

If Europe doesn't care for the people, the people won't care for Europe

Later this year member states will negotiate the EU's budget for 2021-2027. It will be a complex, technical and (most likely) tortuous task. But, if we are going to get an agreement that allows Europe to thrive, member states need to appreciate the value - not just the price - of what's being negotiated.

Concluding an EU budget involves navigating a maze of political and national positions. It is no easy task, and the stakes are high. These decisions will affect, in one way or another, 500+ million people. But the opportunities are even higher, if we get it right.

The budget is the EU's main financial tool to improve our continent - building schools, hospitals, and roads; supporting scientists, students, workers and farmers; and a whole range of other EU initiatives. Against a backdrop of growing discontent with the status quo and rising populism, the budget is one of the EU's most important tools to prove the added value of the EU project to citizens. But only if member states keep sight of the Europe we all want.

As social democrats our principles are clear: European solidarity, democracy and human rights. It's time to agree the key priorities for Europe, red line not just for social democrats, but for all governments of the EU. This is how we prove the value of the European project to citizens.

The budget must start with an ambition for more and better jobs, and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Every worker, whether employed or self-employed, has the right to good working conditions, good work life balance, and social security.

Secondly, we must align EU policies and initiatives with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. To ensure a socially fair and sustainable transition to a greener Europe that protects the environment and fights against climate change. These policies must be framed by a Just Transition Fund that supports research and development, and the training of workers to make sure they have the skills needed in the green economy and the jobs of tomorrow.

Europe must ensure strong welfare states which support the changing needs of society. Education, healthcare, social protection must be underpinned by economic sustainability, and we must strengthen cohesion and convergence between our countries and regions. Poorer parts of our continent must be supported to catch up, so contributions and prosperity are shared.

Equality is a must. Europe must fight discrimination based on gender, origin, age, disability, religion, belief or sexual orientation. All programmes and instruments should be gender mainstreamed.

We must invest in the next generation and commit to eradicating the scourge of child poverty. It's time for a European Child Guarantee so every child has access to quality healthcare, nutrition, education and housing.

It's time we invested in our people with quality education and lifelong learning too, guaranteeing access to everyone. Let's strengthen Erasmus+ to ensure people from all social backgrounds can benefit.

To secure a thriving economy, we need world-leading infrastructure - roads, hospital, schools - that make life in our communities easier, safer, and more productive. It's time for a real plan for affordable housing and clean public transport.

We must invest in innovation whilst addressing the challenges of digitalisation. European nations must not just keep up with the rapid changes of the 21st century, we must lead them.

Finally, it is time to deepen the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), so we strengthen the EU economy and increase our resilience in case of future crises.

The next EU budget is our opportunity to prepare Europe not just for the coming decade, but to set our continent on the right path for the long term. It is an opportunity to cement Europe as a global player in the fields of climate change, trade, and in areas linked to our values: freedom of speech, the welfare state and democracy.

We believe that these objectives must transcend the maze of political and national positions during the negotiation. We will fight for them, for a strong and ambitious Europe, that defends European democracy and the European social model to the core. The rule of law, an independent judiciary and transparency measures and checks to prevent corruption are not negotiable in the EU. When governments do not meet these criteria, the EU should effectively use all instruments to ensure respect to EU values.

In the coming months, as we negotiate for a stronger European budget, all member states must keep in mind the value - not just the price - of what's being negotiated. Because, if Europe doesn't care for the people, the people will cease to care for Europe.

Signatories

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