

He is the most vocal defender of the European project sitting in the European Parliament.

His passionate, vehement speeches earned him the title of “rock star” of European politics.

Guy Verhofstadt is a former prime minister of Belgium, president of the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and Brexit negotiator for the European parliament. He is also the author of several books including *The United States of Europe* (2006), *For Europe* (with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, 2012) and *Europe’s Last Chance: Why the European States Must Form a More Perfect Union* (2017).

Mr Verhofstadt, in the last 20 years you have been a leading figure on the European scene, first as Belgian Prime Minister and then as Leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. During this time, were there any big opportunities to bring forward the European project that the EU did not manage to take?

We have achieved a lot over the last 70 years together, however, there are indeed big opportunities we have missed and that should be corrected to make the European Union fit for the new challenges we are facing. For example, we have been talking for over ten years about a common asylum and migration policy, we have seen numerous plans to create a European Defence Capacity and although the financial crisis has shown us that we need a European Economic Governance, we have not made enough progress in this field either. That said, I am an optimist. People want Europe to solve these big issues and we must keep on fighting to accomplish them. In the last 20 years, the process of enlargement almost doubled the number of member states. This complicated and slowed down the EU decision-making process. Was an enlargement of this proportion a mistake? Was there maybe another way to build Europe?

The enlargement was more difficult than expected. Some new Member States have grown economically but have also developed into illiberal democracies. We have to make clear that this goes against the European idea and it must have consequences. However, I absolutely do not regret our decision. We have unified Europe, no other decision would have been right after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But the job is not done yet. The EU is still growing and there is room for more Member States, as we have seen with the latest entry of Croatia, which will perhaps be followed by other ex-Yugoslavian republics, who can certainly be part of our family in the near future, as long

as they respect EU values, European agreements and especially the rule of law.

The so-called "Franco-German engine" played a central role in the process of European integration. Was the leading role played by big countries in recent times of crisis, Germany especially, a good thing?

I had hoped that Germany would have been more daring in embracing European integration in the field of the Euro. The Commission has made some very substantial proposals over the last couple of years that have been watered down by Member States, often under the leadership of Germany. With President Macron we have new energy in Europe and I hope that this will bring the much-needed change to move Europe forward.

You are a convinced federalist. What are the main obstacles that prevent the establishment of the United States of Europe?

One of the big problems is that Europe's successes are claimed by the governments, while national failures are blamed on Brussels. In the UK we have seen what happens when you tell people for over 30 years that something is bad, but you ask them at the same time to vote in favour of it. It was not a surprise that the referendum result was negative. As long as national leaders do not explain to their voters that we need a united Europe to tackle the future challenges and defend difficult European decisions, it will be very difficult to get it done. However, I see that many youngsters want more Europe. They see that countries alone cannot possibly fight climate change on their own or protect their interests vis-a-vis big players such as China. They also see that countries need to work together to put in place a common policy to deal with migration in a humane way.

Many people complain that EU institutions could spend their money better. They refer, for instance, to the double seat of the European Parliament, in Strasbourg and Brussels. If a decision on the seat of the European Parliament was taken, could this help to change people's perception with regard to the way the EU spends its money?

I absolutely agree with this. In my parliamentary report about the future of Europe, I pleaded for a single seat, so I agree that two seats are not necessary. A majority in the European Parliament voted in favor of a single seat, but it is up to the Council to take a decision. We do not decide about our own seat, that is a real problem. So please put pressure on the Council to support our proposals!



Guy Verhofstadt

MEPs have a double loyalty, to their member states and to their group in the European Parliament. Is it possible to overcome this double loyalty in the name of European interest? I don't see it that way. Regional or national interests do not contradict European interests. Personally, I am from Ghent, I am Belgian and I am European. There is no contradiction. The national interest and European interest go hand in hand. Strong countries in a strong Europe. The EU invested a lot of money to improve the way in which the activity of its institutions is communicated. However, people still have difficulty understanding what happens in Brussels and Strasbourg. What went wrong?

I don't believe in propaganda from Brussels. You need a real exchange with the people. That is what I try to do via social media, and soon we will launch a big European debate to hear exactly what our voters want us to do in the next 5 years. But secondly, I strongly believe that we have to show people that we have a plan for Europe and that we are capable of making Europe a better place. Of course "Brussels" and "Strasbourg" remain far away for many people. However, Brexit has shown people what happens if you abandon the European project. The chaos in the UK has made people think twice about this. The approval ratings of the European Union have increased significantly since the Brexit vote. People have a clearer understanding of what is at stake.

The middle class in several European countries is in crisis. The living standards of many people have worsened, other people fear losing their status. In France this has led to the protest of the yellow vests. How is it possible to reverse this trend?

We have to be honest with people. The competition from countries such as India and China means that we have to work closer together to compete and make sure that there are decent jobs and decent salaries. We cannot hide behind borders and hope that we are protected from outside competition. Together we are much stronger in a world that is dominated by big players.

You have a strong personal bond with Italy. How do you feel looking at the social and political situation in our country?

People in Italy want change. I understand that. However, Salvini is not the answer. He is closing Italy's doors for everything that is different with a nostalgia for the past that I cannot understand. Salvini is spreading fear against everything and everyone that is different. It is a policy based on finding enemies instead of proposing solutions.

You are a strong advocate of a European Defence Union. Was any relevant progress achieved in this field during the last legislature? Which is the way forward?

Some progress has been made - the Council decided to launch Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on defence: 25 EU Member States decided to pursue binding commitments with regard to developing some joint capabilities, pursue concrete joint investments and also strengthen EU's operational readiness. In parallel, the Commission proposed a European Defence Fund of €13 billion, which is to accompany the PESCO efforts, and facilitate joint investments into research, technology and defence capabilities.

These are important steps in the right direction. However, I am afraid that they are far from sufficient if we realistically look at the security landscape in and around Europe today: our continent is in the middle of a ring of fire - an aggressive Russia in the East, sectarian violence, proxy wars and terrorism coming from the South. We cannot afford that our security continues to be dependent on the willingness of our American allies to come to our defence - especially not in the world of Trump's America First policy.

Therefore, I think that our approach to common European Defence must be much more ambitious: we need a plan for progressive integration of European defence forces, built on a joint defence budget, allowing us to acquire the critical joint capabilities. We must build this European Defence Union as a European pillar of NATO, able to act autonomously if the situation requires.

You are the Parliament's coordinator for the negotiations on the UK withdrawal from the EU.

What will be the most important changes for the EU, once Brexit will finally take place?

Hopefully we can put all the energy we are now spending on a negative project – the separation of the UK from the EU – into something positive, i.e. the further integration that the EU so desperately needs to be able to face the challenges of the future. We have a lot of work ahead of us: climate change, the finalisation of the internal market, how to become more competitive vis-a-vis the new “empires” such as China and India; we must build a European economic governance, protect ourselves against Russia by creating a European Defence Pillar within Nato and finally put in place a functioning asylum and migration policy. Let’s start working on this!

There is a rising feeling that a “greener Europe” is needed. Climate change is threatening the existence of our planet but measures to target it, like the ones that sparked the protests in France, are heavily opposed by one part of the population. How do you explain this phenomenon and what measures do you propose to fight climate change at the EU level?

I have the feeling that some elements in the Gilet Jaunes movement have radicalized the debate about how to tackle climate change. It is not only about climate change anymore. We have to find solutions to what they address and I think President Macron is doing the right thing by launching a big national debate. In the last decade, Europe has done a lot to mitigate climate change. We are investing heavily in renewables, we have reduced the emission standards of cars, invested in better public transport between countries, made most products more energy-efficient and we agreed on the Paris agreement. We should continue doing this and keep on being the world leader in the fight against climate change. This will be one of the key priorities for us in the next years. In one of your recent tweets you said that “the traditional grand coalition, composed of the EPP and S&D, have made the EU lethargic. We, Liberals and Democrats, want to shake things up and work for a more united and efficient Europe”. With what allies do you plan to do this? Is your project open also to the Five Star Movement?

Two years ago we tried to integrate the Five Star Movement into the ALDE Group, but the differences were too big. This has not changed.

In a moment in which nationalism is on the rise in all of Europe, you are one of the most vocal supporters of a federal Europe. With which arguments do you plan to convince the citizens of the different member states that a federal Europe is a good solution?

Only by working together and further integrating will we be capable of facing the challenges of the future. The world has been changing rapidly after the end of the cold war. Instead of two superpowers, we are dealing with multiple big players like the United States, India, Brazil, Russia, China and Japan. Only if we work together, will we be able to play a role in this new world model. Stronger together!

