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Competitive, Resilient and Sovereign European Agriculture

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Preamble

European agriculture is the foundation of our food sovereignty, rural economies, cultural heritage, and the world's highest production and environmental standards. Our family farms deliver safe, high-quality food and sustain vibrant rural communities and essential public goods. Yet European farmers are being met with issues, such as an ageing farming population with too few successors, rising costs, administrative burdens that exceed the capacity of small producers, environmental obligations imposed without adequate compensation, and trade agreements that expose European farmers to competition from regions operating under fundamentally different standards all threaten the viability of the sector.¹

Slovenia exemplifies the structural fragility affecting much of European agriculture. Average farm size remains under 7 ha, with more than 60% of holdings below 5 ha, parcels scattered across complex ownership arrangements, and conditions for modernisation severely constrained.² The age structure is deeply unfavourable: 33% of farm owners are over 60, while only 4.9% are under 35,³ well below the already alarming EU average of 12% of farmers under 40.⁴ Succession is blocked by high entry costs, fragmented inheritance, and a near-total absence of rural housing for young people.³ Marginal and hilly areas face accelerating abandonment, with meadows converting to forest, traditional landscapes disappearing, and risks of fire and erosion rising on the Karst plateau and in mountainous regions.⁵ Prime lowland soils are being irreversibly consumed by logistics zones, infrastructure, and housing, with spatial planning decisions that consistently neglect long-term food security.⁶ Self-sufficiency stands at only 27% in fruit and 36 to 41% in vegetables, with production fragmented, seasonal, and weather-dependent.^{7,8}

Slovenia's regulatory environment compounds these difficulties. With the EU's highest Natura 2000 coverage at 37.5% of territory,⁹ strict limits on fertilisation, mowing, construction, land consolidation, and plant protection product use are imposed with compensation mechanisms that rarely cover actual production losses.⁹ Slovenia authorises fewer active substances than most neighbouring countries, new formulations reach the small market with significant delays or not at all, and the humid climate heightens disease pressure on fragmented parcels.¹⁰ When the EU withdraws an active substance,

Slovenia frequently lacks a viable replacement, leaving producers exposed to economic losses with no realistic means of protection.¹⁰ The Commission's Food and Feed Safety Omnibus of December 2025 acknowledged that no new conventional active substances had been approved in six years and that more than 80 substances had been withdrawn, and proposed mutual recognition reforms to address this problem.¹¹ Primary producers' bargaining position in the food supply chain remains structurally weak: a Commission evaluation of December 2025 confirmed that a pervasive fear of retaliation continues to prevent farmers from challenging unfair contractual terms.¹²

Germany faces a structural crisis of its own. The number of agricultural holdings has fallen from approximately 458,000 in 2000 to around 255,000 today, a decline of roughly 44%.¹³ Dairy farms fell below 50,000 for the first time in 2024, with nearly 28,000 lost in a single decade.¹⁴ The agricultural workforce has contracted by approximately 62,000 since 2020,¹⁵ while input costs have risen sharply and many farms cannot compensate through higher sale prices.¹⁶ The human cost is increasingly visible: studies indicate that one in four German farmers experiences symptoms of burnout,¹⁷ consistent with European Parliament Research Service findings confirming that agricultural workers face significantly higher fatality rates, stress levels, and suicide rates than workers in other sectors.¹⁸ Germany's wolf population now comprises 219 packs, with approximately 4,300 livestock killed in around 1,100 attacks in 2024 and herd protection expenditure reaching €23.4 million.¹⁹ Despite Germany having notified the EU Commission of a favourable conservation status and the wolf's reclassification under the Bern Convention, practical management tools for affected pastoral farmers remain insufficient.¹⁹

These challenges are not exceptional. The average EU farmer is now 57 years old with only 12% under 40.⁴ Farmers' gross income across the EU averages only approximately 60% of wages in comparable sectors,²⁰ and risk management tool uptake in 2024 ran 89% below planned CAP milestones.²⁰ The agricultural workforce is projected to fall from 17 million in 2020 to 7.7 million by 2030.²¹

The EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement, signed on 17 January 2026²² and entering provisional application from 1 May 2026,²³ has worsened some of these vulnerabilities. Mercosur countries produce under significantly lower environmental, labour, and plant protection standards, enabling price advantages that constitute a form of systematic competitive dumping against European producers operating under far stricter requirements.²² The most exposed Slovenian sectors are beef cattle, oilseed and protein feed crops, and the sugar chain.¹⁰ The scale of farmer opposition was demonstrated in December 2025, when an estimated 10,000 farmers converged on Brussels to oppose the deal.²⁴ On 21 January 2026, the European Parliament voted 334 to 324 to refer the agreement to the Court of Justice of the European Union,²⁵ yet the Commission proceeded to finalise provisional application on 23 March 2026.²³ The risk is more than just economic: sustained price pressure drives farm abandonment, deepens import dependency, and erodes the food sovereignty which is a key part of European strategic autonomy.

The Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food (February 2025),²⁶ Generational Renewal Strategy (October 2025),⁴ CAP Simplification Roadmap (May 2025),²⁷ and post-2027 CAP proposal²⁸ represent the most ambitious EU agricultural policy package in a generation. The Youth of the European People's Party welcomes these steps but insists that their value depends entirely on consistent and ambitious implementation, complemented by proportionate environmental obligations, functioning rural housing markets, and trade policies that do not systematically disadvantage farmers who have invested in meeting European standards.

Recognizing that:

- The ageing of the European farming population and the shortage of young successors constitute an existential structural threat. The average EU farmer is 57 years old⁴ and only 12% are under 40.⁴ In Slovenia, 33% of farm owners are over 60³ and only 4.9% are under 35,³ with succession blocked by high entry costs,³ fragmented inheritance,³ and lack of rural housing.³ In Germany, agricultural holdings have declined by 44% since 2000,¹³ with dairy farms falling below 50,000 for the first time in 2024.¹⁴
- Small-scale and fragmented land structures limit economies of scale, modernisation, and investment. Slovenian holdings average under 7 ha,² with over 60% below 5 ha² and parcels scattered across complex ownership arrangements, creating barriers that compound one another and prevent efficient production.²
- The abandonment of marginal agricultural land is accelerating. In Slovenia, steep and remote areas are being deserted, meadows are converting to forest,⁵ traditional landscapes including the Haloze terraces are disappearing,⁵ and risks of fire and erosion are rising on the Karst plateau and in mountainous regions.⁵
- Prime fertile soils are being irreversibly lost to urban development. In Slovenia, productive lowland areas are consumed by infrastructure, logistics zones, and housing,⁶ with spatial planning decisions that neglect long-term food security⁶ and where recultivation is practically impossible.⁶
- Self-sufficiency remains critically fragile. Slovenia records only 27% self-sufficiency in fruit⁷ and 36 to 41% in vegetables,⁷ with production being fragmented, seasonal, and weather-vulnerable.⁸
- Administrative burdens disproportionately affect small family farms. The complexity of CAP and national procedures overwhelms producers without dedicated administrative staff,² generating under-ambitious project applications²⁶ and diverting attention from production.²
- The weak bargaining position of primary producers allows processors and retailers to capture value that should accrue at farm level. The Commission's December 2025 evaluation confirmed that the fear of retaliation prevents farmers from challenging unfair contractual terms¹² and that bargaining imbalances persist despite the 2019 UTP Directive.¹²
- Nature conservation restrictions impose costs that are inadequately compensated. Slovenia's 37.5% Natura 2000 coverage⁹ imposes strict limits with compensation mechanisms that only partially offset actual production losses,⁹ rendering otherwise legitimate environmental objectives counterproductive.
- Plant protection product regulation creates severe competitive disadvantages. In Slovenia, fewer active substances are authorised than in neighbouring countries,¹⁰ new formulations are delayed or unavailable,¹⁰ and the absence of viable replacements following EU withdrawals leaves producers exposed to losses with no realistic means of protection.¹⁰ The Food and Feed Safety Omnibus of December 2025 acknowledged that no new conventional active substances had been approved in six years,¹¹ while more than 80 had been withdrawn.¹¹
- Regional inequalities between productive lowlands and hilly or mountainous farms are worsening. Hill and mountain farms in Slovenia face structurally higher costs⁵ and near-total subsidy dependence,⁵ with abandonment driving rural depopulation and village decline.⁵

- The disappearance of German family farms constitutes a structural crisis. With approximately 255,000 holdings remaining, down from 458,000 in 2000,¹³ and dairy farms below 50,000 for the first time,¹⁴ consolidation is proceeding at a pace that threatens rural communities and small and medium family operations.
- The agricultural labour force is contracting sharply. In Germany, approximately 62,000 workers have left the sector since 2020.¹⁵ At EU level, the workforce is projected to fall from 17 million in 2020 to just 7.7 million by 2030.²¹
- Farmers' mental health is a growing crisis without adequate policy response. Studies indicate one in four German farmers experiences symptoms of burnout.¹⁷ European Parliament Research confirms that agricultural workers face significantly higher fatality rates,¹⁸ stress levels,¹⁸ and suicide rates than the general working population.¹⁸
- Wolf-related livestock losses impose a disproportionate burden on smaller pastoral operations. In 2024, approximately 4,300 livestock were killed in around 1,100 wolf attacks in Germany,¹⁹ with herd protection expenditure reaching €23.4 million,¹⁹ while practical management tools remain insufficient despite the legal basis for regional management now existing.¹⁹
- The EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement, entering provisional application from 1 May 2026,²³ creates structural risks for European agriculture. Mercosur countries operate under significantly lower regulatory standards,²² which produces systematic price advantages that undercut European producers. An estimated 10,000 farmers converged on Brussels in December 2025 to oppose this deal,²⁴ and the European Parliament voted to refer it to the Court of Justice on 21 January 2026.²⁵
- Farmers' gross income across the EU averages only 60% of wages in comparable sectors²⁰ and risk management tool uptake in 2024 ran 89% below planned CAP milestones,²⁰ which shows that the current policy framework is not delivering adequate income security.

Acknowledging that:

- Family farms and rural communities form Europe's social, economic, and cultural backbone, requiring active and proportionate policy support rather than excessive or inconsistently applied regulation.¹
- The Generational Renewal Strategy of October 2025 sets a target of doubling the share of young farmers by 2040,⁴ proposes a mandatory starter pack of up to €300,000 in the next CAP,⁴ and recommends Member States allocate at least 6% of agricultural spending to generational renewal,⁴ yet its impact depends on consistent Member State implementation.
- The Vision for Agriculture and Food of February 2025²⁶ and the CAP Simplification Roadmap of May 2025²⁷ represent meaningful steps toward reducing bureaucratic burden and strengthening support for small and medium-sized farms.
- The post-2027 CAP proposal introduces a mandatory €100,000 cap on direct payments to larger farms²⁸ and new instruments for generational renewal,²⁸ whose effectiveness depends on implementation that redirects resources toward family farms without disproportionately penalising labour-intensive holdings.

- In 2024, 164,000 young farmers received set-up support, exceeding planned targets,²⁰ and nearly 200,000 jobs were created through young farmer and rural development interventions.²⁰
- The Food and Feed Safety Omnibus of December 2025 contains proposals to address PPP delays through mutual recognition and fast-track procedures for biological products,¹¹ which, if implemented properly, could begin to address the unequal access to crop protection tools affecting farmers in smaller Member States.
- Cross-border enforcement rules on unfair trading practices in the agri-food supply chain were adopted by the Council in March 2026,²⁹ establishing a mutual assistance mechanism that represents a step forward, but must be followed by a full revision of the UTP Directive.
- A dedicated Mercosur safeguards regulation establishes mechanisms for suspending tariff preferences on agricultural imports causing harm to EU producers, with faster procedures and simpler triggers than existing tools,²² but these must be activated proactively to provide meaningful protection.
- The European Parliament's December 2024 plenary debate on farmers' working conditions and mental wellbeing¹⁸ formally acknowledged the sector's mental health crisis, but this recognition must now translate into concrete funded support mechanisms.
- The inclusion of the wolf in Germany's Federal Hunting Act and its reclassification under the Bern Convention represent important steps toward workable regional management,¹⁹ but implementation must be legally secure and practically accessible for affected farmers.

The Youth of the European People's Party Calls upon EU institutions to:

- Implement the Generational Renewal Strategy of October 2025 with full ambition, including the mandatory starter pack of up to €300,000 in the post-2027 CAP,⁴ simplified credit instruments, and dedicated rural housing solutions, with Member States required to allocate at least 6% of agricultural spending to generational renewal⁴ and to address the specific barriers posed by fragmented inheritance structures in countries such as Slovenia.³
- Advance land consolidation and soil protection, including targeted support for inheritance reform,³ a legally binding obligation to protect prime arable land from urban encroachment,⁶ and investment in infrastructure serving hillside and mountain farming.⁵
- Implement genuine bureaucracy reduction across CAP procedures: raise lump-sum payments for small farmers,²⁸ fully digitalise application and reporting,²⁷ and establish one-stop advisory services accessible to producers without dedicated administrative staff,²⁶ ensuring that the fear of repayment demands no longer drives under-ambitious project applications.²
- Ensure that the cross-border UTP enforcement regulation adopted in March 2026²⁹ is implemented effectively by all Member States, followed by a revision of the UTP Directive including mandatory written contracts, mandatory mediation mechanisms, and strengthened rules for producer organisations,¹² so that structural imbalances of bargaining power are genuinely addressed.

- Ensure that Natura 2000 obligations on agricultural land are paired with full, timely, and adequate compensation calculated on actual production losses,⁹ with consistent and proportionate enforcement and practical agronomic guidance for affected farmers.
- Adopt the Food and Feed Safety Omnibus with its mutual recognition provisions and fast-track pathway for biological products,¹¹ establish a binding principle that when an active substance is withdrawn a viable replacement must be authorised before the withdrawal takes effect,¹⁰ and apply equivalent PPP standards as a condition on all agricultural imports entering the EU single market.¹¹
- Treat the Mercosur Agreement's safeguard mechanisms as active instruments to be triggered proactively whenever import surges threaten sensitive sectors,²² and insist, as a condition of the European Parliament's consent to the agreement's full ratification, on effective mirror clauses requiring Mercosur agricultural products to meet equivalent environmental, animal welfare, and plant protection standards to those imposed on European producers.²⁵
- Invest in agricultural innovation and self-sufficiency, including precision farming, irrigation infrastructure, protein crop development, and climate resilience measures,²⁶ with priority given to raising horticultural and feed self-sufficiency in Member States with strategic vulnerabilities.⁷
- Address the mental health crisis in the farming sector with dedicated, funded support services including psychological counselling, peer support networks, and financial crisis mediation,¹⁷ ensuring that the European Parliament's December 2024 recognition of this crisis¹⁸ translates into concrete and enforceable commitments at EU and Member State level.
- Ensure effective and regionally differentiated wolf management, providing pastoral farmers in geographically constrained areas with legally secure and administratively streamlined tools for the removal of problem individuals,¹⁹ and guarantee that herd protection funding is adequate and accessible regardless of farm size.¹⁹
- Implement the post-2027 CAP direct payment cap of €100,000²⁸ in a manner that does not disproportionately penalise labour-intensive holdings in regions with historically larger farm structures such as eastern Germany,¹³ and redirect those freed resources toward small and medium family farms and generational renewal.⁴
- Organise, through YEPP and EPP member organisations, annual rural youth forums and training workshops for young farmers and rural activists, building a pan-European network for the exchange of best practices in sustainable family farming and generational renewal,⁴ to guarantee that young farmers' voices are represented throughout the post-2027 CAP design process.

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