

# **“THINK EUROPEAN, ACT LOCAL”**

**Empowering the voices of  
local governance within EU policy-making**

# EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: THE REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

“THINK EUROPEAN, ACT LOCAL”  
EMPOWERING THE VOICES OF  
LOCAL GOVERNANCE WITHIN  
EU POLICY-MAKING

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper aims to understand whether an empowered engagement of local and regional representatives in EU affairs would have a positive effect on European democracy.

The first step is the adoption of the multilevel governance approach (MLG) to analyze the process of European integration. MLG, based on the interdependence of (European) governments at different territorial levels, provides proper attention to the involvement of local governors within European policymaking. Afterwards, three European programs are selected as examples of fostered dialogue between the local and the European decision-makers.

*Building Europe with Local Councillors*, the *Young Elected Politician Programme*, and *BridgEU* analyzed through qualitative interviews to 5 key informants, attempting to understand the main goals, features as well as to find possible improvements.

The result of such analysis will indeed take the shape of 10 policy recommendations and institutional reforms aimed to better involve local leaders within EU policymaking and, ultimately, to strengthen European democracy.

## Social Media summary

This paper sheds light on how a greater involvement of local and regional councillors within EU policy-making could empower European democracy

## Keywords

#ThinkEuropean #ActLocal #localcouncillors #EU #policymaking #democracy

## Short bio

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His political mission is to bring "Europe at home", getting the EU - with its opportunities, policies and funds - closer to cities and youth.

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# INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that a greater involvement of local and regional representatives - such as mayors, regional and municipal councilors - could have a positive effect on the strengthening of European democracy.

First, a brief methodological section will be elaborated, explaining the reasons why a policy analysis of case studies, complemented by 5 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, is selected as the research method.

Later on, a theoretical background will follow in order to frame the concept of democratic deficit and to assess the status quo concerning the participatory democracy within the European institutions. Adopting the theory of multilevel governance to analyze the process of European integration, the focus will finally shift to the involvement of local governors within European policymaking.

In the following chapter, three programmes and activities put in place by the main EU institutions will be presented as case studies on how to foster a dialogue between the local and the European decision makers, as well as with young political activists:

- the European Commission programme [Building Europe with Local Councillors](#)
- the Committee of the Regions [Young Elected Politicians Programme](#)
- the activities of the [REGI Committee](#) of the European Parliament

Afterwards, I will share the results of 5 semi-structured interviews with the following key stakeholders:

1. One Member of the European Parliament's REGI Committee - Sandro Gozi
2. One policy officer of the European Commission's department for the programme Building Europe with Local Councillors - Irenella Sardone
3. One member of the Secretariat from the Renew Europe group at the Committee of the Regions - anonymous
4. One “Young Elected Politician” - anonymous
5. One participant of the programme “Building Europe with Local Councilors” - anonymous

Finally, based on the previous considerations, I will elaborate ten policy recommendations on how to improve the selected case studies through technical, financial and institutional reforms. These policy suggestions will desirably lead to a pragmatic and efficient empowerment of European democracy.

# METHODOLOGY

I adopt a deductive and qualitative approach, inferring from general principles and available data - as well as deducting new primary information from interviews with key actors -. The objective will be to obtain key new insights on the adequacy of the dialogue between the local and the European level and policy recommendations on how to strengthen EU's democratic nature via the empowerment of local and regional decision makers.

Firstly, I will elaborate a brief theoretical background of the main subjects concerning the thesis, from democratic deficit to the evolution and application of participatory democracy in the Union, and the theory of multi-level governance. Afterwards, a qualitative description of three selected case studies will follow. This policy analysis - focusing on the European Commission programme [Building Europe with Local Councillors](#), the Committee of the Regions [Young Elected Politicians Programme](#), and the activities of the European Parliament's [REGI Committee](#) - will be backed by the findings of five interviews to pivotal stakeholders.

I selected five key informants (KIs) in view of their ability to provide relevant insights about the topic under study. The following selection criteria were used to KIs:

- a) Individuals with professional exposure to the topic and content expertise about democracy in EU;
- b) Experts of the European Commission, the Committee of Regions and a Member of the European Parliament with an established commitment to the objective of strengthening democracy;
- c) Individuals who participated or are still participating to the aforementioned programmes.

The approach utilised for analysing the interviews is characterised by intelligent verbatim transcript, qualitative coding and thematic analysis. I systematically categorise excerpts from the interviews in order to find common themes. It enabled me to transform the unstructured transcripts into structured patterns, providing transparency and reflexivity to the analysis. This analysis will be relevant to find to understand the main features of the programmes and elaborate some policy recommendations for improving them with the aim to pragmatically contribute to the strengthening of democracy within the European Union.



# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

## The European democratic deficit

The term 'Democratic deficit' defines a situation in which institutions and their decision-making processes lack democratic accountability. In the context of the European Union, it points to the perceived lack of accessibility and representation for ordinary citizens in relation to EU institutions. This results in a perceived gap between the powers of these institutions and the ability of citizens to influence their decisions (European Union, n.a.).

Throughout the process of European integration, the issue of democratic legitimacy has been a sensitive concern. It has been addressed in various treaties, which gradually granted more authority to the directly elected European Parliament. These treaties also expanded the areas where the Parliament shares decision-making powers with the Council of the European Union, transforming it from a consultative body into a co-legislator.

Despite these reforms, concerns are still raised for the lack of democratic openness that is characterizing the EU institutions and its decision making. From the excessive power of the European Council, to the alleged “bureaucrarchy” of the European Commission and the closed-doors trilogues, where the Parliament and the Council of the EU negotiate the most relevant norms for the future of Europe.

At this point, it is useful to remember what one of the greatest experts of democracy and European integration was arguing almost 30 years ago: Dahl (1994) conceptualised the size of an institution and the democratic participation within it as negatively correlated. In other words, as we move from individual nation-states to international organizations, the potential for effective citizen participation decreases. If we aspire to achieve the democratic ideal of maximum citizen engagement, it becomes evident that larger representative systems will inevitably lag behind their smaller counterparts in this regard (Jensen, 2009).

Stimulated by the scholarly discussion, democratic themes have also rightly become a more central part of the EU agenda, with European policymakers and bureaucrats striving to find ways to progressively strengthen internal democracy (Abels, 2009).

## Strengthening democracy at EU level

The question of reducing democratic deficit reflects the specific model of democracy one considers appropriate for the European Union. The more the EU converges from that ideal, the more the democratic processes within the institution will be strengthened (Jensen 2009, pag.1).

Participatory democracy is one of the main ideas which has been used to relate to the lack of accountability in the EU. Theorised in the modern age by Wolfe (1985), participatory democracy can be described as a collaborative decision-making process that blends aspects of both direct and representative democracy. In this system,



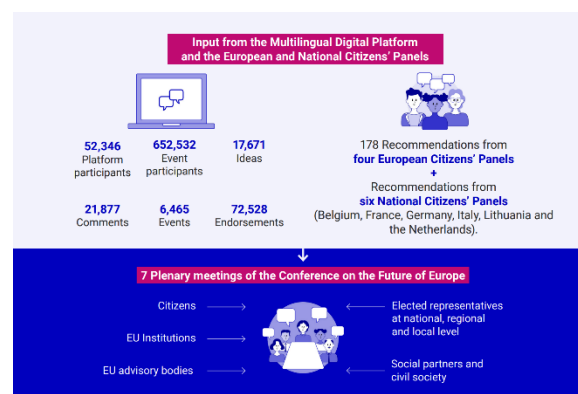
citizens hold the authority to make decisions on policy proposals, while politicians are responsible for carrying out these policies.

The European Union has become an active and innovative advocate of participatory engineering (Abels, 2009), starting from the open public consultations, to the elaboration of the European Citizens' Initiative, the latest tool for public participation in European policy making has been the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The Conference on the Future of Europe represented a unique initiative. It consisted of citizen-led debates and discussions held between April 2021 and May 2022, providing an opportunity for individuals from all over Europe to contribute their ideas and collectively influence the direction of our shared future (European Commission, 2022).

This Conference stood out as a significant pan-European democratic endeavor, fostering citizen-led dialogues that empowered people throughout Europe to express their thoughts and contribute to the shaping of an EU common destiny. While it surely created a new momentum to focus on renewing and improving the European project, its success ultimately depends on the change it can deliver. In this sense, besides the Conference Feedback Event organized in December 2022 (European Council, 2023), nothing relevant has happened. Regrettably, the European Council and not a few Members of the European Parliament showed dissent for the hypothesised EU treaty changes, while the transnational lists - approved in the European Parliament - are experiencing a stalemate within the Council of the EU. As we say, *hope is the last to die*, and COFOE notably represented a novel framework of participatory democracy (Marcu, 2022). However, despite its intention being noble, this kind of initiative was only advisory and thus exerted limited influence. Answering to the question of Fabbrini (Fabbrini et al., 2021), COFOE has surely been a good forum for reflection (see its outcomes in the next figure).

**Figure n. 1: the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe**



Source: European Commission (2022). Conference on the Future of - Europe Report on the final outcome.

However, for the moment it has not become a vehicle for reform. In order to achieve actual change, democratising initiatives like the Conference should be institutionalised and equipped with legislative competencies (Rindhauser, 2023).

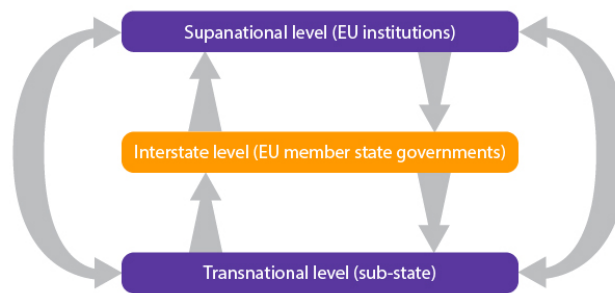
## Is participatory democracy the only available approach? The theory of multilevel governance

The theoretical background of participatory democracy, while being the main approach to analyse European integration in terms of strengthened participation to its policy-making processes, is certainly not the only available option. Furthermore, as the previous chapter highlighted, its successful application at EU level still faces some difficulties. This paper wishes to put light on another perspective, the theory of multi-level governance, which may be insightful to reflect on EU democracy and to advance policy recommendations.

Gary Marks coined the term in the early 1990s to describe and account for a number of institutional and political transformations in the process of European integration (Tortola, 2017). In particular, these changes included increased funding for structural projects, the creation of a "cohesion fund," and a restructured decision-making system. This shift transferred power upwards to the EU level in Brussels and downwards to regions, making local territories more influential in structural policy. The prevailing models of European integration, namely intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism (Moga, 2009), could no longer adequately explain such dynamics.

This transformation in European policy-making was characterized by a fluid, non-hierarchical structure, involving continuous negotiations among different levels of governments (supranational, national, regional, and local). The traditional gatekeeping role of nation-states weakened, replaced by new networks and relationships between regions and the European Commission, where regions played a more active role in policy implementation and decision-making through channels like the Committee of the Regions (*ibidem*). The process more and more recognised by EU scholars was the transformation into a new, modern form of governance; in this sense, the European Union was a prime case in a more general turn from one level government to multi level governance (MLG) (Hooghe and Marks, 2020).

Even though the EU was originally created by states to serve their economic and political purposes, it has increasingly metamorphosed into a much more complex and unpredictable political system. An intergovernmental path to integration dominated by sovereign states has been replaced by an EU *governance* (Jordan, 2001), a political system which is multi-layered, decentred, and which is causing the relative empowerment of sub-national actors. Hence the term multilevel governance (MLG) approach, that contains both vertical and horizontal dimensions: the term ‘multi-level’ concerns the increased interdependence of governments operating at different territorial levels, while ‘governance’ signalled the growing interdependence between governments and nongovernmental actors at various territorial levels (Bache & Flinders, 2003).

**Figure n.2: How multi-level governance work in EU**

Source: [European Studies Hub](#), n.a.

### Empowering local governors and facilitating the multi-level dialogue

Although not a theory of integration, this approach is providing local and regional actors the attention they deserve within the EU policy-making process. An attention that must be given also in the allocation of resources in order to boost the effectiveness of the public policies elaborated at the European level and to increase the democratic accountability of its decision making. Indeed, going back to Dahl's work on democratic deficit, as the scale increases from individual nation-states to international organizations, the need for delegation becomes even more pronounced (Jensen, 2009). In this sense, establishing a constant and active participation of local/regional authorities in EU policy making could increase its democratic nature, as the public opinion would connect EU level policies to the local level decision-makers who are the best aware of their conditions and challenges. Since the Treaty on the European Union, regional and local authorities are assigned a larger role in this increasingly complex system. The closer integration of the territorial authorities for which the reform of the structural funds provided shows how important the regions and municipalities have become in the EC.

This heightened emphasis on territorial authorities can be attributed to a diverse range of factors. These factors include the growing inclination towards regionalization in select Community countries during the 1980s, as well as the more frequent instances where regional and local authorities take the lead in coordinating their actions or addressing shared challenges (Wiehler and Stumm, 1995). The move towards regionalization, decentralization, and federalization in several Western European nations is motivated by various reasons. Nonetheless, one common thread among them is the desire of individuals represented at the subnational level for greater consideration of their interests.

The creation of the Committee of the Regions 25 years ago through Article 198a of the Treaty on European Union represented a significant milestone. It was an expression of this willingness to involve local and regional authorities and to enable them to represent their interests in the EU's institutional architecture (Wassenberg, 2019). It has granted municipalities and regions the unprecedented chance to

actively engage in shaping objectives within policy domains that pertain to them. This enhanced participation will not only ensure that territorial authorities are well informed about Community-level developments at an early juncture but also empower them to exert influence on these developments.

As perfectly described by a member of the Renew Europe CoR Secretariat, a considerable part of EU legislation (some estimate it at almost 70%) is implemented at local and regional level.

*“The Swedish Association of local and regional authorities discovered that 60% of what was on the agenda in local and regional councils were related to the EU. Therefore, it is clear that local and regional politicians have a role to play also at European level and need to have a say in EU decision making. Otherwise legislation might not be implementable on the ground.” (KI 1)*

### **Think European and act local: the activities of the European Committee of the Regions for raising local and regional voices at EU level**

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is the EU's assembly of regional and local representatives serving the cause of European integration. Through its political legitimacy, the CoR provides institutional representation for all the European Union's territorial areas, thus involving regional and local authorities in the European decision-making and encouraging greater participation from citizens (European Committee of the Regions, 2009).

The Committee of the Region consists of 329 members and 329 alternates representing all EU member countries. Serving a five-year term, they are put forward by their respective national governments to form national delegations.

The European Commission and the Council of the European Union must consult the CoR whenever new proposals are made in areas that have repercussions at regional or local level, such as economic, social and territorial cohesion, Structural Funds, European Regional Development Fund or trans-European networks (European Committee of the Regions, n.a.). The CoR adopts recommendations on draft EU laws and proposes new policies based on local and regional expertise. However, as reminded by two of the interviewees, MEP Sandro Gozi and a Member of the Renew CoR Secretariat, there are two main issues. First, the Committee of the Regions is not involved in the trilogues among the Parliament and the Council where the law proposals from the Commission - with potential high impact on EU territorial areas - are negotiated. Secondly, the recommendations that CoR is providing to the Commission are not legally binding, but only political advises.

Despite its limited powers, the CoR has undertaken many initiatives to raise local and regional voices at EU level. The following are the ones I find the most innovative and with room for improvement:

**1) "Erasmus for local and regional representatives":** this pilot project was launched in 2012 to improve elected representatives' knowledge on European cohesion policy. Although the initiative was a great success – with more than 1000 applications received for 100 places – it has not yet been made a permanent programme (European Committee of the Regions, 2018).

As remembered by KI 1, at the initiative of Renew CoR President, François Decoster (FR/ALDE), the CoR adopted an opinion on 31 January 2018 calling for the upgrade of the "Erasmus for local and regional representatives" from pilot project to permanent programme (European Committee of the Regions, 2018). However, this has not happened yet.

**2) The European network of regional and local councillors** is an initiative addressed to local or regional politicians having a political mandate at regional or local level in one of the EU Member States.

The network is designed to act as platform for local and regional councillors to meet, discuss and network with other councillors and the members of the European Committee of the Regions. It also encourages local and regional councillors to take part in different events and communication activities ahead of the next European Parliament elections (European Committee of the Regions, n.a.). Besides its noble intentions, one of the main weaknesses of the initiative has been highlighted by the interviewee coming from the Renew CoR Secretariat, namely its complete lack of budget. The issue is confirmed by the dedicated website of the CoR: “There is no financial support for members of the network from the CoR” (ibidem).

Many others are the initiatives undertaken by the main EU institutions to stimulate local authorities' empowerment at European level, but the ambition nor the aim of this paper are to synthesize all of them. On the contrary, the next chapter will describe three programmes/initiatives I have selected as case studies to understand the room for improvement in the multi-level dialogue among local authorities and Brussels-based institutions.

# POLICY OUTLINE: THE ANALYSIS OF THE THREE CASE STUDIES

## *Building Europe with Local Councillors - European Commission*

Through an unprecedented partnership between the European Union and local municipalities, the "Building Europe with Local Councillors" (BELC) project establishes a network of locally elected politicians across Europe with the goal of speaking about the European Union. The project will ensure that local politicians collaborate on EU topics and will exchange best practices to solve problems that concern their constituents. The overall aim is to support the creation of a truly European public sphere (European Commission, n.a.)

As reminded by Irenella Sardone - a responsible of the project and seconded national expert from Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, the BELC network started in June 2022 at the input of the European Parliament, which promoted the initiative through its committee on Constitutional Affairs.

*The project to establish a network of local councillors took shape and substance in the course of the Conference on the Future of Europe. [...] The Commission has implemented the CoFoE recommendation described in Proposal 36, which provides crucial importance to the creation of a European public sphere, promoting all forms of participation in the European debate, especially in local politics [...] where BELC councillors assume a strategic role in the dialogue with citizens (KI 5).*

*"Building Europe with Local Councillors" establishes a network of locally elected politicians across Europe. It took shape within the Conference on the Future of Europe*

A participant to the programme made similar argumentations, confirming that the strength of the programme lies in placing an administrator elected by the citizens at the centre of the narrative:

*If it is a member of the community who talks about EU, there can be more trust and more willingness to listen to certain topics; just as the elected person can more easily gather feedback on the European Union and 'popular' proposals for its future. (KI 3)*

In terms of results, from a quantitative point of view, one year after the launch the member



are more than 900 from 26 countries, the most represented countries are Italy, which has exceeded 200 members, Romania and Spain. The community's reach is fast expanding, with new applications submitted on a regular basis (European Union, 2023).

Almost half of the members come from European municipalities with a population under 10,000; according to Ms Sardone, this is *“a sign that it is precisely in small towns that the response has been most generous or that the gap was most felt”*.

From a qualitative perspective, BELC councillors have been invited to participate in a program of customized visits to the European institutions, where they had the opportunity to learn about the European democratic mechanism and get hands-on experience with policymaking. In fact, BELC members encounter European Commission officials directly engaged on directives and policy projects that have or will have an impact in their communities. These meetings tend to elevate the sense of belonging to the European project: in fact, BELC members took the lead during Europe Day 2023, actively engaging with their communities, and organising collaborative events on EU at local level. At the same time they promote local experiences to a EU-wide audiences, such as at the 14<sup>th</sup> *EuroPCom Conference* or the 2023 *Annual Covenant of Mayors*.

Investigating issues and things to improve, the first difficulty is linked to communication: advertising the project and acquiring members is more difficult in some countries than in others. This problem could be solved, for instance, with specific communication strategies to strengthen the presence and authority of the BELC network at different levels, implementing synergies with the national media system and other networks managed by the European Commission, such as Europe Direct centres (KI 5).

Another potential problem for an effective outcome of the project is the lack of fund for individual members; this could be a limit particularly for councillors coming from smaller municipalities, which do not have proper funds to finance European project or campaigns within the municipality. For this reason, a BELC participant thought about the possibility to give a small budget to each councilor or at least to establish financial cooperation with Europe Direct centers, which will fund projects elaborated by BELC members after an impact assessment (KI 3).



## Young Elected Politicians Programme - European Committee of the Regions

The Young Elected Politicians programme (YEPs) is an initiative that brings together young politicians in the European Union (EU) who are under the age of 40 and hold elected positions at the regional or local level within the EU. The program is designed to provide various opportunities and resources to support and empower young politicians in their roles (European Committee of the Regions, n.a). Each year, a call for applications is published, inviting young politicians to apply and become part of the YEPs network.

An interviewee working in the Committee of the Regions argued that YEP is an important programme as it helps training young politicians on EU affairs, while creating an arena for networking both between themselves and with CoR members. *This is key to further EU integration and a better communication to citizens of what is happening in the EU and also a better reporting back to the EU level of the situation on the ground (KI 1).*

The program facilitates the involvement of YEPs in activities organized by the Committee of the Regions (CoR), such as attending meetings with rapporteurs, participating in events and seminars organized, and engaging in communication activities related to regional and local governance in the EU. According to a YEPs participant, this programme can strengthen participatory democracy in Europe in view of the direct link between small municipalities/regions, thus a dialogue and greater closeness with European institutions - that are often perceived as very distant - is a positive that YEPs is contributing to foster.

*The YEP programme creates moments of stimulating confrontation between young politicians from all over the EU*

*“Furthermore, creating moments of confrontation between young politicians from all over the EU is stimulating and involving especially because topics that are dear to us are dealt with and lead to greater participation and interest.” (KI 4)*

Looking at possible improvements, more in-person activities for all the participants (and not only to a strict selection) could be organized. Indeed, most of the activities are online for budget and logistical reasons, thus not facilitating the networking experience at the center of the programme.

*“It would be interesting to have a weekend-long school where young elected representatives from all over Europe can participate and discuss important topics such as the environment, rights and labour”. (KI 4)*

Overall, the YEPs program has proven to effectively support the development and engagement of young elected politicians in the EU by providing them with a platform for collaboration, access to relevant training, and opportunities to participate in EU-related activities.

### BridgeEU and the activities of the Committee on Regional Development (REGI) – European Parliament

The REGI committee is responsible for preparing legislation and scrutinising the European Commission’s work on cohesion policy. The latter is a key instrument for delivering regional growth, reducing economic and social disparities across the European Union (Research 4 Committees, n.a.). For instance, during the last REGI meeting on 7 September, Members of the European Parliament discussed the draft report on the Implementation of territorial development and its application in the European Territorial agenda 2030 (European Parliament, 2023).

As argued by MEP Gozi, REGI cares about local institutions, always keeping in mind territorial impact and relevance of European legislation, *“bringing the voice and needs of the territory to the centre of European policymaking”* (KI 2). This Committee therefore has a warning and awareness raising function on the importance of cities and regions for the EU. It also plays a key role in territorial cohesion policy and its budget.

*REGI cares about local institutions, bringing the voice and needs of the territory to the center of European policymaking (MEP Sandro Gozi)*

As an example of the legislative work developed within the REGI Committee, Sandro Gozi described his initiative to promote transnational cooperation between regions in view of the hundreds of thousands of citizens living in border areas, which - as regulated nowadays - prevent full collaboration between territories on the two sides of the border. *BridgeEU* – Border Regions’ Instrument for Development and Growth in the EU – aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion by eliminating administrative and legal obstacles on an ad-hoc basis, and with the involvement of local and regional authorities.

Without this proposal, adds the interviewed Member of the European Parliament, *“the current normative situation causes a lack of growth of 5/6 % of European GDP and loss of jobs of about 1 million a year. Indeed, the negotiation on the proposal of the Commission (European Commission, 2018) was stuck in the Council of the EU”*.

The Own-Initiative Report of Sandro Gozi has now been supported by all political groups and, with a more realistic and feasible scenario of a 20 % removal of obstacles for all border regions, it has the potential to create benefits amounting to €123 billion (Jančová and Kammerhofer-Schlege, 2023).

This initiative will involve local governance as active protagonists of a strengthened transnational dialogue in EU “language”, the one of common projects, funds, and cross-state collaboration.

Regarding bottlenecks to overcome within the REGI committee, the activities of the European Parliament on regional development are not completely linked to the ones of the Committee of Regions. Indeed, there is no structured exchange of views between the Members of the two institutions. This issue will be touched upon in the policy recommendations.

## CONCLUSION

Whether an empowered engagement of local and regional representatives in EU affairs would have a positive effect on the strengthening of European democracy was the main focus of the paper.

The first step to deal with this research question coincided with the adoption of the multilevel governance theory to analyze the process of European integration. An approach based on the increased interdependence of (European) governments operating at different territorial levels proved to provide sufficient attention to the involvement of local governors within European policymaking.

Consequently, the European Committee of the Regions, main voice of local territories within the EU, has been briefly described in terms of mission, structure and main activities.

Afterwards, I selected three European programs as examples of fostered dialogue between the local and the European decision makers, whereby the EU institutions have the chance to stimulate the implementation of an effective multi-level governance.

Thanks to the unique insights of key informants, Building Europe with Local Councillors, the Young Elected Politician Programme, BridgeEU and the REGI Committee, have been analyzed in the attempt to understand their objective as well as to find possible improvements.

The next and last chapter will shift the previous research into policy recommendations and possible institutional reforms for the empowerment of local leaders within EU policymaking and, ultimately, for the reinforcement of European democracy.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Proposals for the European Committee of Regions

1) **The Committee of Regions should be involved in the trilogues** among the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. In this way, CoR Members could provide, during the negotiations, a **unique expertise on the local implementation and the territorial impact** of the directives and regulations proposed by the European Commission.

2) **The recommendations that CoR is providing to the Commission should acquire a legally binding nature** whenever they concern policies with direct repercussions at regional or local level, such as economic, social and territorial cohesion, Structural Funds, European Regional Development Fund or trans-European networks.

2) Upgrade the **"Erasmus for local and regional representatives"** from pilot project to **permanent programme**, with dedicated funds in the framework of the Erasmus + project.

3) The Committee of the Regions shall provide **financial support for the members of the “European network of regional and local councillors”**. Only in this way the programme could have an effective impact within the EU territorial areas.

## Proposals for Building Europe with local councillors (BELC)

4) Initiate **targeted communication strategies to strengthen the presence of the BELC network** in as many Member States as possible. Establishing collaborations with the local and media systems and with Europe Direct centres is a possible way forward.

5) Guarantee a **small budget to each BELC members to implement pro-European campaigns in their constituencies**. This could be done, for instance, by creating financial cooperation with Europe Direct centres or Regional Councils, that will fund projects elaborated by BELC councillors after a careful impact assessment.

## Proposals for the Young Elected Politician Programme (YEPP)

6) **In-person activities for all the participants** (and not only to a strict selection) must be organized yearly in order to stimulate the sharing of local best practices and the development of an effective network of young change-makers. A weekend-long **European school of young local leaders** could be an idea, taking the example from the political school of Italia Viva “Meritare l’Europa” or the Summit of Young Elected Liberal Leaders of Renew CoR.

7) **Structured and regular dialogues among YEPP members, alumni and CoR members** should be established via Whatsapp chats, LinkedIn/Facebook

groups and monthly online meetings on specific policies to guarantee the long-term effectiveness of the programme

### **Proposals for the REGI Committee and BridgEU**

#### **8) Establish a structured exchange of views between the Members of the Parliament’s REGI Committee and the Committee of Regions.**

In this sense, CoR members could be regularly invited to the REGI meetings, while MEPs should participate to CoR plenaries and have a structured dialogue with the local municipalities inside their constituency.

**9) Mayors and local councillors** should be **central part of the BridgEU national contact points** that will implement the transnational projects foreseen by the Own-initiative proposal of the REGI Committee.

### **Be brave: “think European and act local” means treaty change!**

10) As some of the previous policy recommendations are not possible with the current legal framework of the European Union, **the author encourages the EU leaders to initiate the process of EU Treaty change**. The aim will be **to empower local voices** in the Union’s policy making, to reinforce European democracy and to properly follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

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