

**In a world  
of strongmen,  
you lose out.**

**Liberals must raise  
their game.**

**Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy**

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**D66**

**Today liberal leaders of all stripes from across and beyond Europe will meet in Brussels.**

**Liberals represent the values that built the world we inhabit and are under attack from autocrats everywhere.**

**Never in recent history was there a moment to fight more strongly for liberalism's promise of shared freedom.**

**Liberals are strongest when they think least about what divides them.**

**When we make our own plans, rather than feature in the plans of other political forces.**

**When the emphasis is on *liberal*, and not on the label preceding it.**

**Liberals have been on the defensive for too long.**

**Acknowledging what we are up against can help us regain the initiative.**

**Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy, MEP**

**We liberals need to stop focusing on the small differences between us, to come together around the bigger ideas that unite us. This is not the time for smug reflection on liberalism's achievements over the past decades. Nor the confidence that cheap populism will mess up so badly, that voters will come running back. We need to prove our worth in this moment.**

There is a backlash going on. Of the strong against the weak, freed from the democratic checks on government. A revolt of the rich, liberated from all constraints of rules and responsibilities. A global revolution at that, with its sights set firmly on Europe as its next prey. This moment calls for a liberalism that is unashamed of its essence: to hold power in check. The counteroffensive starts when we once again boldly use democratic power to restrain governments, on behalf of individual people. Of course, society and the collective are important, but for liberals there is intrinsic value in taking the individual's point of view. Only then, can we really get into focus the awesome power of government to do both good and evil.

When we are again proud to see politics as a countervailing power against otherwise overbearing global forces. For 'when bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle' (Edmund Burke).

We started with an introduction on principles, because first we must agree. Refresh our vows, so to speak. Now we propose five priorities. Five areas in which a liberal fightback should be especially bold.

# 1. Combat ignorance

**Knowledge is power, but it is losing out against attention. The brains of individual citizens are colonised and mined, often by foreign powers. This is a moral crisis, as well as an economic problem in the making. Especially for Europe.**

We are a continent with few resources, other than our world-beating education. A lack of investment, or even cuts, in this area is a real threat. We should not just do more. We should aim for what seems impossible. Every school should be a palace of learning. Every child should have a top-notch teacher. This is not just about money. We need a story on why we have education. To empower you as a citizen, to prepare you for rapid and unprecedented global economic change, to weapon you against false prophets in politics and religion, to give you the opportunity to harness your potential--irrespective of what your parents did or where you were born.

Liberals acknowledge practical dilemma's, we approach government as the art of choosing in the interest of common freedom. Liberalism is not 'I am free', it is 'we are free'. That is why, when we choose, when we put our principles into practice, we should always choose education. It is the fountain of democratic freedom and the ultimate antidote to anti-democratic populism.

## 2. Free trade is fair trade (if done properly)

**The realisation that open, rules-based global trade is the basis of our wealth comes just at a time when the geo-economic climate is darker than ever. Trump uses confusion, coercion and outright corruption as means for personal enrichment. Following his example, leaders from South America to Asia and Africa have reverted to 'transactional' trade to increase their personal power. On the other side, all we have is countries like China who see regulated trade as one-way traffic at best.**

We should be unblushing in our defence: Unfree trade makes for unfree people. Open trade is the only way to spread wealth, opportunity and power across the world, unchecked by national borders and the politicians that control them. As decidedly unsexy as it may seem in today's debate about 'strategic autonomy', radical free trade remains the surest way to weave webs of global interdependence. Transparent trade agreements bring order to a world made messier by digitisation and communications technology, setting standards that apply to all partners equally, and laying down rules to which everyone has to sign up. We have nothing to be ashamed of.

Indeed, we should do more. Europe more than ever has to take the lead in signing trade deals, drawing a coalition of willing countries closer together. With our main trading partner disengaging, we have to upgrade our economic agreements with close allies like Canada, the UK and, yes, the Mercosur countries. On non-strategic sectors we should also go further with a more frightening partner like China. And we have to do all we can to fill the hole left behind by the Trump administration's slashing of USAID. Africa in particular is eager to work with a reliable and reasonable partner like the EU—realising full well that other global powers offer only short-termism if not blatant exploitation—but it demands a bigger investment of political and actual capital than Europe is now willing to put up. Liberals believe in trade, so the only question is *how*.

### 3. Liberals love regulation (sometimes)

**If regulation made by lobbyists is a disgrace; regulation *unmade* by lobbying is no different. There is a serious risk that the current deregulation agenda is hijacked by special interests.**

Ask anyone who has recently been in touch with US tech bro's and the politicians that do their bidding: their real goal is not tariffs but the DSA—the regulation that imposes limits on social media and digital platforms and, in defence of the European public interest, ascribes responsibilities when standards aren't met.

On their cue, a host of European companies and sectors have also started to call for rules to be scrapped and standards to be lowered in the name of competitiveness—from nature restoration legislation to car emissions and animal rights standards. The danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater is real.

Sure, nothing is perfect. Legislation is complex, legislators have a tendency to get overzealous, the result is sometimes ineffective or unrealistic, especially for smaller companies in globally competitive sectors. Let's have that discussion. But let's never allow it to undercut our valid political goals and broader public interests.

Populists rule by brute force, liberals rule through regulation—especially at the EU level. The values and interests of the people we represent are written into the small print of legislation. The freedom of consumers lies in restrictions on companies. The competitiveness of smaller businesses comes from the relentless scrutiny of their bigger rivals. On that we can never compromise. Not even if the US is doing it. Especially not when the US is doing it *to us*.

## 4. Government works for the people. Never against it.

**The hottest places in hell are reserved for legislators who claim the law doesn't work, and for the powerful who claim they are powerless.**

Like the nine governments that recently signed a letter insisting the European Court of Human Rights made it impossible for them to deport international criminals. No concrete examples were given (though legal scholars were quick to provide examples to the contrary, showing the Court indeed kept a careful balance between individual rights and the public interests, for instance in terrorism cases), no concrete measures were proposed, there was not even a concrete addressee.

Nine of the most powerful, democratically mandated people in Europe just decided to put the message out there that democracy was unable to fend for itself, because rules and courts restricted their own room for maneuver. No wonder political arsonists Viktor Orbán and Geert Wilders loved the message.

No! Government is one of those big beasts to be tied down by citizens' power. Because once they freely get to decide on right and wrong, when to follow the rules or when to break them, soon all sense of rights and accountability is out the window.

It is one of the main tasks of not just the ECHR but also the European Commission, to keep governments on the right track—the track they have freely signed up to and set out for themselves, written into the treaties and EU law.

It is a task that has become increasingly fraught, with governments begging and screaming to be released from their commitments, or simply ignoring them—from infringements of environmental law in Ireland to Italy's unauthorised farm subsidies, from Greece's tax breaks to, of course, any obligations of the Orbán regime to uphold the rights and freedoms of the Hungarian people. More and more, also in Europe, power is as power does.

This is not the Europe any liberal can defend. Particularly in sensitive cases like foreign criminals, we need to restrain the Orbán in all of us and not give in to anecdotal authoritarianism.

The law is not there to please politicians. Human rights and civil liberties are there to protect citizens—if need be from their own government.

## 5. Europe means sovereignty (so support it unequivocally!)

**Everything leads to Europe. It is the best way for us to reign in governments, lest they be tempted to impinge on their citizens' freedom. It is the only way to safeguard our collective sovereignty in a hostile world.**

If they harass us for being European, we have to confront them *as Europeans*—else we will fall one by one, unpitied, in a contemptible struggle against illiberal forces all around us. No two ways about it: If European unity is essential, liberals need to embrace it ungrudgingly, generously, enthusiastically.

We need Europe the most where citizens are most fearful: real investment in common asylum and migration management, a real security and defence union—not just fluffy cooperation but full integration.

For such a genuine European Union to be workable, it needs to have solid and separate sources of income and more leeway to spend it when and where it is needed—meaning own European resources and a proper European budget strategy, not to assist national governments but to support the European public interest and *only* the European interest.

And if we reinforce the European Union that way, we need it to be more politically effective and democratic—with a European government, accountable to Parliament, not compromising on values, nor hamstrung by veto's. Liberals believe in democracy or they don't believe in anything, so that goes for the EU level as well.

**At a time when liberal principles are  
being vindicated every day and  
liberal values are rediscovered.**

**We need to do everything to  
give them political clout.**

**We need to be clear in saying:  
We are in politics to empower  
citizens and disenfranchise the  
strongmen that weaken them.**

**We are one movement.**

**We know what we stand for.**

**We know who stands against us.**

**And we will stick it to them  
with all we have!**