



# **Presidency Conclusions on Urban Matters**



# **PRESIDENCY CONCLUSIONS**

## **of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU on the occasion of the meeting of the Directors General on Urban Matters**

**Brussels, 26 June 2024**

### **Preamble**

At the invitation of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union, a meeting of the Directors General on Urban Matters took place on 26 June 2024.

The Directors General from the European Union Member States and Norway with responsibility for urban matters discussed policy developments relating to urban policy.

Representatives from the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Investment Bank, EUI, Urbact, JPI Urban Europe, OECD, UN-Habitat also took part in the meeting.

The presidency was also pleased to welcome representatives from Eurocities, CEMR, EUKN, the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP-CEU) and Eurotowns.

## Activities and publications developed under the Belgian presidency

The Belgian presidency organised various activities on urban matters during the first semester of 2024:

- A high-level event with mayors on "a European urban policy fit for the future" on 24/01/2024
- A meeting of the UATPG (Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group) on 20/02/2024
- A conference with mayors on "Translating the EU Green Deal into local action" on 15/03/2024
- A meeting of the UATPG on 16/04/2024
- A conference with mayors on "Local government approaches to diversity" on 19/04/2024
- An Urban Agenda Lab on the impact of EU policies and regulations on land-use in cities, on 24/04/2024
- A meeting of the UDG (Urban Development Group) on 25/04/2024
- A European seminar of urban planning agencies on 29-30/05/2024
- A meeting of the UATPG on 04/06/2024
- A joint session of the DGUM (Directors General on Urban Matters) and DGTC (Directors General on Territorial Cohesion) on 25/06/2024
- A meeting of the DGUM on 26/06/2024

The Belgian presidency produced two Declarations, one research paper and two publications on the subject of urban matters:

- The [Brussels Declaration "A European urban policy fit for the future"](#) signed by more than 160 mayors and urban networks
- [The Declaration of European local and regional leaders on "Translating the EU Green Deal into local action"](#)
- The research report "Impact of EU policies and regulations on land-use in cities"
- The publication ["Should I stay or should I go? Urban sprawl, density, and a new planning agenda for Europe"](#), published on the occasion of the European Seminar of Urban Planning Agencies on 29-30/05/2024
- The publication [Urban Policy in Belgium](#)

## Conclusions

The Belgian presidency on urban matters presented its conclusions on the 3 main messages arising from the 6 months of the presidency:

1. Continuing the implementation of the Urban Agenda for the EU
2. Recognising the role of place-based approach, spatial planning and metropolitan governance as a means of tackling future urban challenges
3. Acknowledging the call from cities for an ambitious European urban policy for 2024-2029

## 1. Implementation of the Urban Agenda for the EU

### 1.1. Progress regarding the implementation of thematic partnerships

The Directors General on Urban Matters welcomed the ex-ante assessment reports on:

- "Water sensitive city"
- "Building decarbonisation: Integrated renovation programmes and local heating and cooling plans".

The Directors General on Urban Matters agreed with the opportunity to launch the Partnerships on these themes, along the recommendations of the ex-ante assessments.

The DGUM agreed that the Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group (UATPG) will manage the open call for expression of interest for cities, Member States and other organisations, in light of establishing these two Partnerships under the Urban Agenda for the EU. The Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group could hence set up the specific parameters and selection criteria for the open call, based on the agreed principles in the Pact of Amsterdam and following documents (the Ljubljana Agreement and its Multiannual Working Programme). The Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group will prepare for the Urban Development Group the proposal for the selection of partners to be agreed by the Directors General on Urban Matters.

## 1.2. Selection of a new theme

The DGUM took stock of the work done by the UDG to reflect and prepare future themes for the Urban Agenda for the EU. Considering the confirmed support for the theme 'Compact cities (Sustainable urban planning and sprawl mitigation)', the DGUM agreed to select it and to launch the ex-ante assessment process on this theme as of beginning of 2025 during the Polish presidency.

## 1.3. Other Forms of Cooperation

The DGUM took note of the suggestions of possible topics that could be used when starting to work through 'Other forms of cooperation' (OFC) included in the research paper developed by the Belgian presidency on the impact of EU regulations and policies in land-use in cities.

The Belgian presidency suggested that the forthcoming presidencies assess the possibility and opportunity to launch an OFC in cooperation with the European Commission, while further working on its modalities.

## 1.4. Operationalisation of cross-cutting issues

The DGUM welcomed the inclusion of relevant cross-cutting issues in the orientation papers of Urban Agenda for the EU Partnerships. They also welcomed the fact that the future action plans, embed these in their actions and include a summary on how they tackle the relevant cross-cutting issues.

# **2. Role of the place-based approach, spatial planning and metropolitan governance as ways of tackling future urban challenges**

European cities are diverse but share common challenges and will be confronted with similar issues in the future. These will encompass the need to address demographic evolutions, to tackle social, economic and territorial cohesion and to meet climate and environmental sustainability goals.

These challenges will only escalate in the coming years, and will emphasise the need for a proactive and cohesive approach. These challenges will also exert increasing pressure on urban

territories and will therefore require integrated solutions. Spatial planning plays a crucial role in integrating diverse sectoral dimensions and translating them effectively at territorial level. The Belgian presidency shares the conviction that achieving ambitious yet imperative sectoral goals (including environmental sustainability, affordable housing, green energy, etc.) requires seamless integration into territorial planning frameworks.

The Belgian presidency stressed 4 important elements of importance when tackling future urban challenges :

### **2.1. The increasing impact of EU regulations and policies on land-use (Annex 1 – Research Report):**

The presidency pointed out that even if urban planning is not a European competence, European regulations and policies in thematic fields are increasingly having a direct influence on land-use and planning in cities. The presidency stressed that in order to ensure that new European regulations can achieve their goal and be properly implemented, it is crucial to consider urban challenges and specificities in the initial design stages of these regulations.

The research report drawn up by the Belgian presidency on the impact of EU regulations and policies on land-use in cities pointed out 5 main recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Provide adequate room for information and exchange on EU regulations with impacts on land use, spatial planning and urban development in the intergovernmental cooperation on urban matters. This includes cooperation with other sectoral intergovernmental cooperation forums and Council configurations.
- Recommendation 2: Strengthen and systematize the role and advisory function of Territorial Impact Assessments (TIAs) in their various forms.
- Recommendation 3: Explore concretely how "Other Forms of Cooperation" could support the Urban Agenda of the EU alongside Thematic Partnerships by way of starting a pilot "Other Forms of Cooperation" related to the spatial dimension of EU regulations.
- Recommendation 4: Increase the focus on land use/spatial

planning by building on and re-assessing existing work within the Urban agenda of the EU.

- Recommendation 5: To ensure that the Better Knowledge strand has an impact, thematic Partnerships should address knowledge gaps on data even more effectively, by means of strong cooperation with key European partners in the field.

The Belgian presidency suggested that the forthcoming presidencies follow-up on this important topic concerning the impact of EU regulations and policies on urban development.

## **2.2. The need to avoid urban sprawl and develop qualitative density**

On 29 and 30 May 2024, the Belgian presidency organised a European seminar that brought together urban planning agencies and administrations of cities from across Europe to share insights and hold discussions on the subject of urban sprawl, density and a new planning agenda for Europe.

The Belgian presidency acknowledged that it is important:

- to tackle the issue of urban sprawl by implementing No Net Land take strategies via more effective cooperation at all administrative and spatial levels and on the functional urban area level in particular;
- to develop qualitative density by adopting innovative approaches when planning and developing the city of tomorrow. In a context marked by climate change, a loss of biodiversity and a shortage of resources, cities cannot keep expanding on green and farming lands. The compact city, as recognised in the New Leipzig Charter, should be the model to implement. Optimising, intensifying, sharing and transforming the existing public space, buildings and infrastructures should be the route to follow.
- that European institutions engage more and better with planners when developing and implementing EU regulations and policies that have an impact on cities.
- that the planning perspective should be embedded within a broader, place-based yet interdisciplinary approach, in which multilevel governance and sustainability in its social, ecological and economical form act as guiding principles. The interplay between all societal challenges and urban characteristics is embodied in the "urbanity as a collective

approach" concept, as well as in the just, green and productive philosophy of the New Leipzig Charter.

### **2.3. The need to promote metropolitan governance and urban-rural cooperation**

Rising to future challenges and meeting ambitious goals cannot be confined to administrative territorial boundaries. Effectively addressing these issues calls for the development of comprehensive strategies at the scale of functional urban areas and, consequently, makes it necessary to encourage the collaborations between urban centres and their peri-urban and rural peripheries.

The Belgian presidency called for:

- the development of a forward-looking EU vision for urban areas that is endorsed by EU institutions and that recognises the relevance of the functional urban (metropolitan) level;
- the inclusion of an urban, metropolitan and territorial dimension in all relevant EU post-2027 policies and programmes;
- measures to foster the development of monitoring, data and strategies for functional urban areas.

The Belgian presidency suggested that the Polish presidency follow-up on these recommendations.

### **2.4. The importance of a strong cohesion policy supporting cities**

The Belgian presidency took good note of the Report of the High Level Group of experts on Cohesion Policy and the 9th Cohesion Report, and in particular of its territorial and urban aspects.

The presidency also recalled the links between cohesion policy and urban matters, in the Conclusions adopted on 18/06/2024 by the Council of the EU on the 9th Cohesion Report, in particular that the Council:

- Reaffirms that cohesion policy is a place-based policy underpinned by shared management and tailored to the needs, specific challenges and vulnerabilities of regions, while strengthening participation and territorial instruments;
- Is concerned about demographic challenges and recognises that they also affect urban regions due to the concentration of activity and population in large urban areas;



- Highlights the importance of a polycentric development model, building on urban-rural linkages;
- Recognises the importance of good governance and capacity building to better address the administrative needs at Member State, regional and local levels;
- Recognises the contribution of INTERREG to achieve a more balanced territorial development and the need for enhanced cooperation across borders.

The Belgian presidency suggested that the Polish presidency follow-up on this important topic.

### **3. Call from cities for an ambitious European urban policy for 2024-2029**

- Based on the [Brussels Declaration of Mayors "a European urban policy fit for the future"](#) (Annex 2) and the [Declaration of European local and regional leaders on "Translating the EU Green Deal into local action"](#) adopted under the auspices of the Belgian presidency, the presidency calls for the next European Commission and European Parliament to:
  1. Establish a systematic dialogue and involvement of local governments at European level
  2. Ensure a better integration and coordination of urban matters at European level
  3. Adopt more urban-friendly EU regulations
  4. Make EU funding more accessible and urban-friendly
  5. Promote multilevel and metropolitan governance
  6. Shift the paradigm towards a new sustainable model for cities.