



# EPP LEADERS' RETREAT

Zagreb, Croatia • 30-31 January 2026

## Our priorities for 2026

### Time for Europe's Independence

In a world undergoing profound transformations, and posing unprecedented challenges, Europe has been struggling to show case its sovereignty and project power. Russia's war of aggression is destabilising our societies and is proving how difficult it is for Europe to play its role in full due to its security and economic dependencies. The crisis of multilateralism and of traditional alliances, and the recurrent attacks to the global rules-based order is challenging our European approach and our EPP values. Due to its institutional setup and overly complex governance, Europe's capability of reacting is increasingly limited and often too slow, as compared to what is required in today's world. Far from bowing to threats, we must reaffirm our confidence in European democracy, rule of law, the Union's territorial integrity, and its values. The rise of left- and right-wing populism in our countries underscores the need to keep delivering for our citizens, with a focus on genuinely boosting economic growth and competitiveness, upgrading our security and protecting our borders. As the strongest political force in Europe, the EPP will continue working tirelessly to ensure a more prosperous and secure continent, faithful to our Bucharest Manifesto, which serves as the compass for our political action.

#### **I. GROWTH BOOST: sustaining economic growth and competitiveness, pursuing simplification, creating quality jobs and opportunities for young people**

In 2025, we led legislative initiatives to boost competitiveness by tackling excessive bureaucracy, relaunching our industry and protecting our farmers. Europe's competitiveness has a direct impact on the cost of living. The more competitive Europe becomes, the more choices European consumers will have, ultimately benefiting family budgets. In 2026 we must do even more, notably Europe needs a mentality swift across all levels of administrations to facilitate the life of our citizens and business, to simplify existing legislation and unlock the full potential for growth and job creation of our economies. The EU will strengthen the EU's single market, attract investments, boost Europe's industrial base, promote our global trade agenda and protect our farmers.

#### **1) We are cutting red tape by streamlining current legislation and withdrawing proposals that hamper competitiveness:** excessive and self-imposed bureaucracy has been slowing down Europe's economic growth and preventing our companies to compete on an equal foot with their international partners. On the contrary, we believe that legislation needs to be user-friendly, easy to understand and implementable. The EPP has been driving efforts to cut reporting



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and due diligence requirements with the Omnibus package and to further postpone and review the Regulation on Deforestation. But we need more simplification. We commit to strengthen and approve the Environmental Simplification Package to streamline and substantially reduce administrative burdens across environmental legislation, as well as the new Omnibus to simplify energy product legislation and the digital omnibus to unlock our European potential in innovative technologies.

**2) We must complete our single market to finally unlock its full potential:**

Europe's economic growth depends on a deep, successful and comprehensive single market, including goods, services, energy, telecommunications, and financial services. We need to reduce barriers in intra-EU trade, bring smarter standards and simplify legislation to provide our companies – and in particular our SMEs - with more opportunities to grow and compete. We want the Single Market to continue being the cornerstone of our Union's success. To achieve this, we ask for a binding timetable to finalise ongoing and upcoming legislation and for the Commission's implementation. In the months to come, we will focus our work on the Regulation on the 28th Regime to support start-ups and scale-ups, on the Energy, Saving and Investments and Banking Unions, on the intra-EU mobility of workers and on the European Product Act.

**3) We are fully committed to the swift conclusion of the negotiations on the MFF,**

which has to reflect the priorities of strengthening growth, competitiveness and security, and we expect the other political forces to share the commitment. Simplification and efficiency must be two pillars of the next MFF, to eliminate bureaucracy and duplication. We will continue support our farmers and regions.

**4) We are supporting and relaunching key industrial sectors and implementing the Clean Industrial Deal:**

we are proving that economic growth and climate protection can go hand in hand, if we avoid ideological approaches and we uphold technological neutrality. We are defending the competitiveness of EU's core industrial sectors, including automotive, steel and chemicals. The repeal of the 2035 ban on internal combustion engines through the recent Automotive Package is a clear sign of the new direction that the Union is taking under our lead, and we are committed to deliver the outcome needed to give back the choice to the consumers, and the expertise to the industry. Further milestones will be the upcoming revision of Emissions Trading System (ETS) and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), as well as our desired review of Natura 2000 and Nature Restoration Law. We believe that Europe should be the house of clean technologies driving future economic growth. Flagship initiatives of the Clean Industrial Deal, such as the Industrial Accelerator Act and new Critical Raw



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Materials Centre, are key components to boost the competitiveness of our economy and should be implemented in full as soon as possible.

- 5) **We are investing in innovation and digital technologies to shape Europe's future:** Europe must bridge the gap with the US and China and reduce its dependencies on critical technologies, such as on artificial intelligence and chips' manufacturing. EU's technological sovereignty is a key priority for the years to come. We should streamline and simplify legislation in this domain too. We will work on the review of the Artificial Intelligence Act to simplify it and foster innovation, as well on a new, more robust Chips Act. Through the European Biotech Act, we will pave the way for a more modern and efficient health ecosystem for EU citizens. Finally, the reform of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) will make this it more efficient, effective and simple to comply with. We should also continue protecting our citizens, and especially minors, in the digital sphere. We will focus on the Action plan against cyberbullying and on further measures to protect minors on digital platforms and to end digital anonymity.
- 6) **We are pushing to negotiate and conclude trade deals to create jobs, access new markets and diversify our supply chains:** We support fair and open trade, and we refuse protectionism and unjustified tariffs. We strongly believe that Greenland's future lies only in the hands of the Greenlanders and Danes. Europe must support them without hesitation. In the context of a world order marked by the use of force and the denial of international law and rules, free trade agreements are more than ever a powerful geopolitical tool to strengthen alliances. They also allow us to open new markets, diversify our supply chains and sustain economic growth. Trade agreements should always be balanced and protect our economic interest and standards. After the crucial signature of the agreement with Mercosur – which will create a free trade area of 700 million consumers – we are committed to secure the implementation of safeguards for farmers with clear automatic triggers, the additional EUR 45 billion budget agreed and the simplification of the environmental requirements imposed on them. We recognise that trust depends on transparency and predictability. Farmers and producer organisations should therefore be systematically associated with the monitoring of Mercosur imports and the implementation of safeguard provisions. Moreover, we will work for the finalisation of the agreements with the US, Mexico, Indonesia and India – which is expected to double EU goods exports by 2032 and improve access to a market of 1.5 billion consumers. Europe should also tap into the unexplored potential of trade relations in South-East Asia or Africa. We need to further strengthen our defence tools to protect our consumers and be more



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competitive in international markets. This can be done by further shortening timelines of investigations, simplifying procedures to initiate them and providing more support to SMEs, which are more exposed to unfair practices. The EU must be prepared to defend its trade interests.

- 7) **We are protecting our economic independence and security:** rising geopolitical tensions require our continuous efforts to ensure Europe's economic security and strategic independence. Through the "Buy European" agenda, we will boost domestic industries, reduce dependency on imports and protect our markets from unfair competition, in particular in public procurement. This "Buy European" principle will notably be important when it comes to sensitive goods. The social aspects cannot be undermined: housing, demographic challenges, health are direct concerns of our citizens.
- 8) **We are living up to our commitment to protect farmers:** we are the party of farmers, and we have proven this by ensuring strong funding for the Common Agricultural Policy in negotiations for the next MFF and effective safeguards in the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement. We remain committed to ensure adequate CAP resources in the next MFF and to make sure that environmental legislation such as the Habitats Directive, the Nitrate Directive and the Water Framework Directive do not hamper permitting for the necessary innovation and investments in the agricultural sector.

## II. **SECURITY UPGRADE: adopting a 360-degree approach to security and defence, tackling state and non-state threats**

Russia is a lasting and persistent threat to European security. We reaffirm our unwavering support to Ukraine, and we welcome the agreement to provide continued financial aid to Kyiv through the 90€ billion loan agreed at last December's European Council. We support a just peace plan including strong security guarantees for Ukraine. Ongoing developments are showing that the traditional security system built after the Second World War faces unprecedented challenges to its effectiveness and founding principles. Notably, EU-US relations have taken a considerable turn. More than ever, we need to put all our efforts in building a stronger European defence by 2030, as to be able both to deter and to defend our global interests and every centimetre of our Union and NATO allies. And while Russia remains the most acute and immediate threat to Europe's stability, our security challenges are now significantly wider and need to be addressed with a comprehensive 360-degree approach, addressing state and non-state threats from all directions, from the Arctic through the Eastern Flank and to the Mediterranean, as well as the growing threat from hybrid warfare. Close cooperation with NATO remains





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a key pillar for European security. This complex global landscape necessitates a new European Security Strategy to adjust to the new security architecture and realities of today's world, notwithstanding neutrality traditions.

- 1) We are working on a real European defence market:** the EU Readiness 2030 initiative led by the EPP represented a significant shift in European defence policy, focusing on collaborative efforts and strategic investments to enhance military readiness and capability. We will continue building on it by strengthening and increasing the number of joint procurements, starting with the announced legislative initiative on simplifying defence and sensitive security procurement, and with a focus on startups. The “Buy European” principle should be applied in this domain too. Moreover, the Qualitative Military Edge Programme is a further important step towards the Defence Union, as it will contribute defining the European way of warfare in the future, ensuring that Ukraine has immediate access to a steady flow of superior military equipment.
- 2) We are tackling the gaps in the nine critical capability areas:** we are conscious of the outstanding gaps in European military capabilities. We will immediately prioritise the four pan-European flagships: (1) the European Drone Defence Initiative; (2) the Eastern Flank Watch; (3) the European Air Shield; (4) and the European Space Shield. These are key pillars for the EU to be able to respond to all kind of threats. In particular, the European Drone Defence Initiative is a central component of this effort, as it will address urgent gaps in anti-drone and air-defence systems across the Union. In order to deploy those capabilities to the fullest, the Military Mobility Package should be implemented as soon as possible.
- 3) We are continuing fighting interference, disinformation and digital warfare:** Last year we stepped up our efforts by supporting the European Democratic Shield, whose actions will be rolled out up until 2027. Crucial national elections for the future of Europe will take place in 2026 and 2027. We need to be ready to combat electoral interference and disinformation, building on the successful initiatives already implemented in some EU member countries. The proposal for a revised EU Cybersecurity Act is an important step, reflecting the need to de-risk Europe's critical infrastructure from countries of concern. We continue advocating for a serious implementation of the DSA too – with a focus on the protection of minors online – as to hold tech giants accountable for their activities.
- 4) We are strengthening police forces and pushing for their recognition:** law enforcement bodies provide an essential contribution to the safety and security of our everyday life, and it is our duty to protect those who protect us. Police work



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must be recognised as a high-risk profession. Anyone who attacks a police officer attacks the freedom of all Europeans. We support a reinforced Europol to strengthen police forces across Europe and will advocate for the establishment of a European Police Day to acknowledge their efforts.

- 5) **We are advocating for the respect of rule of law within our borders:** democracy and rule of law are the cornerstone of our European way of life. We support efforts for the establishment of an integrated annual cycle on the rule of law, as well as rule of law conditionality for all EU funds, which should be a pillar of the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 (MFF).
- 6) **Freedom and democracy are intrinsic, sacred values that the EPP defends:** beyond the Union, anywhere in the world, as we have done in Ukraine, Venezuela and Iran. We reaffirm our commitment to publicly support the Venezuelan people. Maduro's arrest is good news for democrats around the world. We support a full democratic transition in Venezuela. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and for the continued enforcement of European sanctions against the dictatorship.
- 7) **We reaffirm our support to the reunification of Cyprus:** European integration and a comprehensive European security framework remain incomplete while part of Cyprus is under Turkish occupation. We commend the committed efforts of the Government of Cyprus and the UN Secretary-General to resume meaningful negotiations, in accordance with relevant UNSC resolutions and in line with EU laws, values and principles. We also express our strong support to Cyprus' full Schengen accession in 2026, to upgrade the EU's security and protect its south-eastern frontier.

### III. BORDER INTEGRITY: fighting smugglers and ending illegal immigration

We stand for a Europe that protects its borders and stems illegal migration. We maintain our full commitment to a firm and fair migration and asylum framework that complies with international and EU law. The EPP is leading ongoing legislative work to enhance enforcement measures for those required to leave the EU and to prevent the entry of persons who fail to meet the established conditions. Our efforts are delivering, as migration figures show that illegal border crossings decreased by 35% in the reporting period from July 2024 to June 2025.

- 1) **We are restricting the admissibility of asylum claims and ensuring swifter returns:** through the introduction of the "safe third country" concept, asylum claims from people coming from those countries will unlikely be successful. Through the New Common European System for Returns, we are ensuring a



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swifter return of those without a right to stay in Europe. Through the digitalisation of returns, we will continue the work on the modernisation of the current system. Moreover, through the new Entry/Exit System (EES) for registering non-EU nationals travelling for a short stay in 29 European countries – an initiative led by the EPP – we are introducing a groundbreaking new tool to reduce illegal migration and fight against organised crime and terrorism. Following its presentation in late 2025, we will focus on the roll out of the Pact for the Mediterranean, as to build comprehensive partnerships in a wide range of domains, including economic stability, jobs, and migration.

- 2) **We are strengthening Frontex to better protect our borders:** we strongly endorse plans to reinforce Frontex as to expand its presence and for it to have a critical role in supporting Member States with returns. We also believe that access to Europol and Frontex data for Member States is necessary to improve information-sharing and have a more accurate picture of the situation on the ground. Mass legalisation of illegal immigrants gravely weakens our migration policy. For this reason, we defend a legal, orderly, and controlled migration policy. Solidarity without control is an intolerable political negligence.
- 3) **We are fighting smugglers and traffickers:** migrant smugglers and traffickers have become increasingly violent, being a danger to our border guards and a risk to our internal security. There is no place for them in Europe. We support the Strategy to combat trafficking in human beings, which must include robust measures, including the proposed sanctions against smugglers and traffickers to freeze their assets, limit their freedom of movement, and eliminate their profits. We will continue to support the affected Member States and their efforts to strengthen the EU's external borders and capacity to respond to state-sponsored instrumentalisation of migration.