Freedom, opportunity, prosperity: the Liberal vision for the future of Europe

In May 2019, European Citizens are presented with a fundamental choice. We are invited to decide in what kind of Europe we want to live in. It is a choice we face in the upcoming European Elections, and the choice is this: do we update the European Union to develop individual freedom, prosperity and stability, or do we go back to the times of nationalism and growing authoritarianism?

The liberal vision is one built around a free, democratic, entrepreneurial, prosperous, sustainable and united Europe open to the world. A Europe anchored in the four freedoms of movement of people, goods, services and capital. A Europe where human rights, the rule of law, and democracy apply equally to all. We liberals believe in you, the individual. We trust in your own talents, entrepreneurial potential, moral conscience, and your right to make your own choices in life.

We are more than 500 million citizens in the European Union, all children of European history. For centuries, even as European civilisation flourished, it was often interrupted by wars, division and outright repression. Even in the 20th century, our parents and grandparents grew up in a Continent still divided by walls and trenches. But in the past decades, we have been breaking down the barriers that divided us.

We, Europeans, have learned to cooperate, to make decisions together, and to shape our own future. We, Europeans, have built common understanding and institutions for democracy and justice, and have the responsibility to safeguard it.

We, Europeans, have achieved peace and prosperity on our Continent. That is a tremendous achievement that should not be taken for granted. The European Union is a positive ideal for many others in the world; an example to follow.

European values are Liberal values

History has taught us that dignity and freedom for every individual are the building blocks of peace, prosperity, and progress. Through strong liberal institutions, the rule of law and independent judiciary, we liberals are committed to protecting and promoting human and civil rights. In the face of the abuse of excessive political or economic power, we liberals defend the inalienable right to a life of self-determination, regardless of birth or belief, gender or sexual orientation. We want a Europe that is proud of its diversity and works for the benefit of its minorities. The linguistic diversity is a strength of Europe. Through competition, fairness and open trade, we liberals believe that progress for everyone and support for the vulnerable can be achieved by embracing the dynamics of market economies. Liberals believe that our diversity is our strength.

Reasonable debate, responsible conduct, respect for evidence and tolerance of diverse opinions sustain the public life of open societies. We

Resolution:
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Madrid, Spain 2018

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want equal and fair opportunities for everyone. We want to leave a healthy planet to future generations. We empower everyone through education as a civil right. Every human should live a life that has reason to value.

Gender-based violence and sexual harassment is still a huge problem in all our Member States. Combatting violence against women is a priority for us and we call for all EU Member States to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are human rights, and the Member States of the EU needs to provide all women with accessible, affordable, good-quality sexual and reproductive health care and services.

We liberals are the keepers of those quintessentially European values.

In every generation, in every democratic election, and during every day we work hard to sustain what we have inherited and extend our achievements. As liberals, we are committed to promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls, and to work for the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision-making, regardless of gender. For we are not just the children of Europe, we are also the parents of tomorrow's Europe. We have a duty to build a continent whole, strong and at peace for our children and grandchildren and to foster more youth civic engagement and political participation.

That duty is all the more important today because the European Union is being challenged at every turn by rising anti-liberal forces and political paralysis. Authoritarian, nationalist and populist movements within the EU seek to undermine the openness, pluralism and tolerance at the heart of the European project. These anti-liberal forces are pushing towards a cultural conflict. They wish to turn our liberal values inside out: They claim to protect our freedoms, by limiting them instead. They claim to defend security, but instead make us unsafe. They claim to be committed to human dignity, yet vilify and respond with hate to those who are different. They want to freeze societies, not free them. Living in an open and democratic society, the majority has to treat the minority respectfully and vice versa.

Today we face profound challenges: climate change, environmental degradation, plastic pollution, and an urgent need for a clean energy transition; terrorism, cross-border crime and human trafficking, youth unemployment; badly-regulated migration flows and the challenges of integration; potential trade wars and protectionism; Brexit; continuing imbalances within the Eurozone; curtailment of judicial independence and freedom of the press in some states; a rapidly ageing population; the revolutionary impact of technology, especially artificial intelligence and questionable handling of personal data; unfair trading practices and the challenges brought by competition from other rising economies like China which reject market economy principles and do not adhere to the liberal set of rules in global trade; a collapse in support for transatlantic amity in the White House; an aggressive Russia that undermines European security and the multilateral world order; and everywhere a tendency to focus on short-term questions rather than long-term solutions.

As the world changes, the European Union needs to lead. The unwillingness and inability of the institutions and the Member States to reach compromises on reform to renew the EU weakens our collective ability to respond to these challenges. Too often we face resistance and inertia from those who want to cling to the status quo. We liberals want Europe to be strong, to be willing and able to act, and be at the forefront of global developments.

This European election in 2019 is about the soul of Europe and our promise to the next generation of Europeans. Success stories such as the Erasmus programme have added great value to a great number of Europeans. We liberals have always been progressive reformers. Our economies must become more competitive, our democratic institutions more responsive, our management of migration more coherent, our ability to act on the world stage stronger, and our collective response against climate change and cross-border crime more effective. Above all, our children deserve better opportunities for the future. We want to lead the European Union forward and for it to adapt to the changing realities of the 21st century.

For a united Europe ready for the future

We must create a European Union that can adapt to current and future challenges in an ever-more globalised World. By undertaking true reforms of institutions and policies, we can become a capable and leading actor on the world stage.

Liberals and democrats have the capacity to harness globalisation and other global trends in order to generate growth and jobs. As a united Europe, we can benefit from the changes and overcome the challenges brought by globalisation. Retraining and tapping into new economic opportunities will ensure that everyone can reap the benefits of globalisation.

Protectionism threatens what we liberals stand for. It undermines the rule of law, distorts economic activity, impoverishes nations, and locks the poorest nations out of the richest markets. It is our duty as liberals to stand for, and defend, the benefits of free and fair trade together with allies from other political groups. We will always remain outspoken in defence of open, rule-based, and free trade underpinned by a strong World Trade Organisation. To make sure that all Europeans can reap the benefits of globalisation, Member States must build sustainable welfare systems and inclusive societies, supporting technological progress and dismantling barriers to enter the labour market.

We want to boost the infrastructure, invest in education, and establish the legal framework for a digital Europe that ultimately makes life better for all Europeans. This includes a fully-integrated market for digital services. We will bring the rule of common European law to matters of migration and asylum. We want to simplify bureaucracy and renew the societal contract for fair opportunities for everyone in Europe to participate in strong, thriving and innovative economies.

We want Europe to be a role model in the world and demonstrate how the European identity of our citizens enriches our national and local identities.

We are lucky to live in a Europe of few physical borders, where people, goods, services and capital can flow freely. This has brought Europe tremendous economic, social and cultural growth. It should be of little surprise that the EU is now one of the most attractive areas in the world for people looking for jobs and opportunities and better living conditions for their families, or seeking to escape oppression, violent conflict, or war.

In its current state, the EU asylum and migration system is no longer fit for purpose. We need a new common European response, based on a long-term vision.

Liberals strongly oppose all forms of racism, division of societies and hatred against human beings. Any form of violence against people on these grounds must be prosecuted.

Liberals will work to ensure that all those that are fleeing the horrors of war or the pain of political repression will find protection. We underline our commitment to the Geneva Refugee Convention and the right to find asylum.

Our policies should aim to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers do not take unnecessary risks with their lives by boarding unsafe boats and falling in with criminal mafias. The EU should aim to provide shelter in the region where asylum seekers came from.

For that purpose, the EU should make migration agreements with safe countries in the Middle East and Africa. These agreements consist of three elements. First, the EU commits to financially support safe countries in hosting refugees. Second, the EU will work to facilitate the resettlement of refugees in a safe, humane, and legal way. Third, we must ensure the return to these safe countries of those migrants for whom, as quick as possible, an effective return decision following due judicial process has entered into force. We will aim to obtain the collaboration of safe countries, in particular by linking financial support to their willingness to facilitate such safe return.

For those who have a right to asylum in the EU, there should be a humane and effective Common European Asylum System with decent reception, responsibility sharing, and efficient procedures in line with EU fundamental rights standards.

The European Border and Coast Guard should become an effective EU border guard service, to ensure consistent control of external borders in line with EU law. The EU should also continue to provide funding and assistance in the region where asylum seekers come from to combat the causes of migration. We want to coordinate development policies between the EU and the Member States in order to stabilise regions of origins, foster good governance, open societies, and to promote opportunities for a good life.

Beyond this, Liberals commit to establish more legal ways to Europe for those that seek jobs, education, or want to invest in our economies. To meet future demographic challenges, we cannot become a Fortress Europe. We want to extend the scope of the EU blue card to act as an EU-wide work permit based on objective criteria.

However, it should be up to member countries, based on their demographic and labour conditions, to decide on the number, skills and qualifications of these migrants, and under what conditions. When the permit expires, they should return back to their countries of origin.

Free movement of people within the EU is vital for continued European integration and prosperity, so we oppose any re-introduction of permanent internal border controls between Schengen member states.

Alongside this new common approach to migration we need a common commitment to integration. There is no one-size-fits-all policy, but we should ensure best practices are spread across the continent to facilitate and develop capacity for the effective integration of migrants into new communities to avoid instances of tension.

A Europe of innovation and opportunities for all

In an era when people increasingly change jobs and careers, we need to strengthen our knowledge economy by investing in research and innovation, and equipping our workforce with the right set of skills for the 21st century while bridging the generational digital skills gap.

We therefore promote education that focuses on critical thinking, entrepreneurial and soft skills, flexibility, and systemic and interdisciplinary thinking, which matches the real needs of the labour market. We consider education to be a life-long learning process starting at early childhood education, so we want more investments in educational and vocational training, more apprenticeships, and broader participation in the Erasmus projects, as well as strategically investing more in digital infrastructure and programmes to produce a smart workforce for the future.

Investments in research and innovation are investments in the future of Europe. Reaching the target of 3% of the EU GDP invested in research and development by 2020 is key to boost our competitiveness, productivity and sustainable job creation. We want to see qualifications gained in one member state fully-recognised in another, including by supporting joint-degree initiatives. We want to foster labour mobility among Member States and regions that helps to fight unemployment and fill labour shortages, which will increase the EU's competitiveness and reduce the mismatch between skills and jobs. We want to see more support to home-grown scientific research in Member States, simplify the application process, and reduce the time to grant funding to EU funded research and innovation projects in order to increase the take up of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) especially micro firms.

Europe still needs to do more in order to include women in the labour market in order to benefit from their full economic potential. To make further

progress, a continued assessment of the effectiveness of existing public policies and workplace practices is needed. Only with resolve and a continued focus can European countries ensure that men and women both contribute to the economy and society in a gender-equal way.

To sustain our way of living and leave a healthy planet for our children, the EU must be a leading force in the world in addressing climate change, ocean health, and sustainable growth. The transition to a resource-efficient circular economy has a huge potential to foster jobs, growth, and competitiveness. The Paris Agreement and the decarbonisation objective help avoid costly lock-ins to high-carbon investments. The role of private actors is therefore crucial, and we need a stable framework for sustainable investments and finance.

We believe that increased international climate and environmental cooperation is crucial to meet the Paris Agreement targets and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2030 Agenda], and that the EU must take global leadership in setting global ambitious targets. To reach these targets, we must complete the Energy Union and move to foster research and development in low emission technologies, infrastructure, clean energy production, energy efficiency, and a reduction of industry and transport emissions including aviation and shipping. We need to strengthen the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) as the key instrument for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and where possible, it should be extended to cover more sectors, such as transport in an upstream model. We want to see an end of the obsolete fuel tax exemptions for international aviation by updating the Chicago Convention.

By 2050 the EU will be a carbon neutral economy. Its energy system will be highly efficient and fully based on renewable energy. Therefore, the single European energy market with free flows of renewable energy now needs to be completed. As an intermediate step, the EU should reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels.

We want to see greater investment in smart mobility, cross-border and sustainable infrastructure projects including Trans-European Networks, in particular for railroads. This enables us to travel seamlessly from any EU corner to another and efficiently connect people in our Union. High-speed trains should connect all of Europe's metropolises, state monopolies in the railroad market should be opened up, and straighter flight routes throughout European airspace ensured for more sustainable travelling. We support innovation and welcome the moves towards more zero-emission vehicles on our roads and decarbonisation of all transport modes, with greater investment required for the installation of associated infrastructure. The EU should be the first to enable self-driving vehicles on its roads and innovative solutions for the last mile of delivery. We need more investment in inland waterways and rail and intermodal hubs.

The EU's cohesion policy can be an important tool for stimulating sustainable economic growth, reducing regional disparities and bringing the EU closer to the citizens. We stand for a result-oriented, efficient, thematically focused cohesion policy that follows on the real needs of

citizens and that stimulates sustainable economic growth and innovation-driven economy in all the EU regions. The EU's cohesion funds shall not support programmes or projects that counter the Paris Agreement or the EU's climate and energy objectives. We all depend on nature for food, air, and water. Nature does not see borders; therefore, it is only logical that we work on protecting nature and the environment together. The EU must be a driver for an international Paris Agreement on biodiversity and establish an economic value for natural capital and ecosystem services.

We also want to make EU action as efficient as possible. Therefore, cohesion policy should be linked to the European Semester and support the implementation of structural reforms.

Opportunities and innovation through small and medium-sized enterprise and free trade

The European Union needs to continue setting global standards in international trade and promote free and rule-based trade as an essential source of prosperity. Faced with emerging trends of protectionism and expanding Asian economies, the EU must overcome internal challenges to seize the opportunity. Liberals confidently counter the growing scepticism towards economic progress and increasing distrust in multilateralism. Modern and progressive free trade agreements are important to stimulate growth and jobs and the only way to guarantee that the European way of securing social, economic and production standards will prevail. Communication on free trade agreements need to be improved, to allow stronger transparency throughout the stages of the negotiation process. The content is to be explained in a clear language to the public.

We support the efforts of the European Commission to negotiate more trade deals, and call on the negotiators to preserve human dignity and human working conditions, sustainability and anti-corruption in future agreements. Global trade from a European perspective must also be fair and sustainable.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of prosperity in Europe. To further support them, we will continue to facilitate the creation of more jobs through easier access to finance, simpler rules for investment funds to support new, innovative businesses across Europe, encouraging knowledge and technology transfer from universities and research institutes, and greater opportunities for young entrepreneurs.

Digital innovation that benefits and unites us

The future is digital, which makes the question of how the international trade of services and data is defined and is regulated crucial. To harness the full potential of innovative technologies and make the EU the most attractive place for companies in the digital economy, the EU must build a fully-functioning Digital Single Market. We shall encourage competition among companies in the digital space, and we will not hesitate to use our powers to prevent the development of monopolies and to ensure competition to develop innovative services.

In the age of digitalisation, access to the Internet is crucial for equal opportunities. In our liberal Europe, there shall be no virtual borders. We abolished mobile phone roaming charges and we will work to abolish geoblocking. We believe you should have the freedom to access your home news and entertainment services as you travel anywhere in our continent. Data protection policies need to be harmonised and balanced in order to ensure the EU's future as place of innovation. Upload filters and censorship infrastructure are endangering the concept of free access to information while intellectual property must be guaranteed in order to let the creative sector flourish.

We believe the EU should be the first to create a solid legal framework for new technologies such as blockchain, artificial intelligence and others to be used in the economy and public life. Legislation should however be focused on applications that use these new technologies and not on the underlying technologies themselves, since this would otherwise limit innovation and the creation of new applications. Every European should get a trusted and secure digital identity to be able to log in and sign documents safely, in a 21st century manner. We aim for making digital the default solution for all public services to make things easier for citizens and increase effectiveness of the public service.

Addressing the issues of cyber security, data protection, and privacy is self-evident for us, there can be no digital society without these base requirements.

A Europe that leads on the global stage

To protect Europe and our liberal democracies at this contemporary crossroads, the future of the EU can only be based on strong and connected European Union. We believe, however, that the external resolve of the EU can only be built on internal strength. We must therefore put our own house in order so that the EU is taken even more seriously on the international stage.

We shall establish a new effective mechanism outside the framework of Article 7 of the TEU to monitor violations of fundamental rights, civil liberties and the rule of law in the member states of the European Union on a regular basis. We call on the European Commission, as the guardian of the EU Treaties and on the basis of objective criteria, to enforce sanctions in cases of violations and create stronger conditionality between the rule of law and receipt of European funding.

In a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, the EU should play a more important global role, both as a soft and hard power, further developing the EU’s immense economic and rule-setting power and growing collective diplomatic and military capabilities.

We believe Member States and the EU as a whole must assume greater responsibility for its security and we support a common EU approach wherever possible to the strategic challenges Europe faces today, and to progressively introduce Qualified Majority Voting on such matters. We welcome greater European cooperation in defence spending and the

agreement of PESCO, and encourage Member States to further increase defence cooperation in areas of mutual advantage, in greater cooperation with and to complement NATO which remains the backbone of military cooperation and guarantor of collective defence for Europe. Solidarity between Member States is crucial to make our common defence efforts credible and tangible for citizens. In the long-term, we support more interlocking and interoperable European forces.

European citizens must be at the centre of our security and defence policy that must involve concrete actions starting with ever-closer cooperation to fight terrorism as well as more effective efforts to secure the EU's external border. Upgrading Europol's powers and increasing cooperation in intelligence sharing are necessary next steps we need to take. It must also involve greater capacity across EU institutions and Member States to defend our economies and societies against hybrid activities, such as disinformation campaigns, cyber espionage, cyber-attacks and crime. These include those aimed at undermining our democracies and our elections as well as to fight climate change, one the biggest security and safety threats of our times.

We believe the EU must continue to play its leading role in development cooperation to ensure sustainable development and promote democracy, human rights, peace and security in the world. To use our resources in the best possible way, we strive for a greater focus on the quality of development projects and programmes, and better coordination within the EU and the EU and its Member States. In this way we can promote both Europe's security interests and our humanitarian values.

We regret Brexit and call on the EU and Britain to make every effort to avoid a 'no deal' scenario which would have negative consequences for all concerned, and Ireland in particular. We hope a positive and close partnership and ongoing cooperation will be maintained between the EU and the United Kingdom if she ceases to be a member of the EU. If the United Kingdom decides to reverse its decision to leave the EU, we will welcome that decision and work to ensure the re-establishment of a refreshed and stable relationship.

The Belfast Agreement must be upheld in full, including the rights of citizens in Northern Ireland to EU citizenship if they so wish, and we want a workable and operable guarantee to be included in the withdrawal agreement that ensures that there will be no hard border on the island of Ireland.

We support greater strategic engagement of the EU in its neighbourhood and the future enlargement perspective for the countries of the Western Balkans and its common European neighbourhood, once these countries meet the accession criteria. We call for a considerable investment by the European Union into the infrastructure of these strategically so important countries. It is in our vital interest to further development and the accession process to help stabilising the region.

We wish to see the collective European Union a strong actor on the international stage. Therefore, Europe has to speak with one voice. We

liberals advocate the strengthening of the European External Action Services (EEAS) and the High Commissioner of European Foreign and Security Policy.

We wish to see the EU take the initiative to reform the United Nations Charter and lead reform of the World Trade Organisation, and aim to reinforce multilateral institutions and treaties against forces of nationalism and unilateralism. We support establishing a European seat in the UN Security Council and other organisations, as well as engaging in dialogue with democratic neighbouring countries, other world democracies and emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil while exercising zero-tolerance when the fundamental principles of democratic processes, law and curse human rights are not being respected.

We condemn the continued annexation and occupation of Crimea and aggression in East Ukraine by Russia in violation of international law. We call for greater EU support to the democratically-elected administration of Ukraine and the EU to continue its economic sanctions on Russia. We call on Russia and the Ukraine to fulfil their commitments under the Minsk Agreement. We want to uphold and strengthen international agreements on disarmament and non-proliferation and urge Russia and the United States to uphold their commitment to the INF Treaty. We support the continuation of the Iran nuclear deal. We will continue to support all free trade that takes place in line with the negotiated agreements, including European companies who are, as a result of their activities under the JCPOA framework, in Iran.

A responsible Europe that works better for you

We believe that decisions should be taken at the appropriate local and regional, national or EU level that serves you best and most directly. We support initiatives to re-evaluate and re-negotiate of the division of competencies between the European Union and its Member States, strongly keeping in mind the principles of simplification and subsidiarity. The Union of tomorrow must be based on decentralisation and diversity, not on burdensome bureaucracy and over-regulation.

We will continue our efforts to bring more transparency and more efficiency to the EU institutions. We believe the European Parliament should only have one seat in Brussels, and that more work needs to be done to reinforce the democratic nature of the European Union. We want to see greater involvement of the European Parliament in decision-making by giving it the right to initiate legislation, and a greater degree of transparency of negotiations and voting within the European Council, and the Council of the EU. A more open, legitimate, and democratic European Union, closer to its citizens, can only be a good thing.

Making every Euro count: investing wisely

We must ensure that European money is spent as efficiently as possible. Every Euro that comes from the EU budget should be treated with care and responsibility by the EU institutions and government of the Member State. It is important to manage all European funds in a more effective and

transparent manner to ensure the EU budget delivers on the issues that matter to citizens and that provides European added value. Before posing the question of “how much”, we, liberals, first want to answer the questions of “what for” and “how”.

We shall promote investments in innovation and research, technological change, security, environment and fighting climate change, and tackling youth unemployment as key priorities that the EU budget should reflect. The EU's budget shall not support programmes or projects that counter the EU's climate and energy objectives. We aim to change the systematics of EU spending. In addition to current spending methods largely based on subsidies, financial instruments such as loans or guarantees can be used more to mobilise private capital and incentivise innovation by linking it to a clear agenda of economic and structural reform.

To ensure longer-term stability, we should use these good times to reform and prepare our economic system for future challenges it will face. The EU needs to continue the reconstruction of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), learning from its past mistakes. In this process, we want to talk about both stability and solidarity, and pay attention to what is politically and economically feasible at national level. We promote combining the responsibility of each Member State for its own policies with a structure that can foster financial stability and economic growth.

We will work for better control mechanism and more automatic sanctions on countries when the stability and growth pact is broken. We will work for the rapid implementation of a banking union in the Eurozone, based on strengthening the responsibility of owners and creditors of banks rather than increasing the liability of either the taxpayer or competitors for the failure of a bank, and for the reform of the European Stability Mechanism into a true European Monetary Fund based on strict conditions ensuring responsibility and the principle of avoiding moral hazard.

We aim to substantially reform and rethink agricultural subsidies as reforming the Common Agricultural Policy will be an essential step to the sustainability goals, and greater transparency and equality in the subsidies payment. We want a unbureaucratic, lean, transparent, and modern common agricultural policy that incentivises innovation, entrepreneurship, generational renewal and sustainability in farming. This should also combat challenges such as antimicrobial resistance, food security, and promote alternative and environmentally friendly agricultural methods. We do not want to see a re-nationalisation of agricultural policy.

Too often the EU debate has been undermined by myths and misinformation. We share a responsibility to foster an honest debate about the future of Europe and better promote the positive impact of EU policies and cooperation on the lives of our citizens.

Building a more Liberal Europe

To build this liberal Europe, the ALDE Party and its member parties, seek your vote so liberals are even stronger for the next five years in the European Parliament.

The momentum is here. Let's embrace it. Let's dream. A dream of renewing the European Union from the ground up.

We want a Europe that is rich in its diversity and united in standing up for the fundamental rights and freedoms of its citizens.

We want a Europe that is free, fair, dynamic and open.

We want a Europe that protects the rule of law.

We want a Europe that renews its promise of a strong social contract for a competitive economy.

We want a Europe that embraces the potential of the technological and digital evolution, of innovation and what the World's biggest research programme can bring.

We want a Europe that protects its citizens against threats like climate change, terrorism, cyber conflict and organised crime.

We want a Europe that defends entrepreneurship and businesses.

We want a Europe of open markets and free trade.

We want a Europe that pursues economic innovation to lead in a competitive world.

We want a Europe where you can succeed.

A more liberal Europe.

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