



European Alliance Group's Political Priorities for 2020 - 2025

*Recommendations for the new term of office of the European
Committee of the Regions*



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of the Regions**

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At the outset of the 7th term of office of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Alliance (EA) Group hereby outlines its political priorities and reaffirms its commitment to a more democratic and decentralised European Union (EU), inclusive towards its nations, regions, cities and local authorities, closer to its citizens and with a strong voice in the world.

A more democratic and transparent EU

We believe in a true multilevel governance system where local and regional authorities (LRAs) are fully empowered to perform their role as the layer of government closest to the citizens. The EA Group will continue arguing for better and simplified governance as well as more efficiency, transparency and accountability in EU policy-and decision-making process.

A stronger role for local and regional authorities

We believe that nations and LRAs need to have their voices heard at the heart of the EU and therefore, the CoR, as the EU's assembly of LRAs must have a stronger role in the development of EU policies and the decision-making process.

In parallel, the EA Group will continue to strengthen its cooperation with other EU institutions, in particular, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, to ensure the effective impact of CoR's initiatives and recommendations.

Subsidiarity

The EA Group will continue to strongly defend the principle of subsidiarity to ensure that decisions are taken at the level of government closest to the citizens. We particularly support the concept of "active subsidiarity" as a new way of working to ensure that the voice of local, regional and national authorities is duly taken into account at all stages of the policy cycle.

The EA Group will also work on improving and enhancing the implementation of ex-ante and ex-post mechanisms designed to provide systematic consultation on and assessment of EU legislation's impact on the ground.

Dialogue with citizens

We need to reconnect the EU to its citizens, enhance their participation in political processes and ensure that they develop a sense of belonging to the European project. To achieve that, it is necessary to deepen their knowledge of policies which affect their daily lives. This is why the EA Group will actively contribute to ensuring that LRAs are in permanent dialogue with citizens, which would make EU policies more

understandable to the public but also serve as a listening exercise whereby people's concerns would be echoed back to the EU policymakers and duly followed up on.

The EA Group believes that engaging with citizens to EU institutions through LRAs has important benefits for European Institutions as well: it improves the efficiency and efficacy of policy-making, it increases the legitimacy of the European project and it avoids the erosion of democratic values

In this respect, the EA Group particularly recognises the key role young people should play in the debate on the EU's future.

Decentralisation and self-determination

The EA Group truly believes in the decentralisation of powers as a way to enhance accountability and transparency of policy-and decision-making and will continue to oppose recentralisation efforts in some Member States which take powers away from lower levels of government.

We commit to continue defending the right of self-determination through which nations can decide on their political and economic future through peaceful and democratic means.

Rule of law

We defend the respect of the rule of law and fundamental rights as they are a direct expression of democracy.

The EA Group supports an EU-level Rule of Law mechanism which, while upholding the EU values, would improve the constitutional balance of powers, independence and efficiency of the judicial system, give an impetus to the fight against corruption, and ensure media freedom and pluralism in the EU Member States.

At the same time, we will remain opposed to any form of EU budget conditionality which would punish local authorities as beneficiaries of EU funds in retaliation for the breaches of the rule of law for which they are not responsible.

A climate-neutral EU

This mandate will be decisive in making sure the EU becomes the first climate neutral continent while investing in innovation and promoting a sustainable and inclusive growth model primarily focused on quality. We believe that a strong response is required, taking into account the affordability of measures for our citizens and the competitive position of our enterprises.

We believe this strong response has to come primarily from the Green New Deal, which we expect to be an ambitious tool to achieve among others the implementation of the Paris Agreement, UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and to incorporate sustainability into all policies of the European Union. As LRA's implement 65% of the SGDs, their involvement will be crucial to deliver these initiatives on the ground

Climate

Since the entry into force of the Paris Climate Agreement, the EU has set ambitious targets to accelerate the transition to a cleaner energy system and reach climate goals. To achieve this, the EA Group calls for a comprehensive approach with additional efforts beyond decarbonisation.

Therefore, the EA Group will closely be following the development of initiatives under the European Commission's Green Deal which will help the EU move towards a low-carbon, climate neutral economy.

Regions' and cities' role is central to make this transition happen. Not only they are the ones that can bridge the emissions gap but they can also demonstrate that further ambition is possible.

The EA Group highlights the importance of supporting climate objectives at regional and/or local level and calls for formal recognition of LRAs role in global climate governance.

We consider it essential to achieve a socially fair transition, to strengthen rural and urban cohesion and to ensure policies adapted to biodiversity and ecosystems.

We advocate a system of Locally and Regionally Determined Contributions to complement national pledges to ensure climate goals are achieved.

The EA Group is committed to raising awareness and helping LRAs decrease their carbon footprint. New, energetic approaches will have to be shaped to spur enduring sustainable growth and promote small businesses and real job creation in local areas.

The EA Group stresses the importance of investing in green growth, technologies and qualitative infrastructure and will therefore work to ensure focus is placed on green investments to ensure sustainable mobility and the efficient use of natural resources.

LRAs are key enablers of clean mobility and they should be at the centre of debate on the transformation of transport systems.

Protection of environment and biodiversity

Protecting Europe's biodiversity and environment should be a key priority for the EU and the causes and consequences of climate change require an adequate response. Therefore, our Group welcomes the initiatives under the new Green Deal aiming to preserve and restore ecosystems and biodiversity. In order to curtail biodiversity loss, the EA Group believes it is vital that we continue to pursue a sustainable forest policy with a priority to planting native species. In our efforts to increase afforestation, attention should also go to sustainability risks related to the exploitation of forests as a source of biomass energy. The EA Group supports the roll out of regional strategies and action plans to protect and enhance biodiversity.

The sustainable development of agriculture, farming, forestry and fisheries is vital to ensure future use of soil and water, to protect biodiversity and local species, and to ensure the capacity of adaptation to climate change effects.

Energy policy and energy security

The EA Group calls for the completion of internal energy markets and the creation of a true Energy Union with interconnected smart energy networks. Existing legislation needs rapid implementation. An ambitious energy policy demands continuous efforts to enhance energy efficiency and promote renewable energy and smart energy networks, which connect fluctuating renewable producers locally and globally. The EA Group especially wants to see measures that will help the EU tap the huge potential of renewable energy sources such as tidal, wave, geothermal, wind, solar, hydro and sustainable biomass while recognising the local nature of these energy sources and while safeguarding food production, natural forests and traditional agriculture.

We trust the Green Deal to do more to promote green energy and help local areas to harness their natural resource potential while ensuring affordable energy to the citizens. We look to move the EU away from dependency on fossil fuels and developing a bio-based economy, while taking due consideration of the different energy mix and the different local conditions across the EU.

The EA Group believes it is important that this transition happens in a just and fair way with increased efforts to eradicate energy poverty. Adequate support measures are necessary for those territories facing major challenges in shifting to cleaner forms of energy.

Our Group pays particular attention to environmental, social and economic burdens local and regional governments carry in order to restore and/or reuse old, outgoing industrial and energy production processes and abandoned and polluted infrastructure such as mines, tailings ponds or industrial sites.

Circular economy

The EA Group upholds the importance of moving towards a more resource efficient economy where wise use is made of natural resources, materials and waste, which should be re-used and recycled as far as possible. In this respect we strongly urge the European Commission to swiftly adopt new initiatives on promoting a circular economy, thus enabling the EU to prevent the loss of valuable materials, such as plastic, to boost recycling, reduce emissions and the environmental impacts while creating new jobs and economic development opportunities.

In that regard, we will have a close look at the New Circular Economy Action Plan to be proposed by the European Commission and we will promote the participation of local and regional authorities in relevant stakeholder platforms.

Sustainable Tourism

The EA Group considers that developing a consistent policy for sustainable tourism will deliver tangible economic, social, and environmental benefits for local communities. Tourism is a major source for employment at local and regional level. The EA Group recognises the key role played by tourism in promoting regional development and territorial cohesion, and urges the European Commission to support Member States and LRAs with accessible financial tools. In this regard, the EA Group calls for measures supporting sustainable tourism not only as the source of the economies income but also with the diversity of landscape, culture and heritage as one of Europe's most defining and remarkable features. They are the core part of Europe identity and economic potential.

At the same time, we should be aware that mass tourism is in many cases unsustainable, polluting, highly energy consuming and increasingly eroding the quality of life of many tourist destinations. That is why we support a shift towards "soft tourism", the decentralisation of tourist destinations and the promotion of public transport for touristic purposes.

Towards a competitive, inclusive and sustainable EU

In light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the EU will have to renew its long term commitment to ensure sustainable, economic and social development. The EA Group is convinced that the achievement and successful implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) depends on a true bottom up approach, involving and mobilising EU territories that will have to implement SDGs on the ground, on the alignment of policies at all levels and on the overcoming of national interests.

A territorial dimension of economic governance to boost investments in the EU

In order to align investments and priorities with a global Agenda, the EU will have to integrate the SDGs in the European Semester and economic governance rules while ensuring it keeps a strong regional and territorial dimension.

Regional and local authorities have a key active role in successfully implementing policy measures. Therefore, the EA Group calls for a more systematic and more forehanded involvement of LRAs in the European Semester. In particular, we call for a greater say for regions with legislative powers in the process and we believe that the EU should take greater account of regional aspects and division of powers in the Member States.

The EA Group believes that reforms and investments are more likely to bring tangible results when they are tailored to the needs of EU territories and where ownership is guaranteed.

Sustainable Investment Plan

The EU should create a flexible framework for sustainable private and public investments in order to promote sustainable development models, while boosting economic growth and competition.

The EA Group supports a robust sustainable investment plan, which also maintains focus on attaining the objective of territorial cohesion.

The EA Group will encourage LRAs to use available resources and innovative financial instruments to mobilize additional funding and make ambitious long-term investments.

Trade policy, SMEs and job creation at local level

For the EA Group, building a resilient European economy is of utmost importance. Nevertheless, it must take place in a sustainable manner, ensuring social inclusion and be based on fair and sound labour market conditions. In this respect, we underline the important role of social economy as an engine for job creation and social innovation.

We support the efforts of the EU to improve the legitimacy and transparency of EU trade agenda and call for greater engagement of regions.

In particular, we call for evidence-based assessments of its impact on regional and local level to ensure LRAs and businesses are adequately prepared for the implementation of trade agreements.

The EU must show real commitment to enhancing the potential of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which represent the backbone of the EU economy to create jobs locally and must create an encouraging business environment for them to scale-up. At the same time, the EU needs to address the obstacles they face to keep up with the rapid pace at which digitalization, data economy, complex administrative regulations or the growing role of corporate social responsibility are transforming the European economy.

Single Market and Better Regulation

Our companies and employees need to be able to enjoy to the fullest benefits that our internal market has to offer. Therefore, efforts must also be made to further integrate and complete the internal market in areas where there is still work to be done, such as in the field of services.

We would like to stress the importance of the LRAs cross-border relations and cooperation to achieve these goals.

In addition, the better regulation agenda will increasingly have to be used as a guideline for the creation of smart, simplified legislation that minimizes administrative burdens. To limit legal uncertainty, effective application and implementation of EU legislation must also be monitored.

Supporting research, innovation and digital development

Research and innovation are key enablers for sustainable economic growth and the creation of jobs. The EA Group fully believes that a flexible and future proof regulatory framework for digital innovation is necessary to address challenges and opportunities flowing from the rise of Industry 4.0.

We believe it is important to remove barriers which businesses currently face when investing in digitalization, for example in the field of artificial intelligence, big data, cybersecurity, digital services and taxation.

As inclusivity is key for the EA Group, we will continue to ensure that all citizens can equally access and take full advantage of the opportunities the digital economy and the information society has to offer.

Digital literacy needs to be improved across Europe and the digital and technological divide between urban, rural and remote areas should be reduced.

The EA Group promotes the development of smart communities and highlights the need for giving regions, cities and villages the adequate support for the creation and deployment of flexible smart approaches and technological and innovative tools. We will continue to make valuable contributions towards the development of local and regional e-Government and promote the interregional cooperation policies through the Smart Specialisation Strategies during the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.

If well managed, Digital technologies have also been a driving force behind democratisation, citizen expression and social progress. As a result, the EA Group will support an approach to new technologies that is citizen-centred, that protects human rights, that enhances equality and democratic values and that addresses the ethical concerns stemming from their use.

Achieving territorial cohesion and balanced development across the EU

Globalisation patterns and new technological developments should not leave any territory behind. Cohesion policy, as EU's main investment policy, plays a pivotal role in enhancing sustainable economic, social and territorial development.

A stronger Cohesion policy

The EA Group strongly defends the EU added value of cohesion policy programmes as they have brought real and tangible benefits for the citizens. We stress the pivotal role of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in guaranteeing a balanced development across all the EU's regions.

The European cohesion policy must evolve with regions' needs, and continue narrowing gaps and supporting all regions, in particular the less developed regions, while enabling the transfer of knowledge, experiences and interregional innovation between them. The commitment by all regions, especially more developed regions, is key to promoting growth and welfare throughout Europe.

The EA Group highlights the role of cohesion policy in supporting smart specialisation strategies and European value chains across all regions and believes that measures need to be put in place to close the innovation gap between leading and catching up regions.

The EA Group advocates a real change in culture in the implementation of cohesion policy and commits to monitoring the involvement of LRAs and the full application of the partnership principle.

We will argue for more possibilities for LRAs to apply for and receive financial support directly from the EU, thus preventing situations where internal political conflicts within a Member State influence the distribution of EU funds.

Urban Agenda and urban rural linkages

The EA Group advocates for a strong Urban Agenda and urban dimension in the EU cohesion policy where urban areas of all sizes are more closely involved in the definition of these policies and urban partnerships are adequately supported.

At the same time a truly integrated approach to development should go beyond city to city cooperation.

A renewed Territorial Agenda should envisage closer relationships and cooperation between cities and surrounding areas, both urban and rural and reinforce linkages between them.

We believe that the sustainable future of Europe depends on the linkage with a strong Rural Agenda to ensure the key role of rural areas to achieve a smart and fair energy transition, to guarantee basic resources

and biomaterials, to provide food security and to ensure health and welfare among all citizens. It is necessary to fight against depopulation of rural areas to ensure these global goals.

Moreover, the EA Group wishes to see clear action to revitalise towns and cities in particular the town and city centres which have been neglected by large scale commercial areas on the outskirts of towns.

For EU policies supporting rural, insular and mountain regions

Rural, island and mountain areas offer a showcase of the diversity of Europe's regions and have unique cultural and natural assets which positively affect the wellbeing of people living in these areas.

The EA Group recalls the need for a better implementation of art 174 TFEU where islands, mountain and rural areas are given special attention due to structural natural, geographic, demographic and social constraints.

We believe that specific measures need to be put in place for these territories to make sure they grow economically and promote new employment opportunities while enhancing accessibility and connectivity to main economic centres.

In particular, it is pivotal to connect these areas to the main EU transport corridors at affordable cost and to guarantee universal broadband coverage in order to avert risk of depopulation.

Boosting territorial cooperation

Territorial cooperation is at the core of the European integration project and Interreg is one of the best examples of the EU added value as it builds bridges and encourage cooperation. The EA Group calls for a stronger ETC programme so that LRAs are given adequate resources to continue cooperating on projects across borders being land or maritime.

The Group highlights the potential of territorial cooperation arrangements and programmes such as macroregions in the European Territorial cooperation based on the positive experiences of the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine macroregions.

In order to resolve legal and administrative obstacles in a cross-border context, our Group will support the creation of a mechanism as currently proposed by the European Commission and highlights also the success of Alpine Macroregional strategy (EUSALP) in addressing administrative obstacles over cross border regions through greater cooperation between different levels of governments in order to tackle common challenges across borders.

Towards an EU rural agenda and sustainable food policy

The EA Group upholds the importance of long-term vision for rural, agricultural and mountainous areas as crucial asset for local economic and social development.

We call on the EU institutions to take greater account of the needs of rural areas and ensure agriculture stays sustainable and compatible with climate change action.

Sustainability of rural areas

The EA Group sees the sustainable development of rural areas as an opportunity which can have beneficial effects on the whole of society, especially in the domains of the quality of life, cultural heritage, wellbeing, food safety, healthy environments, jobs and growth.

The Group highlights the importance of providing a fair standard of living for farmers and keeping a modern and sustainable agriculture to strike the right balance between urban and rural development policies.

Over this mandate we will insist on the necessity of "rural proofing" of all EU policies and ask for concrete measures on how to enshrine it in future legislative initiatives stressing in the main strategic goals of gender equality and youth. We will also insist on fair direct payments to all farmers from all Member States.

We commit to creating a European Rural Region Award aimed at promoting and supporting sustainable activities in smaller regions and villages, based on the existing European capital awards model.

We reiterate our commitment to the development of an EU rural strategy to assist rural areas in overcoming the significant challenges they face in ensuring the provision and accessibility of public services, in particular health, education and social services.

We will work to prevent further expansion of the gap between local governments when it comes to meeting the needs of local communities.

We believe diversification and modernization, the main goal of which is more sustainable development, will be key to the development of rural areas. It is necessary to support innovation in business models to achieve socio-economic sustainability in rural areas.

Therefore, we call for the integration of a forward looking policy on smart villages in the EU rural agenda. It will promote and maintain economic activities and public services, countering the potential risk of depopulation, territorial divide and brain drain that has resulted in rural areas being left behind. As such, standardisation and adequate funding of public services as well as bridging the digital gap should be priorities.

Sustainable food policy

The EA Group highlights the importance of the "Farm to Fork" Strategy. This strategy should set out a new policy that would bring together sustainable food production and food distribution with clear labelling schemes for consumers, in order to ensure a more sustainable food circuit in Europe. A main goal is to have fair relations and balanced power position between the stakeholders on the food chains.

EA Group will call to incentivise the uptake of digital technologies and provide fair income and support to young farmers and contribute to climate, environmental and biodiversity goals by reducing the use of pesticides, fertilisers and chemicals.

It is also necessary to foster maritime strategies that ensure sustainability of fishery and marine biodiversity.

Investing in health

A healthy population is a part of investment in the future. The mental and physical wellbeing of our European citizens is of the utmost importance. The EA Group asks for the EU to adequately deal with health risks in a preventive way and to provide solid frameworks to address possible harmful impacts on human health, flora, fauna and the environment for example caused by endocrine disruptors or hazardous chemicals. Our Group will also support and fight for better quality of air, water and safe food policy in the EU.

Empowering people and investing in culture

Empowering people and investing in human capital is an ongoing process in need of continuous efforts. Protecting and promoting culture and cultural heritage more proactively, especially amongst young people, is essential to strengthen identity and democratic values in Europe and to contribute to social and economic cohesion.

European society is more and more intercultural due to migration and it shall be considered as an opportunity to reinforce the EU role in the world and to strength the demographic evolution of Europe and its regions.

Educating, re-skilling and upskilling our citizens

Our European social security and pension systems are under pressure due to the ageing population and low birth rate. These demographic trends pose major challenges especially for young people's access to the labour market. The EA Group gives the highest priority to universal access to education, training and the acquisition of skills in an inclusive manner. These elements are crucial to increase participation in the labour market and contributing to the creation of a European Education Area.

In addition to tackling Europe's chronic youth unemployment levels, additional attention should also go to educating those who are already active on the labour market, regardless of their age. Support and cooperation – also cross-border - for lifelong learning, re-skilling and upskilling are necessary to provide people with the relevant knowledge, skills and experience to address the needs of the labour market.

The EA Group pays particular attention to the recognition of qualifications and any policy aimed at encouraging mobility and investments in entrepreneurial culture. Increased investments in education will bring positive consequences for Europe's global position regarding competition and leadership.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

The EA Group believes that Europe's strength lies in its cultural heritage as well as in its breadth of cultural diversity. The EU has its historical origins in some of the oldest sites of civilisation in the world. Globally it is also fortunate to have some of the most comprehensive heritages and beautiful landscapes and regions. The EA Group acknowledges that cultural heritage unites EU citizens, inspires creativity, ignites the concept of active citizenship, and is one of the important foundations, underpinning strategies for urban and rural development.

We will work to support national and regional identities. Assuring that the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity is a decisive factor for successful integration, which is not about levelling out differences or creating uniform identities but fostering greater cooperation and understanding among the peoples of Europe. The EA Group will continue to promote and safeguard lesser-used, regional and historical languages to preserve the diversity and richness of Europe.

Integration

We consider that the successful integration of legal migrants and refugees represents a great opportunity for Europe's economy and culture. At the same time, we believe that integration is a two-way process that implies rights and obligations on both sides. We advocate a comprehensive approach to integration which will empower the newcomers to learn the language, familiarise themselves with the host society's values and receive career guidance, thus becoming and feeling part of the host community in the shortest timespan possible. To achieve that, we call for greater support to host LRAs who are at the forefront when it comes to integrating newcomers.

Protecting social and fundamental rights

The EA Group calls for continuous efforts to enhance the social dimension of the EU. Regions and cities needs to be fully involved in this process, in order to make sure the European Pillar of Social Rights is effectively implemented.

The EA Group will follow the principle that people come first and will remain committed to promoting social inclusion and mainstreaming the respect for fundamental rights across all EU policies, as stipulated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

We strongly oppose any form of discrimination and we are committed to empowering and encouraging a greater participation of women in policy- and decision-making processes.

Stronger EU at home and abroad

The EA Group believes that the EU must have a strong voice in the world and be one of the main pillars and guardians of multilateralism and the rules-based global order. We think that EU's action in foreign policy should focus where it can have an added value in the neighbourhood and globally, and be coherent with the EU's internal policies.

Ensuring stability and prosperity in our Eastern and Southern neighbourhood

We believe that enhancing cooperation and promoting stability, prosperity and democracy in Europe's neighbourhood is of vital interest for the EU itself.

We will insist on the need to increase funding for neighbourhood cooperation and provide support to LRAs in the EU's neighbouring countries, both in the Mediterranean, taking into account especially the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process, and Eastern Partnership countries, especially those countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood which have strong historical and cultural links with the EU's own Member

States. We will actively work on forging closer links and establishing more substantial cooperation between local governments in the EU and those countries.

We will support local border traffic, making it easier to cross borders, particularly by foot or bicycle, and the creation of new border crossings.

Security

The EA Group will advocate the completion of the Security Union and a holistic approach to stability and security inside the EU and along its borders. That would entail better cooperation in law enforcement, a greater involvement of LRAs in combating organised crime, terrorism, radicalisation, cyber threats and disinformation campaigns. It goes without saying that such efforts must be balanced with the respect for citizens' fundamental rights, including privacy and freedom of speech.

Migration and Asylum

The EA Group will advocate a common, modernised, holistic and sustainable migration, refugee and asylum policy which, while having respect for fundamental rights as its guiding principle, would take due account of the needs and challenges of EU's LRAs.

We call for greater solidarity and cooperation among the Member States, stepped-up cooperation with third countries and clearly regulated pathways for legal migration. At the same time, we stress the importance of speeding up efforts to secure the EU's external border and combating illegal immigration and human trafficking.

Enlargement

The EA Group will encourage the European Commission, the Council and the Parliament to make the enlargement policy more effective and will support further negotiations with candidate and potential candidate countries in the EU accession process, provided that they show commitment and results in aligning with the Community acquis, especially in the areas of justice, judiciary and fundamental rights.



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