Europe’s liberals start the countdown to the 2024 EU polls

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Next year’s EU elections loomed large as Europe’s liberal political family, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, gathered in Stockholm for their last annual Congress before the polls.

EURACTIV was in Stockholm and reports on some of the key policy directions and personalities as the liberal family prepares its policy platform and key candidates ahead of the elections.
Kyiv MP: Ukraine needs EU membership timeline to accelerate reform process

Economy, climate change, security at heart of EU liberals’ 2024 campaign

One year to European elections: a final window of opportunity
One year after EU governments backed Ukraine’s status as a candidate to join the bloc, Kira Rudik, a senior lawmaker in Kyiv, says that the country is on track for EU accession – but it needs political support from the bloc as much as ever.

Rudik, who is the leader of the liberal Golos party, chairs the Committee on Digital Transformation in the Ukrainian parliament, putting her at the centre of the legislative reforms in Ukraine as it adapts its legal framework to match the EU’s acquis.

Ukraine was handed seven recommendations for policy reform by the European Commission last year, including enacting legislation on a selection process for the country’s Constitutional Court judges on a competitive basis, strengthening the fight against corruption, harmonising media regulation with EU standards, and protecting minority communities.

The European Commission is set to publish its assessment of Ukraine’s progress later this year, after which a decision will be made on whether to open formal accession talks with Kyiv.

“We acknowledge that we have a long road in front of us in terms of implementing all of that, but the legislative part is in place,” Rudik told EURACTIV.

“The Ukrainian Parliament had sittings almost every other week, last year. When there was an EU/Ukraine Summit in February, it was the first time where we came like, you know, school children that have their homework absolutely done,” she added.

She adds that the legislation aimed...
at integrating Ukraine’s legal framework with the EU’s is usually adopted with a constitutional majority in Parliament.

“The question right now is how do we get the clear process? And when would the discussions on the ascension process give us some confirmation?” said Rudik.

“By the end of the year we hope that we will know a clear path with a timeline on how we will become an EU member,” she added.

### The role of pan-European political parties

However, while EU leaders continue to talk up their commitment to Ukraine and its EU perspective, Rudik, a Vice President of the ALDE party, is concerned by proposed changes to the rules on the financing of pan-European political parties. This could lead to parties from Ukraine and other pre-accession states being prevented from being full members, she cautioned.

“On one hand, we’ve been told that the EU embraces Ukraine and that the EU embraces new members. And on the other hand, we have these regulations saying that there are limitations and that to comply with these regulations we’ll have to limit ourselves to have only 30% of non-EU members and not accept funds from non-EU members,” said Rudik.

Ironically, the position taken by EU governments in the negotiations is driven by a wish to prevent interference from Russia and other third countries in EU politics and elections.

“This is exactly what Russian propaganda is saying. Their main narrative is ‘you are not wanted in the EU. The EU doesn’t really want you,’” she added.

“For me, being a vice president of ALDE is an expression of support from party members that, ‘Ukraine is part of Europe and Ukraine will be part of the EU. This was the most straightforward way of saying, ‘we stand with Ukraine.’”

“I would want to see more support in this matter from the EPP,” said Rudik, adding that “it’s unfortunate that we are not fighting together with other political families.”

### Towards rebuilding

While the war continues to rage, Ukraine’s political leaders are also looking at the prospect of how to rebuild the country after the fighting ends.

“We know that we have a very short window of opportunity of rebuilding the country. Not just rebuilding but building back in a better way. And we know also that there will be huge amounts of money invested in Ukraine and donated to Ukraine for the rebuild process,” the liberal lawmaker told EURACTIV.

An assessment made jointly by Ukraine’s government, the World Bank, the European Commission and the United Nations, and published in March put Ukraine’s reconstruction and recovery needs at $411 billion, more than double its economic output.

It also estimated that Ukraine would need $14 billion for critical and priority reconstruction and recovery investments in 2023.

“We want to have in place the processes and procedures, the same as in the European Union, to make sure that we will not create new oligarchs with this money, but that the Ukrainian people will benefit from it.”

“So there will be an open market for who will be rebuilding the country, there will be an open market on the decisions on like which way to do it the best way.”

Meanwhile, Rudik, who was one of the speakers on climate change and food security, argues that ending the war would be the biggest single global step to tackling climate change.

“Over the last year, the amount of the toxic waste that has been released has increased 23 times,” she said, adding that “radiation, the same as pollution, doesn’t care which passport you’re holding, and does not have any borders.”

“Ukraine used to be like one of the largest exporters of grains, greens, sunflower oil, tomato, barley and wheat but we have been robbed of that. Right now, 30% of our territory is a landmine.”
Economy, climate change, security at heart of EU liberals’ 2024 campaign

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com

The economy, climate change and Europe’s security will be at the heart of the campaign by European liberals at next June’s European elections, according to leading party officials.

The liberal ALDE party gathered in Stockholm last weekend for its annual congress, the last such gathering before next June’s European elections, and has been putting together its policy platform ahead of the opening of the polls.

“We actually started last year already with questionnaires of citizens to learn where the problems are. And this was actually our starting point,” Svenja Hahn, the Vice-President of ALDE who has been tasked with preparing the common manifesto, told EURACTIV.

The manifesto is set to be formally completed at a pre-election party congress in early 2024.

“We’re going to have a strong focus on boosting the economy, that will certainly have a strong focus on free trade, for example. But we’re also connecting it with combating climate change, because it’s also clear that there cannot be a strong future for the European Union, if there is no safe environment,”
Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was one of the liberal leaders to deliver a video message to delegates in Stockholm, and the war and its impact on the EU was one of the main topics among delegates. Last June, four Ukrainian parties, including Zelenskyy’s Servants of the People and the Golos party led by Kira Rudik, now a Vice-President of ALDE, formally joined the pan-European liberal family.

“The conflict of our time is autocracy versus democracy,” said Hahn, adding that her party wants to define what it believes the EU’s role should be in this battle.

“I went into the elections with my party in 2019, campaigning for a European army, and people were, like, why? What do we need that for? And now no one is asking that question. They see that defence and security is a topic that we can only address together,” said Hahn.

“We don’t need to create a European army tomorrow. But we’re taking the first steps right now. And having a closer defence unit,” she added.

In the meantime, some questions about the campaign are unanswered, one of them being whether the ALDE party will hold primaries to elect a Spitzenkandidat as its nominee for the European Commission presidency.

Ahead of the 2019 elections, the liberal family picked a team of seven lead candidates rather than an individual. However, the initiative, which was used to select Jean-Claude Juncker as the Commission President in 2014 was ignored by EU leaders following the 2019 elections and is increasingly unlikely to be a factor in 2024.

“This is something that is too early to call yet,” Hahn, a first term MEP from the German Free Democrat Party, told EURACTIV.

For her part, Margrethe Vestager, Vice President of the EU executive, and one of the seven liberal candidates in 2019, repeated to EURACTIV her ambivalence about the Spitzenkandidat process.

“I think people who run for the European Parliament, should run for the parliament because they want to seat in the parliament. And not because they want another job,” said Vestager.
Elections are nothing without voters. With 12 months to the next European Parliament elections, European politicians and political parties are approaching the final window of opportunity to engage with citizens and encourage them to make their voices heard, writes Didrik de Schaetzen.

Didrik de Schaetzen is the ALDE Party 2024 Campaign Director.

While European politicians and officials can, and often do, disagree on a range of topics, it can’t be denied that we are living through a period of great uncertainty and rapid change. In these past years, our continent has gone through a public health crisis, economic hardship, social challenges and, of course, a full-scale war that sadly still goes on.

These difficult times understandably have a significant impact on Europeans’ outlook on life. According to research conducted by the ALDE Party across several Member States, angry, anxious and frustrated were among the most common adjectives Europeans used to describe how they feel about the future. Only a tiny minority described themselves as happy.

This is the reality that Europe’s
liferts together with other European political parties are faced with. As we all know, voter turnout has been consistently low in the past European elections, with 2019 seeing for the first time an increase in turnout to just above 50 percent. While it is great news that half of those eligible to vote used their right to vote, it also means that half of all possible voters chose not to. And, if we look back to the previous election, it is clear that the world has changed a lot since then, and not all for the better. It would not be wise to assume that past success will necessarily translate into future success.

This lack of engagement from voters is about more than individual parties gaining representatives to the European Parliament. It is about the legitimacy of the elected officials and the policies they implement. If we don’t manage to convince Europeans to make their voices heard when they are presented with the opportunity to do so on an election day, how can we encourage them to shape the future of our continent in a positive way during the five years that follow?

Many Europeans feel disconnected from politics, either because they don’t see how it benefits their daily lives or because they don’t trust their politicians and elected officials to act with their best interests in mind. Moreover, at the European level, the overall complexity of the European Union can make it difficult for people to understand what exactly they are voting for. This is understandable and should force us in the ‘EU Bubble’ to challenge our own set of ideas of what we believe the EU to be.

In the upcoming elections, a large group of people will also be voting for the first time. In some Member States, 16-year-olds are able to cast their vote while others require the voters to be at least 18 years of age. If we don’t take into account the potential of Europe’s youth for the overall election result, we are setting ourselves up for failure. Last year’s European Year of Youth was a great initiative to include young people in policymaking, but if we leave it at that, we will struggle to build the future generation of voters and politicians.

In some ways, it all boils down to trust between voters and politicians. Politicians must show that they are responsive to the needs of their constituents. One way to achieve this is to create more opportunities for citizens to participate in political debates and projects, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, or the current Manifesto drafting process undertaken by the ALDE Party. This kind of approach not only builds trust but also has the potential to strengthen our democracies by ensuring that decision-making processes are more transparent.

12 months might seem like a long enough time to fix some of these challenges. In reality, we are quickly closing the final window of opportunity before it is too late. After all, as politicians and political parties know, it is not the period of an intense electoral campaign that matters the most but what happens between two consecutive campaigns.

Europe’s liberals will gather in Stockholm to discuss the road towards 2024 at the annual ALDE Party Congress. On our website, you can follow the programme and watch some of the sessions – join us on 26-28 May!
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