

EFA 2024 European election manifesto

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Foreword

The European Free Alliance [EFA] is the only European political party that stands for self-determination as its foundational principle. We are an alliance of 41 parties representing stateless nations, regions and minorities across Europe. We stand for human, civil and political rights, the principle of subsidiarity, and cultural and linguistic diversity. We do not allow fundamental rights and freedoms to be eroded or attacked. We believe European democracy should become more assertive and resilient. Together with the rule of law and the EU fundamental rights and freedoms, democracy constitutes the bedrock of European society. We seek to build a Europe **for all** peoples, nations, minorities and regions – not only the powerful centralised states and their majority interests.

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

Since the last European elections in 2019, there have been huge developments that have impacted the life of every European. A global pandemic forced us into lockdown, with accompanying economic and social crises. The United Kingdom has withdrawn from the EU. The Qatargate and Moroccogate corruption scandals have shaken public trust in EU politicians, while the Pegasus revelations have shown the extent to which states are spying on their political enemies. And above all, full-scale war has returned to the continent with the Russian Federation's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

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

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

In June 2024 they have an opportunity to raise that voice. But it won't be enough to simply give another mandate to the mainstream political forces that have missed every opportunity to enact real change in Europe. To make the European Union able to give voice to all its citizens, there is an urgent need for every people, territory and minority community to be empowered.

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

We collaborate together at the EU level when it generates added value. Other competences should stay at the local democracy level. The EU's unique blend of intergovernmentalism and its European-level community approach is its strength. That is what EFA stands for: a political model that truly

reflects its peoples and their interests. One that can give them representation, empowerment and hope.

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

1. Democracy for all

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

But currently the EU only allows for a few voices to be heard. EFA has always believed that the European project must be based on the diversity of its peoples: it can no longer content itself as being a union of centralising states promoting their own interests. Certain voices – like those of nations and minorities that do not have their own state – are frozen out of this state-focused system. And ultimately, the EU is only as democratic as its member states – many of which are incapable or unwilling to grant proper representation to their citizens' wishes.

We need a very different Europe: one that allows for new states, new structures, and new ways of involving minorities and voices which are currently excluded. We need the readiness and ambition to envision a new Europe.

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

In those cases where achieving these rights within existing state frameworks turns out to be impossible due to state blockages, the EU should be able to take up a role in seeking a compromise. EFA Members of the European Parliament have been among those who have worked on and presented a legislative proposal for an EU regulation for exactly this.¹ It provides a blueprint for how the EU can mediate to ensure the rights of peoples to decide their own future can be exercised, even when the state is opposed. It proves that it is possible within the current EU competences: no Treaty Change is necessary.

In the European Parliament, we seek the removal of all unfair barriers to electoral participation. Electoral thresholds are used in many European countries to deny representation to smaller parties – in some cases, a deliberate tactic to exclude national minorities or territorial movements. This must be ended, and European Parliament constituencies should reflect the regional diversity within states. It is absurd that large states like Spain or France are a single constituency when there is huge diversity within them, including stateless nations that are denied political representation. These European mega-constituencies must be broken down into smaller areas that are more in line with local interests and identities.

The European Parliament must also have the right to initiate legislation. Currently, only the European Commission has this right, with the result that many proposals are based on technocratic centralism rather than the needs and wishes of Europe's regions and peoples.

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

As a counterweight to the influence of the member states, and to ensure that all parts of Europe have formal representation in the EU system, we seek reform for the European Committee of the Regions. Rather than being merely an advisory body without real power, it should be able to influence and amend European legislation.

The President of the European Commission must be democratically elected, on the basis of a proposal by the European Parliament.

The Qatargate scandal has demonstrated that we need more transparency in all the European institutions. There must be zero tolerance for corruption. Furthermore, the Pegasus revelations have shown that, in some member states, governments are illegitimately spying on opposition politicians, journalists and others. Surveillance in European democracies must only happen with judicial oversight, for legitimate reasons, and must always comply with fundamental rights.

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

Finally, the EU must step up and proactively involve young Europeans in the policy-making processes. The focus should be on increasing European youth's access to the political system. Furthermore, the Union ought to integrate a youth perspective across all policies and levels of government. EFA supports the implementation of an 'EU Youth Test', as proposed by the European Youth Forum,² to ensure young people's concerns and needs are systematically considered throughout the EU legislative process.

2. Diversity for all

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

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

Europe's geography is diverse too. It includes densely populated urban areas, and rapidly emptying countryside where depopulation is a real problem. Each place is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to any challenge. The EU legislative process must be more transparent and foster greater participation from the bottom up. Reliable impact assessments must take due account of

² <https://euobserver.com/health-and-society/157306>

the impact at national and regional level. It is fundamental for EFA that all EU policy must recognise the specific needs of each territory in its implementation.

This goes especially for locations which face particular challenges due to their geography. EFA has a special concern for the unique needs of Europe's island communities. Islands face logistical and infrastructure challenges unknown to mainland communities, and must not be left behind or disadvantaged. EFA calls for a special status for islands to be introduced into EU law, unlocking extra support, funding and exceptions to help those who live on islands. Other areas that require special attention include remote, peripheral and mountainous regions, where infrastructure and agriculture also face unique challenges. Cross-border regions also have specific needs: EFA believes in building a strong cross border cooperation mechanism in the EU and with neighbouring countries.

The EU institutions currently recognise 24 official languages. But the reality is that there are hundreds of languages and dialects spoken across the territory of the EU – several of which have more speakers than some of the recognised EU official languages. The list of EU official languages therefore reflects the interests and identities of the states, not the true linguistic diversity of Europe. EFA stands for the right to use many more languages in the European Parliament, and for the right for EU citizens to write to the EU institutions in their mother tongue. This is not impractical nor unduly expensive: the European Committee of the Regions already has a system allowing members to speak in Catalan, Galician, and Basque so long as appropriate notice is given.

The EU also needs to respect and protect the rights of historical national minorities. Currently minority rights are left almost entirely to the member states, which frequently violate them or refuse to recognise minorities at all. EFA proposes to establish a European Ombudsman for Minority Rights, who would be empowered to investigate member states' compliance with the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and to issue recommendations.

The refugee and migration flows into Europe have placed the Union before unprecedented challenges. None of the Member States is capable of dealing with these challenges by itself. Working together will enable us to put forward a common European response. This response should be based on humanitarian principles and international law, and seek to develop safe and legal pathways.

In recent years, steps towards gender equality have been made in the EU. But there is still a long way until we reach full equality. Further legislation regarding women's empowerment and protection has to be developed. To achieve it, women need to be heard. In 2022, the global share of women in national parliaments reached 26.2% - up from 22.4% in 2015. At that pace, it will take another 40 years for women and men to be represented equally in national parliaments. In the European Parliament during the 2019-2024 term, just over 40% of MEPs were women - still well below parity. Addressing this situation would increase the legitimacy of European institutions while bridging the democratic gap between them and the citizens. It would also improve the efficiency and responsiveness of EU policies, better fitting women's needs.

However, we must recognise that the underrepresentation of women is not only a legal matter, but also a result of cultural and social norms that create and maintain gender stereotypes. The EU, its member states and the media must take more action to change mentalities regarding the role of women and take action against cultural stereotypes.

LGBT rights are another cornerstone of human rights. The persecution and demonising of LGBTQIA+ people in many parts of Europe goes beyond legal discrimination. We condemn hate speech on this ground and we consider that no discrimination or persecution should be allowed.

3. Sustainability for all

The European Commission's "Green Deal" and its Industrial Plan have put it at the forefront of a global push for a more environmentally sustainable future, a simpler regulatory framework, faster access to funds, enhancing skills and improving trade. EFA supports the Green Deal in principle, as we must act together to tackle climate change. But we are concerned that its centralised top-down approach is having a disproportionate social and economic impact on certain sectors and regions. Above all, we need to preserve the integrity of the internal market and the global competitiveness of the EU.

A transition is essential to secure our planet, but if it does not take the people and businesses with it, it will inflict suffering and poverty on many communities. For us it is essential that the burden of dealing with the environmental crisis does not fall excessively on hard-pressed individual citizens and small businesses or farmers - and that it is distributed fairly among Europe's regions. We demand special adaptations for small and medium enterprises [SMEs] and for remote, rural or peripheral regions and especially islands.

Farmers need regulatory clarity, and the time and trust to adapt their businesses to sustainable models. These policies cannot simply be imposed top-down: they need the active input and support of farming communities - those who know the land. Those who implement good practice must be rewarded for it. European law should be flexible enough to allow for case-by-case pragmatic solutions, while supporting farmers to adopt sustainable practices and promoting local markets.

Europe's rural strategy should include a strong focus on the conservation of nature, biodiversity and the distinctive landscapes of Europe's territories. In many cases landscape forms a vital part of our sense of identity and rootedness. EFA wants to recognise landscape as part of intangible cultural heritage of Europe's peoples, and ensure that environmental goals are consistent with this recognition. We support the rapid expansion of renewable and low carbon energy projects, but they should be in harmony with the local communities: macro-scale projects have an unacceptable impact on the local communities, and even cause environmental damage of their own. It is possible to provide clean energy discreetly and in harmony with local needs.

We support the European Commission's target, laid out in the European Green Deal and Industrial Plan, to make Europe the world's first carbon-neutral continent by 2050. This should help to keep the global temperature increase below the 1.5 degree target mentioned in the Paris Agreement. However, regions and municipalities must have the flexibility to adopt their own strategies to achieve these commonly agreed targets: objectives identified in Brussels can be reached in different ways in different parts of Europe, taking account of the local needs and opportunities that each region knows best. The primary focus should be on attaining our existing objectives through fair and attainable means.

4. Solidarity for all

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

Solidarity, peace and democracy should be the guiding principles of all EU action in the world. EFA wants to see the EU take a particular role in standing up for the rights of minorities worldwide, and helping other countries to build governance structures that allow their people to decide their future freely. We want to see the remaining non-self-governing territories of the world take up their right to self-determination. We call for a greater EU role in supporting the people of Palestine, Kurdistan and Western Sahara among others.

Even within the continent Europe itself, there are self-determination conflicts that have not been resolved. The EU has taken up the responsibility to mediate in the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia. It should do the same between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, especially now that Azerbaijan is forcibly integrating the territory, creating a new humanitarian disaster. And within its own borders, the EU must not forget that there are still democratic questions to answer. In EU territories where the people are demanding their right to autonomy or independence [including the overseas territories], the EU should be able to negotiate with stubborn or unwilling member states.

In its immediate neighbourhood, the EU has been shaken by the brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, which we fully condemn. We must continue to provide as much solidarity with Ukraine as we can, including by providing shelter and support for the millions of people who have been driven from their homes by the war. But the EU must also take a stronger role in the diplomatic response, given that this conflict will not be resolved exclusively on military grounds.

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

Ultimately we seek a full withdrawal of Russian Federation troops from the whole territory of Ukraine. EFA believes that borders in Europe can be changed, but never under any circumstances through coercion or force. We categorically reject the Russian State's claim to be acting on behalf of Russian-speaking peoples: their invasion has caused immense suffering to all of Ukraine's peoples, and their actions have been in clear violation of international law. The so-called 'referendums' held by gunpoint in Russian-occupied territories are in no way a genuine exercise of the right to self-determination.

We support Ukraine's path towards EU accession, as well as that of the Western Balkans and Moldova. There are many reasons – historical, economic, and strategic – why these territories belong in the EU, and meaningful progress should be made towards their accession. But that process will also require genuine commitment to reform and meeting European standards among the new members: there can be no compromises on EU values and democracy, not least regarding minority rights. Current stateless nations in the EU which become independent in a democratic manner will also automatically become members of the European Union.

The EU must also be sure to never close the door on the peoples of the UK. EFA supports the right for Scotland and Wales to choose their own future: only through independence will Scotland, Wales, and England itself (and its regions) be able to pursue their own diverging interests and meet the aspirations of their people.

5. Prosperity for all

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

We should move away from the centralised model of an economy that primarily serves the interests of large urban areas, and instead make sure that every region is treated according to its needs and capacities. We should improve the local basis of our supply chains, helping the development of regional industry and creating jobs in rural and peripheral areas.

Instead of the centralised distribution of EU funds, EFA supports a fairer system of distributing funding: one where every region of Europe can determine its own needs, not have decisions imposed on it from above. EU solidarity must result in reform and sustainable growth on the ground. At the same time, many needs that are cross-border in nature can be addressed through establishing new economic and cultural macroregions for areas facing common challenges. EFA also stands for an EU islands status to provide tailored assistance to the specific needs of island territories.

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

In today's globalised world, European businesses have to compete not only locally but with producers from all over the world - many of which are able to produce more cheaply thanks to lower labour costs, lower environmental standards and/or state support. In the USA, the Inflation Reduction Act and other new protectionist measures are putting the squeeze on European exports to the US; at the same time, we are locked in competition with China, a communist state where all industry can benefit from state support. Europe needs to recognise the changing global mood regarding free trade and make strategic public investments in European industry to keep it competitive. That includes a renewed push for diversifying EU trade, more assertive action against dumping practices on our market, easing conditions for industries and SMEs, the introduction of an EU competitiveness check and strengthening entire supply chains - which often cross borders. That is a European-level task by default, but will also help to boost local economies.

In all aspects of industrial strategy, Europe should recognise that it is currently a world leader in a few sectors: notably machinery, biotech, food and drink, tourism, transport, and research and development. It also has world-renowned ports. These sectors should be safeguarded and helped to grow sustainably, with a particular focus on building European competitiveness in key future-oriented areas: pharma, biotech, emission-free vehicles, hydrogen storage, environment-friendly

agriculture, sustainable tourism, and key tech components such as semiconductors and AI. Europe is currently home to the most highly-educated, high-skilled workforce in the world: this must be nurtured through high-level education, R&D investments and sensitive industrial policy to preserve our place in a rapidly developing world.

A call to act: for a Europe for all

Every nation and people has its own experience of Europe. Our common European story is told in many different tongues – far more than just the 24 official state languages currently recognised by the EU institutions. To move forward as a continent, we need more voices, political pluralism and territorial self-government for all and everywhere. That is what EFA stands for.

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

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