities: in Malmö, Sweden, the mayor is developing new, totally ecological neighbourhoods capable of withstanding global warming. In Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, the environmental policy of Mayor Mike Josef (SPD) has been hailed by all the associations, particularly environmentalists, for its respectful urban planning and preservation of the river. In Spain, the city of Valencia, led by Maria José Catala (PP), was voted "European Green City" in 2023 for the creation of the Albufera nature park and its effective management of urban waste. To encourage European towns to commit to an environmental path the "[Green Capital of Europe Prize](#)", piloted by the European Commission was launched in 2006. The latter aims to link the environment and urban development. Among the winning cities are Essen (Germany), in 2017, for its efforts to convert brownfield sites into environmentally friendly areas; Nijmegen (Netherlands), in 2018, for its programme to become energy self-sufficient by 2045; Oslo (Norway), in 2019, for its enhanced protection of biodiversity; and Tallinn (Estonia), in 2023, for "*its commitment to reducing carbon emissions, restoring biodiversity, and promoting innovation and sustainable governance.*"

The mayor can also implement a "cycling plan" in his municipality to develop soft mobility, and develop public transport with buses and trams. The last important area is food, with school canteens. Mayors have a real role to play in the fight against food waste, but they also one in the choice of food, taking into account short supply chains.

### **WHAT INFLUENCE DO MAYORS HAVE IN EUROPE?**

Mayors occupy a difficult position in Europe. On the one hand they are represented in the [European Committee of Regions](#) (representative body of local authorities, i.e. municipalities, counties and regions). It is a consultative body whose task it is to promote local interests,

particularly those of decentralisation and subsidiarity. The work of representation is also undertaken by the [CEMR \(Council of European Municipalities and Regions\)](#), which advocates taking greater account of local and regional authorities at European level. The aim is to influence European decisions, particularly Community legislation and policies, through interaction between governments, locally elected representatives and European leaders. The Council is particularly active in the twinning field, with 26,000 twinning between European towns and cities. From this point of view, it is a resounding success. The CEMR also implemented the [Charter of Municipal Freedoms](#) as early as 1953 to gain recognition for "*local self-government as a factor in development and emancipation*". Progress was made for example with the establishment of the [European Charter of Local Self Government](#) under the aegis of the Council of Europe as well as the [Congress of Local and Regional Authorities](#) still under the auspices of the Council of Europe. But the influence that mayors are able to wield is still relatively weak.

While large cities, especially major metropolitan areas, are able to make their voices heard with a certain degree of ease, dialogue is more difficult with suburban and rural communities. The metropolitan areas are highly integrated into the European decision-making circuits – "metropolitanisation", moreover, is driving this concentration of power and networks - often leaving smaller towns by the wayside. A sense of relegation, unease and incomprehension persists among many local councillors, many of whom feel abandoned in a world of legislation that is increasingly difficult to understand. For them, Europe seems distant, and obtaining European funding very difficult, while they are faced with cities that have the weight of groups such as the "[C40 Cities](#)" which brings together hyperconnected megacities to combat climate change.

### **THE EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL "MILLEFEUILLE"**

C40 Cities is giant. Founded in 2005 by the former mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, it comprises 94 of the world's largest cities and 6 others that have "observer city" status. It is a very large conglomerate, representing 600 million inhabitants,

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25% of the world's GDP and ... 70% of greenhouse gas emissions.

The idea is not to challenge such an alliance of cities for the climate. It is an innovative and above all essential approach, because the participation of the "giants" in reducing the carbon footprint is non-negotiable. But the role of small towns must not be forgotten.

The strong feeling of incomprehension among the inhabitants of these territories should not be underestimated, if the feeling of relegation really is to be reduced. This impression is echoed in many European countries (Italy, Greece, Spain), where citizens feel both neglected by public policy and far removed from the European decision-making process, which is sometimes used as an easy scapegoat. Today's urban marketing, i.e. the range of techniques used to promote and enhance the value of towns and cities, must also be applied to rural areas. Peripheral and rural areas are beset by the anxiety of being relegated to the sidelines. These populations need to be targeted, drawing on the famous principle of subsidiarity.

Europe has a card to play. By applying the principle of subsidiarity, it could protect the municipalities that are least integrated into globalisation. It could help them to enter fully into the era of ecological transition. Local authorities receive certain types of European aid, particularly in the environmental field, because of their negotiating skills, especially with the regions. For example, in the French region of Sud (formerly Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur), President Renaud Muselier (RE), a former MEP, is well acquainted with the schemes. As is Stefano Bonaccini (PD), President of the Emilia-Romagna region, who has been President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions since 2016.

The scheme "[zero smoke ports](#)" (*Zero emissions stop-overs*) enables shore-side electricity connections to be made for ships berthed in European ports such as Hamburg, Marseille or Venice, which are receiving European aid to adapt their fishing models and reduce the concentration of pollution linked to freight or tourism.

European funds are also used for rural development. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

([EAFRD](#)) promotes the competitiveness, sustainability and diversification of rural areas. It is an essential element of support for agricultural activity through financial assistance for agricultural markets and direct payments to farmers. A mainstay of the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP), it often helps farmers keep their heads above water. Moreover, the [Regional rural network](#) is a tool for "*exchange, cooperation and sharing*". It helps to combat the digital divide, to encourage new farmers to set up and to develop short distribution channels. It is a formidable tool for ecological transition and social cohesion. This type of initiative is chosen by the regions to participate in the financing of projects that provide "*a new and innovative service for local residents or businesses*". In 2021, the European Commission launched the Rural Pact to respond to the needs and aspirations of rural communities.

The European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)) enables massive European investment in the regions to strengthen economic and social cohesion and regulate regional imbalances. Thanks to regional funding, it promotes a "*smarter Europe, thanks to innovation, digitisation, economic transformation and support for small and medium-sized enterprises*", but also "*a greener, zero-carbon Europe, which implements the Paris Agreement and invests in the energy transition*". Examples of this include the work being done to redevelop [brownfield sites](#) and promote sustainable development. It is interesting to look at some of these brownfield sites: in Hamburg, Germany, a former industrial and port wasteland is now the HafenCity eco-district, featuring high standard housing and the use of waterways as an alternative mode of transport. Furthermore, since 2022, 30% of ERDF funding has had to be allocated to climate commitments.

Despite these undeniable successes, it is often the most populous municipalities that reap the rewards of European subsidies, ahead of the smaller, less vocal and less powerful ones. Creating a representative body at European level to defend rural areas and small towns, with balanced representation, might be a solution.

#### A EUROPEAN SENATE?

A European "*Senate*", representing small and medium-sized municipalities on a European scale, might serve as

a forum to defend the interests of Europeans who are far removed from the centres, and therefore from the political circuits, and who are increasingly suspicious of the ecological transition. The aim would not be to create yet another "do-nothing-committee", but to provide a tool for local elected representatives to ensure that the necessary ecological transformation is carried out properly. The establishment of such a structure, which would not only be consultative but active in both the allocation and distribution of subsidies according to objective criteria (isolation, exposure to bad weather, desertification, etc.), would allow for fair subsidiarity. And no doubt a better understanding of the usefulness of the European Union. This body would also be useful for passing on information faster to the various European institutions. This European "Senate" would be attuned to the "grassroots", a concept that reflects a Europe in which pastures and ploughing still form a reassuring stereotype for city-dwellers, but which is far removed from the realities of rural and peri-urban life. It should not be forgotten that 83% of Europe is rural.

The European Union is already doing a great deal: 25% of cohesion policy investment (between 2014 and 2020) for rural areas, €60 billion earmarked (between 2023 and 2027) for rural development under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with 35% of the new CAP for local development in harmony with climate change, the protection of biodiversity and animal welfare.

A [European Rural Observatory](#) to boost the attractiveness of rural areas and reduce the feeling of abandonment among rural Europeans was launched in January 2023. It collects data on "rural areas", taking into account demography, economic and social issues, work, health, education and accessibility. But why not take into account the environmental dimension of these areas? Why not prepare them better for the necessary changes in practices linked to global warming? The time has come to pass on information from the local players. For too long - and this is the main criticism levelled at the European Union - the approach has been vertical. These difficulties could be resolved by creating a meeting place for local mayors, a new European "Senate".

For a long time, European institutions and services have been difficult for our fellow citizens and local elected representatives to understand. They do not always know where to go, what procedures to follow, or which source of funding to use to consolidate a particular community project. This is why a one-stop shop is needed: a single service, run by local elected representatives, focused directly on helping local communities and on the ecological transition. In a polemic free spirit, it might even be a good idea to merge all the current services to create genuine ecological subsidiarity, with a body based on the "prytaneion"<sup>[1]</sup> model. With the sole aim of transforming territories to become leaders in environmental action. This format would be a step forward for Europe, not to say a revolution, because it would facilitate the link between rural or peri-urban elected representatives and the European authorities.

The idea would be to merge all the subsidies for local authorities, which are scattered across various European departments, to create an overall fund that is entirely transparent and distributed in a fair and balanced way. The main aim of this fund would be to ensure the ecological transition of the regions, particularly the most remote. Is it normal for mayors to find themselves powerless in the face of water shortages? Is it right that communities, such as those near the Tagus River in Spain, should find themselves in dire straits, faced with the dilemma of whether to drink water or let their agricultural plantations collapse? Residents can legitimately ask what Europe is doing. This fund should help to anticipate and mitigate climate change, based on observatories and expertise, but with a real concern for the realities on the ground. And to make European subsidiarity a reality. In 2023, Europe has a [budgetary](#) envelope of 50.9 billion € at its disposal for the territorial cohesion policy, and 4.8 billion € for strategic investments. Excluded from the calculation are expenditure on agriculture and fisheries (56 billion), security and defence (1.2 billion), space policy (2.3 billion), migration (3 billion), administrative expenditure (10.6 billion), the Erasmus project (3.3 billion), research and innovation (12.9 billion) and development aid (14 billion).

If for example the European Union were to merge and reallocate even a third of the investments for territorial cohesion (so as not to weaken projects already

<sup>[1]</sup> The town hall in Ancient Greek cities

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underway), i.e. €16.6 billion, and a quarter of the strategic investments (adapting to global warming can be an investment!), i.e. €1.2 billion, the result would be a fund of €17.8 billion. To this, it might be worth adding the funds from the new "plastic resource" (€0.80 for each kilo of non-recycled plastic), i.e. an additional €6.7 billion a year, equating to €24.5 billion. Finally, by reducing and reallocating "other expenditure" and administrative costs (say 20%), this territorial green fund could be increased by €3.9 billion, totalling €28.4 billion a year each year, and over a five-year budgetary framework, €142 billion for the transition of cities and especially the countryside. This is just a starting point. Over time, it would no doubt be possible to reallocate more of the various investments in territorial cohesion. This windfall would, of course, be financial. The sum of €142 billion over five years would be a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of the requirements of the ecological ... and digital transition. But this European gesture would above all be symbolic, acknowledging the Community's action for local elected representatives. The Member States would also have to contribute their share. At a time when funding is continuing to shrink, Europe must play the game for small towns and villages. It must return to the roots of European integration through the exercise of subsidiarity. Measures must be applied at the appropriate level, and on a local scale, within the reach of local elected representatives: their own. In these complex times, when many questions are being asked about the changes now taking place,

and public decision-making is under attack, the role of the mayor is essential.

The members of a "European *prytaneion*", which would be rural and peri-urban in terms of European geography, could be chosen by the drawing of lots, thus reviving the great principles of Athenian democracy. This system would allow local elected representatives to be selected for a term of office equivalent to that of a Member of the European Parliament. After careful consideration, and in these disruptive times, it makes sense to breathe fresh life into the method of appointment. A vote by indirect universal suffrage - by locally elected representatives - might be a solution that would act as a counterweight. To create a democratic shock, the drawing of lots would ensure equality in the final choice and might, importantly, draw the attention of Europe's disaffected citizens to this new authority. Putting the mayor back at the centre of Europe would be an appropriate response. The mayor must be given renewed legitimacy to lead the ecological transition in the rural world. It would also be an innovative proposal on the eve of the European elections.

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