

## **ALDE input to the Conference on the Future of Europe**

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge to Europe and adds to a series of challenges that Europe has faced in the last years: climate change, the migration crisis, the financial crisis, Brexit, and the rise of populism. All these crises have exposed the EU's inability to react rapidly and jointly to challenges, the lack of resilience of Member States, and the institutional defects in the Union. The need for EU reform has never been so evident.

As European Liberals, we share a responsibility to foster an honest debate about the future of Europe which should not be a public relations exercise but rather include all democratic input by citizens, NGO's, political parties, EU institutions, and Member States together with their national parliaments and subnational governments to lead to a more effective and democratic European Union with a positive impact the lives of our citizens.

By undertaking true structural reforms of institutions and policies, we can become a capable and leading actor on the world stage. The ALDE Party must work, along with other democratic political forces, to redefine our foundations for a united, and democratic Europe.

We welcome the European Commission's initiative to create the Conference on the Future of Europe. This Conference is an opportunity to reform Europe and build an EU which is powerful, united, stronger and with the solidary and capacity to tackle emergencies and protect its citizens. In order to bring about true reforms, the EU needs to move forward and make the Conference become a reality and to make it as inclusive as possible.

The conclusions of the Conference must lead to credible and progressive reforms. We must use this opportunity to move forward with institutional reforms in order to make the EU more accountable to its citizens and strengthen Europe's role in the world. Following the Conference on the Future of Europe, a European Convention should be convened in order to implement necessary treaty adjustments.

ALDE Party input to the Conference could focus on issues such as the protection and promotion of human rights, the further development of the Schengen system, democratic reforms in the EU, mitigating climate change, the energy transition, the modernisation of EU competition law to adapt it to the challenge of digitalisation and globalisation, the enlargement process and the creation of a European Security Council in foreign policy matters. More globally, these issues are further exacerbated by the challenges recently posed to multilateral institutions.

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## **Strengthening European Democracy and values**

The European Parliament should have one seat in Brussels. The European Parliament as well as all political groups and must be reinforced with the right to initiate legislation.

Harmonisation of EU Member States' laws for the European Parliament elections, to fix inequality concerns such as the electoral threshold and the right to vote from abroad.

Subsequent European elections should be held using constituencies with geographic and demographic size that ensures connection between voters and representatives.

The Commissioners should no longer be proposed by the 27 Member States, but should be limited to a maximum of 18 members and nominated by the President-elect of the Commission alone and confirmed individually by Parliament. In addition, Parliament must be reinforced with the right to remove individual Commissioners.

Transnational lists with the necessary adjustments of national legislation in each Member State need to be in place for the next European elections, allowing citizens to vote for candidates from across the EU.

The European Union should take steps in order to safeguard liberal values such as the rule of law, democracy, freedom of speech, as well as prevent racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, and consolidate an area of diversity, freedom, security and justice. Further steps should also be taken to develop tools and mechanisms to strengthen the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs.

## **The EU as a global leader**

Reinforcement of the European External Action Services (EEAS) and the High Commissioner of European Foreign and Security Policy. The High Representative should be able to act as a full-fledged 'EU Foreign Minister'.

Establishment of a European seat in the UN Security Council and other organisations, and give the High Representative full and equal speaking rights in the UN GA.

Introduce the Qualified Majority Voting for decisions on foreign and security policies.

Establishment and implementation of the European Defence Union subject to parliamentary control.

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Support the countries of the Western Balkans and enhance the accession process to ensure that the enlargement of the Union continues in parallel with the discussions on the future of Europe and the internal reform of the EU. The Conference must engage widely with representatives of the Western Balkans, especially the next generations.

The EU should consistently promote human rights around the globe. The observance of human rights should be a basic condition of all international agreements. Moreover, the EU must become more resilient against foreign influence through e.g. disinformation and state-backed foreign direct investment (FDI) in critical infrastructure.

### **Sustainable development and fighting climate change**

Europe should take a leading role fighting climate change, protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development. This will allow it to maintain and even further improve quality of life on the European continent and worldwide, both today and for future generations. Europe should ensure the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Fighting climate change and sustainable development offer great economic opportunities. Europe should set the right framework conditions for European businesses to grasp these opportunities. Research and innovation are key ingredients alongside smart regulation in order to support green growth.

### **The market economy, shared values, free trade and green growth**

The European Union has a responsibility to promote economic cooperation and growth within the EU and with the rest of the world. The European Union should set the necessary conditions and binding targets to foster green growth and sustainable development in a market economy based on equal opportunities, climate neutrality, and free competition.

Strengthen co-operation in environmental protection on land and at sea, between the EU and Member States to provide the healthy environment for current and future generations.

The European Union needs to promote free and rule-based trade and fight for modern and progressive free trade agreements to stimulate jobs, green growth and EU fundamental values.

The completion and expansion of the Single Market must be prioritized to identify and create new opportunities for economic growth and greater innovation and boost the EU's competitiveness.

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The EU must build a fully-functioning Digital Single Market to harness the full potential of innovative technologies and make the EU the most attractive place for companies in the digital economy.

An active monitoring of investments in EU companies that may affect national or public security in Europe and regular assessments of possible risks and market distortions caused by such interventions.

Foreign companies should only have access to the European procurement market if they are in line with relevant WTO agreements.

### **EU funding**

Use more financial instruments such as loans or guarantees to mobilise private capital and incentivise innovation. Evaluate the efficiency of existing programmes, especially the co-existence of national and European programme approaches.

The European Recovery Programme has been adopted by all member states, we should now implement it and the projects financed by the Next Generation Europe should be an instrument, together with the Green Deal, to support research and innovative start-ups alongside programmes for upskilling the European workforce, equipping citizens with improved digital skills, and skills for the 21st century. This programme should create a more robust and sustainable European economy.

### **Rule of law and human rights**

Considering the weakening of democracy and rule of law as well as the undermining of fundamental rights for instance by the governments of Hungary and Poland that threatens to extend to other member states, we need to establish effective measures at European level to protect the basic values of the European Union according to Article 2 TEU.

The current system based on Article 7 TEU has not proved to be effective. Therefore, the European Parliament was right to come up with a new approach during the negotiations on the multi-annual financial framework and Next Generation EU.

The new opportunity to suspend the payment of financial support in response to an ongoing breach of the values of Article 2 TEU by the Council is crucial for the protection of these values. This budgetary rescue package for the rule of law is a new milestone in the EU's history. There must be no more rebate on the EU's values.

### **Asylum and immigration**

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Integration is the key element in order to obtain successful and sustainable immigration. Integration is reached through successful access to the labour market and education and through adoption of basic liberal values including freedom of expression, religious freedom, secularism, capitalism, democracy, freedom of the press, racial equality, gender equality, equal rights regardless on sexual orientation or gender identity. Member states and immigrants are both responsible for insuring successful integration.

For those applying for asylum in the EU, there should be a humane and effective Common European Asylum System with high-quality reception, responsibility sharing, and efficient procedures in line with EU fundamental standards. This would also include a harmonisation of the criteria, acceptance rates and conditions for asylum seekers and improved return procedures. Those who do not qualify for asylum should return back to their countries of origin in respect with EU law.

EU institutions and Member States should increase funding for reception centres in the regions of origin where the vast majority of asylum seekers are currently hosted, and should devise safe and legal pathways, providing asylum seekers for alternatives to apply for asylum in the EU without the need to risk their lives physically traveling to the EU and thus reducing their risk of falling prey to human traffickers.

There needs to be a proposal under EU law to better coordinate search and rescue efforts in the Mediterranean, since member states have to share their responsibility to support those efforts and, unless asylum status is denied, host the people that have been rescued at sea.

Extend the scope of the EU blue card to act as an EU wide work permit applied by all Member States. When the permit expires, they should return back to their countries of origin.

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