liberal bulletin

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The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party is the party representing liberal democrat values across Europe.

In conjunction with our liberal member parties throughout the European continent, we are translating the principle of freedom into politics, economics and across all other areas of our societies. The ALDE Party provides an increasingly vital link between citizens and the EU institutions and is continuously growing in size and significance.

The ALDE Party is made up of more than 60 member parties and many individual members from across Europe. Liberal Democrats created their political family in 1976, ahead of the first European elections. ALDE was established as a truly transnational political party in 1993. In April 2017, the ALDE Party was legally recognised under European law as the first European political party.

Liberal Bulletin is a publication of the ALDE Party. It is published twice a year.

With the support of the European Parliament
FOCUS ON EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2019: STRONGER AND MORE LIBERAL EUROPE

In May 2019 a new European Parliament will be elected. Liberals should fight a united campaign to become a dominating force. We cannot accept being the fourth largest group again. Given the fact that we now have eight liberal Prime Ministers in the European Council, five European Commissioners, have strong established member parties at the forefront of national politics, and new liberal forces that we hope will send many more liberal MEPs to Brussels: we should win, and we can win.

We cannot win the European elections from Brussels. It has to be done by our member parties, but we can assist when asked. We just hosted a meeting of national campaign managers in Washington DC to learn from each other and outside experts. But we need to have a winning message too. We have an active, inspiring Manifesto Committee led by former Estonian Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas and many expert forums, together with ELF, are being held across Europe, listening to citizens and gathering input for the Manifesto Committee.

We as liberals must work together as a network. Liberals must Unite! We must work together closely with the ALDE Group in the European Parliament. We recently held a Western Balkans Roundtable to bring together our partners in LIBSEEN, under its new Chair, Roman Jakic. Together we will meet in Sofia, Bulgaria, hosted by our member party MRF, a reliable supporter of political cooperation in the Western Balkans. We have to further explore the options of close cooperation with the French Movement En Marche. I visited, together with my colleague Jean Arthuis MEP, the Party President of En Marche, Christophe Castaner, recently. Building confidence is the key. ALDE Group leader Guy Verhofstadt MEP will be visiting Paris soon. The ALDE Group in the Committee of Regions will be in Paris in June. We have to team up with our ALDE Group in the Council of Europe as well. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte had a tête-à-tête with French President Emmanuel Macron in The Hague recently. It should all come together with the result that a united ALDE will negotiate future relations in the European Parliament after 2019 with En Marche.

At the last ALDE Pre-Summit meeting in Brussels, both Albert Rivera MEP of Ciudadanos (Spain) and Vince Cable MEP of the Lib Dems (UK) joined as guests our meeting of liberal Prime Ministers, members of the European Commission and our political leader in the European Parliament. Lib Dem leader Vince Cable and VVD leader Mark Rutte agreed that if the Brits would reconsider Brexit, they are welcome in the EU. This position was already taken by the ALDE Congress in early December 2017 in Amsterdam and was again endorsed by the ALDE leadership at the Pre-Summit. Whatever happens, the ties between the UK and the EU must be strong and cordial. The Lib Dems will play a vital role as member of the ALDE Party.

So as we move closer towards the 2019 elections, ALDE is ready and our member parties will be ready for the battle! Let us go forward together for a stronger and more liberal Europe.

Hans van Baalen MEP
ALDE Party President
A roadmap for the Western Balkans

Mustafa Karadayi MP
Party leader of MRF

In this edition, the spotlight is on Bulgaria as we head to its capital, Sofia, for the next ALDE Party Council. That is why we talked with Mustafa Karadayi, the leader of our Bulgarian member party MRF, and Ilhan Kyuchyuk ALDE Party Vice President and Member of the European Parliament for MRF. In this double interview, they tell us about how Bulgaria has changed since it joined the European Union, the main priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and the prospects for liberalism in the Western Balkans.

Ilhan Kyuchyuk MEP
ALDE Party Vice President
Bulgaria is now in the spotlight as you hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. What will this presidency bring to the European Union?

MK: The EU Presidency is very important for us, but it is our common duty of all political forces and civil society to guarantee in the first place the state’s security and stability, especially when Bulgaria has a symbolic responsibility for the entire European Union. We hope that the Bulgarian Presidency will bring the much-needed structural reforms for the future of the European Union, as well as a clear perspective on the membership of the Western Balkans and of Turkey - an investment in the stability of the European Union and the region which will be paid back many times in the future. Of course, the last must happen after the finalisation of the negotiations and in strict compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. We would be pleased if the Bulgarian Presidency would give a sufficiently strong impetus to the discussion of the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework with clearly outlined priorities and real ambitions.

“We work to make our party more modern, more flexible and more open.”

In order to make real progress, the Western Balkan countries need a clear roadmap, and the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU is the right time to do it.

IK: Europe gives serious confidence to Bulgaria because our presidency of the Council of the EU comes at a time when our continent is at a crossroads. The European Union’s agenda includes important topics such as Brexit, coping with the migration crisis and the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework. In addition, the Brexit vote exposed the long-hidden truth that today’s Europe is an investment in the stability of the European Union and the region which will be paid back many times in the future. Of course, the last must happen after the finalisation of the negotiations and in strict compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. We would be pleased if the Bulgarian Presidency would give a sufficiently strong impetus to the discussion of the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework with clearly outlined priorities and real ambitions.

Mustafa, when you took over as MRF leader in 2016 you said one of your goals was to reform and in strict compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. We would be pleased if the Bulgarian Presidency would give a sufficiently strong impetus to the discussion of the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework with clearly outlined priorities and real ambitions.

The basic idea is to create conditions and democratic instruments to transform the relatively passive attitude of citizens towards local authorities into a committed and active position.

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Ilhan, you have recently been awarded the Honorary Sign of your Bulgarian home town Sevlievo for your outstanding dedication and active public engagement aimed at young people. What's your key message for young people in Bulgaria and in Europe?

IK: I am extremely grateful for receiving this recognition. This Honorary Sign is very special to me because it comes from Sevlievo, the city where my journey began. It is a real pleasure for me to work for and with young people. I want them to know that when a person has the desire to work and when he has clear goals, he will gradually succeed. I have always wanted to work for our community and I am glad to have this opportunity. Every person should be able to see the meaning and feel the satisfaction of their work and I am happy that I can see mine. This honorary distinction is not only for me, but also for each and every young individual with whom we work.

“Bulgaria has its own and unique ethnic model, and this is something that makes me really proud.”

MK: At that meeting, I expressed our position on the Bulgarian EU Presidency and in particular on the Western Balkans and EU relations. I shared with the Liberal Prime Ministers and Commissioners that Bulgaria has a convertible political product: the Bulgarian ethnic model. In my opinion, this gives us the chance to integrate the Western Balkans into the European Union. Also, I brought up the subject of our country’s membership of Schengen. Besides, I also expressed MRF’s concern about the participation of nationalists in the current Bulgarian government.

All in all, the meeting was extremely productive, and the topics were discussed in a way that only liberals can do: directly. We discussed issues related to the state of the Brexit negotiations, EU defence, EU external relations and migration.

Finally, as we are heading to Sofia for the next ALDE Party Council, could you tell us what are your favourite spots in the capital?

MK: I can recommend the National Library, the Town Library, the National Gallery Square 500 and the City Art Gallery. I also recommend you to visit the remains of the ancient Roman fortress of Serdika. Close to the ruins, there are Orthodox churches, a mosque, a synagogue and a Catholic church. It is a crossing of different historical eras, different religions, ethnicities and cultures; their diversity in a single cohabitation gives you a very special feeling.

IK: You should dedicate at least a few days to Sofia. There is a little bit of everything there - the old, eye-catching trams, modern buildings, traditions, innovations. But I would surely recommend you to visit the Triangle of Religious Tolerance in Sofia. Do you know that our capital is one of the fewest cities in the world that has an operational Orthodox church, a Muslim mosque and a Jewish synagogue placed in a close triangle within a two minutes’ walk from each other? For many years, we live in religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Bulgaria has its own and unique ethnic model, and this is something that makes me really proud.
Europe is our shared responsibility

INTERVIEW

Martina Dlabajová MEP

Member of the European Parliament for ANO

Martina Dlabajová is a Member of the European Parliament of our member party ANO. Before joining politics, she mostly worked in business, an experience that she has later used to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to encourage young people to fulfil their professional dreams. She explained this in this chat with us as well as more details on her party’s success in the last Czech elections.
In the last legislative elections in the Czech Republic, your party, ANO, emerged as clear winner. What was the key to your party’s success?

From January 2014 until the last Czech elections in October 2017, ANO was an active partner in the Czech coalition government and succeeded in building a record of achievements that helped to strengthen its position in order to prosper in the 2016 regional elections, and finally to become the main political player in the country. The legislative election result was not only a victory for ANO in the Czech Republic, but also for the ALDE Party.

I believe the key element and importance of this success can be attributed to the party’s concept of bringing a positive change to domestic politics and mainly to our open communication with citizens. Our party leader, Andrej Babiš, is intensively in direct contact with citizens and he constantly keeps on explaining his programme and politics in general in a pragmatic way. He never turns away from people when the elections are over.

Before joining ANO as a Member of the European Parliament, you were an active businesswoman. What motivated you to join politics?

When I look back with hindsight, politics have surrounded me my entire life; starting from my studies at Padua University in Italy when I decided to specialise in political science with a focus on European politics. During my business activity years, I focused on advising business entities and offering consultancy to regional municipalities and cities in different countries. In order to succeed, I had to master the art of international and economic diplomacy and international relations as such. By the time I was elected President of the Regional Chamber of Commerce, I got involved in the world of politics even more as I led meetings with businessmen or politicians on a regular basis. All of these had an impact on forming my political views and my desire to explore “the other side”. I figured that I could use this experience to make the European Union more accessible and bring it closer to its citizens; this means, to inform people, both in Europe and in the Czech Republic, about the benefits and the opportunities that the EU offers and how can citizens make the best out of them.

The Liberal Europe that we have been fighting for should remain a symbol for new opportunities, competition, market openness and, above all, for freedom. This is something that we should treasure and not undermine.

You were born under an authoritarian communist regime which then turned into a free market economy. How has this shaped your view on the European Union?

Coming from a former communist country, I have always dreamed of unity and prosperity for Europe. The regime and events in the late 80s in the Czech Republic, made me feel motivated and brave to make a real change. That is why right after graduating from high school in 1994, I moved to Padua in Italy to study at the local university. I had just turned 18 and therefore I had the chance to learn many things while I was abroad. Apart from mastering Italian, I learned to never depend on anyone but myself. I learned how to survive with very little money and that nothing must be taken for granted. Notably, I also learned not to give up without a fight, which is extremely important in my life as a politician as well.

The history of my country and my experience with the communist regime is, of course, crucial in forming the opinion of Czech people on the EU and its values. The whole process of becoming an EU member was an important political and social symbol as “our return back to Europe.” It was mainly the prospects of joining the Single Market and the freedom of movement within the EU that motivated us to join the Union. I feel disappointed that the current directions in Europe are heading rather towards protectionism and restricting the four freedoms, which stood at the very beginning of European integration. The Liberal Europe that we have been fighting for should remain a symbol for new opportunities, competition, market openness and, above all, for freedom. This is something that we should treasure and not undermine.

You have said before that “We have to stop the ‘us’ and ‘them’ rhetoric in which we blame the European institutions. Could you elaborate more on that?

The Czech Republic unfortunately is one of the most Eurosceptic countries in Europe. The reason behind that is that we simply failed to communicate Europe and its achievements. The emphasis on European issues has been weakening for the past 15 years, even in the case of the political parties which used to be pro-European; they stopped caring about the EU. It was convenient to take all the credit for political successes and blame the EU for every unpopular decision. And now it all comes back as a boomerang with the low support for the Union.

I believe we have already made a certain positive progress, but we need to change even more and come up with a constructive approach to EU politics. We will not achieve anything by only criticising, and the EU should not be an excuse to any dubious behaviour or decisions. We need to better communicate what we do in the EU. What remains vital is also the cooperation between politicians and the media, as they have the most influence on how the public sees the European Union. We need to better educate young people about European integration and its benefits. We are Europe and we are all responsible for the decisions we make, this is what we need to keep on explaining to all European citizens.

Liberal parties must strike back, show the courage, vision and convince people that we must do everything to invest in our European future.
As an MEP, you are particularly engaged with helping young people integrate in the labour market and become entrepreneurs. Could you tell us some of your initiatives in this field and why it is so important to you?

My intention is not to push everyone to become an entrepreneur, but rather showing them the way and supporting them to take a proactive approach to their future and career choices. My greatest achievement is to see that my work helps make their lives better. It is the case of successful stories of my trainees, who took part in my own project of motivational traineeships called “PročByNe?” (“WhyNot?”) supported by the ALDE Group, a project that I created in the Czech Republic three years ago. The programme is not that much about tackling youth unemployment in the country, but mainly about motivating young people to fight for their dreams. We already have over 60 successful alumni who completely changed their lives or got a job offer thanks to their dreamed traineeship, and this is what makes me really happy about my job. Tackling youth unemployment has been one of my biggest struggles since the first day of my parliamentary work. Therefore, winning the 2015 MEP Award in the Employment and Social Affairs category and being nominated for the same prize this year too is a true reward for all the efforts I put in it.

Your next months will be busy with another project: the ALDE manifesto, as you are a member of the drafting committee. How would you describe in one sentence your dream 2019 ALDE manifesto?

I want to see a confident, united and competitive Europe that creates new opportunities for young people to live a life of fulfilment; a Europe that simply works for its citizens!

“Liberal parties must strike back, show the courage, vision and convince people that we must do everything to invest in our European future.”
Christian Lindner MP
Leader of the FDP

Christian Lindner is the leader of the Free Democrats (FDP) in Germany, a position he has held since December 2013. Under his leadership, his party has been revived and transformed into a dynamic force in Germany, returning to the Bundestag in the last federal elections. The FDP now works as a team and leads the way in digitalisation and business competitiveness. We talked to him about the FDP’s recipe for success, the liberal achievements he is hoping for and his vision for Europe.
The FDP is back in the Bundestag. What are the key messages of the FDP’s campaign that secured a comeback to Parliament?

First and foremost: we are the party of self-reliance and personal responsibility. Therefore, we did not hold anyone else responsible for our defeat in the 2013 elections, but ourselves. We started with the question of why we existed, not how we can get back into the Bundestag most quickly. We developed a mission statement that was supposed to outlast specific campaigns. We agreed on three principles to guide us in the future: openness to progress, love for freedom, and fair rules. These principles led to precise goals, such as achieving a cutting edge educational system and an unbureaucratic state, and applying self-determination in every aspect of life. Our goal is politics for entrepreneurial people, not for individual professional groups or branches.

You won a seat in the regional Parliament in your home state of North Rhine-Westphalia at the age of 21. Now, under your leadership, the FDP has been revived and transformed into a dynamic force in Germany. What was your recipe for success?

From early on, I wanted to take responsibility for myself. For example, I founded my own company to not depend on my parents’ money anymore. As a teenager, I joined the FDP for similar reasons: the feeling of independence, the feeling of being able to independently make decisions for my own life and the feeling of building confidence in one’s abilities. This feeling has been my personal compass throughout my political life. We, in the FDP, first trust in people and their own initiative before we involve the state.

In 2013, the FDP was perceived as a pro-business party, but we want to be a pro-market party. This means being a party defending competition because it essentially leads to the best possible outcomes for everyone. The FDP was not voted out of the Parliament because the party was too liberal, rather the opposite. The FDP had not shown enough determination in presenting itself as liberal. For example, if banks are being saved by taxpayers, this does not fit the principles of a social market economy. Same goes for industries that are being protected from disruption.

Also, we needed to learn to be a team again as a party, because previously, we were known as the most estranged party in Germany.

Another grand coalition deal has been reached between Angela Merkel’s CDU and the German Socialists. What does this mean for Germany and for Europe?

In sum, same business as usual. However, the world is changing. There are new technologies and digitalisation is taking over. Power constellations in the international arena are changing with President Trump and with revived tensions with Russia. China is becoming more assertive. There is a new discussion about restricted free trade. France is becoming more competitive. The list goes on.

If Germany does not assess and change itself in this ever-changing world, we will fall behind. I am concerned that the next three and a half years will be lost years for the future of our country; that decisions are made now will cause problems in the future for competitiveness, integration, and demographics. Unfortunately, a so-called “Jamaica” coalition, supported by the FDP, would not have led to better outcomes. In Europe, we could have witnessed a turn away from Wolfgang Schäuble’s financial political course. That would not lead to a positive development.

We agreed on three principles to guide us in the future: openness to progress, love for freedom, and fair rules.

The FDP is now one of the loudest voices in opposition in the Bundestag. What liberal achievements are you hoping for?

Over the past four years, we have shown that change is possible from the opposition — without even being present in the Parliament. Out of all parties, we prioritised digitalisation the most, which led to everyone else to at least recognise the importance of the topic. Unfortunately, this realisation has not led to real action yet. Additionally, I would consider the turn in the refugee debate one of our achievements as well. The FDP is a democratic alternative to the centre that wants liberal politics à la Canada. The most important subjects for us for the future are a reform of our education system and climate policies that incorporate international goals but use market economy tools.

The European Union needs to change to be future-proof. Which kind of reforms do you envision?

We should welcome the fact that we are having a European debate again after President Emmanuel Macron presented his ideas. We should, however, not let him alone lead all those debates. On the one hand, liberals across Europe need to campaign for more commonality on security, migration, free trade, cooperation with Africa, a digital single market, and fair competition. On the other hand, we should also be the force encouraging EU Member States to be more self-reliant and to initiate reforms. Only through individual responsibility will Member States be incentivised to tackle their own problems and reforms. The ideas brought forward by the Dutch coalition of VVD and D66, for example, are convincing. They combine fiscal self-responsibility with a focus on EU investments in influential ideas and projects. We are open to joint investments in new technologies, such as a joint industry initiative for battery technology and e-cars.
How EWA helped inspire me to power

When I was part of the very first class of the European Women's Academy (EWA) of political leadership and campaigning in 2016, I had been in politics for nine years already. I had participated in two local and one national election campaigns, had been elected as a local representative in my home community, and I was member of the national board of Venstre, the liberal party of Norway. Yet, EWA definitely changed my life as a female politician. It turned out to be the very best training in politics and targeted campaigning ever!

Firstly, the European Women's Academy provided me with a complete set of tools and techniques to act more strategic and shape my messages, to brand myself in the media, to build networks and a core team for my campaign, and to raise self-awareness and self-confidence in regard to gender aspects in politics. I learned how to handle obstacles and challenges that women in politics still face – and it proved to be upmost important knowledge in the election campaign in 2017.

Secondly, EWA taught me about the necessity and beauty of fundraising. I never thought I would embrace the idea of personally collecting money for my campaign – but that was before I met Annika, Ian and the rest of the fantastic EWA team. Thanks to this programme, not only my campaign team, but the entire Venstre party started raising money in a totally new way in 2017. And it worked. “Team Rebekka” ended up raising even more money than planned, and that gave me more power, a bigger network, more freedom to create my campaign and more visibility than in all earlier campaigns.

“If we really want to achieve gender equality, we need to inspire and connect dedicated women to support their strength and talents. That’s exactly what EWA is all about.”

Last, but not least, EWA inspired and empowered me profoundly. I got to know a bunch of wonderful and smart liberal women from all over Europe who have developed a sisterhood of politicians that is still alive and thriving. The three training sessions of the European Women's Academy were an important ingredient in my 15-month election campaign, which again was a significant component in Venstre succeeding in the national elections in 2017. I did not get elected to Parliament, but I won many votes for my party in a difficult election. Besides, my campaign – and me as a person and candidate – stood out and inspired other candidates and campaigns within the party. As a result, when Venstre entered the government some months later, I was appointed Deputy Minister of Research and Higher Education.

EWA has helped me making my way through politics and to acceding to power. It inspired me to work harder and do it in the best way I can. I am truly thankful to the ALDE Party and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for encouraging and empowering me and many more liberal women across Europe. Several candidates from the 2016 class got elected. Together, we are a solid proof of EWA’s crucial role in providing Europe with strong female liberal leaders in the years to come. If we really want to achieve gender equality, we need to inspire and connect dedicated women to support their strength and talents. That’s exactly what the European Women’s Academy is all about.

Rebekka Borsch
Deputy Minister
Research and Higher Education
Venstre, Norway
Chris Pyak and Thalia Ntoka were re-elected as members of the Individual Members Steering Committee in October 2017 and a few weeks after, were appointed as Co-Chairs. Thalia has worked hard for expanding the network of country coordinators and for launching the blog Liberal Words, while Chris is one of the leaders behind the strategy process for individual members. Find out more in this interview about their vision for the future of ALDE Party’s Individual Membership as well as their plans to support liberal candidates for the 2019 European elections.
“I am in favour of big changes, so I would like to see us grow and have a stronger voice inside the ALDE Party as well as in our countries and in Europe.”

Chris, in 2017, you initiated the “strategy process”. Can you tell us more about it and why is it important for individual membership?

CP: The strategy process helped us individual members find our purpose. We are a force for progress that aims to empower individual citizens all over Europe. This is the reason why, among other things, we fight for a reform of the European Union and for the creation of a federal structure that gives more power to the European Parliament. For the moment, regular citizens have little influence over European policy decisions and holding those in power on EU level accountable. This must change, and ALDE Party Individual Members are those who fight for this.

Thalia, you have worked with a number of our members to establish a blog for individual members. Why is that blog so valuable for the visibility of individual members?

TN: Our blog Liberal Words was one of our biggest challenges, and I am really happy that we succeeded to establish it the way we wanted it, even though there is always room for improvement. We are always encouraging our members to write and participate with their pieces and the reason is very simple: we believe that it is the perfect way to share with our own words, our thoughts for the Europe we want, our fears for incidents we believe could become a threat for Europe, and our common campaigns. Liberal Words is also a platform for us to make public to other people things that happens in the countries we live in.

Our next step is to invite the ALDE Members of the European Parliament, and other relevant people within the ALDE Party to share their vision for the future of Europe on our blog. In general, I am always supportive of the idea that when something is given to you, you should take it and improve it.

Chris, the mandate of the Steering Committee is until the autumn of 2019 and includes the European elections. What do you have in mind how can members get involved in the campaign?

CP: We are Europeans. Ideas are more important to us than someone’s place of birth. That is why we want to support liberal candidates all over Europe for the 2019 elections. We will invite every candidate for the European Parliament in 2019 to reach out to us. We would then encourage individual members from all over Europe to rush to their support, especially for those candidates who compete for seats that can be won, but that are not secured yet. In short: we will give our members the opportunity to become the drop of water that tips the balance of the bucket in favour of our liberal candidates.

Could you tell us your favourite spot in your cities, Düsseldorf for Chris and Athens for Thalia?

CP: At the moment, this would be the “Wildpark”, which is in walking distance from my house. It is a green forest, full of deers, sheeps, goats and other animals. It is a place where you can breathe and enjoy a moment of silence. The perfect place to clear your head and think about the strategies that can move you all the way towards your goal - and not just half a step ahead.

TN: I think many people would expect me to write about Akropolis or the areas of Plaka or Monastiraki, and I think this should be the best answer because those places show our visitors our history and this is what I should promote. They are the reason for our tourism, and I hope we offer you all the best services once you visit us. Also, the museum of Akropolis makes you travel back in time in a very interesting way.

But since you are asking about my favourite spot, I would suggest a very lively area called Kolonaki, which is right now very trendy, full of people enjoying their coffee and food in wonderful cafés and restaurants. In this district, you can also shop anything you want, or if you are feeling more adventurous, you can take a walking path that will lead you to Lycabettus Hill, where you can enjoy an amazing view of the city.

“Ideas are more important to us than someone’s birth place. That is why we want to support liberal candidates all over Europe for the 2019 elections.”
ALDE Towards 2019 European Elections

- **Deadline for nominations**: 01/02 February 2019
- **Launch of Manifesto Drafting Process**: 1-2 December 2017, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- **Consultation on Lead Candidate status ahead of European Council**: 14 December 2018, Brussels, Belgium
- **Manifesto Forums all over Europe**: 8-10 November 2018
- **Adoption of the Manifesto Opening of nominations lead candidate**: 01/02 February 2019, Madrid, Spain
- **End of February 2019**: Electoral Congress and Campaign kick-off
- **End of May 2019**: European elections
Integration of Western Balkans - a bridge for the EU

The integration of the Western Balkans countries, once they meet the accession criteria, would benefit the European Union for a number of security, political and economic reasons. First we must not forget the fact that geographically, the Western Balkans countries are already inside the EU. Thus, the instability in the region directly affects the stability of the Union. The integration of these countries into the European Union, after successfully implemented reforms and alignment with the EU acquis, would diminish security threats right at the doorstep of the EU, and would cost the EU far less than any crisis containment measures in the future. As already noted, because geographically the Western Balkans are in between EU countries, it interrupts communication between EU Member States, as well as EU partner countries. For example, the shortest trade and transport routes with Turkey and the Middle East run through the region. Investments in the region’s infrastructure would boost the local and the European economy and cut trade and transport costs within the EU as well as with Turkey and beyond. In this sense, from a strategic perspective, the Western Balkans can serve as EU protection from negative influences from the East and South, but also as a bridge to these two adjacent areas of the Union. That is why, the EU should take advantage of its political and economic leverage with the region.

An essential part of further EU enlargement is the message it sends. Successful integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union would show the EU’s ability to spread its influence to its immediate neighbourhood and as such, position the EU as a credible actor in expanding its influence to the area of its immediate and wider interest, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, among others.

By supporting the democratisation of the Western Balkans countries, the EU strengthens its position in the international arena as an advocate of fundamental democratic values.

One should not neglect the economic interests of the EU in the Western Balkans. The region has an enormous potential for renewable energy, particularly solar and wind, and it is of vital importance for the EU to secure permanent and safe access to renewable energy sources of the Western Balkans. Moreover, some key gas routes transporting gas from Russia and/or Central Asia will run through the region. The integration of the Western Balkans within the Union would secure this vital energy infrastructure and diversify energy sources for several Member States.

The lack of EU influence in the Western Balkans, but also in the immediate Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods of the EU, would enable stronger influence of other world powers whose interests and values are not consistent with European values, and thus bring problems directly to the EU’s external borders.

The accession of the Republic of Croatia to the EU has certainly contributed to the strengthening of democratic institutions in the country, but Croatian governments have not yet been able to take advantage of all the benefits of EU membership. The awareness of the benefits of the membership of Croatia in the EU is not yet universal. Nonetheless, Croatia is a positive and encouraging example for the Southeastern European countries. With the EU membership, Croatia has a stronger impact on the stability of the Western Balkans and that is the core advantage that Croatia has brought to the European Union.

Jozo Radoš MEP
Member of the European Parliament
GLAS, Croatia
On Valentine’s Day in 1995 I took my first steps in the Western Balkans as a United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) soldier.

As a conscripted soldier, I wanted to do something useful, which is why I ended up in Srebrenica. “Why risk your life for Bosnia?” and “put a fence around it and let them fight their civil war themselves” are just a few reactions I received from people around me. Today, I still wonder how people who once lived together peacefully can suddenly slaughter each other.

I am currently a member of the House of Representatives of The Netherlands, where I am a Spokesman for my party on the Western Balkans. Last year, I visited the former Yugoslavia a couple of times. First, as a panel member at a conference of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, later, as an election observer in Serbia, and finally, on a visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In coming May, we will visit Serbia, Montenegro and Albania with a parliamentary delegation prior to the Summit on the Western Balkans in Sofia.

The European Union has a great interest in a stable Western Balkans – its own backyard. No one wants war and refugee flows like in the 90s, but the countries in the Balkans will have to take steps towards stability themselves. They must reform their countries so that the accession criteria are met. What’s most important is that political leaders do not reform their country because the European Union demands that from them, but because they see it as what is best for their country and for their people. A politician who is concerned with his or her country and its inhabitants, tackles corruption, fights organised crime, ensures an independent judicial power, guarantees the rule of law, ensures that democratic institutions function normally, facilitates economic growth and ensures good relations with its neighbours. He does not drop smoke bombs in Parliament, as the opposition in Kosovo did on 21 March 2018 in order to thwart a vote on a border deal with neighbouring Montenegro. He is not afraid of diverse and independent media and does not play the ethnic card during difficult times. Do Balkan politicians do that enough right now? Do they act in the interest of their inhabitants? I doubt it. This makes it difficult to create support for EU enlargement with the countries of the Western Balkans.

People in the European Union have no desire to import the current political culture of the Western Balkans, especially now that the European Union finds itself in divorce proceedings with the United Kingdom. By allowing countries with many problems, such as a weak rule of law and too much corruption, we have made EU enlargement go too fast in the past.

In this light, it is unwise that the European Commission has mentioned a date - 2025 for Montenegro and Serbia - for possible accession. By naming a date, there is a high risk that countries will focus more on the date than on meeting the criteria. This is not how they should approach this. Whether or not countries meet the criteria, this should be evaluated strictly and fairly.

Fear is a bad counsellor, which is why responding to anxiety is of no help. The argument that foreign powers will dominate the Western Balkans if they do not join the EU, is not helpful. This kind of blackmail will convince no one.

The Balkans will need to have a convincing and positive narrative towards the European Union, explaining why they qualify for accession and what their added value is. This is imperative for support among the European nations. Obviously, the European Union can and should provide help in the process, but in the end these countries will have to take the necessary steps towards accession themselves.

Anne Mulder MP
Spokesman on European Affairs
VVD, the Netherlands
In June 2016 the United Kingdom held a referendum on its membership in the EU. Leave won by a tiny margin, which is all that is needed under UK legislation. The result was a disaster for all those who believe and champion European ideals and Brexit is likely to be disastrous for the country’s economy, social rights, and the freedoms of future generations.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron called the referendum to appease the right-wing of his own party and nationalist parties like the UK Independence Party that had won many seats at the last European elections. As soon as the result was clear, Cameron resigned, as did other champions of the Leave campaign, such as Boris Johnson who left the details to Mrs May, who had campaigned to remain. The fact that she then took such a hard line declaring that we would leave the Customs Union and the Single Market shows that the right wing in her party are still in control. But what was clear was that not only did the Brexiteers not expect to win, they had no plan for what Brexit looked like either.

The campaign to leave was based on lies and they accused the Remain campaign of “Project Fear” when they highlighted the consequences of leaving the European Union. The Leave campaign was littered with scaremongering with racist undertones such as claiming that future Turkish membership of the EU will pave the way for terrorists from bordering countries to freely enter the UK, and linking EU free movement with overstretched public services, the lack of housing and terrorist attacks.

The result of this referendum has not only divided the country, it has also divided families. EU nationals in the UK, and UK nationals in Europe have been left with uncertain futures. EU citizens in the UK were denied a vote, some having lived most of their adult lives in the United Kingdom. British citizens living elsewhere also had no vote if they had lived out of the UK for over 15 years.

It is these citizens who will be most affected by Brexit as they see their EU rights stripped away.
Unless citizens’ rights are at the forefront of negotiations and ring-fenced from the “nothing is agreed, until everything is agreed” line in negotiations, they could be the hardest hit by Brexit. The European Parliament has made its line on protecting these citizens clear, and some progress has been made, but there is still a lot yet to do to ensure that “Brexit citizens” are not punished for life decisions they made using EU rights.

I am working with other Members of the European Parliament to prioritise citizens’ rights as it is essential that EU citizens who live and work in the UK will not be forced to leave their homes or face intolerable financial burdens to clarify their status. On behalf of all those citizens, I would like to thank my colleagues for their help and support in the various committees of the Parliament.

Young people will also be some of the hardest hit as opportunities like travel, training and work in other EU member states may be taken from them. As Liberal Democrats, we have always campaigned for young people to have a say in their future and the future of their country. Had 16 and 17 year olds been given voting rights, as they were in the Scottish independence referendum, the result might have been very different.

As the negotiations progress, it is clear that the Conservative government, propped up by hard-right Northern Irish MPs are not only without plans, they underestimate the enormity of the task. Given the underlying challenges that the UK now faces with Brexit it is hard to see how we can make it a success. It is certainly impossible to see how any sensible agreement covering the magnitude of issues can be achieved before March next year.

“ We are the only major party to put the rights of EU citizens first and our Members of Parliament in Westminster have consistently voted to stay in the Single Market and Customs Union. ”

Still to be agreed are issues such as the Irish border issue, security issues and data handling, police cooperation and extradition, border controls and inspections to name just a few. As soon as the UK leaves the EU, it will also leave all the 50 or so trade agreements and over 700 other agreements that cover trade, medicines and the plethora of other daily issues that affect daily life and trade.

The Liberal Democrats accept the result of the referendum. However, the results of the terms of a leave vote were not made clear to the British voters and almost two years after the referendum it is still not clear exactly what Brexit means. That is why we say that when we really understand what Brexit is, the voters should have a vote on the final deal, with the choice of remaining as full members if they reject that deal. This won’t be easy to achieve, and timing will be critical, but we are determined to fight for the future of our country.

The Liberal Democrats as an internationalist party remain committed to our position of staying members of the EU. We have made our “Exit from Brexit” (#ExitfromBrexit) stance strong, we are the only major party to put the rights of EU citizens first and our Members of Parliament in Westminster have consistently voted to stay in the Single Market and Customs Union. The remain voters in the UK know that the Liberal Democrats are the party of remain and support has been growing since the referendum through membership numbers and seats gained in local elections.

Leaving the European Union is unprecedented, and with a Conservative government still pandering to the hard-line nationalists, it is impossible to see benefits. The European Union brings huge benefits that the UK should not abandon. We, as Liberal Democrats, will do everything we can to ensure a democratic decision is taken on the terms of Brexit, a decision that is taken by the voters and this time they will know what they are voting for. The people in the United Kingdom should be able to, and deserve to, make a decision based on the facts.

“ The people in the United Kingdom should be able to, and deserve to, make a decision based on the facts. ”

Catherine Bearder MEP
Member of the European Parliament
Liberal Democrats, United Kingdom
Social media highlights

Facebook
/aldeparty
Welcome to our new very special @ALDEindMembers: @SophieintVeld from @d66 - welcome to the family! #ALDEcongress

The drafting committee of the #ALDEmanifesto for the 2019 European elections today together for the first time in Brussels under the leadership of Chair @TaaviRoivas. Time to move Europe forward! #liberalsunited

Congratulations to the newly elected ALDE Party Bureau! #ALDEcongress

CRASHES YOUR FACEBOOK LIVE
Trine Skei Grande MP

**Trine Skei Grande** is the new Minister of Culture of Norway, after her party, Venstre, joined the government in January 2018. Venstre is now in charge of three ministries. “It is my job to take Norway in a greener and more social-liberal direction, and I have got a strong crew with me on the team,” she commented.

Emma Bonino MP

**Emma Bonino** led the pro-European list Più Europa, featuring ALDE member party Radicali Italiani, in the last Italian elections in March. Più Europa obtained three seats in the single-member constituencies, including Bonino’s, and one seat in the European constituency. In the coming months, they plan to work even harder to get to 4% in the 2019 European elections.

Nils Torvalds MEP

**Nils Torvalds** is one of a number of ALDE Group MEPs who recently picked up an MEP Award for their work in the European Parliament, a prize awarded annually by the Parliament Magazine. Torvalds received the award in recognition of his work in field of the environment emphasising the key role of forests when moving towards a fossil-free EU. His fellow MEP colleagues Petras Aušrevičius, Ilhan Kyuchyuk and Morten Helveg Petersen also received awards.

Svenja Hahn

**Svenja Hahn** is the new President of LYMEC, the European Liberal Youth, following her election at their recent Congress in Berlin. She is also a member of the Board of FDP Hamburg as well as a member of the ALDE Manifesto Drafting Committee for the 2019 European elections. She has previously been LYMEC’s Vice President.
More and more citizens think and act across borders. **ALDE Party’s individual membership** allows us to engage and involve individuals to help us build a stronger pan-European party. Join us today!

**NOT YET A MEMBER**

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