

CHALLENGE EUROPE

Yes, we should!

EU priorities for 2019-2024



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Our vision: Europe, a beacon of sustainability

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MAIN RECOMMENDATION ► The EU needs to become a beacon of sustainability, a place that respects the rights, livelihood and environment for all its citizens, both now and in the future.

WHAT TO DO:

- Adopt a comprehensive policy package to tackle the climate crisis, including measures regarding energy and transport, agriculture and food and circular economy.
 - Counter inequality through tax reform and stronger social policies at the EU level.
 - Take effective measures against discrimination of women and minorities in its member states by adopting legislations and appointing an own vice-president of the Commission on human rights.
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On 20 August 2018, Greta Thunberg's seat in her Stockholm high school remained empty. She was not on holiday. She was not sick. She had just decided to go on a 'climate strike' in front of the Swedish *Riksdag*, every day until the Swedish general elections in September 2018. She has gone on strike each Friday ever since. What started out as an individual protest grew into an international youth movement with thousands of protesters in over 20 countries around the world.

Climate change is not the only cause for which Europeans have rallied in demonstrations recently. Women's marches, protests against corruption and human rights abuses, the *gilets jaunes*, those protesting social and economic inequality – it has been busy on the streets of Europe.

We, as younger Europeans, need to make our voices heard. This is why we, the participants of the YES Lab met in February 2019 in Brussels, to formulate what we think the next EU leadership should pursue in the coming politico-institutional cycle. Although there is some diversity in the group in terms of nationality, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and sexual identity,

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we do not claim to represent *all* young Europeans. However, our discussions were informed not only by our own experiences but also by the increasing fragmentation between and the polarisation within European societies, exemplified by the protests we see taking place all over Europe.

Inspired by the rise in political activism of a new generation of Europeans, we are presenting our vision for the future EU. We want the Union to become a beacon of sustainability, a place that respects the rights and livelihoods of all its citizens, and the environment, both now and in the future. In the coming years, we want the EU to take action in three areas connected

to building a strong, stable and sustainable European community. While many different themes are important to younger Europeans, we choose to focus on the ones that we think are vital in making the EU a beacon of sustainability: climate change, economic inequality and human rights.

These topics deserve urgent attention in the 2019 European elections, the definition of the Union's strategic agenda and priorities for 2019-2024, the formation of the next European Commission, and the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The choices that will be made over the next five years will determine the future of our generation and those to come.

1. A comprehensive policy package to tackle the climate crisis

The house is on fire. Environment-related risks have been dominating the World Economic Forum's ranking since 2016. Global temperature has reached new records, prompting extreme weather events across the continent and beyond. Moreover, climate change has contributed to changing migration patterns, which is affecting the EU. In response to political inaction, hundreds of thousands of young Europeans flood the streets every week to rightly warn of a betrayed generation, urge policymakers to curb emissions and demand drastic measures. To help tackle the climate crisis, we want the new EU leadership to pursue changes in three particular areas: energy and transport; agriculture and food; and the circular economy.

ENERGY AND TRANSPORT

► Accelerating decarbonisation: emitting 1,000 kg of CO₂ currently costs less than a

monthly public transport ticket.¹ The OECD recommends tightening allowances to reach €60 per tonne of CO₂ by 2020.² However, returning to a path where temperatures do not rise above 1.5°C requires binding "Maastricht criteria" for emissions, which urge member states to stay within their greenhouse gas budgets, in addition to the 3% budget deficit.

► Subsidising solidarity: European member states sponsor fossil fuels for an amount of over €100 billion a year.³ They should heed the Commission's calls to stop environmentally harmful subsidies by 2020. Part of the money that is saved should go to a new environmental disaster fund that supports member states when climate change-related disasters strike. The other part should fund regional innovation clusters for research on clean energy, electrification, grids and storage solutions. Investments in storage and grid interconnection are especially needed for a

successful transition and should be supported by building on the 2017 Commission Staff Working Document ‘Energy storage – the role of electricity’.

► **Prioritising clean infrastructure:** as long as train tickets cost more than taking the plane and Europe spends more on gas routes than on grids, a sustainable future remains a pipe dream. EU policymakers can nudge governments in the right direction by subsidising and fast-tracking modes of transportation and transmission powered by clean energy.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

► **Planting prosperity:** the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been a key pillar of European cooperation in the past six decades. But if Europe wants to be more efficient in the 21st century, the next European Commissioner responsible for agriculture should aim towards a shift from animal husbandry to plant-based programmes with a shorter supply chain and smaller carbon footprint.⁴

► **Greening subsidies:** today, 80% of CAP subsidies go to 20% of Europe’s farms.⁵ The MFF negotiations provide a window of opportunity to boost small businesses and move even further away from hectare-based payments to funding linked to socio-economic and environmental criteria. Moreover, allocated funds should foster regional and seasonal farming to support sustainable regional food supply, instead of exporting cheap meat and dairy products.

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

► **Procuring responsibly:** defining green public procurement criteria for 20 product groups can only be a first step. Similar to the Netherlands, the EU should aim to raise the proportion of circular procurement to 10% by 2020 to unleash the multiple benefits the European Commission has identified.⁶

► **Modern recycling:** whereas Europe’s construction sector recycles 89% of its used materials, the rate is disappointing when one looks at plastic (42%) or e-waste (41%).⁷ Valuable, finite materials must not go to waste if Europe wants to champion sustainability. Initiatives on furthering landfill mining and trading recyclable raw materials would bolster the Circular Economy Action Plan.

► **Promoting zero waste:** EU policies have to ensure a sustainable production cycle from cradle to cradle. The planned

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Europeans would ultimately benefit from the increased revenues that digital taxation would generate. More money could be spent on housing, education, health and infrastructure, thereby reducing inequality at the national level, too.

Policies should be focused on creating opportunities for young people to enter the labour market in their own country first so that they will not be forced to move.

Many roadblocks are still present in the field of human rights, minority rights and with respect to women's discrimination.

The Union has not paid enough attention to secure the rights of marginalised groups in European societies.

To implement the protection and strengthening of minority rights horizontally, across different policy areas, the next Commission should appoint a vice-president responsible for human rights.

Normalising discrimination of both women and minorities is a serious problem that leads to the creation of a future generation that does not understand the dangers of having an unequal society.

ban on single-use plastic is a step in the right direction. A consistent carrot and stick approach would increase the chance of accomplishing the mission. Regions and municipal applicants should only benefit from European Structural and Investment Funds if they have submitted a zero-waste plan that considers the full life cycle of products.

2. Countering inequalities

Economic divergence is growing, leading to inequality and development discrepancies within and between EU member states. Dealing with this issue is extremely important as it fuels polarisation within European societies and the fragmentation between member states. This jeopardises the common European project as such, because it contributes to EU scepticism and ultimately to a dysfunctional European Union.

ACHIEVING COHESION

EU cohesion policy is fundamental for the Union's prosperous future. Policy implementation was meant to support the overall development of its member states and regions by reducing economic and infrastructure disparities. Despite spending €350 billion on cohesion policy over the past five years⁸, many citizens are unaware of the EU investments in their regions. The EU should thus better communicate its cohesion policy efforts and successes to the wider public.

However, at the same time, the EU's self-congratulatory assessment about the decrease of disparities between the regions seems to be out of place, as the Gini index, which measures the extent to which the distribution of income within a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution, still varies significantly between member states – its value in 2013 ranged from 0.25 (in Slovenia, Sweden and the Czech Republic) to 0.35 (in Bulgaria, Cyprus and the Baltic states). Even though many suggest that the Gini index shows a positive picture, reflecting high European standards and high levels of equality within the EU, we believe that measuring by the average is not adequate when dealing with equality issues. We do not want the reality of cohesion to be hidden in average characteristics and we believe that median results paint a more detailed and honest picture. For example, the average wage in Latvia is more than €1,000; however, if one takes a closer look at some Latvian regions, the average wage is at least 40% less than

that. Similarly, many other EU regions are lagging behind. The south of Italy and the eastern parts of Germany are also very clear examples of European regions that are not doing so well when compared to national averages.

We believe that cohesion should be promoted and measured not only by putting EU resources into regions that are lagging behind, but also by enhancing the links and cooperation between member states. Societal cohesion in Europe can be further developed by existing exchange programmes, like Erasmus for students and young start-ups. Right now, these international programmes are lacking analysis of existing trends, strategic planning and clear direction setting. If we manage to connect underdeveloped EU regions with the most developed regions and promote intellectual and physical exchange between them, then we most certainly will be able to create a much more cohesive EU.

FAIR TAXATION AND ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING ACTION

Economic inequality between EU citizens and among EU member states is also the result of flawed and ineffective tax policies. In the EU, tax fraud, tax evasion and deals between corporations and tax authorities cost citizens €1 trillion each year.⁹ Huge amounts of money are hidden in tax havens.

Building on the existing work of the European Parliament on Financial Crimes, Tax Evasion and Tax Avoidance¹⁰ the EU should, as a matter of priority, focus on overhauling the system for dealing with tax evasion and avoidance; as well as on phasing out golden visas and passports and tax havens within the Union.

The comparative advantage some EU countries have over others when it comes to corporate taxes should be removed. Last,

but not least, the unanimity requirement on tax issues in the Council should be changed to qualified majority voting.

Member states should also adopt the Commission's legislative proposals on the Fair Taxation of the Digital Economy that would result in a fairer taxation of corporate digital activities in the EU. No state should be allowed to veto proposals for tax reforms at the European level, as this fuels a race to the bottom, whereby all countries try to attract investment from the digital sector by exempting companies from paying tax on profit or activities. Europeans would ultimately benefit from the increased revenues that digital taxation would generate. More money could be spent on housing, education, health and infrastructure, thereby reducing inequality at the national level, too.

EU UNEMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

In January 2019, 16.222 million men and women in the 28 EU member states were unemployed. Of these, 3.38 million were young people under 25. Among the member states, the lowest unemployment rates in January 2019 were recorded in Central Europe (Czech Republic 2.1%; Germany 3.2%), while the highest unemployment rates were observed in Southern Europe (Greece 18.5% (in November 2018); Spain 14.1%; Italy 10.5%).

We are witnessing high levels of internal economic migration, from member states that face economic and social problems towards countries with stronger economies. Frequently, those who move abroad are young and highly-qualified citizens. They make use of the possibilities of moving to and working freely in another EU country. This possibility can be a solution to their personal hardship but many of them feel that they were forced to leave their countries due to bad economic and social circumstances.

In addition, as the number of those leaving is continuously growing, the resulting 'brain drain' hampers the economic catching-up process in these countries and fuels a feeling of unequal opportunities for youth across the Union.

The EU should tackle this issue by designing policies which will allow for more cohesion

within the EU. Policies should be focused on creating opportunities for young people to enter the labour market in their own country first so that they will not be forced to move. The Union should enhance programmes aimed at reducing youth unemployment by giving young people more opportunities to acquire professional experience in their home country.

3. Promotion of human rights

Many roadblocks are still present in the field of human rights, minority rights and with respect to women's discrimination. Policies that could address these issues do not exist, and if they do, they might not tackle the problem in all its aspects or are viewed as being of secondary importance in decision-making.

ENHANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women are still discriminated in the EU. The inequality between men and women is reflected in a major pay gap. On average, for each €1 that a male counterpart makes, women with the same degree and level of experience are, on average, only paid around €0,84.¹²

No EU-wide policies are currently in place that aim to effectively promote income equality. Under-representation of women in many professions, particularly in STEM fields, as well as in the realm of politics¹³ is another example of women's discrimination. This is also reflected in the composition of EU institutions, including the Commission college and the cabinets of Commissioners. Furthermore, even the simplest and most basic rights, such as sexual and reproductive health rights, are contested in parts of Europe, for example when it comes to abortion rights in Italy

or Poland. Finally, even today, European women today still have to deal with sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence.

To address these challenges, the next EU leadership should aim to initiate new projects, grants, and scholarship programmes supporting women in science and women's achievements in the scientific and public environment. This should be adequately reflected in the next MFF. The EU should also take steps aiming to prolong paternity leave, reduce the gender pay gap and promote human rights, not only abroad but also within member states. Women still spend more time on housework and child-rearing than their male partners, so a gender-sensitive budget should be implemented and employee rights related to parenthood should be progressively balanced in an effort to ensure that working women will not be disadvantaged.

STRENGTHENING THE RIGHTS OF MINORITIES

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has recognised that minorities (including ethnic, religious, sexual and gender minorities as well as disabled people) continue to face widespread discrimination across the EU and in all areas of life. Indeed, the

Union has not paid enough attention to secure the rights of marginalised groups in European societies. Minorities, in particular ethnic and religious minorities who are not white or seen as ‘European’ are often used as scapegoats to fuel divisions between “us” and “them”. Furthermore, migrants and Europeans who are not white are instrumentalised to distract from actual issues such as social injustices, corruption or mismanagement of the economy. This trend is witnessed across the EU, not just in countries like Hungary or Poland, whose current governments have most evidently disrupted the very foundations on which the European Union is built, undermining the rule of law, basic human rights and fundamental values in their country. The Danish government, for example, wants to pass laws that in fact label certain areas with a high immigrant population as ‘ghettos’, which will be subject to harsher laws¹⁴.

Minorities and migrants tend to generally only succeed in society if they adapt to a predominantly white, heterosexual and male ideal. Minorities and migrants still experience discrimination and are often targets of hate speech, both in the real and virtual world. They are on many occasions treated unequally and do not have the same opportunities in finding jobs and housing.

Over the next five years, to implement the protection and strengthening of minority rights horizontally, across different policy areas, the next Commission should appoint a vice-president responsible for human rights. This vice-president should work towards incorporating the protection of minorities’ rights in all policy fields.

Legislation is important but as long as ignorance and intolerant attitudes linger, then prejudice, discrimination and inequalities will continue to be part of our societies. The lack of equality and diversity lessons in European education programmes encourages the negative influences of social media, adults and peers. Normalising discrimination of both women and minorities is a serious problem that leads to the creation of a future generation that does not understand the dangers of having an unequal society. Many schools and universities have started with “equality weeks” aiming to raise the awareness regarding the different topics of equality. Especially with people moving to new cultures and migrant students being thrown into a new reality, a good inclusive educational system is crucial for these people to be able to integrate and be accepted as constituent parts of Europe’s young generation, and thus of its future.

We, as younger Europeans, see that there is still a lot to be done if we want a bright and sustainable future for the EU.

Despite all its weaknesses, we love to call Europe our home, and we think the foundation for that home as laid down in the Treaties is sound.

If the EU really is “United in Diversity”, then it needs to safeguard those elements in society that make it diverse, take action to prevent diversity from being a hollow term, and truly ensure equal opportunities for all Europeans.

Concluding remarks: Our European future

Picture this: it is 2057 and the European Union is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Rome Treaties. The EU has weathered many storms, but it has succeeded in maintaining peace and stability for a full century. It has been a long and arduous road to ensure European citizens' active participation in and political approval of the European project. But the EU has managed to set an unprecedented record of a century of peace and prosperity: it is a beacon of sustainability.

Rewinding back to 2019, and we, as younger Europeans, see that there is still a lot to be done if we want a bright and sustainable future for the EU. Looking at the status quo, we see a Union that is still divided by inequality between and within member states. We see inequality between men and women, ongoing discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, gender identity, or disabilities. Looming over it all is the threat of climate change. Rising sea levels, droughts, wildfires, and extreme weather events are threatening the lives and livelihoods of millions of Europeans, not only in the distant future, but right now.

Despite all its weaknesses, we love to call Europe our home, and we think the foundation for that home as laid down in the Treaties is sound. To strengthen the European house we live in, for us, our children and grandchildren, and to make Europe a beacon of sustainability, there is still a lot to be done.

The whole world needs to take action to tackle climate change, and in signing and implementing the Paris Agreement, many countries are doing just that. As a strong union, the EU needs to lead by example. It should invest in its energy

and transport sectors, by building a clean infrastructure, investing in innovation and divesting from polluting energy and ways of transport. It should reconsider the current CAP structure and invest in sustainable agriculture and food chain. It needs to promote recycling and the circular economy and set up a disaster fund to strengthen European solidarity in times of crisis.

The Union should also try to achieve more social cohesion, and fight economic inequalities between member states. Fair taxation needs to be a central pillar in its social policies. EU unemployment support is another priority. Only by having a fair division of wealth between people and between EU countries can the Union be sustainable and strengthen the feeling of belonging among everyone who lives in the EU.

We have a strong tradition in Europe to safeguard human rights, but it remains important to protect and promote them in EU policy discussions. Like economic inequality, the unequal treatment of women and minorities are a threat to the social cohesion in Europe and stand in the way of a strong and sustainable EU. If the EU really is "United in Diversity", then it needs to safeguard those elements in society that make it diverse, take action to prevent diversity from being a hollow term, and truly ensure equal opportunities for all Europeans.

We, as younger Europeans, still have our whole lives ahead of us. Most of us will live to see 2057. We need the EU to take the necessary steps now to ensure that Europe is a beacon of sustainability, and a safe and comfortable home for all Europeans.