

Geneva 2026: Peoples, Europe and the New International Order

We are gathered here in Geneva, one hundred years after the 1926 Congress of European Nationalities. At that time, a fundamental question was already at the heart of the debate: how can the rights of peoples and national communities be guaranteed within an international order organised primarily around states?

A century later, that question remains profoundly relevant.

The world has changed since 1926. International law has changed too. The United Nations Charter and the 1966 International Covenants established the principle of the right of peoples to self-determination.

And yet, a tension remains: the political realities of peoples have often evolved faster than the legal and institutional instruments available to fully recognise their capacity to decide their own future.

The Basque experience allows us to understand this tension in concrete terms.

The Basque people constitute a historic, cultural and linguistic community whose territory is divided between Spain and France. Throughout the twentieth century, this reality was marked by repression, political conflict and armed violence.

But this reality has undergone a fundamental transformation.

In the Basque Country, armed struggle came to an end, and an exclusively political and democratic path was chosen.

From that point onwards, the question changed its nature.

The problem is no longer one of violence. It has become a question of democracy.

How can a political question that once stood at the heart of a conflict now be addressed fully through democratic means? How can a political community be given the capacity to decide its own future?

This experience brings us back to **the question of self-determination**.

Because perhaps we have too often reduced self-determination to a single question: should a people become a state?

I believe we need to think about it more broadly.

Self-determination is also about the ability of a people to organise its political, economic, social and cultural life democratically, to exercise forms of self-government, and to define its relations with other peoples and with states.

There is therefore an internal dimension to self-determination, as well as an external one, linked to determining political status and relations with others.

What we need to further explore today is this capacity to decide and this can be at risk if the far right wins

And this leads us to **rethink sovereignty**.

Sovereignty has traditionally been understood as an exclusive power exercised by the state over a territory. But our political reality is more complex. Different peoples, territories and communities can coexist and exercise different powers without one necessarily having to absorb the others.

This is where the **idea of a pact** becomes interesting.

Rather than thinking of territorial relations solely in terms of a hierarchy between a centre and territories to which it delegates powers, we could think of them more in terms of mutual recognition, consent, cooperation and reciprocity.

Not sovereignty disappearing, but sovereignty shared, articulated and established through pact.

This question naturally brings us to Europe.

The European Union is already a particular experience of moving beyond sovereignty understood exclusively in state terms. Yet its architecture remains largely structured around states.

The question, therefore, is this: can the European Union become a political space where states, peoples and territories participate together in shaping a common political order?

This question is all the more important because the international order is currently undergoing a profound transformation. Faced with the return of power politics and competition between major states, there is a strong temptation to reinforce the state once again as the principal instrument of sovereignty.

But we can make a different choice.

We can consider that the diversity of peoples and territories is not a problem to be solved, but a political reality to be organised democratically.

Perhaps this is where **Geneva 2026 can make a contribution.**

The aim is not simply to commemorate Geneva 1926, but to revisit its question under the conditions of the twenty-first century:

How can we strengthen the right of peoples to decide their own future?

How can we build political relations based more on consent, reciprocity and pact rather than on inherited territorial hierarchies?

And ultimately:

How can we develop an international law capable not only of regulating relations between states, but also of recognising the political agency of peoples and creating the democratic conditions for their coexistence?

Perhaps this is where Geneva 2026 truly connects with Geneva 1926: in the idea that peace between peoples cannot depend solely on the balance between states.

It also depends on our ability to recognise peoples and open democratic pathways through which they can decide their own future.

Note: Pact: By pact, I do not simply mean a mechanism for sharing power within an existing state. I mean a way of structuring political relations between different subjects on the basis of mutual recognition, consent and reciprocity.