

Lower Saxony Ministry
of Federal and European Affairs
and Regional Development

Lower Saxony in Europe – positions and priorities

A discussion paper by Lower Saxony's
Minister of Federal and European Affairs
and Regional Development to mark the
establishment of the new European Commission

Autumn 2019



Niedersachsen

Foreword



For us in Lower Saxony, Europe is synonymous with democracy and the rule of law. The European Union represents a strong economic and values-based community. And it guarantees its citizens, numbering around 500 million, opportunities and freedoms unknown to previous generations.

We, the people of Lower Saxony, believe in the achievements of the EU. We are working hard to ensure it moves forward for the benefit of all. A bright future without the European Union is unthinkable to us. Our federal state has clearly shown this in the past year, a good example being the state-wide cross-party alliance called 'Lower Saxony for Europe'.

Various aspects of the European Union are being called into question at the moment, both from within and without. What is needed now are voices vigorously defending it. It is in this spirit that Lower Saxony's Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development presents this discussion paper. For us in our state, it represents constructive input into the debate on the EU's further development. Could there be a more opportune moment for this than now, in the autumn of 2019?

On the following pages we set out our position on the future of a progressive and robust union. Our focus here is on those policy areas that are currently the top priority in Lower Saxony. We were helped at the preparatory stage by several dozen associations, organizations and initiatives in our federal state that we surveyed to find out their expectations. Several positions they hold vis-à-vis the new European Commission are reflected in this discussion paper. And we also asked young people in Lower Saxony for their views. Their suggestions merited giving them their own section of this paper. Time and again, it is our youth that particularly impresses upon us just how precious European integration is.

Birgit Honé

Lower Saxony's Minister of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development

Summary

With elections to the European Parliament held in May 2019 and the new European Commission formed in the following autumn, the roadmap for the EU's future journey has been – and is continuing to be – drawn up. This position paper will be submitted to the new European Commission by the Lower Saxony Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development in order to set out Lower Saxony's interests with regard to European policies. Our focus is on those policy areas that are currently at the top of the agenda in Lower Saxony.

Europe must become more socially aware – and fair.

The new European Commission should:

- enhance and strengthen Europe's social dimension;
- propose minimum standards for appropriate national minimum-wage regulations and for provision of appropriate basic social benefits such as a European unemployment reinsurance scheme;
- in response to workplace digitization, develop a framework which helps ensure compliance with proven standards of social and health protection that also apply to new forms of work;
- make sure that, in combating poverty and social inequality, special emphasis is placed on addressing the interests of children and young people;
- consistently advocate for the equality of women and men in all life situations, and present a European strategy for gender equality.

Industry must become innovative and ecologically sound if it is to be economically successful too in Europe and the wider world.

The new European Commission should:

- review European state aid and the rules for merger control and, as appropriate, modify these to reflect current international trends in competition;
- support industry pilot schemes that foster technological innovation, such as applications for regeneratively produced hydrogen, production of battery cells and storage technology.
- align industrial research funding to more strongly reflect structural changes, both environmental and digital;
- increase resources for existing initiatives that enable small and medium-sized enterprises to develop and implement technological advances.

Lower Saxony is Germany's top region in terms of mobility, agriculture and wind power, and seeks to responsibly implement strategic European goals on climate and the environment.

The new European Commission should:

- draw up a comprehensive EU sustainability strategy (timeframe: to 2030) for implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Agenda 2030, involving time-targeted objectives, a plan for their implementation and specific actions;
- adjust EU climate targets upwards, from a 40 to 55 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030;
- to this end, pool its energy policy-related efforts;
- put in place a new package of measures to assist transition to a circular economy;
- develop an eighth Environment Action Programme (EAP);
- draw up a new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2021–2030 backed up by specific measures to implement it.

Attractive living conditions in all parts of Lower Saxony are of key importance.

The new European Commission should:

- be committed to strengthening rural regions with all the resources available to them;
- develop more effective approaches within the Structural Funds too, and promote regional-development processes;
- counteract the trend towards centralization in the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD);
- promote social innovation as an instrumental factor in social cohesion;
- institutionalize rural development more fully as a policy area within the European Commission.

I. Introduction



The European Union stands for 60 years of peace, prosperity and security.

The European Union has brought peace, prosperity and security. More than five hundred million people, who live together on the foundation of solidarity and shared values in the current 28 member states, expect these benefits to be preserved. They have 'united in diversity' the EU. We wish to uphold this achievement of the European Union: against nationalist aspirations in Europe and against worldwide protectionism.

Eight million people live and work in Lower Saxony. This state's prosperity is based chiefly on the automotive business (along with its suppliers), and on the agricultural and food industries. Lower Saxony is the driving force and engine of the transition to renewable energy and is at the forefront of Germany's capacity increase in wind power. Although Lower Saxony is the country's leading federal state for mobility, agriculture and wind power, we are facing major structural change in these economic sectors. In addition, fundamental processes of transformation are occurring, such as the demographic shift and the digitization of all areas of life and work. We want to make Lower Saxony fit for this future.

The future of European cohesion policy is of particular importance at regional level within Lower Saxony. With the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the EU supports projects in Lower Saxony and is helping to create good living and working conditions in our federal state.

With elections to the European Parliament held in May 2019 and the new European Commission formed the following autumn, the roadmap for the EU's future journey has been – and is continuing to be – drawn up. This position paper will be submitted to the new European Commission by the Lower Saxony Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development in order to set out Lower Saxony's interests with regard to European policies. In preparation, we consulted a large number of associations, clubs and youth organizations in Lower Saxony to glean their expectations of the new Commission. Some of their positions are reflected in this discussion paper. Additionally, our focus has been on the policy areas that are currently the top priority in Lower Saxony.

II. For a socially inclusive – and fair – Europe



Young people should have access to social participation, healthcare and education everywhere in the EU.

'United in diversity' can only succeed when the EU's citizens find equality in both opportunities and living conditions across all member states. Digitization is changing all aspects of our lives and work. This is associated with tremendous potential, but also risks, both for employees and the newly self-employed. Likewise, demographic trends present a major challenge in terms of social-security systems. High youth unemployment in southern and eastern Europe has not yet been overcome. We will continue to integrate refugees and immigrants in future. This places highly differing and diverse demands on our various regions. In order that people identify themselves with Europe, the socially inclusive Europe must become clearly visible to all.

The new European Commission should therefore:

- enhance and strengthen Europe's social dimension, drawing on the interinstitutional proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights of Gothenburg in 2017. We support the announced presentation of an action plan aimed at fully implementing this Pillar with labour market policies (including the introduction of minimum standards for appropriate national minimum-wage regulations) and for provision of appropriate basic social benefits, such as a European unemployment reinsurance scheme, and measures to combat poverty and social inequality;
- in response to workplace digitization, develop a framework which helps ensure compliance with proven standards of social and health protection that also apply to new forms of work;
- take action on poverty and social inequality – especially where this affects children and young people – by means of, for example, adequate social-security assistance at all stages of life. We welcome the introduction of a European child guarantee including access to social participation, healthcare and education;
- make gender equality a high priority. The number of women in management must be increased. And the gender pay gap must be closed as well.

III. For an innovative and sustainable industrial policy



Research funding should be aligned more strongly with environmental and digital structural changes.

If industry is to be innovative and environmentally friendly – and hence competitive – it needs a reliable industrial-policy framework at European level. This applies both to major corporations and to small and medium-sized enterprises, many of which are exposed to international competition.

All of these companies are facing manifold challenges caused by issues such as climate change, digitization and international trade conflicts. The goal of a reliable EU industrial policy, therefore, must be to help businesses meet these challenges and thus achieve economic success.

The new European Commission should therefore:

- review European state aid and the rules for merger control and, as appropriate, modify these to reflect current international trends in competition that are marked by increasing tension, especially between the USA and China;
- fully support industry pilot schemes that foster technological innovation with potential for future market use, such as applications for hydrogen generated by renewable energy, production of battery cells and storage technology;
- align industrial research funding to more fully reflect structural changes both environmental and digital. The processes by which the benefits of European research projects pass down to regional level must be simplified;
- increase resources for existing initiatives that enable small and medium-sized enterprises to develop and implement technological advances;
- devise SME development strategies for rural areas;
- substantially increase the resources of the European Social Fund so that those affected by disruptive changes can be helped.

IV. Lower Saxony responsibly implements European climate and environmental goals



Important carbon sinks such as peatlands and forests should be preserved and developed.

Scientists have described the impact of global warming and environmental destruction with great clarity in the sixth United Nations Global Environment Outlook report. And insurers have been warning for some years of the costs that national economies will face due to climate change. EU policymakers urgently need to find answers to the effects of our changing climate by developing and implementing long-term strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preserving biodiversity. To make Lower Saxony fit for the future as Germany's leading region for mobility, agriculture and wind power, we want to achieve the EU's strategic climate and environmental goals locally in Lower Saxony.

The European Commission should therefore:

- draw up a comprehensive EU sustainability strategy (timeframe: to 2030) for implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Agenda 2030, involving time-targeted objectives, a plan for their implementation and specific actions;
- adjust the EU's 2030 climate target upwards, from a 40 to a 55 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Important carbon sinks such as peatland and forests must be preserved or restored;
- combine the following key areas to establish a coherent energy policy: infrastructure, innovative technologies for renewable energy and energy efficiency, as well as sector coupling and integration in conjunction with storage technologies;
- put in place a new package of measures to assist transition to a circular economy. This should be aimed at using resources within Europe in an even more sustainable and efficient manner, including reduction of plastic waste and promotion of returnable bottle systems and recycled materials;
- develop an eighth Environmental Action Programme (EAP). Its aim should be enhanced integration of environmental concerns into other policy areas, with improved monitoring of progress;
- draw up a EU Biodiversity Strategy 2021–2030 backed up by specific measures to implement it. The Commission should make protecting and restoring biodiversity part of the cross-sectoral objective of all relevant EU policies.
- make environmental obligations, and the safeguarding of employment rights, a binding and integral part of EU Free Trade Agreements, and provide for legal protections and possible sanctions.

V. Attractive living conditions in all parts of Lower Saxony are of key importance

Much of Lower Saxony's population lives in rural areas. These have diverse assets: scenic natural beauty, civic involvement and strong levels of community cohesion. However, our rural regions are also facing considerable challenges, including demographic change. Digitization offers major opportunities for rural areas, although this has not yet been recognized everywhere. Lower Saxony is committed to achieving attractive living conditions both in towns and in the country. While this can be accomplished in conjunction with regional players, it does require EU support.

The new European Commission should therefore:

- place its funding policy on a firmly region-specific basis. The trend towards decentralization, evidenced by calls for national plans, must be counteracted. The same applies to the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy, namely the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD);
- develop regionalized strategies and regional participatory structures within the Structural Funds;
- continue to support social innovation in order to strengthen social cohesion and help ensure adequate provision of social services, especially in rural regions;
- provide more resources for PR work promoting structural support in the EU;
- institutionalize rural development more fully as a policy area within the European Commission.



Historical street in Einbeck (district of Northeim), Lower Saxony.

Closing remarks



We are committed to a united, strong and democratic Europe. Our rationale in issuing this discussion paper is to translate into action the EU motto 'United in diversity' and to further enhance the visibility of European added value

in Lower Saxony, with its varied regions. A sense of regional identity and European consciousness go hand in hand and can help prevent populism.

Annex



Participants of the first European Future Lab held in Hannover in mid-September.

What does Lower Saxony's youth expect from the new European Commission?

Europe's youth is Europe's future. It is the young women and men – who are now still at school, or have begun vocational training or studies – that will determine the future direction the European Union takes. It is, therefore, appropriate and important to involve them at this young age and to ask them what their expectations are of the new European Commission.

Lower Saxony's Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development therefore initiated a think tank for the younger generation called 'Zukunftslabor Europa' (European Future Lab). Here, young women and men from all spheres of society in Lower Saxony come together to discuss European policy issues, express demands and make suggestions. They are keen to get involved regularly in debates both now and in the future. The first meeting of this group was held in mid-September 2019 in Hannover at the invitation of the Ministry.



Very different young people from Lower Saxony came together at the European Future Lab.



Positions were worked on by the participants in several teams.

Here are the initial findings of the 'Future Lab' youth think tank:

Greater cohesion

The EU must be strengthened as a united whole. This will involve:

- intensifying interaction within the younger generation. For young Europeans in EU member states, it should increasingly be the norm to spend time abroad. International exchanges involving school pupils or tertiary students should be mandatory;
- introducing symbols that strengthen the sense of community, such as a shared European public holiday;
- the expansion of cross-border European train connections. Modern international rail services reflect the notion of a Europe that transcends borders;
- the extension of the eurozone. A decision on this should not factor in only economic and fiscal considerations.

Better communication

Overall, the way the European Union provides information is felt to be antiquated. The following will help to meaningfully reach more young people:

- strengthening the European institutions' information presence on social networks;
- promoting the EU in a bolder and more proactive way – on Instagram or Snapchat, for example;
- specifically training teachers so they are equipped to inform pupils more fully and accurately about the EU.



The teams presented their results to Minister Honé at the end.

Faster decisions

The long, drawn-out nature of decision-making processes leaves many young people baffled. The youngsters would approve of:

- a switch to the principle of majority decision-making. In future, the EU would thus align itself with innovative pace-setters and no longer with the slowest and most inert members.

Stronger democracy

The European Parliament elections in May proved a wake-up call for many young people in Lower Saxony, prompting them to look into the principles that respect the rule of law. They are thus calling for:

- the 'right of initiative' to be introduced for the European Parliament, so that MEPs elected by the people can themselves propose legislative bills;
- greater commitment to ensuring adherence to the rule of law in member states.

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