



## **Contribution of the PES-Group in the Committee of the Regions on the PES-Manifesto Theme "European Democracy and Diversity"**

European unification is an eminently democratic project. It was started after the most horrific abuses of totalitarianism as an answer to dictatorships from both the right and the left. European integration is a peace project, and as such it relies on democracy. Moreover, it is a project which builds on diversity based on common values. The diversity of Europe, its regions and cities, languages, cultures, social systems and traditions, is a reality. Diversity is a wealth, but we have to acknowledge also that diversity is ultimately the limit to integration in the EU. Yet, diversity must not be a limit to democracy. Every member state must be democratic, and the EU structures must also be democratic and representative

The key challenge for the EU is therefore to integrate diversity in Europe into a common framework of democratic rules. This needs to be a dynamic and flexible balance, because as the EU develops, new political challenges require new tools and solutions. For this balance between democracy and diversity to be both flexible and stable, we need to support the development of a European identity in which citizens can recognise themselves. We also need to create a European public in which participation can be organised, where citizens can discuss the great questions and where a democratic culture is formed. A key element of this culture must be gender equality and equal opportunities for all.

One way to achieve this is to use the new instrument provided by the Lisbon Treaty with the citizens' initiative: this is a tool which we need to promote because it will help to create a transnational debate on specific issues which matter to European citizens. We would therefore encourage the PES to already identify in its Manifesto European policy issues such as public services, decent work or minimum income on which the PES could commit itself to support possible future citizens' initiatives.

This might also lead to the recognition of the need for truly European referendums on fundamental changes to the EU structures, with a single question being asked on the same day to voters all over the EU.

European integration can be the great success it is because under the European 'umbrella', national, regional and local diversities, but also different cultures, beliefs, traditions and aspirations can develop. Socialists and social democrats have always fought

for social progress through democracy - because where there is democracy, social justice, fair jobs, sustainable development, respect for diversity and participation can flourish. Local and regional authorities as the democratic level closest to the citizens must help to build on these foundations and promote the development of a real European citizenship in the interest of European democracy. In this context, it is particularly important to focus on the education of young people, and especially on developing and teaching a common vision on the history of our continent. It is also important to improve the communication about the activities of the European Union and make its contribution to citizens' life more visible. We propose for example to foresee more stringent rules on the visual identification of projects co-funded by the EU, to extend the "Europe at school" initiative to all Member States and to encourage training periods of EU officials in local and regional administrations.

In a number of policy areas, making Europe more visible and relevant requires concrete action and political choices to be made, which sometimes are not going to be easy. We need to address the issue of migration and integration of newcomers at European level. The EU and all its member states are based on the rule of law, and this must be the bottom line for accepting diversity. Therefore the PES should stand for a credible European migration policy which takes into account the fundamental rights and the needs of those who migrate, for whatever reason, the concerns of those who live in the areas to which migration takes place and the need to ensure integration of the newcomers into the host societies.

Europe needs both migration between member states, which is a key benefit of the integrated Union, and migration from outside the EU for a number of reasons. We have to make sure that all concerned get the most benefit of both kinds of migration. Mobility within the EU is a basic right of EU citizens, and the member states should take the necessary steps to facilitate the exercise of this right. Migration from outside the EU is a reality which needs to be managed in a legally sound, humane and transparent way. This also requires a determined fight against human trafficking and the exploitation of the weakest (often women and children) in the migration context.

At the same time, we have to support all efforts, in particular at local and regional level, to foster the integration of individuals into their new societies. Migrants might have the European Union as a whole as the aim of their journey, but they arrive to towns, cities and regions in a particular member state. It is into these communities that they have to integrate, and in which they need to participate actively. Integration is a two-way process, requiring those who arrive to accept the laws and democratic rules, and the host societies to offer them the opportunity to become part of the community. This includes the need to pay particular attention to education, training and language learning. The role of women in

this is essential and they need to be supported with appropriate facilities and structures (for example in the area of childcare, training, education and support for finding employment). We also need the active involvement of local and regional authorities in promoting fundamental rights for all those who live in the EU.

At European level, the PES should continue to put pressure for a more transparent, democratic and effective EU, in which the role of local and regional actors is recognised and supported. The European political parties themselves need to play a bigger role, and they should start sharpening their profiles by putting forward candidates for key offices in the European elections. We also need local and regional actors to engage actively in communicating with citizens about the EU and ensure that they can participate in political process at all levels, including the European elections. We need to engage with diverse groups, the social partners and individuals to try to create a fairer and more integrated European society.

In particular, in the context of the manifesto process, we asked you to respond to the following questions. The view of the PES-group in the CoR on these key questions for a Europe of democracy and diversity, is this:

*1. Which should be the future role of local and regional levels of government in the European democracy?*

Democracy begins at home. The wealth of different democratic institutions that has developed in the local and regional structures of the EU Member States is one of Europe's strengths. We need to develop a culture of participation and involvement which covers different levels and includes also the European elections. We also support the element of direct democracy at EU level (introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in the form of the citizens' initiative), and we propose to build on the existing experiences at local/ regional level with direct democracy in order to make it a workable tool to create a European public debate.

Democratic participation is also a key element of integrating migrants and those otherwise at risk of exclusion. Migration is a key element of the social, cultural and economic development of Europe. Local and regional authorities are bearing crucial responsibilities in managing migration and supporting the integration of our societies. We support therefore the creation of a coherent European migration policy based on the principles of solidarity, humanity and the respect for human rights, but also on the acceptance of the rules and laws of the democratic societies receiving migration, to the benefit of those who migrate and their host societies. We should in particular encourage opportunities to migrate legally

into the EU and strengthen the rights of third country nationals to reside and work in EU member states, e.g. by further approximating the procedures for applying for and being granted residence and work permits. We do support the Commission's proposal to set a uniform EU model for third country nationals' residence permits.

*2. Local and regional authorities are directly affected by the consequences of social change in the EU. By which means can they promote democracy and integration on the ground and argue for diversity and inter-culturalism in order to help coping with social change?*

Social change which comes with globalisation is often very disruptive and many people perceive it as a threat. Diversity is a wealth, but it needs to be managed adequately and to respect the common rules of the community. Local and regional authorities very often bear key responsibilities in areas such as education, social policy, provision of services of general interest, policing and employment policies. We need to work together, learn from each other and reassure ourselves and our partners at European level of what the common elements are, which make up our vision for Europe. Then we will be in a position to offer our citizens the tools and the skills to make the most of a diverse and dynamic Europe. An important commitment to the promotion of diversity would be that all EU Member States ratify the European Charter for regional or minority languages.

We need to invest in education and culture, to build on successful experiences and to adapt to changing circumstances. We need to give the weak in society a fair chance to contribute and participate. This means that special attention needs to be paid to fighting unemployment, indecent work and discrimination of any kind. Freedom of movement within the EU is a key achievement of the integration project, and we need to extend its benefits further. We also need migration in many areas to address the demographic challenge – but this requires integration between the local populations and those who arrive. The PES therefore calls for support for measures undertaken at local and regional level to foster such integration, such as language teaching, projects to promote active participation and training for particular groups. Local and regional authorities have a crucial role in providing the means for communities to integrate with each other, and we are offering to exchange and share best practices and knowledge.

*3. How can local and regional actors use their influence to promote the participation of their citizens in a democratic European society?*

To make participation 'attractive', it needs to be clear what is at stake for each democratic level: political alternatives and human faces associated with the different options are the key ingredients for a successful democratic process – this is true at the local, regional, national and European level. As local and regional actors we have to make sure to inform our citizens about the decisions which are taken, and also about the fact that often decisions taken locally or regionally, have effects elsewhere. European decisions also need to be brought to the local and regional level – all politicians should be involved in showing that 'Europe' is not an abstract phenomenon, but that it has a real impact on citizens' everyday life, wherever they live in the EU. We consider that third country nationals who are legally residing in an EU country for a certain period should obtain the voting right at local and European elections.