



**It's
up
to
us**

During two workshops in 2025, the European Liberal Forum, the Hans van Mierlo Stichting and the Martin Filko Institute gathered liberal think tanks in Bratislava and in the Hague to discuss how liberals can be successful in opposition to the far right.

During these sessions, we learned from successful societal campaigns and opposition efforts across Europe that moved the needle, driven not only by political parties but also by civil society, media and municipalities.

‘It’s up to us’ is a way of thinking when in opposition. If we really want to defend liberalism, we cannot remain passive while in opposition, nor can we leave the work of opposition to other, more ‘activist’ movements. It is up to us to not only react to the far right, but to go on the offensive: to reimagine a world where liberal values deliver on their promises and to present this vision from opposition.



The old political paradigm is dead

During the workshops, we acknowledged the challenges liberals face in confronting the far right, which is now seen not only as a challenger, but as a dominant new political narrative that upends the previous post-war political spectrum.

The traditional '**left versus right**' is no longer the relevant spectrum to look at in politics. The new era of politics is defined by deeper conflicts over **identity, democracy, and the nature of society itself**. The real divides are now **liberal vs. illiberal, open vs. closed society, globalist vs. nationalist, urban vs. rural, democrats vs. autocrats, us vs them**. The main focus points of the political debate are **identity, culture and affordability**. This is why standard political responses to populism, either moving further towards the left or defending the status quo, have proven structurally ineffective at winning elections.

Liberals must adapt

Liberalism cannot remain static in this environment. If we are seen as defenders of the status quo, we risk becoming irrelevant. Instead, we must dare to be bold by envisioning, inspiring, building, and delivering. With this in mind, we have put together this simple checklist of dos and don'ts for liberal movements to help them to adapt their behaviours, to be successful in opposition, and to reinvent themselves for the 21st Century.



DO

01

Own your narrative

While populists have claimed the narrative of a glorious past, liberals must counter this by offering a compelling vision for the future that provides a sense of hope and security. We should strive for a new "abundant liberalism, that builds". This involves proposing ambitious, supply-side building programs and design-thinking (e.g., housing, green energy, digital infrastructure) to create tangible results and to offer a hopeful vision for the future.

Speak in public like you would speak with a friend

02

Being authentic is key. Use your personal language, story and storytelling rather than political jargon to connect with people. Let people see who you are, what motivates you and how your experiences connect to the issues they care about.

03

Go out to the countryside

Too many liberals talk only to themselves or in places where they feel at home. Campaign beyond liberal strongholds, visit places where liberals rarely go, especially communities where people do not vote liberal. Listen first, understand local concerns and build relationships outside the usual political bubble.

04

**Show you care and
invoke emotions**

Non-verbal communication is important to public perception and should mirror your narrative. For example, be optimistic and positive in your language, attitude and posture, particularly when your opponents communicate through anger, fear or aggression.

**Focus on
day-to-day issues**

05

Focus on issues that directly impact people's everyday life and move beyond the traditional liberal policy priorities. Housing and healthcare are on top of the agenda for most voters, yet liberals too often leave these issues for other political forces to define. They rarely take up these ministries in government and rarely publish policy ideas on these topics.





06

Create alternative, pragmatic narratives on far-right priorities

Don't leave difficult topics to the far right. On migration, security or identity, acknowledge legitimate concerns and offer credible liberal solutions. Show that problems can be managed effectively without feeding to the far right's worldview.

Reclaim national identity symbols

07

Don't allow the far right to monopolise national symbols. Connect patriotism with liberal values such as freedom, openness, and democracy. Offer an inclusive national identity that gives people a strong sense of shared values, community, and belonging.

08

Actively involve citizens

Don't just communicate at people but give them a sense of ownership, agency, and community by involving them in campaigns, policy development and community activities. This breaks through perceptions of elitism and reignites politics as a common project.

09

Reach people where they are

Develop 'parasocial politics' and reach people beyond traditional communication channels by working with influencers, creators and trusted online personalities. Build relationships with new communities and cultural ecosystems where liberal ideas can travel organically.

Work with the right messengers

10

Politicians can't do it alone. Liberals should partner with civil society and industry stakeholders (make sure it's the right ones). Industry can be helpful on key issues like innovation and migration, civil society can help mobilise people. It's up to us to build a broad church with a lot of messengers around a new liberal narrative.

11

Use culture to connect with people

Successful events and rallies often use gatherings that are cultural rather than purely political to engage with the public. Think of innovative ways that are not panel-based political events which are old-fashioned and do not engage the audience. Instead, gather people around a table for food, music or other cultural activities where you can listen and engage rather than talk down to from a podium.

12

Adapt to real-time campaigning

Successful modern campaigns operate in real-time, using social media to immediately own the narrative and force journalists to follow their framing. This requires well-functioning internal party structures and cooperation with civil society, influencers and media ecosystems, capable of rapid response on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Adopt automation and volunteer integration strategies

13

Integrating digital efforts with ground-game operations, supported by a strong data backbone (CRM system), is key. For example, the Mamdani campaign is a success story in using automation to convert online engagement into offline action. By using automated Instagram DMs, the campaign efficiently recruited a massive volunteer base.

14

Be intellectually honest and open to criticism

Empathise with people and welcome criticism or feedback on what your government, your party or liberalism in general have failed to deliver. We must admit the inadvertent impacts of globalisation, demographic shifts, inflation, and affordability.

DON'T



01

React to the far right

Don't let the far right set the agenda by always reacting on what they say. This is not owning your narrative but reinforcing their framing.

Underestimate your opponent

02

We are still underestimating the risk of the far right and anti-democratic forces as if they are a wave that will subside rather than the increasingly dominant narrative in a new political era.

03

Rely on bashing the far right

Too much energy is often spent villainizing the far right and particularly their leaders with little attention paid to our own agenda and what makes us different.

Borrow the language of the far right

04

Do not borrow the rhetoric of the far right using their narrative or language i.e. 'unborn babies', 'woke' etc. Use your own framing in communication.

DON'T

05

Be shy

Liberals must not shy away from issues dominated by the far right like migration. We must not ignore the real problems of people, even if they are not usual liberal policies.

Let the far right own your flag

06

Don't allow the far right to monopolise national symbols, your values or your past. Instead, create an inclusive national identity.

07

Complicate things

Political correctness has lost its purpose and stops liberals from communicating with people in ways they understand, wasting our time and energy crafting messages that will not land.

08

Live in a bubble

Don't surround your organisation only with people who think like you. Many liberals living in democracies are in a pro-democratic and elitist bubble that doesn't represent the whole of the society.

09

Sugar-coat reality

There are real risks of war, of interference in our democracies. Yet many liberals shy away from alarming people, despite the risks.

10

Be scared of criticism

Real participation in campaign narratives can actually reinforce your message and help you reach more people.



A liberal future in a united Europe

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