

EPP Congress Paper: The Europe We Want to Build Emphasising Our Values and Responding to New Challenges

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1. Introduction

This document is the first comprehensive party document since the adoption of our current EPP Platform in Bucharest in 2012. It is not meant to replace this platform, but to update the EPP's positioning within the political spectrum of Europe, and in light of new challenges. During the past decade, Europe has faced many challenges: the global financial and economic crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit and, most recently, a pandemic that our citizens have not experienced in their lifetime. Most recently of all, the invasion of the Russian army into Ukraine has changed our world overnight. This has put the European Union and its institutions into permanent crisis mode. Sometimes Europeans have struggled to find rapid common responses to challenges, but in the end we have all realised that every one of those challenges is too big to deal with on the level of individual countries alone. Moreover, important global challenges have become more urgent over the past decade: the war in Ukraine, climate change, migration, terrorism, increasing inequality, as well as disinformation, challenges to the rule of law and the rise of populism and authoritarianism, to mention only a few. New geopolitical challenges and the weakening of values-based international multilateralism are challenging our values on the global level.

The European People's Party, and its Christian democrat, conservative and other centre and centre-right political parties, have been shaping the European project since its foundation. As the largest political family in Europe, we continue to do so. The EPP has never shied away from taking responsibility and is committed to solving the problems we are all facing. Only if we focus on the common good and on common answers will we emerge stronger from crises. We believe in a strong and united Europe and we want to improve it for future generations.

2. Our fundamental values

We are united by the belief in a particular set of principles. Taken together, they form the fundamental values upon which the European People's Party is built. Europe has always striven to be a place of culture, reason, progress, faith and knowledge. We have learned from

history – ours and that of others. We understand the EPP as a broad political family enriched by cultural, regional and historical diversity. While these differences sometimes appear challenging, they also foster unity in diversity and mutual understanding in our political family. Regardless of our different national identities, we share a common cultural heritage: rooted in Hebrew prophecy, Greek philosophy and Roman law, harmonised and enriched by the Christian message and Judeo-Christian values. This long tradition of Christian thought has created the conditions for European Enlightenment (human rights, democracy and the rule of law). This is our cultural heritage, which we will cherish and defend against old and new adversaries. Our positive vision for Europe's future is only complete when naming the ideas we reject. Saying what we want and saying what we do not want are two sides of the same coin. Our political thinking is based on the following interdependent, equally important and universally valid Judeo-Christian and democratic values.

Human dignity is unalienable: the human person is at the centre of community life and at the centre of political action. Individual freedom, which is of paramount importance, is not possible without social responsibility. Our Christian tradition calls upon us to respect one another and treat every human as equal. The freedom of religion, including the right to change one's faith or to have none, must be respected globally. Each person must be able to achieve personal development regardless of his or her origin, sex, race, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, state of health and age.

We believe that a human being develops his or her full potential in relation to others and that the central aim of our political action is to work for the common good. Solidarity works both ways: it is an obligation for those who are in a better position towards those who cannot fend for themselves, who in turn also have the responsibility to engage to help themselves. The respect for weaker, fragile and vulnerable persons has to be the premise of secure, resilient societies. We support the family as the foundation of society. It is in families in all their diverse forms that children experience first what it means to be human and develop in a general way. In families, generations take responsibility for each other.

Facing the challenge of populism, we firmly believe in a cohesive society in which every voice should be respected and politicians should serve the common good. The EPP strives to overcome divisions and build bridges; this is challenging in times of widespread social media use and isolated realities, but it is the only way to advance our societies, solve our problems and build a better future together. Our political family must strive for dialogue and reconciliation. This cannot be achieved without the firm protection of freedom of speech in all its forms.

The project of European integration was built by Christian democrats deeply convinced that Europe must never repeat the past mistakes which led to such devastating results. We reject authoritarianism and nationalism and are convinced that the nations of Europe can only be masters of their future if they act together and share elements of their sovereignty. 'My

country first' can never be the motto if we want to live in a Union that is more than the sum of its parts. We also confirm our commitment to the cultural rights of autochthonous minorities. Without denying the nations that make up the European Union and the identity they create, we want to develop a true European identity based on our common values.

We consider liberal democracy the only viable political system to guarantee our fundamental values. This entails the rule of law, free and fair elections, strong and independent institutions, especially an independent judiciary, free and unrestricted media, transparency of public administration, as well as a strong and unhindered civil society and the rejection of all forms of corruption. So-called 'illiberal democracy' and democratic backsliding, i.e. the systematic weakening of checks and balances and the negation of their importance, have no place in our political family.

We strive for a strong European Union based on the principle of subsidiarity, with strong institutions addressing those problems which cannot be solved on a local, regional or national level. Political decisions must be taken as closely as possible to the citizens, including strong local and regional governments. We believe in the strength of empowered individuals, families, schools, churches, civil society organisations, local communities, social partners, cities, regions and Member States up to the level of the European Union in a strong bottom-up system – each with shared responsibilities for shaping our diverse societies. But subsidiarity must be coupled with solidarity; otherwise, it becomes an instrument serving only the strong. The concept of reciprocity is particularly important. Subsidiarity expresses itself not only vertically in the political system but also horizontally in society, based on the premise that society and its institutions and organisations can be constructed in freedom.

The future development of the European Union and its institutions must be based on broad public support. We want to push for a Europe of concrete and tangible results for citizens. People have to see the benefits and added value of any further steps in European integration as a precondition for a trustworthy, reliable and operational European Union in both peaceful and challenging times. Trust and security in transitions are fundamental. Wellbeing and better opportunities, equality and inclusion for all are what citizens expect Europe to deliver.

We consider an ecological and competitive social market economy the best guarantor of growth, prosperity and social justice, as well as human freedom and a planet with a future. We uphold the principles of sustainability and stewardship: taking into account the wellbeing of future generations, not only with regard to the environment but also in terms of finance and economics. We are committed to preserving our planet for generations to come.

Social dialogue and the collective bargaining of social partners, as well as respect for Member States' different labour market traditions, are central to the social market economy. They enable employers and workers at company, sector and cross-industry levels to negotiate and to find common and proportionate solutions and to improve the dignity and quality of the working and living conditions of all concerned actors. In an ever-changing economic sphere

and world of work, these actors are challenged. In order to guarantee and strengthen the democratic and horizontal participation of all, the institutional setting underlying social dialogue and collective bargaining needs full support and an enabling environment which empowers the worker and employer on a personal level and allows for the collective flourishing of the social market economy.

Power is never an end in itself but, gained and exerted democratically, it is a means to strengthen and promote freedom, peace and prosperity. Our Union will only be able to project these values externally, if it lives according to them within. We stand by the global solidarity of democrats and a robust defence of liberal democracy against authoritarian threats and populists. If the coming decade becomes a global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, we know we must be firmly on the side of democracy both within the EU and vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

3. The Europe we want

- A Europe able to act

The EPP has always fought for a strong Europe based on the community method. It is our lesson from the history of our continent but also a necessity in a globalised world. Working together means better defending our values and interests. Especially during times of crisis, our citizens expect us to solve the problems at hand. This is what our political family has been doing for decades and will continue to do. We are committed to dealing with the concerns of our citizens in the future – based on facts and science. The decision-making structures in the EU do not always make it easy to generate rapid response. We want to equip the Union with the right structures and resources to tackle the next emergency, be the problem-solver in the next crisis and build a stronger basis for the future to improve our capability to act. We need to be able to act strategically and to extend the use of qualified majority voting in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy. Moreover, we need to better clarify the distribution of powers and responsibilities between the European Union, its Member States and its regional and local authorities, so our citizens know who is accountable for each decision. This includes reducing 'grey areas' and ensuring greater transparency of decision-making.

A European Union able to act will also require its own budgetary resources in order to have sufficient flexibility to deal with crises and emergencies.

We expect that the EU institutions and national parliaments will jointly and effectively follow up on the proposals endorsed by the Conference on the Future of Europe, in particular the following:

- A democratic Europe close to citizens

We are convinced that every political decision should be made as closely as possible to the citizens – in their town, region or state. The European Union should focus on the big

challenges, those that we can only or better tackle together. We need a stronger EU in security, climate policy, foreign and development policy, defence, migration, trade relations, our ability to be a global player and crisis resilience while leaving other important competences with Member States. Greater accountability of decisions can fill the democratic deficit, with a lively parliamentary democracy and a stronger European Parliament (EP) and European Committee of the Regions at its core – as well as by creating greater synergies with national and regional parliaments.

A successful European Union true to its values can only be based on Member States which are truly democratic and strictly respect the rule of law. Therefore, we need a better functioning control of the rule of law, with a continuous application of the Copenhagen accession criteria in all Member States based on a regular review and equipped with sanctions, including financial sanctions. This also means that we need a functioning Article 7 procedure. The role of the European Court of Justice needs to be preserved in safeguarding the rule of law across the EU and the functioning of the internal market.

The EPP strongly believes in active citizenship, the empowerment of citizens and the necessity of the recognition by the EU and Member States of a legal space for civil society and civil society activities. It is the duty of all governments to confirm in their laws, public policies and practice that civil society groups and NGOs be recognised as fully pledged democratic partners. New ways to embrace the EU's motto 'Unity in Diversity' will have to be developed to ensure that all citizens feel a sense of belonging.

To strengthen democracy and accountability at European level in the eyes of Europeans, we want to reinforce the 'Spitzenkandidaten' system. Europe is based on finding common ground, forging coalitions and solving issues through debate. To strengthen democracy and accountability at European level in the eyes of Europeans, we want to reconcile the 'Spitzenkandidaten' system with Article 17/7 TUE. Without wanting to undermine the prerogative of the European Council to propose a candidate for president of the European Commission, we will strongly urge the European Council and the European Parliament (especially the parliamentary groups) to respect the outcome of the European elections and propose the 'Spitzenkandidat' of the strongest party in the EP as president of the European Commission. This candidate then needs to find a majority in the EP.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has provided a forum for debates on EU policies and Europe's democratic future with European citizens of all walks of life, from all European regions, and with civil society. The follow-up to the Conference needs to be driven by parliaments, the European Parliament as well as national (and regional) legislatures, in close collaboration with the European Commission and with Council members, while striving to make better use of the existing treaty. The EU needs a more effective process of decision making, enabling Europe to focus on delivering and reconnecting with its citizens. This can include treaty changes.

- European way of life and its protection

We want a Europe that better protects its citizens and their European way of life. In our definition, this primarily consists of freedom, democracy, security, prosperity, solidarity, social security and social justice, quality of life and equality of opportunity in life, a healthy environment, cultural diversity and rights for all minorities. In order to safeguard these elements and sustainably secure them for future generations, the EU needs to provide the right framework. This entails more effective health protection after the pandemic and a persistent fight against climate change that leaves enough space for economic growth, as well as for personal freedoms and social security. It also comprises regaining leadership in digital technologies and building on our strengths with a vibrant middle-class and strong and innovative small- and medium-sized enterprises. Moreover, lifelong learning and an enhanced effort to promote and protect Europe's cultural heritage will be important elements of this framework. We see free movement within Europe as a central element of the European way of life that must be preserved and strengthened. Sometimes there will be hard choices to be made because they are difficult to enact simultaneously and with the same priority. We as the EPP, with our traditional strength of offering pragmatic solutions which serve the citizens, are best placed to offer this protection without resorting to populism.

We see free movement within Europe as a fundamental freedom which it is necessary to preserve and strengthen. Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania fulfil all the necessary prerequisites to join the Schengen Area and are still awaiting for the Decision to join to be adopted within the Council. Bulgaria's, Croatia's and Romania's place is within the Schengen Area especially now, when we face many humanitarian and security challenges at the borders of the EU. Protecting the European way of life also entails decisive action against increasingly complex internal security threats. The EU should support Member States' authorities with tools to effectively fight against serious and organised crime and terrorism. EU agencies', such as Europol's and Eurojust's -, potential to facilitate cross-border cooperation, support investigations and prosecutions, and to provide relevant information to national authorities should be fully used. We are increasingly facing trends towards parallel societies in which radicalised individuals or groups systematically undermine Europe's fundamental values. We have to counter threats against freedom of expression online and offline with the same rigor as hate speech, terrorist and violent-extremist propaganda. Radical Islamism – often promoted and financed from abroad – aims at bringing division and intolerance to our societies and provides the ideological basis for jihadist terrorism. The EPP has always been a defender of the freedom of religion, provided all religions comply with the laws and principles that are the foundation of our societies. We will not accept the spreading of ideologies that run counter to the values of universal human rights, freedom and democracy. Therefore, we decidedly reject right-wing and left-wing extremism and all forms of violent radicalism.

4. Key future challenges

- Defending European Values against Putin's War

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, war has returned to our continent. We are determined never to accept the Russian army slaughtering innocent people and blatantly violating international law, the UN Charter and the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. The war crimes committed by the Russian army demand international investigations.

The Ukrainian people have demonstrated unprecedented examples of courage, bravery, and readiness to fight and even die for freedom and democracy. It is our moral duty to help and support Ukraine in defending our common European values against the devastating revisionist agenda of a ruthless dictator.

The world has to stop Putin, the military dictator of the 21st century. Since the beginning of this invasion, the EU and its Member States, together with our allies and partners around the world, have taken decisive steps to implement far-reaching sanctions intended to isolate Putin and to give military support to Ukraine so Ukrainians can better defend themselves. Our unity is our strength: we ask all our partners and friends to align with this effort and assist in the full implementation of sanctions. All sanctions must be coordinated with transatlantic allies and like-minded international partners in order to maximise their effectiveness.

We must expand sectoral sanctions: to increase the number of banks cut off from international financial systems; to introduce immediate embargo on Russian oil and coal and for Russian gas as soon as possible; to discuss the confiscation of Russian high officials' property on EU territory; to enlarge the list of the individual sanctions.

Russia's war on Ukraine is fueled by the Kremlin's massive spread of disinformation, lies and propaganda. The EU and its Member States should strengthen their resilience against foreign information manipulation by adopting appropriate measures aimed at detecting and countering foreign interference, and by banning from EU territory all Russian TV propaganda.

- Protecting our citizens and their rights during and after the pandemic

Over the past two years, the EU and its Member States have struggled with the biggest public health crisis in a century and with its consequences for our people, societies, and economies. Despite a constant learning process in managing the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, some lessons from the crisis are already obvious:

EU health policy should concern those policy areas where true added value can be guaranteed. We need direct solidarity among Member States and well-coordinated

approaches at EU level, especially in border regimes and travel, data collection and information exchange, testing strategies and the development of vaccines and therapies.

When the next pandemic strikes, we need to be better prepared. Strengthening the EU's health sovereignty means improving our ability to possibly avoid, foresee and, if necessary, manage, public health crises. In building the European Health Union, four areas are key:

- Future shortages of critical medical products and protective equipment must be avoided. The EU should provide incentives to relocate production from outside the EU borders, diversify production and create larger stockpiles of medication and protective equipment.
- Access to, and availability of, health data should be improved. For better research and development, the exchange of data is vital to successful research on vaccines, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment. A real European Health Data Space is essential, but it must also remain in accordance with our data protection standards.
- The EU's role in global health policies must become stronger. Its voice in the WHO must grow, to counterbalance the recent rise of Chinese influence. EU health-related agencies must be reinforced to enable us to effectively cooperate with global partner institutions. Strong capacity to address public health crises globally will also improve the EU's capacity to stabilise its neighbourhood, especially to the South and in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Europe's long-term care and ageing systems will face remarkable challenges in the future, including the increase of Alzheimer diseases. The fight against cancer should continue to be a priority as well. The EU should act in these areas of concern to strengthen Member States' efforts in mastering these essential problems, including in the area of mental health.

Better preparing the EU for future health emergencies, enabling it to react quickly and reducing dependency on third countries, will enable the Union to play a crucial role in protecting the health and well-being of our citizens. At the same time, the EU must show international solidarity with other parts of the world when health crises emerge. Global challenges must be addressed globally.

Over the course of the pandemic, healthcare professionals have been on the frontline. It is of vital importance that Member States have a sufficient amount of well-educated and valued healthcare professionals to ensure the EU is prepared for future health emergencies.

The restrictions applied to our economies during the pandemic were necessary to reduce the spread of the virus, save lives and protect the health of our citizens: but they also caused grave socio-economic disruptions which were countered by unprecedented measures both at national and European levels. The pandemic has already changed the way we interact, work and travel; many of these changes will not be entirely reversed once the pandemic is behind us.

- Leading the fight against climate change and making the Green Deal work while improving the EU's energy security

Unprecedented heat waves, droughts, wildfires and floods in recent years have added to the overwhelming scientific evidence of global warming, while the slowdown of the Gulf Stream, melting ice sheets and the increasing loss of biodiversity suggest that we are fast approaching the point of no return: we have to act swiftly and resolutely. In 2015, world leaders agreed on the historic international commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Since then, it has become evident that for the EU to fulfil the requirements of the Paris Agreement and meet its own goal of climate neutrality by 2050, it needs to step up its climate ambition. The current security threats from Russia further highlight the need for the EU to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels.

Our thinking about our planet and its future is deeply rooted in the principle of stewardship: we do not own Nature, we merely take responsibility for the Earth and for the integrity of the created world. This should be seen not as a policy mantra, but rather as an intuition to be infused and cultivated in every individual, every citizen of our society. We have to deal with it responsibly, with future generations in mind. Moreover, the Russian threat should not deter our climate goals but incite them. Therefore, the EPP supports the proposal of the European Commission to reduce the EU's carbon emissions by at least 55% by the year 2030 while strengthening the competitiveness of our businesses, creating jobs and prosperity for our citizens. Sustainable transition will require a systematic approach and a paradigm shift in all major sectors. The emissions trading scheme, as the cornerstone of EU climate policy, should be strengthened and expanded to more sectors of the economy in order to progressively cover all fossil-fuel emissions. A robust carbon price should give the necessary signal to businesses and drive the energy transformation in the most cost-effective way. We must end fossil-energy subsidies, promote energy efficiency and shift funds to renewables and low carbon infrastructure, production and services - complying with Europe's strict environmental and safety standards while respecting each Member State's right to decide on its own energy mix. Technologies for capturing, storing and re-using CO₂ will further reduce emissions in areas where the transition is slower. For the EPP, an ambitious climate agenda goes hand in hand with a social agenda. The green transition should leave no one behind. The impact of the recent energy price hikes on electricity and gas bills as well as on transport fuels shows we must remain conscious of the social impact of the Green Deal agenda. Therefore, implementing legislation should consider the social dimension. Moreover, we should create targeted financing schemes that will support a fair transition for the most vulnerable regions, households and transport users.

Electricity production must be fully decarbonised, while full risk-identification and -assessment to prevent vulnerabilities and crisis situations in the electricity market will be key. The expansion of renewable and low-carbon electricity production will create local jobs and investments and decrease our dependence on energy imports. Deployment of electrification and harnessing the potential of low-carbon energy-efficient hydrogen will help with the

further decarbonisation of the industry and transport sectors. The insulation of buildings is a low-hanging fruit, with immediate energy-efficiency results and economic benefits for residents alongside boosted job creation in local communities. Standing firm on the principle of technological neutrality and the right of each Member State to determine its energy sources, we are aware that energy decisions in one Member State may have an impact on other EU countries. The EPP recognises the important role of nuclear power in some Member States in achieving carbon neutrality and energy security, provided this complies with Europe's strict environmental and nuclear safety standards.

European farmers are important partners in combatting climate change through their efforts in improving the sustainability and security of our food production. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates how importantly food production in Europe can also contribute to global food security. The potential of soils and forests as carbon sinks should be harnessed as part of the solution while preserving and fostering biodiversity and a healthy environment, including waste avoidance and commitments to reduce pollution.

As the EU is accountable for less than 10% of global carbon emissions, our international partners need to step up their ambitions, too, as foreseen by the Paris Agreement. Otherwise, international competition will be distorted, with carbon leakage by production moved outside the EU, which will harm European businesses. Therefore, the EPP is keen to explore the potential of carbon border adjustments to enable fair competition. We also support that all of the EU's future trade agreements pursue the objectives of the Paris agreement.

In order to fully finance our climate agenda, significant additional efforts from both the public and the private sectors will be required. The green transition cannot be financed with only public money. The green transition will only be successful if we also mobilise sufficient private resources: our private initiatives, industries, companies and, entrepreneurs. We should create coherent public strategies and rules that can channel much-needed resources towards green projects.

- Renewing the social market economy for the post-pandemic age

The social market economy as a concept was developed in Europe's darkest hour - in the 1930s and 40s - as an antidote to crisis, totalitarianism and war. The pandemic has shown that a renewal of the principles of the social market economy at European and global levels are now more important than ever.

Faced with the war in Ukraine, the EU has agreed to a powerful coordinated response through economic and financial sanctions on Russia. It has shown that our values of solidarity and cooperation prevail. But it will have consequences on our future economic resilience and governance and further add to existing trends triggered by the post-pandemic context: inflation is rising across all EU countries, and while economic growth has picked up, it will be

slower than expected. At the same time, we also must keep our focus on building a recovery that has to make Europe greener and more digital-, and that maintains these objectives.

Today, Europe's economy is facing unprecedented challenges in adapting to the increased need for pursuing a more sustainable future and fighting climate change. The European People's Party will continue to support the European Union's leadership in driving these policies globally and domestically, based on the principles of the social market economy. Our climate ambition must be raised in a manner that will spur sustainable economic growth, create jobs, deliver health and environmental benefits for EU citizens and contribute to the long-term global competitiveness of the EU economy by promoting innovation in green technologies.

We believe that the euro and the European Single Market have delivered great benefits to many European citizens in the past and will remain sources of prosperity and stability in the future. The EPP supports completing the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) based on the core principles of responsibility, fairness, resilience, flexibility and solidarity. The completion of the Banking Union and protection of national budgets from bailing out financial institutions should be prioritised.

The euro area also requires more political effort to ensure a well-functioning Single Market. The EPP will continue to work towards a more complete Capital Markets Union in Europe which can act as the financial backbone of future growth.

For the EPP, it is essential that the economy serve the people and not the other way around. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the key drivers of economic growth, competitiveness, innovation and employment. They play a crucial role in ensuring recovery and in boosting a strong and sustainable EU economy. As the pandemic has created an additional boost towards a digital economy, we must further increase private and public investments into digital infrastructure and services and improve our education and training systems. In order to strengthen European competitiveness, we must also provide our enterprises with the best possible regulatory framework. That, for us, includes a long overdue reform of European competition and state-aid rules. Fairness is at the core of our economic values. The Pandora Papers showed how the EU should move faster and take a strengthened leading role in fighting tax evasion. Eliminating tax havens, implementing real monitoring and clear sanctions as effective deterrents must be our priority, with cooperation, justice and transparency being key principles.

The pandemic has clearly shown the ingredients needed for a successful, sustainable and inclusive European economy in the future: new skills, creativity, availability of funding, the ability to use digital technologies, greater flexibility and a willingness to adjust. We must make sure that our policies, both national and European, continue to support our citizens when

needed and that we provide a trampoline-like safety net to help people bounce back from unemployment and re-enter the labour market. Our aim is to benefit all groups in society, not only a few. Respecting the competences of Member States, the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and taking into account the current burden on Member States and their societies imposed by the pandemic, we must also strengthen the Union's support for the employment, entrepreneurial and social policies of Member States such that no one is left to the side. This must be based on the European Pillar of Social Rights, which must be respected in all our Member States. We must commit ourselves to managing a just and competitive transition particularly for climate and digitalization, for rebuilding and strengthening public services, and for the full economy. We are determined to continue deepening the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights at the appropriate responsible level in order to reduce inequalities, defend fair wages, fight social exclusion and tackle poverty, take on the objective of fighting child poverty and address the risks of exclusion for particularly vulnerable social groups such as the long-term unemployed, the elderly, persons with disabilities and the homeless.

We are the people's party, and we strive to build a society and an economy that works for all. In order to capitalise on the high consuming potential of the elder population, Europe should also highlight the Silver Economy for securing the increase of the economy in the EU.

- Helping refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine and finding the right balance for Europe

Since the migration crisis in 2015, the EPP has been at the forefront of efforts to protect our external borders, prevent fraudulent and illegal crossings and protect our asylum systems from abuse. Conflicts and instability in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood and in Latin America, population growth in Africa, as well as the misuse of visa-free regimes have kept pressure on the EU's external borders and asylum systems high. Tackling the root causes of irregular migration remains essential: we have to help create future prospects for people in their home countries. At the same time, we have honoured our responsibility to help those qualifying for international protection and those in need of humanitarian assistance. The unjustified invasion by Russia has forced millions of Ukrainians to flee their country. This refugee crisis has occurred at the EU's borders: we are not shying away from our responsibility to welcome and accommodate our Ukrainian neighbours.

We need to prioritise Ukrainian refugees, who are forced to leave their country, our immediate neighbour. We welcome the Temporary Protection Directive which enables Ukrainian refugees to stay in the EU for a period of up to three years, hereby including residency rights, access to the labour market, education, and social welfare assistance.

- Towards a Common European Asylum System

Separately, we welcome the European Commission's legislative proposals to reform the Common European Asylum System by means of an efficient, fair and flexible solidarity mechanism. Under the existing EU legislation, including the Dublin III regulation, frontline Member States have been carrying a burden beyond their capacity while other Member States have been disproportionately burdened by secondary movements. The principle of solidarity is enshrined in the EU Treaties, and therefore, all European partners must assume their share of responsibility, using different measures such as capacity-building and operational and technical support, also in third countries, that effectively contribute to combating and preventing irregular migration to Europe. Controlled and secured external borders are the precondition of the border-free-travel Schengen area inside the European Union.

The European Union should work tirelessly to stabilise countries in conflict, as well as work with third-country administrations to enhance their governance structures. We should help third countries with their border protection and offer incentives to those countries that are willing to cooperate. We must increase repatriations of those who were not granted asylum and focus on integrating those who are fleeing from war and violence, including from Ukraine.

Besides looking at the challenges regarding immigration, we should also make sure that no race to the bottom will occur in the EU itself due to intra-EU mobility of workers. The establishment of the ELA has been an important step in this regard, but we should remain vigilant when fighting and monitoring abuses in the European labour market. Both to protect all EU workers, but also to maintain support.

- Embracing the digital transformation

The world is in the middle of a digital and technological revolution that changes the way we communicate, work and shop and which has a far-reaching impact, even on the very functioning of our democracies and institutional processes. The pandemic has been an additional driver in shifting certain activities to the online sphere. This transformation has brought challenges but also opportunities that we need to embrace. On the one hand, people fear being left behind as shops and businesses close because they cannot compete with large global tech giants. On the other hand, there are many positive examples where digital innovation improves lives and creates new jobs. Therefore, the EPP believes in a strong and competitive digital economy that leverages the full potential of technology in a way that respects European values and the European way of life. We are committed to taking advantage of the benefits and tackling the challenges of technology: creating an inclusive, empowering, secure, and sustainable society.

Europe needs a frictionless, citizen-oriented Digital Single Market where companies of all sizes, especially SMEs, compete on a level-playing field, use technologies to boost productivity

and create new markets through research and innovation. In this Digital Single Market, data protection and privacy are respected, freedom of expression is safeguarded - whilst ensuring user safety online and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups. The EU must establish the right conditions to develop and deploy its own capacities and encourage a pro-investment approach in technology that makes a real difference to people's daily lives. Corporate tax rules must be designed to meet the challenges of the digital economy as everyone must contribute their fair share. As competition in this sector is undoubtedly fierce, we must translate innovation and the social market economy into the digital world. This comprises common EU rules on the responsibility of online platforms to take effective and targeted action against illegal content on their services. To enable users to understand how and why specific content is shown to them or why certain products and services are recommended to them, algorithms should be subject to transparency requirements.

Education and training, including reskilling and lifelong learning for all age groups, are necessary to maintain a competitive, inclusive and knowledge-based society. Europe must recognise its citizens' aspirations and needs, especially those of young people, ensuring they have digital skills and preparing them for the future of work. For that, the EU's infrastructure for the digital economy must include advanced wireless technology and high-quality connectivity, accessible in rural and urban areas. The merging of urban planning, ecology and information technology improves people's lives. In rural areas, technology helps European farmers to increase efficiency and improve the use of resources.

The EU has to be equipped with the right competences, which will only happen if we further develop Horizon Europe. The EU should drive clear flagship projects, such as creating 5G infrastructure, fostering clean innovation and asserting EU's digital sovereignty, including via a secure digital single market equipped with state-of-the-art infrastructure and cybersecurity systems. This will allow us to fully reap the benefits of Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things in many areas, ranging from manufacturing and entrepreneurship to law-enforcement and the judiciary.

None of the above can take place without distinctively and explicitly recognising the challenges the digital and technological revolution bring vis-à-vis information-accessing and information-sharing. What the recent pandemic has made evident, and what populism and authoritarianism already knew and have tapped into the past few years, is that the power of technology and information within a digital global ecosystem can, on the one hand, bring people together - but it can also drive them apart. It can bring about unity, just as it can bring about division. The EU needs to develop a concrete strategy and a toolbox that will directly target the intentional (disinformation) or negligent (misinformation) spread of fake news and corrupted information and data.

- Fostering new generations through supporting high-quality education

Ensuring education of the highest quality, based on all eight EQF (European Qualifications Framework) levels, is indispensable both for the further development of our societies and for

the flourishing of our economies. European countries must safeguard the accessibility of education to all European citizens, regardless of their financial means, background or age. Everyone who is formally eligible to enrol at an educational institution should have the option to start his or her trajectory in that institution. In this regard, it is important to ensure quality in all levels of education and forms: including primary education, secondary education, vocational education, post-secondary education, and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning as an all-learning activity undertaken throughout life has the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences and therefore should be included in as many educational concepts as possible. Lifelong learning contributes to active ageing and allows people to work and fully participate in society. Moreover, we should ensure access to, and take-up of, education and training opportunities at work or outside of it.

The quality of vocational training has to be improved by strengthening the cooperation between businesses, social partners and vocational, education and training providers. In order to help people, find quality jobs and match the labour market's needs, we should counter the digital gap by strengthening the digital skills of vulnerable groups so that they can benefit from online education.

Studying at a university or institution of post-secondary education is a central stage in the life of every student. These formative years are not just about gaining knowledge and learning skills; they also provide opportunities for participation in social and political life. As a part of that participation trajectory, we are committed to the system of democratically legitimised student representation in European universities. Furthermore, we believe that it is important to constantly inform young people about upcoming strategic and project initiatives, especially in the entrepreneurship sector. Young people are a source of dynamism, talent and creativity for Europe. They must be the driving force of the inclusive green and digital recovery: to help build the Europe of the future.

We firmly stand for the guaranteed freedom and financial support of education and scientific research. Educational institutions on all levels and universities are elementary hubs for scientific progress and serve to develop and spread knowledge that is indispensable for the development of our societies. The work of universities and other post-secondary education institutions should therefore always be independent from the influence of any current government. State intervention is only warranted in cases where the dignity or physical integrity of individuals is at stake. Because of its indispensable role in our modern societies, science requires public funding. We stand by the principle that basic research is an indispensable part of research funding, the exceptional quality of which is the foundation for the further development of Europe as a location for research and innovation. The financial support for the development of applied technologies, on the other hand, should primarily be the responsibility of industry. However, fruitful cooperation between industries and governments should be promoted for this line of research.

Europe as a community begins with our society's young people who carry this idea forward. A common European consciousness and a common understanding of our values are the foundation for a consolidated Europe-wide progress and steadfastness in times of crisis. As a basis for this, we need to further strengthen intercultural exchange: for example, through Erasmus+. The youth of Europe must be able to network, to meet and communicate so as to understand each other and thus be able to live the European project of peace and common interest-led culture. A transparent, cross-border and permeable education is therefore essential for an effectively functioning Europe.

- Turning the demographic challenge into an opportunity

The thorough demographic change that Europe is faced with confronts us with challenges and opportunities. Citizens have a higher life expectancy, which adds considerably to our overall well-being, and older people remain actively involved in the whole of society; but we will also need to invest in resilient health and care systems to ensure a dignified life for all our older citizens, no matter their age. The EPP therefore fully supports a coordinated European strategy for demographic change which aims at supporting healthy active ageing at every age throughout our lives. We are convinced that we need stronger intergenerational solidarity and responsibility, ensuring a high standard of self-determined life for our older citizens. We encourage multi-generational work environments in order to secure the high-value transfer of knowledge and know-how between the older and younger generation. The EPP also fully endorses the active involvement and full societal participation of the older population, which simultaneously is an important means to tackle the rising challenge of loneliness.

5. Global strategic challenges

The world has become more dangerous. Our ability as Europeans to determine our future and live peacefully in freedom is increasingly challenged. This includes political instability and war, mass migration, pandemics, economic shocks, natural disasters and other effects of man-made climate change. All these have been exploited, and sometimes deliberately provoked, by authoritarian powers or non-state actors in order to undermine our democracies, divide the EU and weaken the West. We need to respond to such challenges by enabling the EU to become a stronger global actor. The EPP endorses and shares the success story on the adoption of the Strategic Compass: to make a stronger and more capable EU to defend and secure itself from internal and external threats as well as to work with strategic partners. The Strategic Compass must be implemented effectively without delay to strengthen the EU's security- and -defence.

For some time many have predicted a world dominated by great powers and divided into spheres of influence, marked by increasing national isolation, mercantilist competition and violent conflict. For Europe, such a world represents the return of the nightmare which European integration was designed to overcome. The EU must resist such a development more forcefully, strengthening multilateralism and reinforcing together the solidarity of democrats not only in Europe but around the globe. The alleged trade-off between values

and interests in EU foreign policy is false: long term stability rests upon the consent of the governed. This is true in all human societies.

Trade is a source of prosperity and mutual benefits. As long as human rights, the rule of law and common rules are applied, as well as strategic interests, while considering environmental and social responsibility on the basis of international labour standards as set by the International Labour Organisation, balanced trade policy can be a way to bring the products of European labour and know-how to foreign markets, driving technological innovation, consumer choice and lower prices while strengthening our geopolitical position in the world and building bridges with other continents and cultures. Businesses have a vital position when it comes to trade. Strong due diligence legislation, coupled with EU trade deals that are more ambitious on human and environmental rights and their enforceability should make sure our trade, economic prosperity and sustainability are secured for future generations.

- European Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy

The EU must become more self-reliant in defence and security and develop its capabilities to be a competent security provider also in neighbouring regions. The EPP welcomes and fully supports the EU's decision help Ukraine acquire arms and capabilities through the European Peace Facility, which shows that the Union can act geopolitically also in the field of security and defence when there is a will. The EU has to improve its resilience against hybrid threats, especially hostile foreign influence and disinformation, and enhance its capacity to protect its critical infrastructures and counter hybrid threats, also through joint action, and to project power in order to ensure stability in the neighbourhood — if necessary, without outside help. In due course, it must also improve its capacity to defend itself against, and to deter, external conventional and nuclear military threats, complementary to NATO. In order to become a serious global player, the EU will have to improve its decision-making process, replacing the unanimity principle by qualified majority voting at least in some strategic areas, such as diplomatic and economic sanctions. It will have to strengthen and integrate the tools enabling it to intervene beyond its borders, whether civilian or military. The new EU Rapid Deployment Capacity is a step in the right direction; but, in light of Europe's deteriorated security environment, the EU must further develop its crisis management structures and raise its military level of ambition. Europe's security cannot be understood in a purely military sense. It also includes cybersecurity: the protection of our democracy and of European values safeguarding peace and stability, the foundations of our economy, the environment and, public health; and responding to natural disasters and migration flows.

The EU's efforts in security and defence have consistently fallen short of the expectations of our citizens. The EPP has been leading calls for enhanced defence cooperation among Member States and improved cooperation and complementarity between the EU and NATO, especially in the face of Russian military aggression and new security threats, such as cyberattacks and hybrid threats from non-state actors and authoritarian powers. COVID-19, Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, and the resulting increased threat to our eastern

borders have further complicated the picture: despite the economic downturn, we support maintaining a sufficient level of defence spending. Intelligence cooperation among the Member States must be enhanced. Investments in our security, particularly when it comes to research and development, will serve to both strengthen our protection against external threats and structurally improve our economic and innovation potential. In light of the war in Ukraine, the EU must also strengthen the credibility of its mutual assistance and solidarity guarantees, namely Article 42 (7) of the Treaty on European Union and Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

- Enlargement and the neighbourhood

The countries of the Western Balkans are the EU's closest partners and friends: the EU is not complete without them. Without a real and fair perspective of membership, the region could become dangerously more unstable, and authoritarian external powers are already filling the vacuum. The most recent Russian aggression and war against Ukraine could have the effect of a catalyst for the Western Balkans' EU integration, for the necessary and urgent geo-strategic unification of Europe. Paving the way for the Western Balkans' future membership requires more effort and attention as well from the side of the EU, as well as more honesty and credibility. In the pre-accession process, the principle 'more for more, and less for less' must be applied more forcefully and EU support more conditioned to the successful implementation of necessary reforms. Western Balkan countries' efforts to strengthen the rule of law, independence of justice and fight against corruption are non-negotiable. The EU's integration capacity, alongside a constant dialogue with citizens about the necessity of further enlargement, is crucial in this process.

The EU's Eastern Partnership policy must be revised and adapted to recent developments. Russia's current war is threat to the entire region, not only to Ukraine.

Turkey can and should be an important EU partner for regional stability; but where Turkey under Erdogan threatens the territorial integrity of EU Member States and peace in the Eastern Mediterranean, it must be confronted. The EU must respond to increasing violations of human and civil rights. The continuation of EU membership negotiations does not make sense anymore and they must come to an end.

The EU's relations with the Middle East and North Africa have come to be largely characterised by worries over instability and war, as well as terrorism and uncontrolled mass migration from or through that region. The EU's response can only be stronger insistence on good governance, on the one hand, and enhancing, on the other, the EU's potential as a security provider, also in the military sense. The EU should be aware of the economic potential of a strong and stable relationship with the Middle East. Protecting freedom of religion and opposing the persecution of Christians must be an important element in our strategy for the Middle East and Africa. Another crucial element must be the European Union–Israel partnership for strengthening economic performance and the security of the State of Israel

while fostering regional cooperation, including via regular dialogue on issues of common interest.

Much of this is also true for sub-Saharan Africa, where demographic development, combined with climate change and worsening prospects for stability and prosperity, hint at rising migration pressures. Europe bears great responsibility for Africa. A more proactive EU approach to the continent will have to be based on partnership and focus on good governance, quality education, sustainable growth and stronger cooperation in security, and in curbing uncontrolled migration movements. There must be a link between development aid and cooperation on migration management.

- Essential Partnerships

The transatlantic alliance remains the European Union's crucial strategic geopolitical partnership: based on common fundamental values and indispensable to European security for at least the foreseeable future. This partnership has been built over decades on the basis of strong historical, economic, cultural and personal ties. We welcome the renewal of transatlantic relations under the new US administration, underscored by President Biden's participation in Brussels in the EU and NATO summits in June 2021 and March 2022. Transatlantic partnership has been essential in supporting Ukraine and imposing costs on Russia in the aftermath of Russia's latest war of aggression. But we also recognise that we in Europe will have to do more to shoulder our fair share of the burden of our common security. The European Union is also well positioned, and committed, to partnership with the US vis-à-vis China. The transatlantic partnership should become the core of a global alliance of democracies.

EU-UK partnership must also be reinvigorated as a cornerstone of EU foreign policy. The challenge will be to keep the relationship as close as possible: through intense cooperation on defence, justice and home affairs and counterterrorism, and through a common resistance to authoritarian aggression.

- The global struggle for democracy and human rights

Human rights and the open societies of the world are increasingly exposed to a global authoritarian threat, spearheaded by Russia under Putin and China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In both cases, premature Western hopes of steady liberalisation and a strengthening of the rule of law were increasingly frustrated over the past decade. Leaders in both countries perceive liberal democracy as an existential threat. In their eyes, the problem is not what we do but what we are. They have begun to cooperate on a strategic level, exploiting our open societies with hostile influence and disinformation while cracking down on civil society inside their countries. Trying to appease either the Kremlin or the CCP in order to pull one into a coalition against the other risks destroying the values we must defend.

Besides North America, the Indo-Pacific and Latin America will be increasingly important and valuable partners for us in Europe, not only in trade and technology but also in protecting our democracies and jointly pushing back against human rights violations, autocracy, and nativist populism. This also means that the envisaged EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy will have to be speedily developed, adopted and implemented. The EU will only be able to credibly support human rights and liberal democracy across the globe if it successfully pushes back against democratic backsliding in the Union itself.

- China

For the EU, China under the CCP has become a systemic rival with whom we nevertheless economically compete and trade and with whom we may still cooperate in many areas. There is scope for mutually beneficial cooperation in many fields, such as sustainable development and the circular economy. At the same time, China has used the loopholes of an open global economy in favour of its state-owned enterprises, stealing intellectual property and collecting data to an unprecedented degree. It is high time we work towards a level playing field in trade and investment. The massive and systematic violations of human and civil rights and of the respective international commitments signed by China, most visibly in places such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong, must be forcefully countered.

Total economic decoupling from China is not an option for the EU, just as China may still be a partner in maintaining certain elements of the global order; but under current circumstances and lack of trust it is not possible to have a comprehensive partnership with China. Free and fair trade will have to be combined with the security of democratic systems, our decreased EU dependency in pharmaceuticals and medical equipment and — above all — technology. Furthermore, respect for fundamental human rights, principles, International Labour Organization (ILO) norms and the fight against climate change must be essential criteria for the development of our relations. Deepening our engagement with the democracies of the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan, and building a truly global alliance of democracies is our best European answer to the political challenges posed by the CCP.

6. Conclusion

At the beginning of a new decade, and in the middle of a conflagration of crises, we in the European People's Party are ready and determined to lead Europe into a better future. We will do so on the basis of reinvigorated values, in a European Union that must be based on the core principles of subsidiarity, solidarity, democracy and the rule of law. We must strengthen the Union while keeping politics as close as possible to citizens. We must further enhance European democracy while improving the EU's capability to act and to be resilient in the face of crises, threats, and new challenges.

This begins with the urgent need for unity and solidarity with Ukraine against Russia's aggression, defending European values against Putin's war. Furthermore, enhanced public health policies and a solid and sustainable economic recovery are on top of our agenda. In a

new social and ecological market economy, we will increase competitiveness, renew our commitments to fight climate change and fully use the potential of the digital economy, just as we aim to protect our European way of life through better migration and integration policies and enhanced security cooperation among Member States.

Because we want the Union to become a global actor, protecting our interests, stabilising the neighbourhood and supporting the rules-based order and human rights on a worldwide basis, we must renew the transatlantic alliance while improving our defence and our capability to act. Our ability to promote the values of liberal democracy externally, and defend them against authoritarian threats, is closely linked to our willingness to live by them inside the Union.

The European People's Party has always been the party family of democratic values, with pragmatic solutions to political problems and a vision for the future. We are determined to build strong majorities by being inclusive, not by polarising. We will rise to the challenge of continuing to lead Europe in difficult times.