

## Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 presented European governments with their biggest challenge in modern history. Not since WWII has any crisis had such a deep and simultaneous impact on the world, and on our citizens. As societies went into lockdown and our economies shutdown, millions of people in fear of their personal health as well as economic well-being.

The COVID-19 crisis has not only been a health crisis, but it is also an economic crisis and our freedoms we have all taken for granted for a long time are under threat; such as our freedoms to move around freely, to travel, work and interact with each other without many limitations and borders. Life will be different after COVID, but our rights and freedoms need to stay fully intact.

We, the member parties of the ALDE Party, acknowledge that we need to use this moment as an opportunity for reflection, new thinking, and progress.

Respecting competence and devolved functions across our Union, we commit to initiating and promoting policy initiatives and transforming the discussion at the appropriate local, regional, national and international level as outlined below.

We pledge to create a new future for Europe in the new global normal, that guarantees our safety, safeguards our liberties and freedoms, and offers opportunity and prosperity for our citizens.

### **Safeguarding public health**

#### **1. Halting the spread by tracking, testing, and tracing**

Public health is our priority, and COVID-19 is here to stay until effective vaccines have been found. We need to invest heavily in our testing capacities and tracking and tracing facilities, including more investment in new technologies such as artificial intelligence, to recover from the economic and physical lockdown quickly and efficiently, and to restore our social and economic freedoms. To achieve this, contact tracing apps will be vital, and our priority should be to secure the interoperability of these apps across the EU as soon as possible. At no time should track and trace become a threat to our fundamental freedoms and privacy. Therefore, apps must uphold the highest standards of privacy and handle data decentrally.

#### **2. Joining forces to supply of medical emergency equipment**

The rush of individual countries to secure medical emergency equipment highlighted the global dependencies and ultimately the protectionist

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tendencies of countries during periods of crisis. We call for national governments to ensure they are prepared. We call for the strengthening of the rescEU mechanism to ensure that the European Union is able to coordinate to collaboratively procure vital medical equipment which is then available for all countries.

In order to avoid further instances of shortages, we need to work towards being able to produce medical supplies and advanced vital medical equipment and technology in Europe, rather than being so dependent on a small number of global sources. Increasing such production and knowledge capacity can also be an opportunity to support and encourage European local business.

### **3. Eliminating the virus: one coordinated EU vaccination programme**

It is clear that the COVID-19 crisis will only end with vaccination, so we need to create the perspective of ending the pandemic. We must develop one coordinated EU vaccination programme to ensure easy, fair and quick access for every European citizen, as well as for lower-income countries, to new medication and a vaccine to help fight COVID-19.

We should work towards a harmonisation of the procedures by which new medicines are allowed in the EU and we should offer our knowledge expertise to the world.

### **4. Incentivise and invest in medical research**

Europe is a pioneer in so many domains, and also, we want to see it lead the way in medical and disease research. We want to see more cross-border and coordinated investment in public health research and discuss the creation of a European Health Research body (beyond the EU). Moreover, to facilitate the highest standards of research beyond national borders, coordination and exchange of data are needed. We call for the creation of a European Data Space for Health without prejudice for the Member states' competencies in this field.

### **5. Greater coordinating role for the European Union**

While respecting the national competency of healthcare, we call for even greater cooperation amongst national member states in the area of public health, and greater coordination role for the European Union through the empowerment of the European Commissioner for Crisis Management to coordinate in similar future scenarios of pandemics and emergencies as well as the creation of a European Health Response Mechanism to better respond to future types of European health crisis.

Moreover, a European Security Council should be created to quickly coordinate crisis management and accelerate the decision-making

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processes. Europe-wide pandemics and other emerging disasters should fall within the mandate of the European Security Council.

The role of the public health agencies such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and European Medicines Agency (EMA) should be strengthened to enable monitoring, surveillance, testing and tracing of future diseases.

## 6. Reform of the WHO

The EU is a natural partner of the World Health Organisation and we want to ensure it is a real global coordinator and a supranational authority. But the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how its authority has been eroded by countries, such as China, using it for their own purposes and a lack of accountability. We should look critically at its structures to reform into a truly global coordinator to manage preventive research into all kinds of diseases and medical care; an independent arbiter and reliable early warning system.

The WHO must establish an independent and impartial inquiry concerning its COVID-19 handling, including the origins of the virus and the information exchange from member countries, such as China, and lessons learned from it. The EU and its Member States should demand the inclusion of Taiwan, who have valuable experience and insight to share, in the coming World Health Assembly (WHA) and as a WHO observer.

### Restoring public trust

## 7. Regaining public trust in democratic decision-making

While understanding that urgent and drastic measures from national governments were needed to ensure the health and safety of their citizens and economies to contain this crisis, we firmly insist that such emergency measures are necessary and proportionate to the objective, limited in time and scope, and are always subject to approval and regular scrutiny by the parliaments and courts.

We call for national governments to practice greater transparency and evidence-based decision-making which will help explain sudden policy actions to their citizens.

We need a Europe-wide effort to tackle disinformation.

## 8. Protecting democracy and the rule of law

Democracy and the rule of law are under siege in a number of member states. We condemn the actions of corona abuse of power and governments ('corona dictators') who use the pandemic as an opportunity to expand their powers, and pledge to hold those in power to account.

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We call for the establishment of mechanisms to monitor democracy and fundamental rights, and for abuses of power and the rule of law and the introduction of conditionality that links the allocation of European financial resources to Member States and the respect of common EU values.

## 9. Learning the lessons

We need to learn the lessons from this pandemic and its response and we call for national evaluations and inquiries to be conducted promptly to learn the lessons nationally and for the European Union to convene a conference to garner what can be learned from the EU-level as a result of the individual actions of member states to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Schengen Area is the backbone of European cooperation, which should be strengthened so that internal borders should stay open to prevent harm to the internal market and freedom of movement. Uncoordinated closures of internal borders must be avoided at all costs.

As health is not an EU competence today, we should carefully look at federal countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, where health remains a competence of the states (Länder, cantons) but during and after the lockdown, the federal government has been an effective coordinator.

We should provide transnational assistance to all European citizens and make it possible for workers, patients and health professionals to continue moving across the border during possible future lockdowns, thereby guaranteeing access to and provision of care through mechanisms of cross-border cooperation such as “health corridors” between neighbouring regions. We should highlight acts of European solidarity and support and better communicate them to the citizens.

## **Protecting jobs, prosperity, and our common future**

### 10. Trade and exchange create prosperity

Through competition, fairness and open trade, we liberals believe that progress for everyone and support for the vulnerable can be achieved by embracing the dynamics of market economies. We note with discord that there has been a growing tendency towards nationalisation and protectionism over the past years, and so we reaffirm our belief that free trade is a win-win.

We will always remain outspoken in defence of open, rule-based, and free trade underpinned by a strong World Trade Organisation. It must be Europe’s priority to make the WTO work again.

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More, not less, free trade and diversifying supply chains will be key to help Europe to recover from the financial crisis and to improve its resilience when faced with future crises.

### **11. Increase economic exchange by keeping borders open**

The common market and our common vision of Europe is built on the right of EU citizens to move freely within the EU. Closing borders should only ever be used as a measure of last resort - even during a pandemic. The closed borders kept EU-citizens from going to work and living their everyday life and created massive disruptions both for business and civil life. We will always remain a strong defender of freedom of movement across European borders for all European citizens.

### **12. Champion European leadership**

In the midst of an US-China trade war and in a rising digital world, Europe should fight protectionism and renationalisation, and advocate the values of openness and free trade from which the EU has prospered. Competitiveness and a fair environment for businesses are key to ensure the well-functioning of the single market and to boost innovation and investment. We must look to existing rules but also to new rules to ensure free and competitive markets and to increase the capacity for the EU to have a stronger role globally.

### **13. Invest in infrastructure**

The digital and green transition should go hand by hand and Europe must invest in research and become pioneers of new technologies. Europe has the most advanced industrial sector in the world, and we must identify the strategic efforts we want to invest in. Europe has all the necessary technological means to build a European 5G network that will increase the connectivity and further the productivity growth of industries while addressing the security threats posed by foreign countries.

Moreover, in order to keep on track for a faster energy transition, we must invest more in clean and renewable energies in line with the Green Deal such as electricity infrastructure network and clean hydrogen energy, while ensuring ambitious transition mechanism for regions that have the longest way to go.

### **14. Invest in citizens and businesses**

The corona crisis endangered the job security of Europeans. We recognise the urgent need to create jobs and support European and national industries, but we need to look towards new reforms to ensure a sustainable pension system.

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Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of prosperity in Europe. To further support them, we will continue to facilitate the creation of more jobs through reduction of bureaucracy and regulations, easier access to finance, simpler rules for investment funds to support new, innovative businesses across Europe, aid to make better use of the opportunities in the EU's free trade agreements, encouraging knowledge and technology transfer from universities and research institutes, and greater opportunities for young entrepreneurs. For example, the launching of an EU-wide network to promote entrepreneurship among young people or the creation of a "student-entrepreneur" status in all European countries would be strong first steps in supporting young entrepreneurs.

The rising digital platform economy also has an impact in the provision of labour and organisation of work. The increase of online platform workers across Europe and its transnational nature demands an initiative at the European level to ensure social protection and social-labour rights for online platform workers, regardless of their employment status, while respecting the independence of these workers in how and when they work.

We should consider models for incentivising more teleworking and home office options alongside traditional work, thus providing for a better work - life balance.

### **15. Embrace the digital revolution**

To complement our sustainable economic development ambitions, we must invest in digital infrastructure to accommodate the increased demand for online business and usage. A reform of the e-commerce directive to ensure the protection of consumers rights and online safety, becomes inevitable in order to secure a new regime for online services. In addition, clearer and harmonised stricter rules for online platforms including those located outside the EU but providing services to European consumers, should be established.

In order to improve the digital infrastructure in place, a new Digital Single Market strategy should be launched.

### **16. Invest in our common future**

We acknowledge that this crisis required unprecedented state help to protect jobs and loss of entire industries. In the context of corona crisis, we want to acknowledge the importance of agreement on the new MFF and the Next Generation Fund, based on the principles of solidarity and unity. In this regard, we call for a debate on new possibilities of cross-border financial support and new mechanism for EU investment in the future.

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Investments in the EU economies should contribute to structural reform, environmental protection and foster innovation and digitalisation, with the aim of making them shock-proof in the future.

Fairness, solidarity, and solidity are reciprocal in the common market; To make the European economy futureproof, countries should commit to a broad long-term reform of energy and climate policies, health systems, labour markets, tax and legal systems, social protection and pension schemes, and the reduction of bureaucracy and state intervention.

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