

European elections 2024: Shaping Europe's future

Demands of the Association of German Cities

Adopted by the Executive Committee of the Association of German Cities
in Trier on 18 January 2024

Abridged version

Special edition from the series "Beiträge zur Stadtpolitik" 121



ISBN 978-3-88082-390-7

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The eleven main demands of the Association of German Cities with respect to the European Parliament and the European Commission

Preamble – shaping Europe's future

Both Europe and the world are in a period of transformation. Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Hamas attack on Israel, it has become increasingly evident that Europe needs to work together more actively than ever to defend the European values of human rights, freedom, democracy and the rule of law. This collaboration necessitates a clear role for Europe in the world and the strengthening of Europe's ability to act internally.

The transformation is being reflected on the ground, where the care and integration of refugees and the uncertainties surrounding energy supply are posing major challenges for cities. Climate change has long since arrived in Europe and calls for effective protection and adaptation measures. Digitalisation offers opportunities and at the same time requires firm guidelines to ensure that it serves people's well-being. These numerous challenges are making it necessary to transform our society on a historic scale. In order to safeguard Europe's sustainability and our democratic values in the long term, the transformation needs to be structured fairly, calling for close cooperation at every level. Only then can we effectively counter the rise of nationalism, right-wing populism and the drifting apart of society as well as hatred, violence and scepticism towards democracy.

It is both our common task and our responsibility to safeguard and shape the future of Europe. Our cities play a pivotal role in modelling the transformation, tackling challenges and fostering social cohesion. The cities are committed to upholding European values and demonstrating solidarity worldwide. In view of the upcoming enlargements and challenges in finding majorities on key issues, cities are already making a substantial contribution to the European Union's ability to act. Maintaining Europe's global acceptance in times of geopolitical tension also calls for greater acknowledgement of the role of cities as international players and the part that city diplomacy has to play in EU foreign policy as well as in international processes such as the G7.

The transformation of our society can only succeed in close collaboration with its cities. For this reason, cities need to be able to act and their perspective must be given greater consideration within the European multi-level system. This requires the continual and structural involvement of cities in European legislative and decision-making processes, for example by strengthening the role of the Committee of the Regions. That is the only way we can get people on board, defend and strengthen our democracy and organise the transition in a just manner.

The upcoming European elections could be crucial for the future of the European Union – and thus for each individual. It is about nothing less than the question of whether we can continue to live in peace, freedom, security and prosperity going forward. German cities are ready to play their part in shaping Europe's future. We have eleven demands to put forward to the newly elected European Parliament and the newly appointed European Commission.

1. Align Europe with its core values and the rule of law

In view of these geopolitically turbulent times, a shift to the right that can be observed in many EU member states, but also encouraging developments such as those in Poland, an even stronger commitment to Europe and the European core values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law is needed right now in particular. These cornerstones of the European Union need to be strengthened and defended. The Association of German Cities calls on the new European Commission to rigorously and consistently apply the rule of law. Suspended budget payments to member states due to infringements (conditionality mechanism) may not be to the detriment of pro-European cities and their efforts to achieve cohesion across the continent. When implementing the Istanbul Convention, the role of municipalities in drafting legislation to end gender-based violence and in the associated support programmes should also be taken into account.



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2. Achieve social cohesion and integration by working together



Photo: @ Open Grid Europe / Constantin Stein

It is the cities that determine whether social cohesion is resilient and integration succeeds. The Association of German Cities calls for the reform of a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) to be swiftly driven forward and for a fair European distribution system to be implemented. The mass influx directive definitely needs to be extended. The EU must do more to address the problems of internal migration and support cities in their integration efforts through targeted, long-term funding programmes. Social security systems must be coordinated at European level in order to safeguard freedom of movement and prevent abuse.

3. Enable digital transformation without hurdles



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The Association of German Cities calls for a clear regulatory framework to be created regarding the use of data by cities. This point is particularly important in order to utilise the potential of artificial intelligence in administrative activity. Greater commitment is required, particularly regarding standardisation. Digital dependencies on third parties must be avoided through the use of open standards. In addition, more incentives need to be created to adopt cooperative strategies in the expansion of digital infrastructure. At the same time, cities need room to manoeuvre in order to prevent conflicts with other infrastructures. When implementing the regulation on the establishment of a single European digital gateway, the costs and financial implications at municipal level must be kept in mind.

4. Support cities as key players for achieving a climate-neutral Europe and implementing the Green Deal

Cities need a reliable supply of climate-friendly green energy. To achieve this, the European framework conditions must enable cities to swiftly expand the use of renewable sources. Measures to improve energy efficiency, particularly in buildings, need both a neighbourhood perspective and refurbishment specifications that comply with national law. The energy-saving targets for the public sector are ambitious. In addition to the public sector, however, every sector needs to make its contribution. The EU also needs to create a framework to promote the production, use and transportation of green hydrogen within the European Union. Furthermore, it needs to create a functioning internal gas and electricity market and rapidly promote the development of a cross-border network infrastructure.



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5. Promote healthy, eco-friendly cities

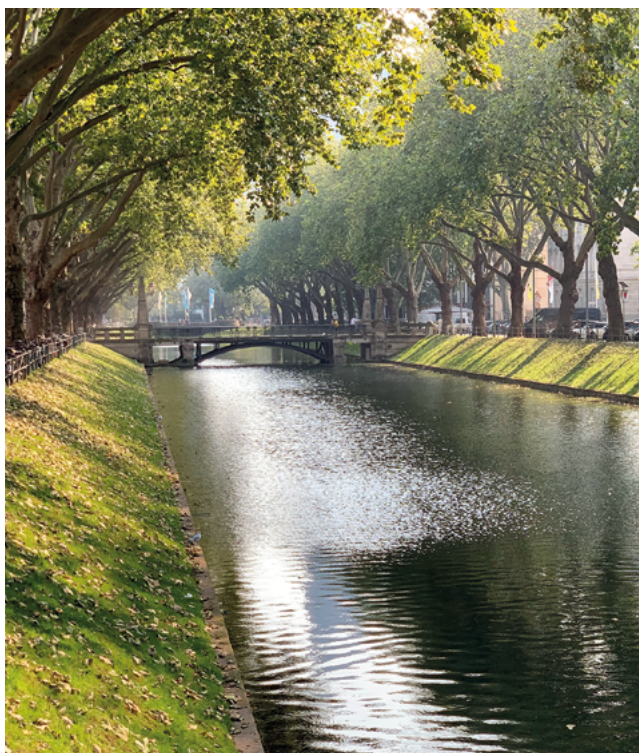


Photo: © Tobias Fricke / Deutscher StädteTag

Clean, healthy and ecologically conscious cities are a fundamental cornerstone of the Green Deal and, above all, an inherent requirement of our cities. The EU is called upon to create the framework for meeting this requirement and to promote municipal activity. There is an urgent need to prioritise measures at source in order to improve air quality in our cities and to implement an integrated approach to reducing emissions. Furthermore, the European Commission needs to create the framework for a circular economy and promote a circularity mindset. To protect our waters, the Water Framework Directive must be extended and the principle of producer responsibility enforced. Moreover, the preservation and promotion of biodiversity is a key issue for the future of liveable cities. With this point in mind, the European Commission must continue to create the framework conditions for implementing the EU biodiversity strategy. This also includes the planned directive on soil monitoring and resilience, which pursues vital objectives, but needs to be more differentiated.

6. Create sustainable mobility

The Association of German Cities calls for the implementation of the Trans-European Transport Network Regulation to respect the planning autonomy of cities, to take into account existing plans and to adequately finance urban measures through the new Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). Digitalisation and competition must be used consistently in conjunction with a strong urban management function in order to link local public transport in conurbations with other services and integrate autonomous driving functions. The conversion of buses and commercial vehicles needs to be stepped up with the help of subsidies up to 2030.



Photo: © Oliver Gühn / Kölner Verkehrs-Betriebe AG

7. Reduce the burden on liveable cities in a shared transformation

European cohesion policy is the key element in being able to initiate transformation processes. However, for cohesion policy to benefit cities, it must be both reliable and flexible. The Urban Agenda and the New Leipzig Charter need to be further implemented and enforced. The role of the New European Bauhaus (NEB) in the transformation of cities in the building sector needs to be defined. The cities need to be able to apply directly for NEB projects. EU programmes relevant to local authorities need to be better coordinated. Urban land-use planning needs to be recognised as a procedure for the fair balancing of conflicting interests. Rigid substantive regulations and redundant procedural requirements need to be reduced within the framework of EU environmental, complaints and procedural law to a level that is necessary to safeguard environmental interests.



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8. Support cities in the sustainable financing of municipal investments



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The Association of German Cities calls for greater consideration of municipal issues and investments in the further development of the European Union's Sustainable Finance Strategy. To do so, a paradigm shift is required in the funding of municipal climate protection and adaptation measures, according to which the amount of funding will in future be based on the effectiveness of a project rather than its costs. Moreover, the impact of new administrative requirements on cities should be given greater consideration and the municipalities should be involved in the development process. This concerns new standards for public sector financial accounting, for example. In order to promote personnel development measures at municipal level, a VAT exemption is required for personnel secondment.

9. Reduce the workload by cutting red tape

Many EU regulations and requirements must be viewed critically and in some cases are no longer up to date. For example, public procurement law needs to be simplified and procedures streamlined. The EU Commission should swiftly begin negotiations with the World Trade Organisation on the Government Procurement Agreement (GPA) to increase the threshold values. Superfluous regulations need to be dispensed with and the municipalities given more room to manoeuvre. When drafting new legislative proposals, the EU Commission needs to involve those potentially affected to a greater extent and introduce an impact assessment to examine the effects of legislation at local level in advance with the involvement of local authorities.



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10. Ensure and step up municipal participation



Photo: @ John Thys / European Committee of the Regions

Cities are the central level of implementation of European regulations. Therefore, they also need to be involved in European legislative and decision-making processes in a structured and continuous manner. This requires mandatory hearing and consultation rights for cities and their associations as well as a strengthening of the Committee of the Regions. In particular, this includes increasing the number of mandates in the national delegations held at municipal level to at least one third. Legislative procedures must be checked for subsidiarity and respect for local self-government by means of an impact assessment. The Association of German Cities also calls for an annual European city summit and a Vice-President of the European Commission for Urban Affairs. These two factors would enable the horizontal and cross-departmental nature of urban affairs to be taken into account.

11. Recognise the role of city diplomacy in international cooperation

In the course of their international cooperation, cities help shape national, European and global developments (for example in relation to Turkey, China and Ukraine). They have diplomatic capabilities that go far beyond the boundaries of city partnerships. The Association of German Cities calls for the urban diplomacy approach to be recognised in the EU's international strategies. The European legal and funding framework needs to take even greater account of this demand by stepping up projects and opportunities for dialogue at cooperation level. Cities need to be more involved in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and its follow-up process at decision-making level. Municipal development cooperation should be budgeted again in the new, multi-annual financial framework as of 2027. To implement the EU-Africa strategy in particular, the cities need independent access to funding in order to maintain and expand partnerships. The Ukraine Facility should make it possible for cities to engage with Ukraine, for example within the framework of city partnerships.



The Association of German Cities – The Voice of the Cities

Cities shape everyday life – and exchange ideas within the Association of German Cities. In the Association, around 3.200 cities and municipalities have joined forces, representing around 53 million inhabitants. Cities from Aachen to Zwickau, among them all state capitals and the city-states of Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen – and of course many smaller cities too.

Working for our cities – what we do

- We represent the interests of all autonomous cities and most county-affiliated cities,
- are in dialogue with the Federal Government, the Federal Parliament (Bundestag), the Federal Council (Bundesrat), the institutions of the European Union and numerous other organizations,
- exert influence on lawmaking and legislation,
- promote local self-government, which is guaranteed in the German constitution.

Cities for people – we provide guidance

- Cities shape the living environment for the people who live in them.
- We discuss issues with our member cities that affect all cities and together we define our standpoints.
- We give the cities guidance on what happens at national level and in the EU.
- We exchange ideas with the cities on a broad range of topics.

Cities with a future – what we want to achieve

Cities provide most of the public services for their citizens. Their employees ensure that urban life runs smoothly. Cities are always on the move. Cities promote democracy. The federal and state governments should see the cities as partners. Cities need to remain capable of responding effectively. Cities require sufficient funding to meet their commitments.

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Layout: Elke Postler