In defence of democracy …
EUROPE NEEDS AN URBAN RESET
An essay

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Geopolitics, new conservative nationalism and the authoritarian temptation put the European unification project at risk.

Rethinking Europe as networks of cities and metropolitan regions allows to deepen the idea of "Europeanness" as a way of living together respecting difference and diversity

METREX and GPM are pleased to present this essay by Prof. Dr. Eric Corijn. We consider it essential to continuously underscore the relevance of urban and metropolitan democracy, particularly within the context of the ongoing European integration process. As metropolitan regions increasingly serve as key arenas where urban and rural dynamics intersect, it is imperative to reflect on how democratic participation can be sustained and strengthened in these complex territorial frameworks.

This essay seeks to contribute to the evolving discourse on democratic governance at the metropolitan level, and we hope it will serve as a meaningful input to the broader debate on how to maintain and enhance citizen engagement across Europe's diverse regions.

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In defence of democracy…

Europe needs an urban reset

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Abstract: The argument developed in this essay proposes a critical review of the history of the making of Europe as the creator of a European world system and the idea of the national state. That global frame determined the European unification project as a market driven intergovernmental collaboration maintaining politics and culture as an exclusive national domain.

Geopolitics, new conservative nationalism and the authoritarian temptation put the European unification project at risk.

This peculiar history of the building of the European Union overshadowed different structural elements omitted in the narrative. Renaissance and the Enlightenment were basically products of the post medieval development of relatively autonomous cities, city states and an urban bourgeoisie that eventually took over leadership from the nobility and the clergy. Urbanity produced the ideas of freedom, equality and citizenship. They were later "nationalized" in the making of the nation states, relegating cities to "localities" in the country. Nationality repressed urbanity. Nationality installed the story of a common history, producing tradition and identity, legitimizing representative democracy within national borders. Sameness and community were identified within very diverse national territories.

Most of humanity lives now in cities. Cities are caught in the post-industrial transition. Their hinterland is networked in the space of flows. Their population becomes multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious. National socializing models become outdated and dysfunctional. Rethinking Europe as networks of cities and metropolitan regions allows to deepen the idea of "Europeanness" as a way of living together respecting difference and diversity. An urban democracy.

Content

1. Introduction

Democracy is at stake in most parts of the world. The Economist Democracy Index[1] states that in 2024 only 6,6% of the world population lived in full democracies (25 countries), 38,4% in flawed democracies (46), 15,7% in hybrid regimes (36) and 39,2% in authoritarian regimes (60). Different other democracy indices[2] do indicate the same tendencies. The Democracy Report 2025 of the Swedish V-Dem Institute[3] says that democracy in the world for the average person is back to 1985, that since 2009 autocratizing countries (45) have overshadowed democratizing countries (19) and that now 72% of the world population is living in autocracies. These data refer to the formalities of democratic systems. And these are under pressure in most of the countries.

Beyond this, one can also see a decline in the overall quality of democratic politics, of the political debate and above all the declining adherence of the citizens. Forty years of neoliberal hegemony under the TINA-motto (There Is No Alternative), in a landscape of commercialized media and new social media, with an increase of populism, delegitimized political struggle over societal alternatives. Social media, populism, infotainment and fake news disturbed public opinion. The resulting decline in the quality of politics and thus of democracy itself might be a main mover of right-wing radicalism and the authoritarian rift. Neoliberalism has been built under the hegemonic triad of linking market economy, individual freedom and democracy as reciprocal conditions. Today, as the market needs more state support and austerity, economic policies seem to support right wing conservative and authoritarian tendencies. Market economy does not necessarily include freedom and democracy anymore. Conservatism seems to have taken over from liberalism. There remains a lot to do at the level of countries (see the annual EU-Rule of Law report[4]). Unfortunately, human rights are declining[5]

Democracy and the state of law are also under pressure in many European countries and even in the European Parliament after the elections of June 6-9, 2024. There was the anxious prediction the extreme right taking a quarter of the 720 seats in the E.P. That was overrated. The so-called centre shifted itself sufficiently to the right to contain an extreme-right breakthrough. The European People's Party (188 seats) gained 10 seats, the Socialists & Democrats (136) lost 4 seats. The big losers were the liberals (80) with 25 seats and the Greens (54) with 19 seats. Conservatives and extreme right gained. They are divided between the Patriots for Europe (85 seats), European Conservatives and Reformists (79) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (27) occupying together nearly one quarter of the seats. In 2024, right-wing populist parties hold or share political power in Hungary (Fidesz), Italy (Brothers of Italy), Sweden (Sweden Democrats), Finland (Finns Party), Slovakia (Slovak National Party), Croatia (Homeland Movement) and The Netherlands (Party for Freedom). They had a breakthrough in

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Economist_Democracy_Index
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_indices
[3] https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/
[4] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/annual-rule-law-cycle/2024-rule-law-report_en
[5] https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025

Germany (Alternative für Deutschland), France (Rassemblement National) and Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Osterreichs). The new European Commission opened itself to Fratelli d'Italia of Giorgia Meloni. An extreme right vice president of the European Commission, Raffaele Fitto, is now in charge of cities. At European and national level, a more restrictive policies and a reform of the state of law can be expected. The axis between centre-right and centre-left will eventually be exchanged for a coalition between centre-right and extreme right. Relationships between the EU, member states and city networks will change. Human rights and the state of law will be rediscussed. Ending the Urban Intergroup in the European Parliament is not a very positive indication.

But democracy is equally a vital challenge for urban governance, one that is increasingly urgent given the growing tension between the authoritarian temptation at national level and the need of deepening urban democracy. The complexity and urgency of the challenges in the urban system, such as climate collapse, biodiversity, social inequality, poverty, housing, migration, cultural and ethnic diversity, and so on cannot be tackled without consent, support, and collaboration of the population. Deepening democratic practices stands high on the urban agenda. Urban democracy is about institutions, but even more so about practices and mentalities.

Urbanity has remarkably other dynamics than nationality[6]. That tension will influence the further European integration processes, especially after the political developments in most European countries. We refer to urbanity as to the specific characteristics of the urban agenda, concentrated and dense urban co-living and social geography, mostly repressed in mainstream media and debates. As the city is also a place in a country and governed by regional or national regulation, urban governance is also the scenery of national and even international politics and ideologies. Growing right-wing politics are surely expressed in urban governance, applying its ideology in urban controversies. It thus positions itself in urban planning, in matters of mobility, energy, spatial planning and policing as part of its hegemonic struggle. Some speak about "infrastructural populism"[7].

Even if the national seems to be the scope of politics in media and public opinion, the practical test mostly lies in governing the urban complexity. The relationship between cities and the national authority comes in different varieties. In most cases national government considers the urban as just a local level. In some countries history has produced established forms of municipal autonomy that install negotiated relations with the central state. The interaction between national politics and local governance is never generic and has always a specific connection, be it the national role of local politicians. The urban has not yet produced its ideologies. These remain adapted products of the 19th century modernization processes within the nation-state. The European space could/should experience a shift in paradigm as internal contradictions are increasing.

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[6] Barber, B. (2013): *If mayors ruled the world. Dysfunctional nations, rising cities*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press; Corijn, E. (2018): *Een stad is geen land. Pleidooi voor de stedelijke revolutie*, ASP, Brussel and (2019): *Une ville n'est pas un pays. Playdoyer pour la révolution urbaine, Bruxelles*: Ed. SAMSA.
[7] Fainstein, S. & Novy, J. (2023). *Right-wing populism and urban planning*. Journal of Urban Affairs, 1–24; Beverage, R.; Naumann, M. & Rudolph, D. (2024): The rise of "infrastructural populism": urban. Infrastructure and right-wing politics, Geography Compass, vol 18, nr2: 1-14; John Wiley & Sons
https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/gec3.12738

2. Europe in the making of "the West"

Europe is not only a continent, but also a history and an idea. It is present in all parts of the globe. Understanding the unification process in post-World War II Europe requires a wider assessment of globalisation and the world order[8]. Immanuel Wallerstein's world system analysis[9] examines international relations within historical capitalism through the long-term interdependent dynamics between the centre of the system and diverse peripheral areas. The centre determines the dynamics and sets the rhythm. The peripheral regions develop interdependent and subordinate to the core countries and regions. This approach assists us analysing the developments both within the European single market and between Europe and other global players. Unfortunately, public opinion is still trapped in a pure inter-national narrative, as politics is still mainly a matter of national governments. There is a lack of attention for specific inter-regional and inter-city interactions, notwithstanding increased research attention[10]. Both infra- and supra-national analysis are underrated.

In postwar Western Europe, the welfare state model, as the ultimate form of the Fordist social contract, develops between the regimes of a US-type free market and the Soviet planned economy. In Western Europe, class bargaining emerged to boost labour productivity in exchange for social redistribution of profits. After the Golden Sixties, the growing intertwining of western economies and their business cycles, making the export of overproduction between countries more difficult, led to the first generalised recession in the mid-1970s. Thatcher (1979) and Reagan (1981) set the neoliberal turn, shifting from Keynesian economic policies to monetarism. The march of the free market across the globe would truly breakthrough in 1989 with the implosion of "really existing socialism"[11]. A "western model" took the lead, and some already think of a Hegelian end of history, a steady state eternal model[12]. Globalisation began as a new era.

A cornerstone in that postwar world order was NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation[13], which presents itself as an alliance of democratic regimes. It could have become the ultimate defence line for democracy. This has to be taken with a grain of salt given that at its inception the Portuguese Salazar regime joined, that France still had colonies, that at its first enlargement in 1952 Turkey and Greece became members, that a putsch of colonels took place

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[8] Solana, M. (ed)(2015): *Espacios globales y lugares próximos. Setenta conceptos para entender la organización territorial del capitalismo global*; Barcelona: Icaria; Holslag, J. (2019): *A Political History of the World*; Milton Keynes: Pelican Books/Penguin.

[9] Wallerstein, I. (1974): *The Modern World-System, vol. I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York/London: Academic Press, Wallerstein, I. (1980): *The Modern World-System, vol. II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750*. New York: Academic Press. Wallerstein, I. (1989): *The Modern World-System, vol. III: The Second Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730-1840's*. San Diego: Academic Press. Wallerstein, I. (2004): *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

[10] https://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/geography/gawc/group.html

[11] Bahro, R. (1977): *Die Alternative: zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus*, Berlin: Europäische Verlagsanstalt.

[12] Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

[13] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67656.htm; Anderson, G. (2023): *Weapon of power, matrix of management. NATO's hegemonic formula*. in London: New Left Review 140/141 MAR.JUN 2023: 5- 34

in that country in 1967 co-orchestrated by CIA and NATO scenarios, that Washington already concluded a separate treaty with the Franco regime in Spain in 1953, ... The true motives were always of a purely geopolitical nature. That is also illustrated today in the war in Ukraine or in the crisis in Gaza and the Middel-East.

When the Federal Republic of Germany joined in 1955, it was mainly about remilitarisation and expanding the number of US bases in the still occupied country. And after the fall of the wall a rapid expansion to the east was negotiated. NATO would eventually become the capstone of defence policy in Europe. There has never been a proper European defence policy in practice. The US military presence in Europe was never questioned. When there was brief talk of a European "Rapid Response Force" in the run-up to the 2000 Nice summit, Europeans heard from the US defence secretary that this would mean the end of the Alliance. Today US president Trump threatens to leave NATO if defence budgets are not increased in member states. On the one hand, he instrumentalizes the alliance to maintain his leadership of the West. On the other hand, he blackmails member states and the EU to be left alone in his bilateral geopolitics with Russia and above all China. NATO was at the same time a boundary and a frame for European unification, a process that never obtained an independent dynamic. The quiet radical shift in American politics alter the cohesion within the western alliance, puts North-Atlantic solidarity at risk and pushes European countries to choose between further integration or nationalist disintegration.

The different phases of the construction of the European Union[14] must be understood in that perspective. After a short period of post-war tripartism (US, UK and USSR) based on the Yalta-agreements, the year 1947 marked the divide of Europe and the start of the cold war[15]. Churchill introduced the notion of the Iron Curtain. Western-European unity took off with the help of the Marshall plan funding postwar reconstruction. The integration project was built on BeNeLux dynamics that convinced France to enter communities. A French - German axis under French political leadership emerged to "control" and "contain" a rebuild German economy. As a counterpart to the European Economic Communities (EEC) founded by the treaty of Rome in 1957, the UK organized a European Free Trade Association. EFTA was established in 1960 by the Stockholm Convention. The original members were Great Britain, Norway, Denmark, Austria, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland, otherwise known as the "Outer Seven".

Wavering within global geopolitics determines the different steps in the EU construction. A first expansion of the EEC in 1973 led to the entry of the UK, Ireland and Denmark. A consolidation came in 1986 with the entry of the Mediterranean Greece, Spain and Portugal leading to a Western European alliance of 12 countries. That eventually led to furthering economic integration with the European Monetary system in 1978 and the Single European Act in 1986. It is in that frame that, after the fall of the Berlin wall and the swift unification of

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[14] Davies, N. (1997) : *Europe. A History*, London : Pimlico ; Balibar, E. (2001) : *Nous, Citoyens d'Europe*, Paris : La Découverte ; Piketty, T. (2012-2016): *Peut-on sauver l'Europe*, Paris: Les Liens qui Libèrent ; Riemen, R. (ed.) (2015): *De terugkeer van Europa*, Tilburg: Nexus Instituut; Guérot U. (2017) : *Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss!Eine politische Utopie,* Bonn : Dietz Verlag ; Aglietta, M. (2018) : *The reform of Europe*, London :Verso ; Vos H. (2021): *Dit is Europa. De geschiedenis van een unie*, Gent: Borgerhoff&Lamberigts; Guetta, B. (2023): *La nation européenne*, Paris: Flammarion; Judt, T. (2024): *Postwar. A history of Europe since 1945*, London: Vintage
[15] Skalli-Housseini, Y. & Van Langenhove, L. (2022): *De erfenis van 1947. Geboorte en toekomst van de huidige wereldordening*, Brussel: ASP

Germany (02.10.1990), a rapid expansion to the east was organized. A process driven by economic integration became determined by geostrategic tempi. In the meantime, Austria, Finland and Sweden joined in 1995. The largest enlargement of the European Union occurred in 2004 with the simultaneous accessions of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, followed in 2007 by Bulgaria and Romania and in 2013 by Croatia. Europe is shared by 51 countries of which 44 are fully situated in the peninsula. Today the European Union unites 27 member states and 9 candidates. The Council of Europe has 47 member states, but notwithstanding it aims at peace, justice and human rights, it does not play a strong role in geopolitics.

3. Recalibrating and rescaling Europe

These unification processes deliver a contradictory product of market driven unification while preserving national state and culture. The latter have now turned into conservative nationalisms. But the territory of the integrated market becomes de facto structured through urban networks and spaces of flow more than within national borders and spaces of place. That even intensified with the growing importance of cities in post-industrial developments. The continent's 828 cities accounted for 37% of the population in 1961, growing to 40% in 1981 and remaining constant from there on, until more recent growth in the urban cores. Today, 72% of the EU 28 population lives in cities and urban areas[16]. These evolutions opened an interesting debate on rescaling and the nexus of power and space[17]. This leads to an untenable split: on the one hand, countries are losing control over their socio-economic and monetary policies, and on the other, Europe has no tools to develop a common citizenship, a European *demos*. Education, culture, media and socialisation remain exclusively national competences. The mental map of citizens is framed by countries, whereas socio-cultural experiences become more and more urban, mobile and superdiverse.

The EU is producing a new reality, another objective infrastructural and spatial underlayer than the nation state. Look at the demography of the continent: less than one-fifth of the European territory is home to more than two-thirds of the people who provide almost three-quarters of the economy. Europe also has a core area. That so-called "*blue banana*" stretches from southern England, across the Low Countries, the Ruhr, and Bavaria to northern Italy. These are basically the urbanised areas of the Renaissance: Holland and Flanders, the Italian city-states connected by the cities on the Rhine with some antennae on the Atlantic or Baltic coasts. That core sets the bar, for policy, productivity, way of life, work ethic, ... That zoning is exacerbated and intensified by post-industrial urbanisation[18]. Most Europeans now live in urban areas. Largely in (smaller) historical cities: some 500 of more than 150,000 inhabitants, 52 of between 500,000 and 1 million, 36 of more than 1 million and some 70 metropolises of more than 1 million inhabitants. But above all, these urban hubs are interconnected. Even more than countries, those city-networks are the spatial underlayer of the European economy. The "*space of flows*" has become more important than the "space of places". That infrastructure is what holds the European continent together.

In contrast, there are two peripheral areas. The Mediterranean countries and culture that are in competition with lower labour productivity (but more balanced lifestyles). The Eastern European countries processing their post-communist transition to a competitive market economy. The European Cohesion Policy attempts to eliminate those regional disparities but oriented by the productivist standards of the (mostly Protestant) Northwest. This also obliges

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[16] https://www.eib.org/en/essays/the-story-of-your-city

[17] See e.g. Leitner, H., Pavlik, C., and Sheppard, E. (2002): Networks, Governance, and the Politics of Scale: Inter-urban Networks and the European Union, in: Herod, A. & Wright, M. (ed.): *Geographies of power. Placing scale*; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publ.: 274-303

[18] Cattan, N. et al (1994) : *Le système des villes européennes,* Paris : Anthropos ; Le Galès, P. (2002) : *European Cities. Social conflicts and governance*, Oxford University Press ; Le Galès, P. (2003): *Le retour des villes européennes*, Paris : Presses de Sciences Po.

countries, especially in the periphery, to invest heavily to keep their main cities in the networking, often to the detriment of rural areas that are becoming impoverished and thus driving people to the cities there too. The core-periphery competitive conditions are not favourable for maintaining democratic depth and rather produce populist discourses.

Moreover, cities are increasingly becoming places of arrival, of newcomers and super-diversity. Not only of "migrants", but also of many "nationals". It deconstructs national traditions and repertoires, to be affected by hybridity and mixed practices and to evolve into specific kinds of cosmopolitan urbanities. Behold the deeper systemic dynamics of the European Union: core-periphery and urbanisation. Both Europeanness and urbanity urge for a cultural shift beyond nationality towards more attention for living together with respect for difference. But this is concealed and hushed up by right-wing and conservative nationalist rhetoric. It is hardly heard in decision-making.

These contradictions within the European space deliver different contexts for democracy. In some countries democratic traditions are deeply rooted, in other autocratic tendencies are more easily established. There is an historical time gap in the original development of citizenship in Europe between the west, introducing some ideas of individual freedom and emancipation in late feudal crusade times as opposed to the maintenance of empires and autocracies in the east until early twentieth century. That also produced different trajectories of urban development, autonomy and subsequent dynamics in cities of religious freedom, free arts, science, liberties and self-governance. The post medieval development of a market economy was based in clusters of cities: in the Low Countries, the Hanse cities, Northen Italian city states, Rhine cities… Renaissance and Enlightenment were urban products. The post second world war division of Europe in a liberal democratic west as opposed to a bureaucratic authoritarian east deepened the divide. It has not disappeared with the reunification of Europe after the fall of the wall. A reunification that has not been able to avoid warfare the Balkan or in Ukraine. In that sense, the deep divides in socio-economic development are reflected in the mapping of democratic regimes and human rights policies.

Resistance against autocratic tendencies depend on political forces and debates of course, but also on the density and activity of civil society. This organised activity beyond the state is mostly more present in cities and in countries with longstanding traditions in self-organisation. But then, the relationship of forces is very much affected by the position of these cities vis-à-vis national and European funding. The bigger cities do have more resources eventually allowing for independent voicing against national governments than smaller cities in need of external support. Capital cities have usually more national institutions and administrations, whereas more commercial or port cities tend to show more openness to strangers. Cities, their tradition and socio-economic status, show a great typological variety. As the European Union is basically an association of national states (mostly with a monocultural legitimation), there is only a few transnational norms like the European Convention on Human Rights or the basic conditions for membership of the EU as references for a resistance against authoritarianism. Politics, public opinion and debate remain encapsulated in the nation and thus political parties tend to represent national ideologies.

Europe has no explicit story of its own, has no soul, makes no culture. It surely is an integrated space, with a currency, with free movement, without customs. That produces a vague

imaginary. But the EU remains overdetermined by its national member states. And so, time and again, the EU remains dependent on a summit between national leaders who must consider whether they can sell unified economic interests to their nationalist constituencies and institutions. If the decision hurts national feelings Europe becomes: "Brussels has decided". If it benefits national interests, it may be: "We have decided" or "We have obtained". In that narrative Europe always remains an external body, an intergovernmental instrument, hardly a political or democratic project.

The European Union is a State in the making without democratic legitimacy. It operates as a society of supposedly sovereign countries. These countries transferred about half of the economic and regulatory powers to a bureaucracy based on a few neoliberal treaties. This lack of transparency and democratic debate has contributed to the current tsunami of right-wing and far-right nationalism. Both joint geopolitics and diplomacy and the elaboration of social harmonisation do seem very difficult. Nevertheless, Europe has become the only relevant scale for crisis management and certain policy areas, but European institutions themselves are now part of the problem. In turn, the internal unification dynamic has now been replaced by geopolitical enlargement priorities. The geopolitical games sometimes do need wider "coalitions of the wiling" than the EU and sometimes increase internal divides.

With the impasse of neoliberal globalism in favour of conservative nationalism, sometimes supported by labourist corporatism, the European integration project is becoming increasingly difficult. One may be lucky that the Brexit is yielding such shabby results, so bad that few "sovereigntists" are still proposing an exit. The return of the nation however is a global phenomenon with two basic characteristics. Globalisation has increased internal contradictions and polarisation in all countries, and the competitiveness of national economies need an ever-increased state support. This is especially true in situations of war or pandemics. There is a general trend to oppose diversity and return to a dominant *Leitkultur*. In most cases that is supported by authoritarian tendencies, statal centralisation and repression of some freedoms. Law and order prevail. In those circumstances the European agenda demands a little more attention and debate. It really should be about the fundamentals.

Sustainable survival for the European Union, means, a reset on at least two levels. European institutions urgently need to be democratised and denationalised. This means that they must be supported by a notion of European citizenship and not by tiered national representation. Europe should be thought of more explicitly as a post-national project, as an ode to diversity against monoculture, as a new modernity in which living together with respect for diversity and difference becomes the norm, as a creolized society. In other words, Europe needs a transition from diplomacy to democracy. This implies that a European parliament that ultimately relies on national constituencies and parties is insufficient. Without a European idea, without a narrative and imagination on that scale, citizens cannot buy into the project. And so, a European media, cultural and education policy is needed. And a new debate on a European constitution. That debate should draw on the free movement of people that encourages more people of different origins to live together. The survival of the European Union requires a cultural struggle.

4. The Urban Dilemma and Democratic Backsliding

The urban population today is bigger than the world population in the time of President Kennedy. Cities are growing bigger with cities like Tokyo, Delhi, Shanghai, Sao Paulo, Mexico City or Cairo well over 20 million inhabitants[19]. Planetary challenges are mainly concentrated in urban areas. Extractive and productivist economies have endangered our relationship with nature creating big problems with climate, biodiversity, ecological footprints and resources. Social inequalities have increased and created tensions both within cities and between cities and their rural hinterland. And cities have become very diverse multicultural and multireligious societies stressing tradition and social integration models. Those contradictions and tensions have questioned the sustainability of deregulated and privatised market economies. Economic crises, increased competition, pandemia and war have put the necessities of state regulation on the agenda at odds with neoliberal principles.

In many places combining increased state regulation with economic competitive needs has led to a decline of individual freedoms, human rights and democracy. Traditional liberal ideology has been replaced by nationalist or ethnic conservatism and traditionalism. Increased authority for state regulation and increased tensions between national government and urban governance seems a global feature. Again, urbanity and its sense of freedom and emancipation have been opposed by authoritarian restrictive state policies. Increased regulation of economies and societies seems necessary. The choice still is between an authoritarian central state approach or a multileveled participatory regulation.

European urbanity has still some specific characteristics as opposed to the urbanisation in other continents. It has a very long history, also of revolts against authorities and fights for freedom[20]. Urban histories have been essential to national narratives. They have inspired modernist philosophies, arts and thoughts. There is a long democratic tradition. The cities are relatively smaller and more open to direct and participatory democratic practices. On the other hand, cultural nationalism is also part of European history and blocks further European integration. Whereas the agenda in favour of urban democracy is global, it takes specific forms in Europe. One could choose profiling it in European geopolitics.

The future of the European Union is thus linked to the choice of a renewed European narrative. This is even more the case now that "atlanticism" is in crisis and "the west" has not a very positive aura in the global south. The renewed narrative must bet on a "Europeanness" in which living together in diversity becomes the rule. This is already the case today in many cities. In this way, the European debate also becomes a stake for the national political playing field. It becomes a plea for a multi-scale democracy, in which the idea of the bounded monocultural nation-state is broken through the different layers from local, through regional and national, to continental and global. If one agrees that "living together in diversity" should

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[19] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_cities

[20] Hohenberg, P. & Hollen Lees, L. (1985/1995): *The making of urban Europe (1000-1994),* Boston: Harvard University Press; Clark, P. (ed)(2013): *The Oxford handbook of Cities in World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Pirenne, H. (2014 /2023): *Histoires de l'Europe*, Paris : Ed. Quarto Gallimard; Dumolyn, J. & Haemers, J. (2023): *Communes and conflict: urban rebellion in late medieval Flanders*, Leiden: BRILL

become the "new normal" one can better start from the long urban history in Europe, than from the relatively short nationalist interface[21]. After all, the nation states were only really defined after Napoleon's defeat in 1815 (Wiener Kongress) and more so after the social upheavals of 1848, known as the Springtime of Nations.

Problem-solving requires innovation and effective action on the ground, and both can only be achieved by harnessing and strengthening the municipal level and cities and in particular metropolitan regions. Accordingly, international and supra-national institutions are increasing their cooperation with cities. As commendable as this is, it does not lead to a genuine strengthening of the municipal level, which is surely necessary. The structural prerequisites for such strengthening are rarely specified, and they are not usually the subject of agreements and programs.

However, strengthening cities and the local level has long since become a crucial issue for whether humanity can effectively confront fundamental crises. Cities and their regions are key actors in mitigating the enormous risks to human development. The prerequisite is that they are supported by national and international levels. Mayors have the crucial mandate to drive the necessary transformative change at the city and regional level[22]. They are compelled to address challenges in a holistic, at least cross-sectoral, manner. Moreover, they represent the political level that can forge collaborations with the citizenry, organizations, business and industry, academia, and culture like no other to drive local action with long-term impact. They can be instrumental in building regional transformation alliances that accelerate socio-ecological change by creating positive social tipping points. The international framework of agreements and community commitments can be an important reference point to strengthen the legitimacy of these efforts and build consensus.

"Empowering cities" has at least four dimensions:
   1. Building true multi-level governance.
Multilevel governance is a major challenge for authoritarian systems, because different perspectives, devolution, open communication about results and evaluations are prerequisites for such governance. On the other hand, they are also coming under increasing pressure to achieve results that cannot be achieved structurally in a purely top-down approach. Multi-level governance is now widely recognized as a condition for more effective policy. However, real progress has been rare. True multilevel governance requires the systematic involvement of the local level in decision-making and policymaking. In terms of a learning system, this must above all mean that decisions can be readjusted based on local experience. The result and prerequisite at the same time is a higher degree of agility.

If awareness of the necessities, but also the requirements, of true multilevel governance is to grow rapidly, the topic must be placed more firmly on the international agenda, especially in the given formats of the nation states. COPs, G20, UN Habitat - none of these events must

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[21] Corijn, E. (2009): Urbanity as a political project: Towards post-national European Cities, in: Kong, L. & J. O'Connor (ed): *Creative Economies, Creative Cities. Asian-European Perspectives*, Dordrecht-Heidelberg, Springer.

[22] Barber, B. (2013): *If mayors ruled the world*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Corijn, E. (2019): Reflecting on the "Global Parliament of Mayors" project in: Oosterlynck, S. et al: *The city as a global political actor*, Oxon: Routledge: 25 - 38

remain without local voices at the core of the negotiations! Consciousness is rising as shown at the UN meetings with mayors of the Global Taskforce[23], with a World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments and a Summit of the Future in New York, September 2024. UN Habitat and the World Urban Forum are leverages.

At the level of the European Union, it seems necessary to institutionalize the involvement of cities in decision-making. This could be done through systematic consultation with the most political representative networks like Eurocities[24] or METREX[25]. But ultimately, as the EU is built on ongoing negotiation between institutions, it might be necessary to dedicate an institution to urbanity. A transformation of the Committee of Regions into a Council of Metropolitan Regions could be a path to go. As institutions have a very conservative weight, urbanity will remain in the meantime a narrative to develop and to represent at different occasions in different constellations. The initiative of Eurocities installing a Shadow Commission College composed by mayors and due to represent an urban view on EU politics might be a gamechanger[26].

2. The expansion of competencies and resources.

The prerequisite for an effective municipal policy, especially in conditions of national restrictive policies, is the competence and ability to decide and regulate everything that can be regulated at the level of the local ecosystem. The right to plan, the responsibility for building permits, the internal organization, the sole access to own personnel and the right to enter cooperations are basic requirements. Responsibilities and rights alone, however, are empty shells if no sufficient financial and organizational resources exist to materialise them. In addition to guaranteed, statutory financial allocations from the national level, municipalities must also have their own revenues that they can deploy. For a more successful policy, it will also be crucial to rapidly develop the collaborations between the core city and its hinterland into a systemic, transformative eco-system. The democratic deficit is not only located between the EU and member states, but also and mainly at the lack of local competences impeding circular economies and short chains to be developed at the level of the local ecosystem. There is a need for metropolitan governance.

3. Building competencies and capacities

Organizing the necessary fundamental changes requires skills from cities that are almost nowhere already sufficiently developed. A democratic urban governance model includes besides the elected bodies and institutions also a good collaboration with self-organized associations. As new value chains, new collaborations within civil society, changes in public space and its use, new community service activities, awareness raising and behavioural change are at stake, local governments have a broad new role to play as catalysts, facilitators and drivers. In addition, not only must the necessary investments be described, they must be translated into portfolios that can also be invested by private capital. For this, there is usually

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[23] The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments is a coordination and consultation mechanism that brings together the major international networks of local governments to undertake joint advocacy work relating to global policy processes. It was set up in 2013 to bring the perspectives of local and regional governments to the SDGs, climate change agenda and New Urban Agenda in particular.
[24] https://eurocities.eu
[25] https://eurometrex.org
[26] https://eurocities.eu/latest/eurocities-shadow-commission/

a lack of methodological knowledge, expertise and capacity. There is also the old-fashioned administrative organisation of cities, prolonging the thematic silos of national government. The governance of a local ecosystem asks for a more transversal organisation and for another clustering of competences and practices[27]. These gaps are proving to be key obstacles to decisively accelerating and broadening the transformation. National and international programs have so far been blind to these challenges, and the international processes on climate protection and biodiversity must act quickly and decisively here. Peer-learning on the local level is key in capacity-building.

4. Preserving and maintaining urbanity

Urbanity is an attitude and civilizational achievement. It delivers another type of society than nationality. It enables people to live together in diversity. It is not exclusive. Mayors represent all the people of their city, regardless of their origin. It is growing nationalism, division and exclusion that threaten the very essence and identity of our cities. As nationalism has now married authoritarian conservatism, the right wing turn in Europe threatens urban cosmopolitanism. The innovative strength and adaptability of cities are based on diversity and the interaction of the different. Cities preserve their heritage and their future when they nurture their capacity for communality in diversity. They are also spaces of experimentation with democratic innovations, deliberative democracy, and citizen-centered policy making, as the literature suggests.

As argued above, the main success factor is the strength and quality of civil society, of artistic, social and cultural associations, of the involvement of the population in social bonding. And then, the willingness of course of local authorities to relate to those vital forces, facilitate their projects, organise a private-public partnership, install co-productive governance. An urban vision and project, a supported sustainable development plan and striving for equal rights helps bridging many diversities in the city. It strengthens the position versus other governments and institutions and is a leverage in deepening democracy.

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[27] The structuring of urban debate, urban project, city administration, government and citizenship have been key elements in writing the White Paper for a renewed urban policy in Flanders in de beginning of the century: Boudry, L. et al (ed) (2003-2005): *The century of the city. City republics and grid cities.,* Brussels: Urban Policy Project, Ministry of the Flemish Community

5. The struggle for Urban Democracy

To make the transition, urban democracy is key to creating sustainable and liveable cities. That project contains action at the level of the institutions, of societal activity and it implies also an active cultural policy and mentality.

1. Democratizing institutions

Cities' scale, diversity, density, and dynamism make the practice of urban democracy foundational in strengthening democracy at the regional, national, and global scales. Urban democracy entails engaging with elected officials over everyday needs, such as transportation, sanitation, and public safety. Reproducing daily life is best done with a focus on *foundational economy*[28]. It can foster alternative perspectives and coalitions from those that define national politics and can generate democratic pluralism reflective of the population. It can serve as a check on corruption and disenfranchisement, and a bulwark against authoritarianism.

Governance and its related institutions should be related to civil society. This results from public debate, providing options and choices and designating leaders who are accepted. Organizing *representative democracy* implies *free elections* where political parties are guaranteed *free expression* and where the composition of the city council as the legislative body is representative. The executive body should be led by an elected mayor and be supported by most councillors. The city institutions and public administration represents both continuity and reflects the priorities chosen. Comparative research shows clearly that if one wants to increase citizens participation to elections compulsory attendance and important competences of elected bodies are the main incentives.

Urban politics and governance have differing formats, some are hybrid forms that adapt to local traditions, the national context and the organization of civil society. Nowhere is there a fully representative urban democracy with elected officers in all positions, for instance, mayors are sometimes not elected. International comparative research and global benchmarking could improve models. Developing an *Urban Democracy Index* would be a good indicator.

Local governance is mostly considered as part of the regional or national state. It is subject to national law or customs and has more or lesser autonomous competences, it is largely dependent on the central state financially. Urban governance is different from national governance, as a city is not a country. The country has the authority to develop the overarching regulatory framework whereas a city has greater legitimacy as it is closer to citizens and to the local complexity. Often there is a *tension between the local and the national*. That tension is part of the democratic challenge.

Democratic rule is bounded within a specific territory, such as the organization of the local state or that of the municipality or the city. Yet urbanity always cuts across borders. Every city has an intensive interaction with its immediate hinterland which is part of its local ecosystem - the metropolitan area. The urban region must be integrated in democratic governance. Every

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[28] https://foundationaleconomy.com

city is also part of a much larger urban network, a cross-border space of flows and interactions. These require agreements or even treaties that are essential to urban development and must be integrated into the overall framework of democratic control.

Urban democracy cannot be seriously developed without empowering cities at the national, continental and global level of governance. This is why giving cities and their mayors a decisive voice in international governing bodies and in international decision-making processes is central as most of the world population live in urban contexts. Most planetary challenges, such as the climate, the pandemic or even war, need cities to leverage solutions. There is a dramatic democratic deficit given that global or European regulation is only a matter for nation-states, interstate bodies and global institutions. But as long as European urbanity does not have its own institutions, cities and metropolitan regions could improve their power in practice with a better collaboration.

2. Democratizing society

Urban society is complex and their communities mostly superdiverse and so the idea that representative democracy is good enough with elections every four, five or six years is completely inadequate. It cannot represent and express the consent of the population or the often volatile and changing views of their citizens. Everywhere and especially in cities urban government is under increasing pressure by civil society groupings, inhabitants or neighbourhood councils, thematic action groups or organized oppositions.

For this reason, across the world forms of *participation*, deliberative forms of *consultation*, *citizens' assemblies* or *direct democracy* are emerging as a complement to regular governance. These take on different forms whether people are selected, elected, drawn or self-appointed, whether they advise or make decisions or proposals or are involved in participatory budgeting. They rely on transparency and accountability from elected officials and local government agencies.

Because of its local scale, complexity, and diversity, urban society is uniquely positioned to foster these forms of democratic engagement. In any case well prepared processes of co-shaping and creating tend to help deliver better solutions to complex interrelated problems. These temporary forms of participation also allow places to integrate wider audiences such as the visions of users, visitors or commuters in choices rather than being based solely on those of inhabitants/citizens.

To respond to the urgent transitions required good governance needs more *cross-cutting policies* to overcome administrative silos. To be successful they need the support and collaboration of the population. Liveable cities imply good public services, a redistributive economy, active citizenship and solidarity. That is why good urban governance implies integrated territorial planning that is adapted to its districts or neighbourhoods and with special attention to the rights of woman, minorities and marginalized groups. A diverse population can relate to shared space. It is here that participatory democracy can be most effective.

Regulation of local life is not only a question of representation or participation. It is not only about the relationship with the state authorities. It is also about social and economic relations.

That complex is an interplay between market, public services and self-organisation. This complex system must be secured by a state of law and guaranteed human rights. In many cities they are under threat[29]. Neoliberal globalisation has pushed a lot of interaction towards privatized market and exchange relations. Welfare provisions and communitarian aid has declined. That is why local authorities are confronted with increased social challenges that cannot only be tackled by state intervention. *Caring cities* need to rebuild social connections and solidarities. In between the market and the state, a resurgence of different forms of sharing, commoning[30] and cooperatives can be noticed. They introduce new experiences of self-governance. In that sense democracy is not only understood as "sharing opinions" but also as "building together a society".

3. Democratizing the urban spirit

Living together in a city requires a special *urban mentality*: a spirit of freedom, tolerance and respect of diversity and individual freedom, with the needs of inhabitants, users and visitors all in mind, as well as to the environment and to resource needs. In that sense city air sets you free[31]. It can emancipate you from tradition and communities that close you in, it allows for there to be diversity of identity and freedom of expression. That spirit of urbanity needs to be cultivated as a form of urban cosmopolitanism[32]. That is not abstract universalism, but contextualised interculture.

Public life is central to the urban project. The *arts, culture and education* are the underlay that can especially express the immaterial spirit of urban democracy. The creation of real public spaces, both material and digital, is vital to maintaining democracy. Thus, artistic or cultural policies cannot be placed at the margin of governance. They should take a central place in uniting and mobilizing the population in forming its collective identities[33].

Democracy needs active citizens, willing to engage in the public good and common interest as distinct from only their individual or group interests. The '*polis*' must place special attention to forming a '*demos*'. This is a form of political solidarity so all citizens can live the life of their choice. It is not only a mission for education or social work, but also for the media and press. An additional mission for governments is to realize that the force of democracy lies in how it handles minorities and protest. The spirit of democracy is not only a form of government, but above all a project for human rights, freedom, equality and solidarity.

The challenge of Urban Democracy is not merely a formal question. It is a quest for places to have a chance to self-govern appropriate to our conditions where most of humanity is living.

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[29] See for instance: https://humanrightscities.net/decide-boost-democratic-participation-in-cities-to-recharge-democracy-in-europe/

[30] Dardot P. & Laval C. (2014): *Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXI siècle*, Paris : La Découverte ; Coriat B. (ed)(2015) : *Le retour des communs. La crise de l'idéologie propriétaire* ; Paris : Les liens qui libèrent ; Cornu M., Orsi F. & Rochfeld J. (ed) (2017) : *Dictionnaire des biens communs*, Paris : PUF ; Standing, G. (2019) : *Plunder of the Commons. A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth*, London: Pelican; Dardot P. & Laval C. (2025): *Instituer les mondes. Pour une cosmopolitique des communs*, Paris : La Découverte

[31] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stadtluft_macht_frei

[32] Meinhof, U. & Triandafyllidou, A. (2006): *Transcultural Europe. Cultural Policy in a Changing Europe*. New York: Palgrave McMillan

[33] See for instance the importance of artistic festivals in the urban project: https://www.efa-aef.eu/en/initiatives/effe-seal-for-festival-cities-and-regions/

The challenge is even more vital given globalizing processes where cities are competing nodes in global markets and where the pandemic and geopolitical effects of war are causing deep stress. Cities will have to develop new economic models based more circular and foundational economy ideas which highlight the centrality of local resources or local ecosystem services. To do that they will need new competences and new forms of governance. This is a global agenda, with mayors and cities at the forefront and focusing on movements like the New Municipalism[34].

No democracy can exist without effective institutions and transparent government. Designing progress in urban democracy is not only about strengthening local governance and its institutions, but also negotiating a new relationship between the regional, the central state and the global. Cities have unique capabilities to engage residents and foster transparency and accountability in government. No democracy can flourish without an active civil society. Without a better mobilization and inclusion of citizens and local inhabitants, particularly marginalized groups, effective and pluralistic democracy cannot be deepened, but also solutions to complex problems will not be adequately addressed. And finally, no democracy can be nurtured without educated citizens. Democratizing is a practice. It nurtures and is nurtured by public life. It involves special attention to education, modernization, arts and culture and to the immaterial conditions of living together.

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[34] https://democracycollaborative.org/learn/publication/whats-so-new-about-new-municipalism, https://scholar.google.be/scholar?q=New+municipalism+definition&hl=nl&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholart,

6. Updating the European narrative accordingly

"*Europe is made up of coffee houses, of cafés*" says Georges Steiner[35]: "*Draw the coffee-house map and you have one of the essential markers of the "idea of Europe"".* The café as a public place of diversity, encounter and public discussion. Europe is also "walked" he says, structured with distances at human scale, alongside a human-historical time. That space is full of collective memory, of stories of the common past, even bending under the weight of the past. Derived from that past, says Steiner as a fourth axiom, is "*the twofold inheritance of Athens and Jerusalem*", a conflictual and syncretic relationship that makes Europe negotiate rival ideals. The fifth element is an eschatological doom with two world wars (European civil wars), an estimated 100 million killed and a part of "suicidal inhumanity": "*Ethnic hatreds, chauvinistic nationalism, regional claims have been Europe's nightmare".* And nevertheless, the ideal of unison is undeniable. How to envisage the future? Steiner doesn't know: "*How is one to balance the contradictory claims of political-economic unification against those of creative particularity? (…) I do not know the answer. Only that these wiser than myself must find it, and that the hour is late.*" Stefan Zweig[36] opposed in his relentless plea for European unity the "*sacro-egoismo*" of nationalism to the "*sacro-altruismo*" of the European idea. It remains more than ever the contradiction of today.

The argument developed in this essay proposes a critical review of the history of the making of Europe as the creator of a European world system and the idea of the national state. In that way it was part of the building of "the West" as a junior partner in the structuring of world hegemony. That global frame determined the European unification project as a market driven intergovernmental collaboration maintaining politics and culture as an exclusive national domain. Geopolitics, new conservative nationalism and the authoritarian temptation put the European unification project at risk.

This peculiar history of the building of the European Union overshadowed different structural elements omitted in the narrative. Renaissance and the Enlightenment were basically products of the post medieval development of relatively autonomous cities, city states and an urban bourgeoisie that eventually took over leadership from the nobility and the clergy. Urbanity produced the ideas of freedom, equality and citizenship. They were later "nationalized" in the making of the nation states, relegating cities to "localities" in the country. Nationality repressed urbanity. Nationality installed the story of a common history, producing tradition and identity, legitimizing representative democracy within national borders. Sameness and community were identified within very diverse national territories.

Europe could also occupy a different place in global politics. It could radically defend democracy, (re)examine defence policies and alliances, and take a position in conflicts inside and outside the continent. In short, develop a voice of its own that does not depend on prior contact with Washington or on the German Holocaust trauma. A position that stands up for a multilateral world order against any hegemonic striving and camp thinking.

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[35] Steiner, G. (2004): *The idea of Europe. Essay.* Tilburg: Nexus Institute
[36] Zweig, S. (2013): *Einigung Europas, eine Rede*, Salzburg & Paris: Tartin Editionen

Globalization and human mobilities, supported and structured by the European Union, transformed the "imagined communities"[37] forming national societies. Most of humanity lives now in cities. Cities are caught in the post-industrial transition. Their hinterland is networked in the space of flows. Their population becomes multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious. National socializing models become outdated and dysfunctional. A cities' cohesion cannot be built on common roots, a shared history, established tradition but needs a common destiny, a project, a futures plan. Whereas countries refer to a common history, cities need a futures vision beyond diversity. Such an urban project can only be hybrid, mixed, intercultural, aiming at bridging diversity and differences. That is why classical representation, and representative democracy are to be enlarged by participation and coproduction. And why territorial borders must be opened in networks of collaboration. A city is not a country! The urban is closer to the world than a country. Urbanity must be developed as a post-national way of life, beyond a fixed identity and tradition. The tension between nationality and urbanity will increase. In all countries with authoritarian tendencies, we see cities in opposition. That is why cities must actively work on the urban narrative and put the arts and research at the centre of the urban project. Each city must tell its specific form of creolisation, of cosmopolitanism[38]. This imagination can be related to Europeanness under construction and inspire a European cultural policy. It could become a specific stand in the geopolitical reconstruction of the world-system.

This evolution is not going to abolish the necessity of a state administration, connecting different localities in a broader territory. The growing importance of urbanity within these states however opens the agenda of types of social cohesion. As urban life consists of multiculture, it puts into question foundations of the modern nation-state, of monocultural assimilation models. The century of enlightenment introduced the possibility of living together without sharing religion and installed the separation between state and (multi)religion. That principle is not yet adopted by many countries in the world, and we know that dictators like the support of their god. But in the concept of the national state the bonding was replaced by a national culture. If no state religion, then a state culture. Urbanity as a social form based on diversity and multiplicity introduces a form of citizenship and belonging beyond a single culture and religion. Maintaining a functional state connecting different localities involves loosening strict cultural and linguistic identities and developing an intercultural belonging sharing spaces, infrastructures, commons and governance. Exactly that is resisted by sectarian nationalism or other forms of essentialist fundamentalism.

Rethinking Europe as networks of cities and metropolitan regions allows not only to deepen the idea of "Europeanness" as a way of living together respecting difference and diversity. It allows also to relate urbanity and the urban way of life as a living lab fuelling European connectivity and cohesion. The urban is crossing borders. Deepening urban democracy is essential to allow for that intercultural polis to emerge and supersede communitarianism and

[37] Anderson, B. (1983): *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London: Verso

[38] Appiah Kwame A. (2006): *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a world of strangers*, New York: W.W.Norton; Harvey, D. (2009): *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*; New York: Columbia University Press; Nussbaum M. C. (2019): *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal*, Boston: Belknap Press.

sectarian fundamentalism. It is also essential as loci for resistance to the authoritarian rift of conservative nationalism.

We see that argument as the only rational construction to build from the announced crisis of the European Union, built on maintaining the nation-state, to open the debate and put it on a different footing. Let not the only choice be between conservative and authoritarian nationalism or a neoliberal lack of transparency in bureaucracy. Let a different European reality speak, develop a vision of European citizenship and use media, presidencies and elections for that debate. A Europe in defence of radical cosmopolitan democracy. That could become the profile of a renewed European Union. It would be groundbreaking.

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GPM aims at a world in which mayors, their cities and networks are equal partners in building global governance for an inclusive and sustainable world. Its mission is to convene a Global Parliament of Mayors to facilitate debates between mayors, national governments and international organisations, drive systematic action to take on global and national challenges and opportunities to achieve political change on a global scale. Mayors take leadership and ownership of the global challenges that they face on a local level. (https://globalparliamentofmayors.org)

METREX is a network of over 50 metropolitan regions and areas in Europe. It contributes to the metropolitan dimension on a European scale. METREX supports Metropolitan Regions and Areas in solving Europe's big challenges. The network connects people in the public sector to work together for a more productive, healthy, inclusive, and sustainable future. This collaboration captures the tools to accelerate the transitions that Europe urgently needs to thrive. It is a non-profit network that collaborates with the European institutions, research community, governmental organisations, and other networks. (https://www.eurometrex.org)