Europe's liberal political family, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, held their first in-person annual Congress since the COVID-19 pandemic in Dublin.

Their Congress, which started on 2 June and was attended by Prime Ministers, EU commissioners and over a thousand delegates, was held against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the energy and cost of living crisis, and questions about EU reform and the bloc's future following the Conference on the Future of Europe. EURACTIV was present at the Congress and reports on the main outcomes.
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The EU must speed up the replacement of Russian gas in its energy mix and dramatically increase investment in renewable energy infrastructure, senior liberal political leaders said on Friday (3 June).

Speaking at the congress of the European liberal party, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe in Dublin, Michael McGrath, Ireland’s minister for public spending, warned that “Europe is likely to be facing the biggest energy crisis since the 1970s.”

“We all accept that it is immoral to pay hundreds of billions of euros to the Russian regime when we know it is funding war. We must face this with much more urgency than we were going to do. We do need the greatest possible coordination at the European level,” McGrath added.

“The green transition is the future of our collective European economy.”

On 18 May, the European Commission unveiled RePowerEU, a €300 billion plan to eliminate Russian energy imports by 2027. However, the EU executive has conceded that the programme will require short-term investments in new fossil fuel infrastructure to replace imports of Russian oil and gas.

“Before the war, we paid more than €300 billion for oil and gas imports. If we are able to replace this with homegrown renewables then it impacts our trade balance. Offshore wind projects tend to be built by
our own companies. This is part of our growth strategy,” EU energy commissioner Kadri Simson, told delegates.

“Even before the imposition of sanctions against Russia, member states were looking for alternatives such as Norway and Algeria,” said the energy commissioner.

The EU energy commissioner also stressed the need for investment and reform of the European energy grid which would need €28 billion of investment.

“We are dependent on fossil fuels and we have to be prepared,” Commissioner Simson said, adding that “we will replace Russian natural gas with alternative suppliers, and we will negotiate on the basis of mandates from the member states”.

However, Swedish MEP, Emma Wiesner, a member of the European Parliament's environment committee, urged the Commission to move faster and criticised the funding allocated to fossil fuels in the RePowerEU programme.

“I am not super happy with RePowerEU. This is a self-destructive way of acting when we keep investing euros in the fossil fuel infrastructure,” she said, noting that the programme features investment worth €10 billion in gas infrastructure and €2 billion for oil.

Wiesner was also critical of the EU’s slow pace in ending reliance on Russian gas, despite the Commission having identified it as a priority several years ago. The policies of the last six years did not work, said Wiesner, pointing out that, in 2021, the EU’s gas imports from Russia increased to 38%.

George Louis Bouchez, the leader of the Belgian MR party, said that alternative gas supplies to Russia were not viable.

“There is no future for fossil fuels. The only solution is a mix of nuclear and renewables,” he said.

“It is not a question of whether you love nuclear, the reality is that there is no gas in Europe. We need to make this decision now,” he added, calling for a large increase in infrastructure investment.

“Europe is a political giant that acts like a dwarf,” said Raoul Boucke, a Dutch D66 MP. He also urged the European Parliament to adopt the most ambitious targets possible on car emissions when MEPs vote on the EU’s carbon emissions and revamped emissions trading scheme next week.

The speakers also emphasised the need for more coordination of energy policy at the EU level, both in terms of the overall energy mix and on electricity grid capacity.

“Only allowing countries to choose their energy mix is part of the problem,” said Bouchez.

“The choices made by Germany have become a problem for the whole of Europe. This is the reason why Europe needs to have the same strategy,” he added.

“Joint purchase of gas is the way forward,” said Wiesner. “I don't think the European supergrid is controversial at all. We need to pour all our investment into a European supergrid. This is a real energy union,” she said.
Give Ukraine green light and overhaul EU defence policy, says liberal group

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com

Languages: Français | Deutsch

Liberal leaders urged the EU to give a green light and the strongest possible encouragement for Ukraine’s bid to join the bloc, alongside a broader overhaul of EU foreign and defence policy at their annual Congress in Dublin.

The European Commission is expected to issue its opinion on whether Ukraine should be awarded EU candidate status in the coming weeks, followed by a decision by the European Council.

Speaking at the Congress of the Alliance of Liberal and Democrat parties for Europe (ALDE), Irish Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Luxembourg’s Xavier Bettel gave their strong backing for Ukraine to be given candidate status in June.

Martin pointed to the rapid economic development made by Ireland since it joined the EU in 1972 as an example of what EU membership could bring. “We have witnessed over fifty years the transformation of Ireland from its membership of the EU,” he said, adding that Ireland would not be a blocker of further EU enlargement and integration.

“Ukraine is obviously the main topic because it touches everything, starting with the question: what can we do to help, and to the question of EU expansion, and the European elections in 2024,” Kira Rudik, the leader of the Golos party, told EURACTIV.
Rudik, who was elected on Saturday as a vice-president of ALDE, also played down the significance of the recent proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron to set up a ‘European political community’ as an alternative to full EU membership which, Macron indicated, could apply to the likes of the United Kingdom and Ukraine.

“President Macron is getting ready for elections. I want him to get himself an as anti-Russian parliament as possible. Then we will talk,” she said. “Once he has won the election, his hands will not be tied.”

However, she stressed the importance of the EU sending a positive signal to Ukraine and other eastern partnership countries.

“Putin’s main propaganda point is that the West does not need you, the West will betray you, the West despises you and treats you like second class citizens,” Rudik told EURACTIV.

A resolution passed by the Liberal party called for full support for Ukraine’s EU candidacy, alongside the continuation of stringent economic and political sanctions against the Russian Federation.

It added that Russia should be “obliged to pay reparations and contributions to compensate for loss and damage inflicted by the Russian invasion”, and that charges against Russian leaders should immediately be brought before the International Court of Justice.

**NEW ALLIANCES**

The applications for NATO membership by Sweden and Finland have also prompted a rethink of European defence and alliances, said Guri Melby, leader of the Venstre Norway Party.

“We have problems coordinating and that makes us weak. We hope in the Liberal party that the decisions by Sweden and Finland will reopen the debate on EU membership for Norway,” said Melby.

“In order to be resilient, we need more alliances,” she said, adding that it was now important for Norway to be more integrated with EU defence policies.

The war has also contributed to reopening the question of EU foreign and defence policy, and the pace of decision making.

EU enlargement has stalled since Croatia became the latest country to join the EU in 2013, with the four Western Balkan candidates having made little progress towards EU accession. The broader enlargement process should be kickstarted, said Michał Kobosko, first vice-president of Polska2050.

“We will be stronger when we will be bigger. We cannot keep talking about expanding the EU but must put it into action. There is no grey area in Europe. We need to let these countries know that there is a clear way for them to the EU,” he said.

Meanwhile, others pointed to the need to speed up EU decision making, set up a genuine European defence system and scrap national vetoes on foreign and defence policy.

Kalle Laanet, Estonia’s defence minister, pointed out that in late May, Baltic defence ministers agreed a communiqué on how to operate military forces across the three states, a model that could be copied elsewhere across the bloc.

“We cannot rely on America forever. We need quicker political decisions and shorter time to execute military orders between our member states,” said Michal Kobosko, a process which, he added, had become a “bureaucratic nightmare”.

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As we gather at the ALDE Party Congress in Dublin over the next few days to discuss the many issues confronting Europe we all know that by working in solidarity we remain stronger than ever. Our core democratic and liberal values are held close as we debate on present policies and plan for the future.

Michéal Martin is Ireland’s Taoiseach and leader of ALDE Party member party Fianna Fáil. He hosts the ALDE Congress 2022 taking place on 2-4 June in Dublin.

We all learned from how well Europe focused on tackling COVID-19 together and how this benefitted our citizens in this once a century event. It is important to recognise that Europe produced its own vaccines and also became the biggest net exporter to the developing world. This illustrates in real terms how collaboration and solidarity work.

Europe has also been working consistently and constantly to sanction Russia for its illegal and barbaric war against Ukraine. We are all appalled at this insidious war against the people of Ukraine and of course the blatant disregard of democracy.

We have seen over the last 107 days how millions of people have fled and how they are being hosted across EU member states. We are all supporting Ukraine in every which way we can.

The war has ensured that we are all committed to exit from our dependency on Russia for oil and gas. This will have a two-pronged impact as
every EU member is now accelerating our conversion to wind, solar and green energy.

The more we act now, the more time we will have to save the planet. Science has convinced us all that the challenges facing us from climate change are stark. The truth is not acting is not an option. We have all witnessed the extreme weather events across Europe in the last while. Extremes of droughts to flooding leading to destruction and death.

We have already agreed and reaffirmed a global goal under the Paris Agreement to hold temperatures increases to 1.5 Celsius. The sustainable finance agenda is advancing at a rapid pace and there is now an increasing focus from governments, regulators and investors.

The European Commission’s strategy for financing Europe’s transition to a sustainable economy allows each member state to have an ambitious roadmap. Europe’s financial systems and indeed our economies are so interconnected that there is clear value in working together to develop common sustainability standards and rules while investing in worthwhile green activities.

Wealthier countries will have to deliver effective accessible and transparent financial support to developing countries that are struggling to cope with extreme weather events and climate impacts.

There was a lot of commitment made at COP 26 and Europe will continue to lead on climate change commitments in Fit for 55. Climate change is the single greatest challenge we face as a continent and as a planet and we must work in unison to meet our goals.

I look forward to meeting my ALDE colleagues while we debate climate, sustainability and many other important issues at our Congress in Dublin.
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