WORKING DOCUMENT FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2024

AN EFA VISION FOR A EUROPE FOR ALL

European Free Alliance

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Working document for the 2024 European Parliament elections

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Foreword

The European Free Alliance (EFA) is the only European political party that stands for self-determination as its foundational principle. We are an alliance of 41 parties representing stateless nations, regions and minorities across Europe. We stand for cultural and linguistic diversity, human, civil and political rights, gender equality, and the principle of subsidiarity. We do not allow fundamental rights and freedoms to be eroded or attacked. We believe European democracy should become more assertive and resilient.

Together with the rule of law and the EU fundamental rights and freedoms, democracy constitutes the bedrock of European society. We seek to build a Europe **for all** peoples, nations, minorities and regions – not only the powerful centralised states and their majority interests. This vision of Europe must give voice to those who are too often excluded, including women, minority groups, stateless nations and many more.

In June 2024, European voters will choose the direction for the EU for the next five years. Those five years will be turbulent and uncertain, and there will be many challenges that we will have to face as a continent. But they will also provide an opportunity to reshape the EU to better reflect its true diversity, and to give voice to *all* its peoples.

Since the last European elections in 2019, there have been huge developments that have impacted the life of every European. A global pandemic forced us into lockdown, with accompanying economic and social crises. The United Kingdom has withdrawn from the EU. The Qatargate and Moroccogate corruption scandals have shaken public trust in EU politicians, while the Pegasus revelations have shown the extent to which states are spying on their political opponents and on civil society, including lawyers and journalists. Inflation and the cost of living are increasing at a frightening pace, leaving millions of Europeans in poverty or at risk of falling into it. And above all, full-scale war has returned to the continent with the Russian Federation's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

In each case, the response was at least partly a European one. European-level solutions are the appropriate response to global challenges. But every part of Europe has its own unique needs, and a centralising Union will be doomed to fail both in understanding and providing for the needs of its citizens. For EFA, democracy and decentralisation must go hand in hand.

For now, the EU's own democracy is incomplete. Its inability to respond to some European nations' push for self-determination has shown this dramatically. Is the EU a real union of its citizens, or merely a club of states? This question will not go away no matter how inconvenient it is for established state interests. On the contrary: Europe's citizens and peoples are finding their voice, and they demand to be heard.

In June 2024 they have an opportunity to raise that voice. But it won't be enough to simply give another mandate to the mainstream political forces that have missed every opportunity to enact

real change in Europe. To make the European Union able to give voice to *all* its citizens – men and women, rich and poor, majority and minority – there is an urgent need for every people, territory and community to be empowered.

We want to see a strong, decisive and effective Union. One which focuses on the powers that deliver a better Europe, which generates added value, and which is built from the bottom up.

The EU's unique blend of intergovernmentalism and a European-level community approach is its strength. EFA stands for a political model that truly reflects its peoples and their interests. One that can give them representation, empowerment and hope.

We want a Europe that works **for all.**

Democracy for all

Intro

This election is a turning point for Europe. Its results will determine the future direction of a whole continent – for better or for worse. It is essential that *everybody* is involved in that decision. 450 million people will be impacted by the outcome.

But currently the EU only allows for a few voices to be heard. Despite reforms over the decades to make it more democratic and closer to the citizens, it is still flawed in many ways. In too many cases, the final say on EU policy falls to the member states, represented by their leaders in the European Council and their ministers in the Council of the EU; the EU's own figureheads, like the Commissioners and Commission President, are mostly senior politicians who got their jobs through political appointments by the member states. Certain voices – like those of nations and minorities that do not have their own state – are frozen out of this state-focused system.

And ultimately, the EU is only as democratic as its member states – many of which are incapable or unwilling to grant proper representation to their citizens' wishes. Consider the Spanish refusal to grant the Catalans a say on their political future, or the refusal of many states to recognise their minorities.

In the last few years, a large-scale process of discussing and planning the next steps for the EU took place: the Conference on the Future of Europe. That exercise showed that even the EU institutions were beginning to recognise the need for change. But in the end, the debate came and went with very little public awareness and, so far, no meaningful output. Many of the proposals submitted by citizens and stakeholders – including by EFA – have been ignored even despite gaining huge public support.

It doesn't have to be that way. The European Parliament provides a link directly to the citizens, but it still needs further empowerment as a true co-legislator, and, particularly, to be granted the right of initiative to propose EU legislation. The right institutions exist, but the power balance is wrong.

We want a radically different Europe: one that allows for new states, new structures, and new ways of involving minorities and voices which are not currently heard. We need the readiness and ambition to envision a Europe that is very different to the one we have.

Above all, that must involve the recognition of the democratic right to self-determination. That right, enshrined in international law, allows all peoples to choose their own future and an institutional framework that empowers them. That includes the recognition of their linguistic and cultural rights, respect for the principle of subsidiarity, increased autonomy or independence. We support all democratic and peaceful means to pursue those goals.

EU reform for all

The debate about making changes to the EU Treaties has returned to Brussels. But there is no point in undertaking the laborious process of treaty change just to make small adjustments. Instead, we should be drafting **a new European Constitution** that will radically shake up the democratic basis of EU and its relationship with its states, nations, regions and citizens.

First, the **right to self-determination must be codified in the Treaties**. The EU should be a Union of its peoples *first*, not only a Union of States. This should include the explicit recognition that **the member states are not the highest power in the Union**. When there are democratic disputes or violations of European values in the member states, the EU must be a supranational authority that can **intervene** and resolve them. EFA Members of the European Parliament have been among those who have worked on and presented a legislative proposal for an EU regulation for exactly this.[1] It provides a blueprint for how the EU can mediate to ensure the rights of peoples to decide their own future can be exercised, even when the state is opposed. It proves that it is possible within the current EU competences: for this step, no Treaty Change is necessary.

European decision-making is often paralysed by the need to seek consensus among all member states. This system is unworkable, and in practice only grants veto powers to certain actors (such as the states) while ignoring the legitimate wishes of others (such as sub-state regions or minorities). That is why EFA seeks to **abolish the veto in the Council of the EU**, to be replaced with Qualified Majority Voting in all cases, including tax policy, social policy, foreign and security policy, and all budgetary procedures, including own resources and the multiannual financial framework. We want more voices involved in the EU process, but no veto powers.

To put the citizens on an equal footing with the states, we also demand the power of **legislative initiative for the European Parliament**. Currently, only the European Commission can propose laws, and the role of the Parliament is simply to amend or approve them. It is absurd to have a Parliament that can only react and not propose. This will be the first step in making the European Parliament the real democratic centre of the EU.

The symbolic importance of the European Parliament is immense. It is the only international legislature of its kind. Its seat in Strasbourg is also symbolically extremely powerful for the history of the EU: as the capital of Alsace, it embodies Franco-German reconciliation and peace in Europe. It is also in Strasbourg like the [consciences] of the world, like Nelson Mandela, are rewarded with the Sakharov Prize, awarded by the European Parliament. Human rights are inscribed in the very heart of the institutions that sit in that city. Strasbourg also represents the decentralisation of the EU's institutions: were it not for this city, all the EU's most visible politics would take place in Brussels, perpetuating the image of a distant, centralising force. If Brussels were to become the EU's only capital, it would mean a great loss for Europe.

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[1] https://selfdeterminationcaucus.eu/selfdetermination_caucus.pdf

The European Commission, meanwhile, can keep its role as the EU's executive. But it, too, urgently needs to be democratised. Some European political parties, including EFA, have started to nominate a lead candidate (Spitzenkandidat) for the position of Commission President. This is a step forward, but so long as it is an informal process (which some parties refuse to engage with) rather than a simple requirement, the whole system is inconsistent and undemocratic and can simply be ignored by the member states. In 2019, for example, Ursula von der Leyen became Commission President despite not being a lead candidate for any party – proof that the current EU system lacks democracy when it comes to selecting its leadership.

Future European elections should be more like other elections. The **European Commission President** should be **elected by the people's representatives sitting in the European Parliament**, after having negotiated a coalition agreement with the political groups supporting the candidate, so that it is undeniable that he/she has the mandate to lead. Furthermore, the current situation with a European Commission President and a President of the European Council is confusing, because it is not clear who has the leadership mandate in the EU. The current allocation of EU commissioners to each member state can also lead to ineffectiveness in administration. EFA therefore sees the need to **conduct a debate about the current structures of the EU** in order to achieve a clearer distribution of tasks and clearer structures in the EU Commission, in the European Council and in the EU administration.

As a counterweight to the influence of the member states, and to ensure that all parts of Europe have formal representation in the EU system, we also seek **to enhance the role of the European Committee of the Regions**. Rather than being merely an advisory body without real power, it should have real power to shape and amend European legislation, becoming a real chamber of the regions in Europe to represent the voice of the territories at Union level.

Votes for all

In terms of numbers of voters, the European elections are the second-biggest democratic event in the world (after the elections to the Parliament of India). But in practice the elections are still more *state-based* than *European*: there are effectively 27 different elections, one for each member state, rather than a single European election. By introducing a **European electoral law**, this can be harmonised and better linked together, building more of a European democratic identity.

Given the wide variety of electoral traditions across Europe, it makes sense to hold the elections on multiple days so that each territory can vote in line with its established practices. But when it comes to the franchise, Europeans are not equal: different member states treat their electorates differently. We seek the **right to vote at 16 for all Europeans**, in recognition of the fact that young people have a vital role to play in building the future of Europe. We also want the **removal of all unfair barriers** to electoral participation. Electoral thresholds are used in many European countries to deny representation to smaller parties – in some cases, a deliberate tactic to exclude national minorities from political participation. This is unacceptable in any democracy. All Europeans should know that they will get the results they vote for. For that reason, we want **no electoral thresholds** for European elections, so that the European Parliament is as diverse as Europe itself.

We also support best practice models to be adopted by more states in the EU, to ensure representation for small ethnic minorities or special territories in the EU. This already exists in the case of the German-speaking community in Belgium, and should be expanded to include other examples, such as the Åland Islands. This goes especially for cases when their effective

representation at the state level is cut off or they are subject to state-level pressure and threats if they declare their free will in 'democratic' elections, as is the case for the Turkish minority in Western Thrace.

European constituencies must also reflect the regional diversity within states: it is absurd that large states like Spain or France are a single constituency when there is huge diversity within them, including stateless nations that are denied political representation. These European mega-constituencies must be broken down into smaller areas that are more in line with local interests and identities, and which embrace historical stateless nations' borders.

The candidates for election themselves should also reflect Europe's diversity. In 2022, the global share of women in national parliaments reached 26.2% - up from 22.4% in 2015. At that pace, it will take another 40 years for women and men to be represented equally in national parliaments. In the European Parliament during the 2019-2024 term, just over 40% of MEPs were women – still well below parity. Addressing this situation would promote gender equality and increase the legitimacy of European institutions. It would also improve the efficiency and responsiveness of EU policies, better fitting women's needs. This could be done through legal means: the EU could strive towards gender-balanced lists to ensure parity in the Parliament, such as by introducing **double preference voting, conditioned on gender**, to be made the standard voting system for European elections.

However, we must recognise that the underrepresentation of women is not only a legal matter, but also a result of cultural and social norms that create and maintain gender stereotypes and gender inequalities. The EU, its member states and the media must take action to change mentalities and social behaviour regarding the role of women and take action to eliminate gender stereotypes and gender-based violence. Moreover, all EU institutions and nominations should incorporate a gender balance approach.

EFA also demands that the EU adopt appropriate measures to combat different forms of discrimination. We call on the EU to measure equality and the impact of new and existing policies and legislation, and to prioritise gender budgeting.

Accountability for all

The revelations that Members of the European Parliament had been accepting bribes and gifts from foreign governments, including Qatar and Morocco, in exchange for influence over Parliament's decisions, seriously shook public trust and confidence in the EU political system. Through their unethical behaviour, these politicians have shown how urgently we need to ensure transparency and accountability in politics.

EFA calls for an **obligatory code of conduct** for MEPs and Commission/Council officials – and the powers for the EU institutions to enforce them rigorously. The rules should go well beyond those suggested by European Parliament President Roberta Metsola after the Qatargate scandal. MEPs should have to declare their assets before and after their term; they should publish all their scheduled meetings as a general rule; they should be blocked from lobbying roles after stepping down as MEPs for a period of up to two years and at least as long as they are entitled to receive the transitional allowance, which is equivalent to one month per year in office; and there should be an effective and credible sanctions regime allowing for zero tolerance for any politician found to be bending the rules. These rules must also include clear, unambiguous **protection for whistleblowers** – a principle that should also apply to whistleblowers in all other parts of European public life, from state institutions to the media and private companies. We need an independent EU ethics body with

the right to start investigations on its own initiative and a sanctioning mechanism, or at least the capacity to propose sanctions to the competent authority in the relevant institution.

It is also vital that the rules cannot be abused to block NGOs from legitimate access to the political system. NGOs can play an important role in increasing transparency and pushing for politicians to take up new ideas. The unscrupulous actions of corrupt lobbyists should never become an excuse to crack down on dissent. We need a more transparent and open EU, not a bunkerised one.

Unfortunately, we have also learned that state authorities themselves are ready to spy on their opponents, in violation of their civil and political rights. The Pegasus revelations showed that supposedly democratic states use spyware to target legitimate democratic opposition. Many EFA politicians in Catalonia have been spied on, including two MEPs. This directly affects the politicians, lawyers and journalists who have been placed under surveillance. But it also indirectly affects their voters, clients and readers. In a case such as this, where an EU member state is brazenly violating the EU's values (such as respect for democracy and human rights), the EU must have the power to intervene and guarantee its citizens rights directly.

The establishment of a "rule of law mechanism" to prevent the distribution of EU funds to member states suspected of violating the rule of law is welcome, but it should be widened to include all manner of anti-democratic activities in violation of European values, such as democracy and fundamental rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Only in this way can the EU step up as a real guarantor of citizens' rights against the at times crooked interests of its own member states. If the EU is serious about its defence of European values and citizens' rights, it must be willing to **take action against its own member states** when necessary.

For example, stateless nations across Europe still do not have a way to exercise their right to decide their future, so long as their state refuses to permit them to do so. This highlights the contradiction not only within states, but also within the EU itself: it is supposedly committed to democracy, but cannot guarantee its citizens' rights when they are at odds with the interests of the established state. Even if the EU now sets high standards in democracy for enlargement countries, once a state becomes an EU member it can act more or less however it pleases, knowing that the EU has very little power to interfere. This has to change, and it can only do so if power is taken away from the state level. It is not right that the EU can set and enforce standards on its member states relating to state support for industry, deficit spending or trade tariffs, but not on the right to self-determination or the recognition and protection of national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.

Participation for all

Citizens' Assemblies can be a radical new tool to get citizens feeling involved, bring their everyday experience into policymaking, and develop new ideas in a consensus-oriented environment. But they are not a simple solution to any tricky policy. Following the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EU should **make topical Citizens' Assemblies a permanent part of its decision-making process** – but with a very clear idea of how the process will work and how the results will be used. Such processes are a large investment of public money and citizens' time: we owe it to all our citizens to make sure they are used sensibly.

These Assemblies should be connected with a **permanent online proposals platform**, so that citizens can be involved in decision-making throughout the parliamentary term, not only once every

five years. Through such a platform, they can engage with the EU directly, rather than only through their state.

There are already some instruments that citizens can use to address their concerns directly to the European Commission – but they are flawed. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), for example, is a tool that allows citizens to submit a petition for a legislative proposal. However, in many cases the Commission has failed to effectively follow up. For example, the refusal of the Commission to act upon the Minority SafePack Initiative, despite calls from 3/4 of the European Parliament, several national and regional parliaments and governments, is problematic from a democratic point of view. The ECI must be reformed to deliver on its promise, and the Commission should have to make a legislative proposal as a result. . Tools such as these are a good idea in theory, but only fit for purpose if they offer a genuine voice to citizens. The **ECI must be reformed** to deliver on its promise.

Finally, The EU must step up and proactively involve young Europeans in the policy-making processes. The focus should reside in increasing European youth's accessibility to our different political systems.

Furthermore, the Union ought to integrate a youth perspective across all policies and levels of government. We support the implementation of an 'EU Youth Test' to ensure young people's concerns and needs are systematically considered throughout the EU legislative process.

Diversity for all

Intro

Europe is far more than its 27 member states. It is all the diversity within those states: stateless nations that have not yet achieved their independence; national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities living alongside the majority populations; historical regions with strong and unique identities, and much more.

It is also all the different people who make up our societies, of all ethnicities, genders, sexualities, ages and social origins. If European politics does not include all these different voices, it is not truly democratic or truly reflective of the communities in which we live.

For all territories

Europe's geography is diverse too. It includes densely populated urban areas, and rapidly emptying countryside where depopulation is a real problem. Each place is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to any challenge. It is fundamental for EFA that all EU (and member state) policy must recognise the specific needs of each territory in its implementation.

This goes especially for locations which face particular challenges due to their geography. EFA has a particular concern for the unique needs of Europe's island communities. In addition to Malta, Cyprus and Ireland, which are island states, the Union has 30 regions from 13 states consisting of 286 islands with over 20 million inhabitants, making up 4.6% of the total EU population. In total, the EU has some 2,400 islands. Despite this, the EU lacks a specific strategy for islands: there is no European action plan or island political agenda with clearly defined priorities. Islands face logistical and infrastructure challenges unknown to mainland communities, and must not be left behind or disadvantaged. EFA calls for a **special status for islands** to be recognised in EU law, unlocking extra

support, funding and exceptions to help those who live on islands. Other areas that require special attention include remote, peripheral and mountainous regions, where infrastructure and agriculture also face unique challenges, and cross-border regions. EFA believes in having a strong cross-border cooperation mechanism in the EU and with neighbouring countries.

EFA is the party that best recognises the diversity of the European Union in all its aspects: national, geographical, economic, cultural and institutional. It is for that reason that EFA is the most active and committed European political party when it comes to recognising distinct geographical needs that the EU must include in its Treaties, legislation and political action.

The borders of Europe are not fixed, and never have been. Today there are many parts of Europe where the administrative boundaries do not line up with the community. In many cases, **adjusting administrative borders** to maintain cultural, historical and national coherence would be a trivial matter: EFA supports the reattachment of the Loire-Atlantique Department to the rest of Brittany, for example, and the replacement of Communist-era regional boundaries in the Czech Republic with the original historical boundaries that recognise the distinctiveness of Moravia. And where changing boundaries is not so straightforward, as in the case of nations split across multiple states, the cross-border nature of these communities should be celebrated, not seen as a threat – and in any case, they have the right to **decide for themselves** where their future lies. The cultural and linguistic cohesion of divided communities should be supported with special EU policies and funds, especially for those which were divided by new state borders in the 20th century, such as after the First and Second World Wars.

Linguistic justice and minority rights for all

The EU institutions recognise 24 official languages. But the reality is that there are hundreds of languages and dialects spoken across the territory of the EU. Several of these actually have more speakers than some of the recognised EU official languages: there are at least 9 million speakers of Catalan, which is more than many state languages. The list of EU official languages therefore reflects the interests and identities of the states, not the true linguistic diversity of Europe. **EFA stands for broadening the number of EU official languages, and for the right to use Catalan, Basque, Galician and many more languages in the European Parliament**, and for the right for EU citizens to write to the EU institutions in those languages and receive a reply, and for official EU publications to be translated into these languages. This is not impractical nor unduly expensive: the European Committee of the Regions already has a system allowing members to speak in Catalan, Galician, and Basque so long as appropriate notice is given.

The EU must also recognise that many of the continent's regional and minority languages are marginalised and threatened with extinction. According to UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Endangered Languages, 186 languages from EU member states are endangered or critically endangered. Although the protection of its linguistic and cultural diversity is listed as an obligation in its treaties, the EU has no strategy, action plan, policy or adequate sources of funding to protect endangered languages. The EU should therefore set up a European Centre for Linguistic Diversity with the technical capacity to make recommendations to the member states and the EU institutions and create specific sources of funding for protecting regional and lesser-used languages.

EFA also advocates for an EU programme to foster language equality in the digital world. There is a big, growing gap between the use of English and all the other languages - even official EU languages,

except, to some extent, Spanish, French and German - in digital technologies. The situation is especially critical for minoritised or lesser-used languages.

The EU also has a moral obligation to respect and protect the rights of national and historical minorities. Currently minority rights are left almost entirely to the member states, which frequently do not respect them or refuse to recognise minorities at all. The EU must therefore be granted with the **power to enforce minimum standards of minority rights** on its member states – with the threat of withholding EU funding if these standards are violated. One way of doing this would be for respect for **minority rights to be included in the EU rule of law monitoring mechanism**, to monitor compliance and impose sanctions on member states discriminating against their own minorities. EFA also calls on all member states and the EU itself to **ratify the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities**.

So far, unfortunately, the European Commission has been reluctant to recognise or accept any responsibility for minority rights in Europe. The Minority Safepack Initiative (MSPI) received the support of more than a million European citizens, and was also supported by a majority in the European Parliament; but the Commission has refused to take any measures to implement it. This is a simple dereliction of duty. In this case, the legislative proposals already exist; they just need to be accepted and incorporated into EU law. The EU **must implement the MSPI**.

The EU also needs to respect and protect the rights of historical national minorities. Currently minority rights are left almost entirely to the member states, which frequently violate them or refuse to recognise minorities at all. We demand that responsibility for minority policy be firmly anchored at all decision-making levels in the EU. We want an EU minority policy that ensures the long-term recognition, protection and promotion of all minorities and ethnic groups. We therefore want the EU Commission to appoint a **Commissioner who is responsible for the concerns of national and stateless minorities** and who can mediate in conflict situations between the state and the minority. EFA also proposes to establish a **European Ombudsman for Minority Rights**, who would be empowered to investigate member states' compliance with the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and to issue recommendations.

Human rights for all

Equality is a foundational value for the EU. **There should be no second-class citizens in any part of Europe.** Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go until we reach true equality and fairness in our societies. It is still the case that an individual's rights depend too much on where they live, even despite the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

For example, not all European women yet enjoy the right to safe and legal abortion services. In some member states, this basic right is still denied. **Access to abortion should be incorporated into EU law** as a right all over Europe, as well as the right to equal opportunities throughout life, including access to housing, equal employment prospects, childcare, medical treatments which are tailored for women, and for awareness and support around menopause, when an unacceptable percentage of women, at the prime of their careers, end up leaving the workforce because it is unable to adequately cater for their needs.

The same goes for equal marriage. Several EU member states have gone so far as to amend their constitutions to define marriage as being between a man and a woman, abusing their position in an attempt to make it harder to change the law through the regular democratic procedure. This is an

affront to democracy and an insult to these countries' own LGBT communities. The lack of recognition of equal marriage across Europe also means that a couple can be married in one country but not have that marriage recognised elsewhere if they were to move across borders. In the name of equal rights, **no right (partnership, marriage, or child) should be lost when moving to another EU member state**. LGBT rights are a cornerstone of human rights, and the same laws on anti-discrimination and acceptance must be implemented and respected across Europe.

The persecution and demonising of LGBT people in many parts of Europe also goes beyond legal means. Discourse on the subject is often polarised and extreme, in some cases to the extent that it violates European values. The EU should respond by applying the rule of law mechanism to **withhold certain EU funds from member states whose governments practice extremist rhetoric** or promote discourse such as "LGBT-free zones".

EFA has been leading a push in the European Parliament to have gender-based violence recognised as a Eurocrime, so that the EU can legislate and properly prosecute all forms of gender-based violence, setting minimum standards concerning the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in member states' penal codes. EFA has also been involved in the negotiations of the EU Directive against Gender-based Violence, which aims to criminalise certain forms of gender-based violence, including cyberviolence, and to provide prevention measures as well as protection and support measures to the survivors. The EU should be provided with all legal instruments to eradicate gender-based violence. EFA welcomes that the EU has ratified the Istanbul Convention, which provides a legal framework and characterises violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination; all EU member states should be pressured to do the same and the implementation of the Convention should be closely monitored.

Free movement for all

We must be open and welcoming towards migration from outside Europe, while preserving our existing cultural diversity and our shared values. There are hundreds of different languages and cultures in Europe, and we can easily take in more – so long as we **maintain one set of shared values**. Our borders should be open to all who want to make their lives here and contribute to our societies.

Cross-border communities also need to be supported. Making Europe's state borders all but invisible has been a major achievement of the EU, but during COVID we saw how easily the borders can return, putting up barriers between neighbours and seriously impacting the cultural lives of those whose national community does not line up with state borders. The Schengen Zone, which allows for free movement around Europe, is not just a benefit to trade, economics or tourism: it has been transformational for those who work and live in cross-border regions, and must be protected and strengthened. EFA calls for the **swift completion of the Schengen Zone** by integrating the member states that are not yet part of it: especially Bulgaria and Romania, which have fulfilled all the criteria but are still blocked for unfair political reasons.

Freedom of movement also has a huge cultural benefit in allowing European citizens – especially young people – to travel and learn more about other cultures. The Erasmus scheme is one of the great European successes. It should be **expanded beyond higher education**, so that it is also possible for young professionals to take advantage of the opportunity to spend time in other European countries and pick up new cultural knowledge and professional skills.

Moreover, studying abroad should not be a matter of financial resources. The aim should be to create equal opportunities for every young European wanting to do so. This is why we want to make the Erasmus program equally accessible for all.

The funding for Erasmus+ and the individual grants have to be increased to be adjusted to the minimum standard of living in the member state of destination. Otherwise, the programme favours youth from a higher socioeconomic background, while discriminating between member states.

European educational and professional qualifications should also be easier to use across borders. The EU should **support more cross-border education and training courses**, providing qualifications on both sides of the border, and should take steps to **harmonise qualifications and improve their recognition** in different member states. For example, the Euregio certificate system implemented in the Upper Rhine as part of the Interreg programme could inspire the development of other programmes.

Finally, Europeans should also enjoy the right to equal access to culture. In an integrated, borderless Europe, where national communities are shared between states and free movement for work, education or pleasure is common, there should be no artificial boundaries to accessing cultural content in your own language. Despite an EU regulation for the cross-border provision of television and radio content, livestreams and media from public broadcasters is still subject to geoblocking, dividing language communities and preventing minorities, travellers and students from accessing their language and culture. It also prevents cultural exchange and international understanding in Europe. **Geoblocking digital and broadcasting content is out of place in Europe and must be abolished**. And the EU's Audio-Visual Media Plan must take steps to **support the use of multiple languages online**, including regional and minority languages. EFA sees the potential for the EU to become a world leader in achieving digital language equality and supports major investment in this area. The EU should also support the creation and development of audiovisual media (such as TV) in the regions.

Sustainability for all

Intro

Humanity faces a multidimensional crisis, partly caused by exceeding planetary boundaries that seriously jeopardise the habitability conditions of this planet for many species, including our own. The relationship between economic growth and the ecological crisis is well established, which calls into question the development model of which Europe has been and still is one of the epicentres.

The high quality of life that most Europeans have been able to enjoy in recent decades is coming into question. Our energy supply, the way of life for our rural and agricultural communities, and the future of our natural environment and biodiversity are all under threat. The climate emergency is just that: an emergency that demands immediate and urgent action.

High-income European countries base part of their standard of living on a net appropriation of resources from the rest of the world. It is not possible to move towards a fairer and more sustainable Europe without recognising, with all its implications, its historical and current degree of responsibility for the emergency situation we are experiencing. This recognition must be accompanied by **a package of emergency measures** that also include repairing the damages

caused, especially to countries in the global South. This should be coupled with a determined commitment to reverse unequal relationships that perpetuate colonial dynamics, such as external debt or the unequal North-South power relationship within international governing bodies.

The European Commission's "Green Deal" has put it at the forefront of a global push for a more environmentally-friendly future. EFA supports the Green Deal in most aspects, but we are concerned that its centralised top-down approach is having a disproportionate impact on certain sectors and regions. For us it is essential that the burden of dealing with the climate crisis does not fall excessively on hard-pressed individual citizens and small businesses or farmers – and that it is distributed fairly among Europe's regions. The EU needs to position itself as a world leader in clean industries and environmentally-friendly technologies, able to create quality jobs while contributing to the fight against climate change.

Vital though the urgent environmental situation is, the sustainability and security of the future depends on other matters too. Europeans must be able to count on state support to help them secure their personal future: a sufficient income, access to education, training and employment; affordable and accessible housing, and so on. This goes especially for young people, who are growing up in exceptionally uncertain times.

Climate action for all

Climate change is impacting us all. But certain regions in Europe face an even more severe situation than others. Take examples such as the Doñana National Park in Andalucía, a UNESCO World Heritage site which is one of the most biodiverse areas in Europe. It is facing severe challenges as a result of rising temperatures and drought, with its unique and precious wetlands under serious threat. The situation is made even more urgent by the widespread practice of draining the national park's water through illegal wells to cultivate red fruits. But instead of implementing emergency measures to save the wetlands, the conservative-controlled Andalusian government is trying to legalise and regularise the wells.

If this is how mainstream political parties respond to environmental destruction in Europe's most vulnerable territories, we are in trouble. It shows that all actions undertaken to save the environment will face opposition from established interests. But it also highlights that climate change is threatening many traditional ways of life, especially in agriculture, and these challenges must be taken seriously. A transition is essential to secure our planet, but if it does not take the people with it, it will inflict suffering and poverty on many communities. **EFA calls for climate action to be paired with support programmes for those who will be most affected by the transition, especially farmers and poorer households**. We seek the highest environmental standards and an ambitious timeframe to adopt them; but that process must not unfairly put too much burden on farmers and the communities they support.

Farmers, who are at the core of the ecological transition and the preservation of biodiversity, should be accompanied in this tremendous challenge they have to face. Thus, they need regulatory clarity, financial support, and the time and trust to adapt their businesses to sustainable models. These needed policies cannot simply be imposed top-down or based on the agro-business industry model: they need the active input and support of farming communities – those who know the land. Those who implement good practice must be rewarded for it. For example, many parts of Europe have programmes, partially covered by EU funding, that compensate farmers for the extra work they do

to preserve the landscape and provide habitats for wildlife. This model should be applied over the whole continent.

Nature conservation should be a core part of Europe's agricultural strategy. There are already many EU Directives providing important support and protection for our natural diversity. **EFA supports maintaining a strict protection regime for endangered species**. But where these protection laws cause problems for agriculture, for example when there are too many attacks on livestock by large carnivores like wolves, **the laws should be flexible enough to allow for case-by-case exceptions** to support farmers' livelihoods and find pragmatic solutions.

By supporting farmers to adopt sustainable practices, we can also take important steps towards improving Europe's food sovereignty. **We propose investing further in research and innovation to develop climate-resilient agriculture systems**, for example through precision farming, agroforestry, and smart irrigation technologies. These advancements can optimise resource use, improve productivity, and mitigate the environmental impact of agriculture. At the same time, technological innovation should not become an excuse to procrastinate the important work in making much-needed changes to make our systems more sustainable.

To secure Europe's food supply, it is crucial that we support local food production and short supply chains, especially in remote, peripheral or island regions. EFA advocates for **the development of regional food networks, supporting small-scale farmers and promoting local markets**. By reducing reliance on long-distance transportation and embracing seasonal and locally-produced food, we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance the resilience of our food systems. Farmers can also be supported by **promoting fair prices, transparent and harmonised labelling, and stringent environmental standards for imported agricultural products**. The EU has a duty to make sure that the free trade agreements it makes with other countries do not undermine European farmers by importing goods that do not meet the same sustainability criteria.

We must also work urgently to reduce and mitigate the impact of pollution. Environmental pollution does not respect borders, meaning it can only be combatted effectively with a cross-border cooperative approach. **EFA calls for the establishment of more macro-regional strategies to fight pollution**. For example, the Mediterranean Sea is threatened by the continuous growth of pollution by hydrocarbons, plastics, loss of biodiversity, maritime and port pollution, which is impacting the livelihood of those who live there. A Mediterranean macro-regional strategy to safeguard the sea should be implemented and led from the European level.

[Energy sovereignty for all](#)

The urgent climate situation is matched by a crisis in the affordability of energy, especially following Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. After an enormous spike in prices, the cost of gas has dropped since the start of the war; by early 2023 it was even lower than it had been before the war began. But the experience revealed how vulnerable Europe's citizens are to spiking utility prices and underlined the continent's reliance on Russia as an energy source. Before the war, 40% of Europe's gas came from Russia. **This must be reduced to as close to zero as possible**. We cannot afford to be dependent on a hostile state for our energy needs.

EFA supports a cap on the maximum price of gas for households and businesses. The current system, whereby the price of electricity is set by the most expensive source, needs to be revised to give greater incentive for energy companies to provide cheaper renewable sources. These rules must be set at the European level to prevent unfair competition over energy prices.

We also call on the member states to **put an end to the energy oligopolies** that exist in some countries, to make a real and effective separation of the different parts of the energy market (generation, transport and commercialisation). Energy companies have been able to make obscene profits over the last few years through a combination of preferential pricing and uncompetitive monopolistic business practices. This a matter of fair competition which the European Commission should intervene to prevent.

In the short term, gas may have to remain one of our main energy sources. But **we must hasten the transition to clean and renewable energies.** EFA calls for **an end to the multi-billion-dollar subsidies for fossil fuel infrastructure.** This money should be used for the expansion of renewable energy and the modernisation of energy efficient buildings instead.

Nevertheless, we must be careful with which energy sources are considered 'green'. Natural gas is not an environmentally sustainable energy source; neither is nuclear. While it may have a role to play as a transitional energy source, **Europe must absolutely aim for a nuclear-free future.** The risks involved in producing and storing nuclear fuel and waste are too great for future generations to bear. In any case, **it should not be possible for nuclear energy to be labelled as 'green'** and thereby get access to EU subsidies. Being safe for the environment is about more than just carbon emissions.

Other energy sources, such as biomass, are also often described as green despite carrying risks for the environment. 48% of the woody material used in the EU is used for energy purposes; but plant biomass can only be considered 'zero emission' if the quantities burned annually in a territory are less than the quantity of biomass that territory produces in a year. This is not the case in many EU countries. Furthermore, plant material is often transported long distances to be burned, adding transport emissions to biomass' carbon footprint. 9% of all EU emissions are due to the combustion of vegetable biomass. **The EU must amend its directives regarding biomass** to ensure maximum carbon storage, and keep it local and focused on disposing of residual waste. **Subsidies for biomass energy production should be phased out**, as it is not a zero emission fuel source.

With regard to all types of energy sources, EFA supports the prioritisation of locally-based production. Wherever possible, municipalities and regions should own the small-scale energy sources that power their communities, and the creation of public energy communities and public-private social initiatives should be encouraged, involving local administration and direct consumers. This could include mechanisms for reducing energy bills for individuals and families facing socio-economic challenges. Massive macro-scale energy plants, owned and operated for private profit, must be opposed.

Renewable sources of electricity should be the first focus of the environmental transition. But there are some sectors where electrification may not be the most efficient solution. **The use of green hydrogen** can help achieve deep decarbonisation of hard-to-electrify sectors such as transportation, industry and buildings. Techniques such as hydrogen blending, which introduces 20% hydrogen into gas networks, provides an opportunity for a significant and rapid reduction in natural gas use in the short term. For the longer term, green hydrogen offers energy solutions with a higher efficiency rate than transferring electricity. **Europe's sustainable energy future should make use of mixed methods, including hydrogen** as a complement to renewable electricity generation.

We support the European Commission's target, laid out in the European Green Deal, to **make Europe the world's first carbon-neutral continent by 2050.** This should help to keep the global

temperature increase below the 1.5 degree target mentioned in the Paris Agreement. However, regions and municipalities must have the flexibility to adopt their own strategies to achieve these commonly agreed targets: objectives identified in Brussels can be reached in different ways in different parts of Europe, taking account of the local needs and opportunities that each region knows best. The primary focus should be on attaining our existing objectives through fair and attainable means

Protecting the environment does not only mean reducing carbon emissions or switching to low-carbon alternatives. The landscape around us is also precious – in many cases it forms a vital part of our sense of identity and rootedness. **EFA wants to recognise landscape as part of the intangible cultural heritage of Europe's peoples** – and ensure that environmental goals are consistent with this recognition. Renewable energy projects should be in harmony with the local communities they are located within: macro-scale projects are damaging to the environment and do not bring benefits to the local communities. It is possible to provide clean energy discreetly and in harmony with local needs.

Infrastructure for all

A connected continent is one in which no region is left behind. **EFA wants to see a fully connected Europe with good infrastructure and transport links**. But transport is one of the biggest sources of carbon emissions. We have ahead of us an opportunity to address both these issues at once by developing a strong and reliable network of climate-friendly transport options. We can start by **eliminating short-distance plane journeys** that are no faster than rail alternatives; and then proceed by **making new rail investments** to undo the damage of the 20th century's short-sighted rail closures.

But **very-high-speed rail networks that only connect national capitals are not a healthy solution**. They contribute to a centralised system and inflict significant environmental damage, often for just a few minutes of saved time. All those who do not live in the large urban areas connected by such services do not get to benefit at all. Instead, the transition towards more environmentally sustainable transport services should be seen as **an opportunity to decentralise power, jobs and opportunities away from the largest urban areas** and towards smaller towns and rural areas, so that these areas can be revitalised.

A special mention is reserved for island transport. Affordable prices should be assured for passenger transport, comparable to costs on the mainland, while freight transport to and from islands should be subsidised. Within the framework of a European strategy for island territories, EFA proposes the establishment of minimum standards for affordable island connectivity.

The rest of Europe's infrastructure should also be upgraded to meet standards of environmental and social fairness. Where they are not already, **basic utilities should be brought into public ownership** to ensure fair access as a matter of principle: this includes drinking water, electricity distribution networks, and waste management. The EU can set standards in this area to make sure that the whole continent is connected with sufficient public utilities – which can be shared across borders when necessary.

Social sustainability for all

The rising cost of living and the uncertainty of a world in transition are causing anxiety and putting up barriers to access to many of the basics of life. Younger people are particularly affected by this.

EFA believes that the EU and member state governments have a duty to help all the most vulnerable members of our society to have real opportunities to build their lives: in terms of access to education, jobs, and housing above all.

We need to ensure equal opportunities for all in the workplace, including child-friendly hours, flexible working, and support for women during menopause. We need to ensure that everyone is able to access the healthcare and treatments that they need in order to flourish as a human being and member of society, that high quality childcare is available to all who need it, and that as individuals and groups of people we are able to be heard, seen, and listened to.

Many parts of Europe are facing a crisis in the access and affordability of housing. Young people are facing the prospect of never being able to afford their own place to live, and some areas house prices are so high that locals have to move away, leading communities to age and decline. This is a demographic emergency. The EU and member state governments must develop a European strategy to secure affordable and fair access to housing as a human right. This could include financial support for young people to gain access to housing, rent caps, increased tenants' rights, and measures to reduce speculation on real estate such as restrictions on the number of residential properties a single person may own, high taxes on properties that are sitting empty or not put to use, or the establishment of a residence status for local communities.

Youth unemployment is still a challenge for many EU member states. Periods of unemployment during the critical transition from school to work can have a negative impact on income, long-term career planning, and labour-force participation. We condemn disparaging youth wages such as low youth minimum wages and unpaid internships – we demand equal pay for equal work.

Furthermore, we want a much stricter and ultimately compulsory implementation of the European Youth Guarantee,[2] ensuring young Europeans' employment and further opportunities within four months after finishing their education.

Intercultural exchange and awareness has demonstrable benefits to society and to the economy. Nobody should be excluded from visiting and learning about other parts of Europe due to cost. EFA supports giving free Interrail passes to young people, as an investment in their European consciousness and in their future. The European Commission's DiscoverEU programme should be expanded so that young people receive free Interrail passes automatically, rather than having to apply for them.

Europe can also use its enormous economic power to make social changes for the better in other parts of the world. By striking free trade deals with other countries, the EU can uphold its own high standards while also encouraging better working conditions for others. Just as there is a 'do not harm' environmental policy in EU trade deals, there should also be a 'do not harm' social policy: just as we should refuse to import goods that do not meet the environmental criteria that apply in Europe, we should also refuse to import goods and services that undercut the social criteria, such as poor working conditions. In this way, everyone will benefit from EU trade policy: the European workers who are protected, consumers who can buy with a good conscience, and the workers elsewhere in the world.

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[2] See https://www.etuc.org/en/issue/youth-guarantee

Solidarity for all

Intro

We don't want a Europe that is isolated or uninterested in the rest of the world. On the contrary, we believe the EU has a duty to be a strong, independent and influential actor on the world stage. The world of tomorrow will be determined by large power blocs like the USA and the rising BRICS economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and potentially others). Only a united and self-confident EU will be able to stand up for its own interests against these old and new great powers.

But if we so choose, Europe can be more than just one player among many. Thanks to its geography, its diversity and its strong developed economy, Europe can take a leading role in promoting democracy, international cooperation and solidarity worldwide. Europe is already a regulatory superpower, setting the *de facto* global standards when it comes to food safety, tech policy and more simply due to the size and influence of its single market. But when it comes to promoting its values, Europe can and should also be a global role model for a healthy democratic society.

But this also requires Europe to be morally impeccable at home. EU member states cannot criticise China over its actions towards Taiwan, Tibet or Xinjiang while still refusing to recognise their own minorities and stateless nations. Europe also cannot boast of its respect for human rights within its borders while reaching cooperation agreements with other countries with the aim of preventing migration arrivals in Europe without ensuring that they will also respect the human rights.

EFA stands in solidarity with the oppressed people of the world – and of Europe itself. We want a Europe that stands up for its values all around the world.

European values for all

Currently, the EU's role in foreign affairs in rather ambiguous. The member states formally have the most authority, but as the EU controls matters of international trade, action at the European level is usually a necessary part of foreign policy. Consider the sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, which would have been virtually impossible if each member state was following its own policy.

This means that the EU is usually represented abroad by multiple people. At meetings of the G7, for example, the leaders of three EU member states are joined by the Presidents of both the European Commission and the European Council. We therefore need a better coordinated EU foreign policy, where the EU speaks with a clear (or with one) voice.

Solidarity, peace and democracy should be the guiding principles of all EU action in the world. EFA wants to see the EU take a particular role in **standing up for the rights of minorities worldwide**, and helping other countries to build governance structures that allow their people to decide their future freely. Our aid and diplomatic relations with other countries should take into account their respect for human rights, including matters such as gender equality, religious freedom and freedom of thought. Freedom of belief should be respected everywhere in the world, and we would like to see a more effective common EU-policy to promote it and to respond to increasing worldwide cases of violence and discrimination on the basis of belief.

That goes especially for conflicts in Europe's neighbourhood, where we have a special responsibility. We should remember that there are places where decolonisation never fully took place. EFA wants

to see the remaining non-self-governing territories of the world **take up their right to self-determination**, especially those still suffering under the impact of Europe's colonial legacy, like Western Sahara. We also call for a greater EU role in supporting the people of Palestine and Kurdistan.

Even within Europe itself, there are self-determination conflicts that have not been resolved. The EU has taken up the responsibility to mediate in the dispute between **Kosovo and Serbia**. It should do the same between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding **Nagorno-Karabakh**, especially now that Azerbaijan is forcibly integrating the territory, creating a new humanitarian disaster.

And within its own borders, the EU must not forget that there are still democratic questions to answer. The Union should reopen the **Cyprus question** to try and find a way to integrate the whole island as a multi-national EU member state, rather than the frozen situation we have today; and in Catalonia, Corsica, the Basque Country and other EU territories where the people are **demanding their right to autonomy or independence**, the EU should be the one encouraging or facilitating a negotiation with stubborn or unwilling member states (see the chapter "Democracy for all" for more details).

The EU needs clear rules for how it will handle **internal enlargement** – that is, the emergence of a new state from one of its existing member states. It is democratically and practically unfeasible to continue insisting that any new state would by default be outside the EU, when this is not foreseen in the Treaties. It would mean the expulsion of EU citizens from the EU, and is clearly just a political statement against independence.

Peace for all

EFA has a commitment to peace and seeks an end to all violence and military confrontation. But the war in Ukraine has transformed Europe's previous assumptions regarding security and defence. It has shown that Europe's states do not have the powers we need to respond effectively to the use of force even on our own continent.

European countries often end up being led by the United States, especially on military matters. There is no reason why this should continue. EFA wants to see Europe become **an autonomous actor on the world stage**: one which makes strategic alliances with the US when they share our interests, but is able to confidently pursue other options when it suits us. We must also accept that we can no longer rely on the US always being a productive partner for Europe.

Nevertheless, for now we must recognise that it is the US that is taking the lead on the democratic response to the war in Ukraine – and we should regard this as a European failure. Our first interest is to stop the war and start talks about Ukraine's long-term stability; not least because Europe is also being harmed by the side-effects of the war, economically and in other fields. Europe must **keep up sanctions against Russia** and continue to provide as much solidarity with Ukraine as we can, including by **providing shelter and support** for the millions of people who have been driven from their homes by the war. But we must also take a stronger role in the diplomatic response, as it is the European model itself that is under attack.

We must provide support and material to end the war. It must always be in line with international agreements and international law. The EU must assert its role within the international coalition supporting Ukraine to prevent excesses. We should aim for a diplomatic solution.

But we must maintain that our dispute is with the government of the Russian Federation and their political allies, not the people of Russia themselves, many of whom are also suffering under Putin's dictatorship. When he personally stands trial for war crimes, it will be a victory for the oppressed peoples of Russia as well for Ukraine, Europe and the world.

We must also bear in mind that the conflict in Ukraine has happened at least partly because the Ukrainian people see the EU model as one they wish to be part of. The EU has a genuine appeal to its neighbouring countries because it stands for democracy, peace, and prosperity. Europe is not a neutral actor in the war, but closely intertwined with Ukraine's future. We must acknowledge our responsibility towards Ukraine, and insist that **its rightful place is within the EU**, so long as it respects the democratic conditions. The choice, of course, is up to the Ukrainian people.

The ultimate goal must be to drive the Russian authorities to the point where they **agree to withdraw their troops** from the whole territory of Ukraine – including Crimea. **EFA believes that borders in Europe can be changed, but never under any circumstances through the use of coercion or force.** We categorically reject the Russian State's claim to be acting on behalf of Russian-speaking peoples: their invasion has caused immense suffering to all of Ukraine's peoples, and their actions have been in clear violation of international law. The so-called 'referendums' held by gunpoint in Russian-occupied territories are in no way a genuine exercise of the right to self-determination. **EFA wants to see a free, independent, stable and peaceful Ukrainian state**, free from intimidation or threats, where **free and fair referendums under international supervision** can take place in several years' time – and *only* if the people of the territories in question wish it. It must be their choice, and theirs alone.

In the coming years, Europe must begin a conversation about what the future of security cooperation on our continent should look like. We are closely tied to American security and defence policy through NATO, and formerly neutral countries like Finland and Sweden have chosen to join the alliance in reaction to Russia's war in Ukraine. EFA sees the potential for the development of a civilian peace corps in the EU to work on conflict prevention and identify areas and issues that could lead to conflict, co-operating with the United Nations. EFA would like to see **a genuinely democratic system of EU security and defence cooperation** – with the oversight of the European Parliament and complementary to NATO.

Eventually, this European defence cooperation could include **merging European armed forces into a single 'EU army'** – which would not only help bind our interests together, but also save considerable amounts of money through **common procurement**.

[Fair EU accession for all](#)

Ukraine is not the only country that currently aspires to EU membership. In our eagerness to support Ukraine's ambitions to join the EU, we must not forget that the countries of the Western Balkans have already been waiting many years. In the last parliamentary term, EU enlargement has effectively frozen, primarily because wealthy states in the west of Europe have lost their appetite for further expansion.

This is unfair and sends all the wrong signals. The **EU integration project cannot be considered close to complete so long as there is still a hole in the map's South-East**. In practice the countries of the Western Balkans are already closely integrated with most EU structures, but lack the formal representation they are entitled to as a full member states. The EU has been a stabilising force for the Balkans following the wars in the 1990s, but now its reluctance to seriously engage is

*de*stabilising the region, while other powers – especially Russia and China – step in to increase their own influence on Europe's doorstep. If we do not act soon, we risk losing the region.

The total population of the six countries awaiting membership is not more than 20 million – less than most existing member states. And many of the region's peoples are part of cross-border communities, with friends and family living in the EU, including in neighbouring countries like Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Greece, where the state borders run right through their historical homelands. There are many reasons – practical, economic, strategic and even moral – why **these territories belong in the EU**, and their membership should be accelerated. But that process will also require genuine commitment to reform and meet European standards among the new members: there can be **no compromise on EU values and democracy**, not least regarding minority rights.

The door must also remain open to Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and other states aspire to join the European family when they are ready to do so. However, **the EU should send a clearer message regarding the membership prospects of Turkey**. Turkey is a close neighbour that at times has leaned towards authoritarianism; we have lots of cultural and historical ties there, but it is clear that Turkey is moving in a different direction to Europe. We should formally acknowledge that Turkey, at least as long as it remains under an authoritarian regime that has no respect for the democratic rights of the Kurdish people, is moving further away from the EU accession standards.

Meanwhile, the EU continues to feel the impact of Brexit. We must remember that very many people in the UK have reconsidered and wish to rejoin the EU – and that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain and were dragged out of the EU against their will.. Brexit is not the end of the story. **We would like to see the whole island of Great Britain return to the EU one day**, but in the meantime, it is imperative that **Scotland and Wales be given the right to choose their own future**. The Brexit debate has laid bare the contradictions of the British State, which is not a true partnership of equals like the EU. Only through independence will Scotland, Wales, and even England itself (and its regions) be able to pursue their own diverging interests and meet the aspirations of their people. The EU must be sure to never close the door on them.

EFA believes that the only solution to the issue of the Irish border, especially after Brexit, is a United Ireland. It is up to the people of the whole island of Ireland to decide how and when that should happen, but the EU also has a responsibility to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement delivers on its promises and the conditions for negotiation and reconciliation are in place.

A safe home for all

Europe is a refuge for those fleeing violence, war and persecution from around the world, as well as those who are displaced from their countries due to the devastating effects of climate change (climate refugees). That is not only because we have the capacity and affluence to accommodate them, but also because they know that in Europe they will be able to live free from further oppression. Europe has a moral duty and a legal obligation to provide for refugees and asylum seekers.

Although the impact people arriving at our borders may present some challenges, it should be clear that we must uphold the highest humanitarian standards. **Building border walls or fences to reduce irregular migration is not a humane solution**. Instead, we must ensure that the whole of Europe participates in supporting those regions, such as those around the Mediterranean, where the largest numbers of people are arriving. **Europe's states and regions should support refugees equally,** such as by committing to distribute refugees proportionately among the member states. This process of deciding who goes where should be decentralised: the **needs of sub-state regions**

and stateless nations must also be taken into account. In some cases, they may be able and willing to take more refugees than their member state government, for example to address local labour shortages. Asylum policy does not need to be top-down.

Most refugees stay in their country of origin or in neighbouring countries. The EU should do much more to provide support the countries where refugees are staying, so that refugees can stay closer to their homes, making it easier to return once the conflict or disaster is over. The EU should create channels for safe and legal temporary immigration, discouraging people from making the dangerous trip across the Mediterranean. This requires offices outside Europe where people can apply for entry into the EU.

European countries enjoy some of the highest living standards in the world. But there is still an unforgiveable level of poverty and suffering in our wealthy societies. **The EU must develop EU-wide minimum standards in terms of social safety nets,** and it must establish EU social programmes in order to leave no-one behind. Every state should have the obligation to safeguard not only fundamental rights, but access to employment and education for young people; fair working conditions and liveable wages; gender equality in terms of pay, equal treatment and opportunities; and to eradicate child poverty and homelessness. There is more than enough wealth to go around – we must ensure it reaches those who need it most. The EU can play a role here by providing funds to build social projects, and by **ensuring fairer taxation at EU level by establishing an EU-wide transaction tax, an EU carbon border tax or making sure that large multinational corporations are not able to dodge their tax responsibilities** in Europe.

Women, children and the elderly are most heavily affected by economic crises and financial instability and cuts in public spending have exacerbated poverty among women. EFA promotes economic independence for women by strengthening EU equality legislation and gender pay and pension gaps.

Prosperity for all

Intro

The EU is an economic project – whose foundation lies with the Single Market – that recognises the potential of prosperity to secure social and political goals, such as peace and reconciliation: its origins lie in binding together the French and German coal and steel industries to prevent another war. Even today, the EU derives much of its legitimacy from its ability to give its citizens better lives. In this time of uncertainty, it must be able to demonstrate that it can provide the stability and certainty we need.

The COVID pandemic was not only a healthcare emergency, but a shock to our economic system too. It suddenly imposed radically different ways of working on entire sectors; many businesses were unable to survive the pandemic at all. More recently, spiralling energy costs have forced more businesses to close. These experiences have taught us valuable lessons about the stability and sustainability of our economies, and we must make sure we have learned how to improve resilience.

EFA believes that the time has come to restructure the European economy. We should move away from the centralised model of an economy that primarily serves the interests of large urban areas, and instead make sure that every region is treated according to its needs and capacities. We should

improve the local basis of supply chains and reduce dependencies on imports. And we should reconsider the idea that constant economic growth is realistic, feasible or even desirable: EFA wants to see a European economy based on the happiness, wellbeing and individual needs of our societies. We believe that prosperity is more than just material wealth.

The EU should be inspired by the Scandinavian model of the welfare state. Despite globalisation and neoliberalisation, the countries of Scandinavia have managed to balance social and economic inequalities and link comprehensive welfare systems with economic growth.

A local economy for all

No two regions are alike; every place in Europe has its own unique needs, strengths and opportunities. Yet many of the biggest decisions impacting our economic lives are taken from above. **EFA wants to see decision-making decentralised, and a greater regional focus on investment strategies.** We should build to each place's strengths, not apply the same formula to all.

EFA welcomed and supported the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund, Next Generation EU, which moved in the right direction by making money available based on the economic and social conditions in each member state. But one aspect that it gets severely wrong is that it is centralised: while funding priorities were decided from the European level, the distribution was done on the basis of applications prepared by the member state governments. This means that the specific needs of regions, stateless nations and local authorities were mostly ignored or not noticed. **EFA demands a fairer system of distributing funding: one where every region of Europe can determine its own needs**, not have decisions imposed on it from above. At the same time, many needs that are cross-border in nature can be addressed through **establishing new economic and cultural macroregions** for areas facing common challenges. EFA also stands for an **EU islands status** to provide tailored assistance to the specific needs of island territories (see 'Diversity for all' chapter for more details).

EFA agrees with the ultimate goal of **completing the Single Market** and integrating all parts of the EU. But we believe it is possible to do so with greater sensitivity for regional needs. For example, we want to see all EU member states join the Schengen Zone, not only because it will facilitate long-distance supply chains and delivery times, but also because border regions and their communities are currently split by the Schengen border, impeding their economic and cultural lives. We also believe that the Eurozone should be expanded..

There are other EU integration projects that remain incomplete. It is imperative that European leaders find the political will to **complete these half-finished jobs** and provide the stability that European citizens need. For example, the European Banking Union is not finished: the establishment of a European Deposit Insurance Scheme has been help up by disagreements among the member states, meaning that not all Europeans' bank accounts are fully insured from bank failures. Now that banks on both sides of the Atlantic are collapsing again at the fastest rate since 2008, such as the Silicon Valley Bank and Credit Suisse, it has become essential that the EU member states **find the political will to put this support in place and guarantee citizens that their savings are safe**. In the banking sector, the needs of citizens must always be placed over banking sector profits.

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy takes up the largest share of EU funding, but it is failing to meet the evolving needs of Europe's farmers. **EFA wants to see farming subsidies distributed in line with actual needs**, so that small-scale farmers can benefit more than giant agribusinesses. This would also compensate farmers for the disadvantages they face in particular geographical locations, such as islands or mountainous areas. Farming subsidies should also be made condition

on environmental protection and sustainable farming practices to encourage more responsible land use (see also 'Sustainability for all' chapter).

Many regions in Europe where (national, ethnic, linguistic, religious, etc.) minorities live remain underdeveloped compared to the majority-populated areas. Minorities are often left in a disadvantageous position as a result of different treatment and policies encouraging segregation. For example, Western Thrace, home to a large Turkish minority, is one of the most underdeveloped regions of Greece and Europe. This is mainly due to the allocation of financial resources according to national concerns rather than the needs of the region. **EFA therefore calls for a "minority diversity fund" to be established** within the EU's Cohesion Policy to support infrastructure projects, education, culture and economic activities in minority regions, so that all can benefit from Europe's economic resources and prosperity.

Fair competition for all

In today's globalised world, European businesses have to compete not only locally but with producers from all over the world – many of which are able to produce more cheaply thanks to lower labour costs, lower environmental standards and/or political benefits. In the USA, the Inflation Reduction Act and other new protectionist measures are putting the squeeze on European exports to the US, traditionally one of our biggest export destinations; at the same time, we are locked in competition with China, a communist state where all industry benefits directly from state support. **Europe needs to recognise the changing global mood with regard to free trade and make strategic state investments in European industry to keep it competitive**. That includes strengthening entire supply chains – which often cross borders. That is a European-level task by default.

That does not mean abandoning Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with other parts of the world – but **they must be subject to even stricter conditions** to ensure that each agreement signed genuinely brings advantages to European producers and consumers.

As for competition within Europe, it must also remain genuinely competitive. To protect European industry, the EU's state aid rules may need to be revisited – but if so, state intervention should be decided at the European level to prevent the system from being abused. Meanwhile, **the EU should raise the budget for regional development funds** to make more investments directly in the EU regions, bypassing the member states, in order to eradicate regional disparities and give each region the same opportunities to develop and attract investments.

The EU's actions to enforce competition on tech giants have made headlines in recent years. The record-breaking fines issued against the likes of Google, Meta and Apple send a strong message that EU citizens' rights must be respected when it comes to data protection. At the same time, it is notable that the EU has fallen far behind the US and China when it comes to tech innovation. In tech, the EU is a regulatory superpower, often setting the standard for policies that will be adopted worldwide (such as GDPR) – but it has yet to produce any tech giants of its own. **The EU should urgently promote European tech startups**. At the same time, **it should not shy away from constructing sensitive and well-researched regulation in areas where it is needed, such as the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI).** One way to approach this would be to set higher standards for 'gatekeeper' platforms with systemic importance than for startups and small-scale projects. It can also help the tech sector by promoting research and development – with a focus on **providing research funding to all who need it**, not only a handful of 'elite' institutions that reinforce orthodoxies.

In all aspects of industrial strategy, Europe should recognise that it is currently a world leader in a few sectors: notably food and drink, tourism, transport, and research and development. **These sectors should be safeguarded and helped to grow sustainably,** with a particular focus on **building European competitiveness in key future-oriented areas:** electric/emission-free vehicles, hydrogen storage, environmentally-friendly agriculture, sustainable tourism, and key tech components such as semiconductors. Europe is currently home to the most highly-educated, high-skills workforce in the world: this must be nurtured through sensitive industrial policy to preserve Europe's place in a rapidly developing world.

Affordable living for all

The skyrocketing cost of living in the last few years has put an enormous strain on citizens' budgets. Many Europeans are facing the prospect of their living standards seriously dropping as inflation, high energy prices and economic uncertainty drive down their purchasing power.

But it is clear that the richest in society are not feeling the same squeeze. If anything, inequalities are continuing to grow. And it is unacceptable that, in the world's richest continent, there are still so many who suffer under poverty. We need a socially just Europe.

The EU has made impressive progress in securing a cap on the price of gas. But this cap is foreseen as a temporary measure. **It should be made permanent,** so that Europeans have peace of mind that they will always be able to afford their energy bills. And **the EU should introduce more price caps on other basic goods** – including basic foodstuffs. These will help to shield citizens from the worst impact of inflation, while the ECB implements cautious rate hikes to reduce the rate of inflation.

European workers must also know that they will be able to make ends meet with the jobs they have. There should be no such thing as the 'working poor'. **EFA supports the introduction of common minimum wage legislation across Europe:** all Europeans should be able to count on a wage they can live off, scaled according to the real cost of living in each territory. **This European minimum wage should be applied not at the state level, but at local or regional level** to eliminate wage disparities within member states as well as between them.

We also need to consider the changing world of work and whether our existing assumptions about work and welfare are out of date. **EFA supports trialling an EU-wide Universal Basic Income (UBI)** as a possible step towards abolishing means-testing for welfare recipients and easing the administrative burden on the welfare state. **We also support reducing the length of the working week** to make a four-day-week the standard. Both initiatives have been trialled in various parts of Europe with considerable success: it is time to scale them up and harmonise across the EU.

Future-fit workplaces for all

The pandemic lockdowns have also revealed that not everybody is equally placed to handle the conflicting demands of work and home environments. **It is time for a cultural change to make workplaces more welcoming** and to ensure that work works for all through more family-friendly policies, better training opportunities, and by providing workers with a better work-life balance.

The EU should develop a strategy to improve the provision of childcare facilities for all, either by employers or by the government, recognising that women and men should be equal carers of children, the elderly and people with disabilities. **It should also guarantee the right to work from home** for at least part of the working week for those sectors where it is feasible. Women and other under-represented groups should be provided with opportunities to participate in leadership

programmes to better progress their careers, and employees should be treated as a resource to be invested in and nurtured. Women should be supported to remain in the workforce during the menopause, rather than feel that they have to leave, in the prime of their careers.

Employers should also be obliged to develop and implement anti-harassment protocols and to crack down on workplace bullying. The European Commission can help in developing guidance on best practice in this sensitive area, as well as templates and legal advice for the policies themselves. These measures would make workplaces more welcoming and inclusive for all their employees – especially women, who are more likely to be subject to harassment.

The EU can also help businesses to grow and individuals to become more qualified by **making more money available for in-work training and apprenticeships**.

New working models are becoming widespread but often present regulatory challenges. For example, the 'gig economy', such as food delivery services or taxi/ridesharing services like Uber, offers ease and flexibility that is attractive to many people seeking full- or part-time work; but under this model they do not necessarily have access to the same rights and benefits as regular employees. As the services in question operate internationally, **the EU should introduce legislation to bring them into line with employment law and ensure that their workers are provided with appropriate levels of labour protection.**

Conclusion

Every nation and people has its own experience of Europe. Our common European story is told in many different tongues – far more than just the 24 official state languages currently recognised by the EU institutions. But there is not enough recognition of that real diversity in the current democracy of the EU and its member states. To move forward as a continent, we need more voices, more political pluralism and more territorial self-government for all and for everywhere. That is what EFA stands for.

We cannot make our turbulent world more secure and certain. But we can make sure the EU is not held back by unworkable establishment interests and technocratic centralism. By distributing power and influence to all its peoples and regions, the EU can begin to act in its citizens' interests – not just a combination of member state interests.

Join us in our movement towards a Europe that is truly united in diversity: a Europe for all.

This document was discussed at the EFA Congress 2023 and was endorsed by the following EFA member party delegates:

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