

CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

WHY LOCAL POLITICS STRETCHES BEYOND CITY LIMITS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
GEORG KÖSSLER

Berlin has been a pioneer in rolling out green policies at a local level – from bike lanes to renewable energy. We talked to Georg Kössler, Green Member of the Berlin State Parliament, about the actors and policies it takes for cities to lead the way on divestment and fighting climate change, but also about the obstacles to surmount to achieve a broader transformation.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: Why do cities have such a unique and important role in the fight against climate change?

GEORG KÖSSLER: Cities have always been spaces of innovation and progressive ideas. They are often places where new technologies are invented and implemented. They are educational and research centres, thus providing fertile ground for green ideas to develop and flourish. In Germany, the *Energiewende* [energy transition] has so far put strong emphasis on rural areas in its first stage, as this is where solar panels and wind turbines are most often installed and biomass is produced. Right now, our cities are catching up and face the more complex challenge of renewable energy production and smart energy consumption in urban areas. At the same time, the majority of cities worldwide are dealing with the effects of climate change, from heatwaves and floods to the influx of climate migrants, and since 90 per cent of all urban areas are coastal, the very survival of cities depends on fighting for climate justice.

What is the power of cities today?

GEORG KÖSSLER: Since cities are responsible for two thirds of the world's energy consumption, their shift towards renewable energies is a make or break issue. Cities will determine the speed of the transformation

ahead. And they have a responsibility to speed up, as dense urban areas have more ways of ensuring a high quality of life with a small carbon footprint, for example through improved public transportation.

What we have to acknowledge, despite that, is that cities don't achieve their impact through formal multi-level governance arrangements, but rather by being a visible beacon for change. A case in point would be Copenhagen, which is widely praised around the world for its progressive policies, yet these policies are often markedly distinct from those of Denmark as a whole. Cities will primarily influence other cities rather than rural areas, thereby leaving some areas behind for which we have to find different solutions.

How important are cities' alliances and networks in your opinion?

GEORG KÖSSLER: Right now, cities' alliances are just another platform for decision-makers to meet and exchange. They have yet to show what they are capable of. Cities belonging to alliances like C40 should take the lead by carrying out a complete divestment from fossil fuel investments or promoting a timely 100 per cent renewables target.

Just like nation-states or regional bodies, cities are more likely to move towards a sustainable transition if it serves their own economic and

social interests. However, in Berlin we see how the political will is formed not only by the classic instrument of politics, but by bottom-up initiatives as well – sometimes against and sometimes in alliance with political forces. It is important for us Greens to tell the positive stories: our bike-revolution in Berlin was only possible because Greens and bike initiatives pushed hard for it and our demands were favourably received, and many are aware of the positive results of bike-based traffic in Copenhagen.

Which factors have enabled Berlin to become a leader in the fight against climate change?

GEORG KÖSSLER: After last year's parliamentary elections in Berlin, a new Red-Red-Green (SPD, the social democrats – Die Linke – Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen) government was formed. For the first time ever, the Greens are participating in a ruling coalition and for the first time, we are able to govern this city. Before, we had been in district councils. But as Berlin is a federal state and a municipality at the same time, local districts have less power than elsewhere in Germany. Therefore, getting into the Berlin government was crucial.

Although the city leans Left politically, Greens have always found themselves in opposition due to various circumstances. The city was divided for years, resulting in a more complex political situation: the inner districts have

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Green strongholds as well as some local Green mayors. The outskirts tend to vote more traditionally but in large parts of the former east, this means a strong vote for the left-wing Die Linke. This contributes to a progressive majority since Die Linke in Berlin is more progressive than in the rest of Germany where it has a more populist approach.

Given the beacon-like character of the German capital and keeping in mind the 2017 German elections, we made sure to have a resolution to phase out coal in Berlin by closing our four coal power plants well before 2030. Berlin became the first federal state to take such a step.

To ensure an ecological transition, the Greens got hold of the Departments for Energy, Climate, and Traffic. However, we have been struggling since then with a prolonged transition phase of restructuring, recruiting, and general organisation. Due to this, our first year was marked by largely political resolutions and guideline decisions. Now we are entering the second stage where real infrastructure is being built and green investments are being made.

Berlin has been instrumental in carrying forward the divestment movement – which steps have been taken and with what results?

GEORG KÖSSLER: The issue of divestment was strongly put forward by local activists who organised a small-scale but very energetic campaign. The Greens supported this with resolutions and demands. When the Greens got into government, the sitting finance senator¹ had already prepared a divestment plan for Berlin. He was lobbied hard by the activists well before the election and I assume the perspective of a soon-to-be coalition with the Greens, as well as running himself for a seat in a progressive constituency, helped in this (similar initiatives on the federal level failed so far as no prominent government figure had put their weight behind the issue). His plan included the creation of a new index which

¹ In the last coalition between the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the SPD, the sitting finance senator (equivalent to a finance minister on the federal level) was an SPD member.

combines German financial safety regulations with our sustainability requirements. Thus, other cities can more easily divest by just shifting money into this Berlin Divestment Index.

For all items on our policy agenda, we have strong allies – but not always the same ones. While the communal water supplier is supporting us in better adapting to climate change, i.e. pushing for more green roofs, the public waste management company is supporting our efforts to get rid of disposable coffee cups. Our biggest project, a new mobility law which includes a strong shift towards a more bike-friendly infrastructure, will only be able to succeed if bike activists maintain their strong pressure on us politicians. So far, car-friendly conservatives have not succeeded in turning public opinion against our new approach.

In a unique process, the Berlin Parliament convened a special committee to analyse Berlin's path towards an emission-neutral city. The resulting *New Energy for Berlin* report, was passed unanimously by all parties during the last parliamentary term. While it isn't a legislative act, it served to build a consensus on the measures Berlin needs to adopt to respond to climate change. The recommended measures comprise the whole range imaginable, from pushing renewable energies, to modernising housing and phasing out coal. Thus the committee's work has become a blueprint for our policies.

Despite progress made towards divestment, we still have a long road ahead of us. With the Berlin Energy and Climate Programme, we are about to enact the general low-carbon roadmap for our city. It includes a wide variety of goals and around 100 measures from all sectors: energy, traffic, housing, economy, and private households, as well as adaptation to climate change. We defined short-term (2020) and mid-term goals (2030) and reference to the Berlin Energy and Climate Programme is supposed to help us in the coming years to push through this green transformation. Measures, among others, include a solar masterplan in Berlin to increase solar energy capacity from 0.6 per cent to 25 per cent of energy production, a shift from coal to gas in the heating sector, power-to-gas/heat units, the construction of 'climate-friendly' city quarters, and an increase in energy storage capacities.

Many possible incentives such as tax cuts or changes in energy regulations have to be made on the federal level. Berlin can only give mitigated support to private transitional projects such as loans through the state's Investitionsbank [business development bank of the Federal Land of Berlin] – or direct financial support. On the other side, there are many shared responsibilities with the local municipalities when it comes to traffic infrastructure. Berlin, however, has many public buildings which have to serve as cores of transitional changes. For example a school which will serve a whole quarter (Stadtquartier) with its combined power and heat unit.

Berlin has created a sustainable investment fund – how does it work?

GEORG KÖSSLER: Berlin's public savings funds include around 750 million euros of which about 150 million are invested in stock market funds. Instead of just passing stricter guidelines and investing in 'green indexes', we built a new one. We wanted to exclude companies which profit from fossil fuels, nuclear energy, or war weapons as well as from child labour or companies that are in conflict with the UN Global Compact guidelines or tax regulations. Further, we opted for a best-in-class approach: from each sector the companies with the highest ESG scores (environmental, social and corporate governance) were taken. Thus, we build our own – stable, secure, and green – index. Other countries and states are free to use it as well, the management of the index for Berlin is done by the Deutsche Bundesbank. So far, the index is performing above average and shows we are on the right track.

Beyond the immediate fight against climate change, do you think the city – and Berlin in particular – is the space that can contribute to shaping a new societal model transcending those of the industrial and modernist 19th and 20th centuries?

GEORG KÖSSLER: The shift away from a fossil-fuel-based economy that relies strongly on individual cars is certainly easier in cities.

In Berlin, half the inhabitants don't own a car and many of my generation are content with a mix of cycling, public transport, and car-sharing. In this respect, it is easier to rely on 'small is beautiful' solutions in cities. Our challenge will be to ride this postmodernist wave further – pushing back cars and enabling more sustainable lifestyles – while finding solutions for the outer districts which still rely heavily on cars. We do not want the city to split into two opposing camps, which is why we put great emphasis on the notion of better mobility as a whole.

One needs to keep in mind that new models of governance, which aim at more bottom-up policy-making, will not only result in more sustainable policies. A strange coalition of populists, pro-business neoliberal and West-Berlin conservatives have just initiated and won a public referendum. They want to force the local government to keep the old and shabby inner-city Tegel airport open despite a new BER airport being built just outside the city limits. Naturally, the fact that the BER is struggling with heavy delays is not helping either. Despite being a dense city with a vibrant culture of debate and a multitude of press outlets, the debate was one-sided and populist.

While Berlin has many eco-minded inhabitants, the postmodern lifestyle of neoliberal flexibility does not inherently make sustainable decisions regarding one's own lifestyle easier. Often the easy, short-term, or hedonistic solution is the

best we can manage, as we all try to survive being more and more entangled in the frantic city life. Sustainable solutions therefore have to bring relief and ease as well. People won't go the extra mile to buy at an organic shop. It is hip, but you just don't have the time for it.

Cities are the faces of societies. Berlin is currently one of the most visited cities in the world. Most people come not to just relax and take holidays, but to "breathe Berlin". This is our opportunity and we aim to get some showcase projects started: for example climate-neutral clubs which generate their own solar power and recycle water, and a green roof project, which brings more plants to public roofs to cool the city in the summer and function as a 'swamp' during heavy rainfalls.

What should be the role and place of cities in 21st century Europe?

GEORG KÖSSLER: The Greens would love Berlin to become a rebellious city like the 'Sanctuary Cities' in the US and we really push for it. Already, Berlin is open and tolerant in terms of queer lifestyles, drugs and much more. However, I don't see cities as new actors of governance. What we see right now throughout the Western world is a drifting apart of liberal urban areas from more conservative rural areas, many of them 'left behind'. I would strongly advise bridging this divide instead of deepening it. While the U.S. mindset uses

nationalism as a cohesive force, we should find other ways.

With the emergence of more and more megacities in the Global South, the exchange between cities and metropolises becomes more important. New infrastructures are being built there faster than our own, which evolved over decades and centuries. Let's make sure we learn the most sustainable ways from each other. We need to talk about examples of best practices, which is why I hope city networks and alliances will continue to grow. They might not set the global agenda, but they can help each other in setting the pace of transformation in their respective countries.



GEORG KÖSSLER

studied political science in Germany and Sweden. He then joined the Grüne Jugend (Green Youth).

Since 2008 he has been involved in Green politics in Neukölln and Berlin. From 2012 to 2017 he was speaker of the Green Party's national working group on Energy and in 2016 was elected to the Berlin House of Representatives for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen.