

Intervention of the President of the Diputación de Badajoz

The province of Badajoz is the largest in Spain by area, but its population density is below the national average. This means we have a lot of space for a small population.

This fact hinders the provision of public services, presents problems of transport and connectivity, infrastructure, among others, and this leads to the loss of population and makes us face the biggest challenge we have, which is demographic.

The Badajoz Provincial Council is a provincial institution with 213 years of history, and, incidentally, I am the first woman to preside over it since June of this year. Its main objective has always been to promote territorial cohesion, preventing the depopulation of rural areas and guaranteeing equity and quality of life in the province.

The role of the Provincial Council is fundamental to ensuring that certain services reach citizens on equal terms, both in small towns and large cities.

In the video that will be shown below, we explain to our citizens the fundamental role that the Badajoz Provincial Council plays in their lives, as it is present in their daily lives.

Therefore, the Badajoz Provincial Council has joint management bodies for public services such as Promedio (garbage collection and cleaning), OAR (collection of fees and taxes), or the Consortium for Extinction and Prevention of Fires CPEI, among other services to help the municipalities to optimize resources and guarantee the efficiency and quality of services.

These are services that a single municipality cannot afford to provide, but which, when unified in this way through the Provincial Council, can be financed and guaranteed to its citizens.

In addition, the Provincial Council has launched other specific plans with the same objective of ensuring territorial balance, in relation to urban planning, the financial capacity of municipalities, adapted transport for people with disabilities, the right to withdraw money from an ATM in small towns thanks to agreements with banks, the installation of electric vehicle charging points, and highlighting one specific plan, the Demographic Challenge Plan with which 8 million euros are allocated to combat depopulation through agreements with the municipalities.

To achieve this goal, our main focus is what we call municipalism. We believe it is the fairest tool to guarantee equal opportunities between rural and urban areas.

Decisions must be made at the local level, and for this, the direct participation of municipalities is essential, because they are the ones who best understand the needs and have direct communication with the citizens. This applies to both small and large municipalities, because we mustn't forget the big cities, as they strengthen and support the smaller ones.

That is why the Badajoz Provincial Council is a close and recurring Public Administration for the City Councils and Local Entities, because thanks to the fact that we develop an active listening to the mayors of the municipalities of the province, we can carry out programs and plans, such

as those I have mentioned above, and that all are committed to the Sustainable Development Goals that define the 2030 Agenda.

This active listening has allowed us to develop two Sustainable Development Strategies with 268 projects, in which citizens have participated with their contributions and suggestions thanks to the governance system that gives them the opportunity to get involved in the strategies of their future.

Here I want to pause and mention that in March the FEMP's Network of Local Entities for the 2030 Agenda considered it a Good Practice and that the Badajoz Provincial Council is in first position in the OpenODS ranking Index for transparency in compliance with the 2030 Agenda.

Currently, we are developing the second Sustainable Development Strategy until 2027 with 166 projects, all aligned with the 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda.

Within those 166 projects, there are some specifically related to rural areas. I want to highlight three of them. One is the Young Talent Retention Program in Rural Areas, associated with small and medium-sized enterprises, which aims to retain the talent of our young people through 50 scholarships for internships in companies, once they have finished their university studies, and through aid to promote entrepreneurship among young people.

The second program develops actions aimed at the empowerment and self-recognition of women in rural areas, highlighting their talent, promoting their importance in the sustainable development of the province and raising awareness in society about equality.

And the third program is focused on boosting the commercial activity of agri-food products from rural areas, where agriculture and livestock farming are basically the main business fabric.

The aim is to revitalize trade by promoting it through digital transformation, expanding the marketing channels for products derived from these agricultural and livestock activities, given their high quality and, in many cases, their uniqueness worldwide. It's about strengthening the brand and its image.

This program is complemented by the Provincial Strategic Agri-food Plan, with which we aim to strengthen this sector in the province by supporting the Designations of Origin and Geographical Indications for wine, Iberian ham, olive oil, cheese, and certified meats; supporting small businesses and extensive livestock farming; and emphasizing the beekeeping sector due to its widespread presence in our area and its importance in crops and the conservation of the Extremadura pastureland.

Extremadura is characterized by its abundant natural resources. We have a rich historical, cultural, agricultural, and natural heritage, which in turn generates unique and exclusive agricultural, livestock, gastronomic, and tourist activities.

And we believe that these activities generate employment, contribute to the identity of the territory and above all, help to retain the population.

And employment is the main foundation we must offer citizens so they can stay in their villages, in rural areas. Having a decent job and access to all services gives them opportunities and options to freely choose to remain in rural areas to build their lives.

And these opportunities will be further expanded with the development of the Integrated Action Plans that have benefited from aid from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in the 2021-2027 programming period.

The Badajoz Provincial Council has been awarded nine Integrated Action Plans out of the eleven it submitted to this call for proposals. This represents a financial commitment from the European Union to this province in Extremadura of €44,558,723.04, with a co-financing rate of 85%, meaning the total public investment will be €52,422,027.10.

It is the Spanish Local Public Administration with the greatest role in this call, being the one with the largest number of approved plans and the second with the largest approved economic allocation.

This position reinforces the leadership of the Badajoz Provincial Council in Spain in the management of European funds aimed at sustainable urban development.

These actions will affect a population of 252,627 inhabitants, representing just over 70% of the population residing in municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants in the province.

The Plans are framed within the Urban Agendas and the Local Integrated Development Strategies (EDILES) of the eleven functional urban areas that we have in our province.

The nine beneficiary areas each have funding of between four and five million euros.

It should be noted that these plans were developed following the guidelines of the Spanish Urban Agenda and based on the Provincial Urban Agenda approved in February 2024.

The proposed projects encompass actions related to digitalization and economic revitalization, energy and environment, social inclusion, urban heritage, tourism and culture.

It should also be noted that the main cities in the province submitted their Integrated Action Plans individually to this ERDF call for proposals and have been selected as beneficiaries.

Therefore, these European funds will practically benefit almost the entire population of the province.

This is a very significant amount of money for our region, and without the European Union, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to carry out all these investments.

Once the funding for these plans has been approved, we now have to implement them, and the Provincial Council is committed to developing them within the timeframe stipulated by the call for proposals, since in addition to complying with the call, we are fulfilling our commitment to the citizens and their future.

And we also have a duty to communicate and explain to citizens that the funding for this project in their municipality is thanks to the European Union and these ERDF funds.

It is one of the challenges we must face, telling people where the money used to carry out activities in their town comes from, because nowadays many are unaware of it.

And these European grants are fundamental for the rural world because they represent a key source of funding to boost the economic, social and environmental development of the areas.

These grants promote sustainability, innovation and territorial cohesion, retaining population and ensuring that rural areas have a viable and balanced future within the European Union.

The main objective for which we work at the Badajoz Provincial Council.

Key points from President Menesini's intervention

The importance of the LIAs role is well demonstrated by the Italian experience. Ten years ago, an institutional reform drastically reduced the competencies of the provinces, reinforcing the power of the regions.

After 10 years of reform, experience shows that many territories have been left behind, particularly in large Region like Tuscany. This isolation has unfortunately had negative consequences for cohesion.

Consequently, there is a growing realization that something must be revisited; further re-evaluation is underway.

At the European level, looking at the next programming period, there is extensive discussion about competitiveness, but the risk is losing sight of cohesion, which is, in fact, the essential prerequisite for achieving true competitiveness.

Moreover, it is important to consider that effective territorial competitiveness simply cannot be managed without an appropriate intermediate institution to guide the process. Municipalities are constantly dealing with daily emergencies and lack the capacity for medium-to-long-term planning, while the Region is often too distant from the local territory.

Therefore, intermediate bodies are positioned to be the adequate institution for fostering genuine cohesion and facilitating mechanisms for competitiveness across the territories.

The lack of intermediate authorities shows once more that a widening gap is increasingly forming between major cities and rural areas. To bridge this divide, we must strategically utilize European financial resources to prevent the concentration of funding solely in urban areas to the detriment of rural ones and the adequate institution that can prevent or limit this concentration is the Province.

Another important example is related to the phenomenon of depopulation.

It is crucial to create the conditions that encourage the population to remain in rural areas. For instance, the theme of ecological transition in the Province of Lucca has become an opportunity to create local production chains. This initiative has fostered the creation of cooperatives, generating employment precisely in marginal areas. These cooperatives, working in agreement with local Municipalities, have also recovered abandoned land and designated it for new productions.

Thus, within a framework of multi-level governance, intermediate bodies can play a pivotal role, particularly in planning local development. They can achieve this by defining strategic plans that outline the direction for the next seven-year period and, based on those lines, identify the necessary European resources.

Key points of President Eremia's intervention

"In Moldova, the European path begins at the local level, and district councils are the heart of this process. They represent the bridge between national strategies and community needs, turning European principles into tangible results that people can see and feel every day," said Natalia Eremia during her speech.

In her address, the President of Laloveni District highlighted local development projects carried out with European support: the modernisation of schools, expansion of drinking water networks, digitalisation of public services, and implementation of renewable energy projects in the district's localities.

"The transition to green energy is not only an environmental priority but also a real economic opportunity. In Laloveni, we are developing partnerships with the private sector and educational institutions to promote energy efficiency, create jobs, and strengthen local autonomy in the energy field," added Mrs. Eremia.

These initiatives demonstrate that Laloveni District actively contributes to Moldova's European transformation, putting into practice values such as sustainability, innovation, and civic participation.

"Europe is not a distant goal — it begins in our villages and towns. Every modernized school, every young person who chooses to stay, every local project is part of this common path toward a European Moldova," concluded President Natalia Eremia.

Key points from Mr. Kubalski's intervention

Accustomed to the model of local self-government that was structurally and competentially shaped in the twentieth century, we may fail to notice that under contemporary conditions in countries with a two-tier system of local government it is precisely Local Intermediate Authorities (LIAs) that will play a key role in unlocking local potential.

Attention should therefore be paid to the formulation of the principle of subsidiarity enshrined in Article 4(3) of the European Charter of Local Self-Government: *"Public responsibilities shall generally be exercised, in preference, by those authorities which are closest to the citizen. Allocation of responsibility to another authority should weigh up the extent and nature of the task and requirements of efficiency and economy."* In light of this provision, public tasks should indeed be performed at the level closest to the citizen, but not at any cost. The natural limits are the extent of the task, the nature of the task, as well as considerations of efficiency and economy.

Across European Union member states with two-tier local government systems, demographic trends point either to population stabilisation—frequently sustained only through positive net migration—or to outright population decline. Current demographic projections are unequivocal. In Poland and Romania, population loss is expected to be particularly pronounced, exceeding 20% by the end of the twenty-first century compared to 2022 levels. Only slightly better prospects can be observed in Italy, where the projected decline amounts to approximately 15%.

Importantly, demographic decline is spatially differentiated rather than uniform. As a rule, areas classified—according to ESPON terminology—as predominantly rural and intermediate are

mostly affected by population decline. Even in countries where the overall population remains stable, such as Spain, a decline in population is observed in the vast majority of rural areas. Cities and their surrounding areas, by contrast, continue to grow.

This phenomenon is also clearly visible in Poland. Forecasts by Statistics Poland indicate that by 2040 many municipalities located in peripheral areas will lose more than 20% of their population compared to 2022. In the most extreme cases, depopulation may reach nearly 42.9%, i.e. almost half of their inhabitants. These trends are accompanied by significant distortions in age structure, undermining municipalities' structural capacity to perform core public functions.

These dynamics create a growing rationale for action at the level of LIAs. From a spatial perspective, LIAs constitute the functional area of the central city. It is precisely at this scale that it becomes possible to effectively address the challenges of today and the near future.

A good example is provided by activities related to energy self-sufficiency. Cities, by their very nature, have high energy demand while possessing limited capacity for autonomous energy generation. Rural areas, conversely, have considerable generation potential but relatively low levels of consumption. Balancing the system is possible only by linking urban energy demand with the production capacities of rural areas—and this is exactly the operational scale of LIAs.

Comparable conclusions emerge from analyses of transport demand in rural areas which shows that the dominant and most desired connections are those between villages and cities. Young people seek access to secondary and higher education institutions as well as to leisure and entertainment facilities, which are generally located in cities. People of working age often commute to jobs in industrial plants situated in urban economic activity zones and their outskirts. They also require access to retail services, with larger shopping facilities likewise concentrated in cities. Older people demonstrate an increasing demand for access to specialised healthcare services, including hospitals. An efficient system of public collective transport must therefore operate across the entire functional urban area, corresponding to the territorial scope of LIAs.

The consequences of depopulation are particularly visible in primary education, traditionally a core municipal responsibility. Birth statistics for Polish municipalities in 2024 reveal extreme demographic sparsity in some cases, with only three births recorded in several municipalities and ten or fewer in dozens of others. Within a few years, such municipalities will be unable to form even a single primary school class. Beyond issues of cost efficiency, this raises fundamental developmental concerns, as the absence of a peer group undermines children's social and educational development. This situation necessitates a reconsideration of the allocation of educational responsibilities and may justify transferring certain competences to the LIA level.

The argument for rescaling public tasks is further strengthened by increasing technological complexity. Challenges such as cybersecurity require specialised expertise, institutional capacity, and financial resources that are beyond the reach of individual municipalities. Effective responses therefore demand coordination and capacity-building at a supra-municipal level.

In sum, without a systematic strengthening of Local Intermediate Authorities, the mobilisation of rural development potential appears increasingly unlikely. From this perspective, European Union policy interventions should place greater emphasis on supporting LIAs as key instruments of functional integration, territorial cohesion, and effective multi-level governance.