

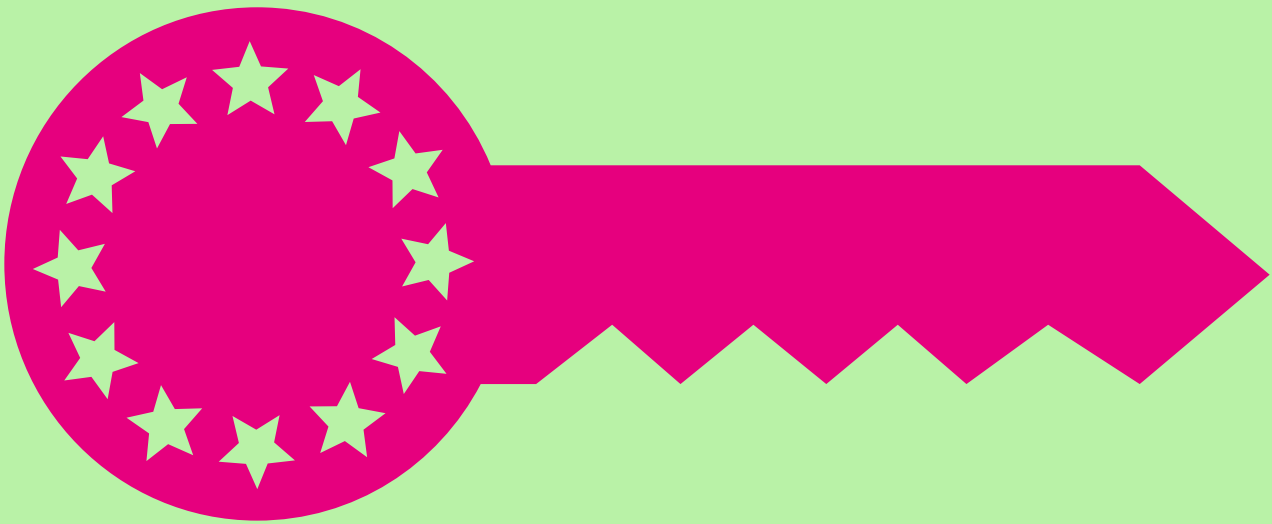


**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Europe



**Project
Europe 2050**



Towards a Brighter Europe

A Collection of Essays

Jaime Figueres

Frida Fernanda García Saavedra

Mohamed Jdia

Garik Khachatryan

Dr. Jong-Sue Lee

Giacomo Leombruni

Tamirirashe Mudzingwa

Fungai Mutimodyo

Ahmet Öztopkara

Moadh Qarouani

Anna Vindics

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich Naumann
Foundation for Freedom
Europe
Rue d'Idalie 11-13
1050 Brussels
Belgium

www.freiheit.org/european-union

LinkedIn: fnfeurope
Instagram: fnfeurope
Facebook: fnf.europe
X: fnfeurope

Authors

Jaime Figueres
Frida Fernanda García Saavedra
Mohamed Jdia
Garik Khachatryan
Dr. Jong-Sue Lee
Giacomo Leombruni
Mohamed Jdia
Tamirirashe Mudzingwa
Fungai Mutimodyo
Ahmet Öztopkara
Moadh Qarouani
Anna Vindics

Editors

Dr Nele Fabian
Hanna Glarmin
Lisa Hemp
Anna Maaten

Date

June 2026

Contact

Phone: +32 2 282 09 30
Fax: +32 2 282 09 31
E-mail: brussels@freiheit.org

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Introduction:

FNF Europe 2050 Project

Collection of Essays

Europe's next great project is to shape its future. By 2050, its power will not be measured by armies, markets, or algorithms alone, but by its capacity to lead as a true economic, security and diplomatic superpower.

We stand at a crossroads. The ideals that once defined our continent – peace, democracy, freedom – can no longer be taken for granted. Authoritarian powers are rising, global rules are being broken, and trust in democracy is tested. The question is simple yet urgent: will Europe step up to lead, or step aside and fade into irrelevance?

Another Europe is possible: a confident, united, and liberal Europe that shapes its own destiny with courage and conviction. A Europe that is ambitious enough to make liberal democracy its greatest export once again. A Europe that is forward-looking yet grounded in the values that have sustained it through centuries.

The essays in this book offer a path for a renewed Europe. They remind us that the fight for freedom is alive in Kyiv, Belgrade, and Tbilisi, where citizens risk everything for our values and security. They show that democracy is not just a system, but a daily practice, rooted in participation, in cities, and in communities. They argue that freedom must be rooted in care, responsibility and inclusion, and that technology especially artificial

intelligence must serve humanity, not control it. And, they demonstrate that Europe's influence grows stronger when shared through partnerships built on equality and trust.

To lead, Europe must act boldly, think bigger, and speak with one voice. It must reindustrialise with innovation and purpose, making "Made in Europe" a symbol of excellence and resilience. Europe must be able to defend itself with unity, speed, and strength by developing a true European defence market that safeguards peace through preparedness. Internal reforms are crucial to overcome paralysis and vetoes. Europe must remain open and forge global partnerships built on equality and shared values.

This is a moment of opportunity: a chance to reclaim confidence, to act courageously, and to shape the future on our own terms. Europe can once again become a beacon of hope for the whole world: strong enough to defend its freedom, shape its future, and inspire others. But we must dare to step up and lead.

Svenja Hahn MEP
ALDE Party President



Jaime Figueres

Costa Rica

President of the Costa Rica chapter of the Global Council for Responsible AI, Director of AI at FUNDEPOS University and Coordinator of the AI Chapter of the Costa Rican Chamber of Technologies. Advisor to the Mayor of Montes de Oca and founder the LATAM Institute for Executive AI Education. Tutor in the Innovate Entrepreneurship Programme, organized by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. His interest in Europe is shaped by his Catalan heritage and his close engagement with European AI governance.

Agency in the Age of AI: A Liberal Europe by Design

Europe stands at a decisive crossroads: the future of freedom in the digital age will be decided here. Between the dystopian risk of artificial intelligence becoming an invisible architecture of control and the temptation to overregulate it, Europe must choose whether to build trust through knowledge or to confine innovation behind walls of fear. As the EU AI Act takes effect and new strategies pour billions into “responsible AI,” the continent tests how much control a free society can bear before it ceases to be free. The task ahead is to cultivate wisdom, an ecosystem where intelligence and liberty grow together, and prosperity is shared through understanding, not obedience. These are not abstract dilemmas, but choices that will define how we live, work, and govern ourselves in the decades to come.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) embodies a paradox: it holds within it the seed of abundance and the risk of control. Guided with clarity, it can open horizons of prosperity, civic vitality, and human autonomy. Left unchecked, it could morph into an invisible architecture of surveillance, efficient, silent, corrosive. Like Athens once gave birth to democracy, Europe and the world today are called to imagine freedom anew, this time for the algorithmic age. What is at stake is not only growth, but the dignity and sovereignty of each person.

This essay defends a vision: by 2050, a liberal Europe remains within reach, if AI is conceived as a co-pilot. A presence that travels at our side, expands our choices, amplifies our creativity, and strengthens our ability to govern our own destiny. Not an overseer from above, but a companion that makes human agency more vivid, not less.

To ground this vision, three pillars will be explored as the architecture of a liberal future: an entrepreneurial renaissance that democratizes prosperity; a civic awakening through hyper-education and critical thinking; and a reimagining of freedom through the transformation of work and human value. Together, they sketch the path toward a Europe that does not fear technology but which domesticates it in the service of its deepest values: freedom, consent, and accountability.

Pillar 1: The Co-Pilot of Prosperity, An Entrepreneurial Renaissance

Artificial Intelligence has the potential to dismantle long-standing economic barriers and open the door to a new golden age of entrepreneurship. What once demanded large teams, heavy infrastructure, and privileged access to knowledge is now within reach of any individual with an idea and an AI co-pilot.

The key lies in the radical reduction of the cost of intelligence. Just as electricity transformed industry by making energy widely available, AI is turning cognitive power into a scalable and affordable resource. Intelligence becomes a utility. Advanced models, capable of analyzing data, generating code, or designing strategies, are no longer confined to global corporations. They are becoming everyday tools, priced at the level of digital energy itself.

This shift democratizes entrepreneurship much like the printing press democratized knowledge. Where Gutenberg multiplied the reach of ideas, AI multiplies the reach of intelligence. A student in Naples, a farmer in

Romania, or a retiree in Lisbon can now summon a team of virtual experts, engineers, consultants, marketers, at the click of a button. The barriers of age, geography, or formal credentials fade; what matters is the spark of an idea and the courage to test it.

The immediate effect is a surge in productivity. Solopreneurs can launch ventures in weeks instead of months, supported by AI that automates what once drained time and energy. Repetitive, low-value tasks give way to creativity, strategic judgment, and genuine innovation. Entire ecosystems of AI-native companies emerge, built from the ground up to harness these new capacities with an efficiency never seen before.

Over time, the consequences deepen. Essential goods and services, housing, healthcare, food, education, could follow a new curve of affordability. In such a world of radical abundance, the foundations of dignity are strengthened: fewer people left behind, more opportunities to thrive, and a society where prosperity is not the privilege of the few but the common ground of all.

Abundance stops being a dream and becomes a baseline.

The liberal promise of this transformation is clear: economic independence and civic self-sufficiency. A Europe where people generate wealth without depending exclusively on the State or mega-corporations is a Europe resilient enough to sustain freedom. AI as co-pilot does not centralize power, it distributes it into millions of hands, weaving prosperity into the very fabric of liberal democracy. Prosperity shared is freedom secured. And unlike past technological revolutions, this one requires no capital or coding – only language. With open models and falling costs, anyone with a voice and a smartphone can command cognitive power once reserved for institutions. The tools for abundance already exist; the task ahead is to cultivate the literacy and ecosystems that ensure everyone can use them well.

Pillar 2: The Co-Pilot of Democracy, Hyper-Education and Critical Thinking

We live in an age defined by disinformation and the erosion of trust in institutions. In this fragile landscape, Artificial Intelligence can become a decisive instrument to revitalize democracy. Conceived as a co-pilot at the service of people, AI functions not as a mechanical tutor but as a companion for human growth, augmenting knowledge, nurturing autonomy, and building collective resilience against manipulation.

Its first contribution lies in equitable access to learning. A well-designed co-pilot can offer personalized tutoring, sometimes through simple explanations, sometimes through Socratic questioning that awakens curiosity. Picture a teenager in a remote village debating history with an AI tutor; a refugee learning a new language through interactive dialogue; or a retired nurse rediscovering philosophy with a patient digital companion. Each encounter democratizes knowledge, opening doors once closed by geography, age, or circumstance. In this sense, AI literacy, understanding how systems work, which biases they carry, and how to interact with them critically, becomes an essential civic competence of the 21st century.

Achieving AI literacy requires treating knowledge and access to intelligence as a civic capability, not a privilege. It means empowering individuals, teachers, workers, and citizens alike, to use and shape AI tools freely and responsibly. This literacy must combine technical understanding with ethical judgment and creativity, cultivating not dependence on technology, but autonomy through it. A liberal Europe must invest in competence: the ability of every person to participate in, and benefit from, the intelligent age.

The second contribution is the strengthening of critical thinking. AI should be less a vending machine of answers, more a sparring partner for the mind. A true co-pilot does not only inform, it provokes. It challenges assumptions, exposes contradictions, and encourages citizens to test

sources, weigh evidence, and deliberate with greater clarity. In this role, AI amplifies human reasoning rather than replacing it, helping to cultivate citizens capable of thinking for themselves in an age of noise, an era where the abundance of content often masquerades as information, drowning out truth, while automation threatens to replace human reflection.

At the societal level, AI can become a barrier against manipulation. Designed with transparency and ethics, it can verify content, detect propaganda, and protect the integrity of the public sphere. In open societies, this strengthens trust; in repressive ones, it offers dissidents and reformers a lifeline to organize, communicate, and resist. Distributed access to co-pilots, far from silencing voices, multiplies them, reinforcing democratic pluralism.

The liberal implication is profound: citizens less vulnerable to populism, more capable of reasoned debate, and more actively engaged in democratic life.

By multiplying the cognitive capacities of each person and ensuring universal access to truth-seeking tools, the AI co-pilot becomes a guarantor of democracy's vitality. Democracy flourishes when citizens deliberate, not when they consume slogans.

Pillar 3: The Co-Pilot of Freedom, Redefining Work and Value

The debate on Artificial Intelligence is too often framed as a fear of automation and job loss. But automation is only one path, and it leads to cages of efficiency.

The true promise of AI lies in augmentation: doors of possibility that expand human capacities rather than replace them.

Conceived as a co-pilot, AI becomes a liberator of time. Teachers can let go of endless notetaking and gain hours to listen to their students. Nurses can rely on AI to track medical data and devote themselves more fully to human care. Artists can shed administrative burdens and reclaim the quiet needed to create. In each case, the machine handles repetition while people cultivate what no algorithm can replicate: empathy, ethical judgment, imagination, and critical thought. Work ceases to be a routine of tasks and becomes a canvas of uniquely human value.

This shift, however, points toward something even deeper: the need for a new social contract. For centuries, human worth has been tied to economic productivity, working to live. AI opens the possibility of decoupling that equation. By automating cognitive labor, reducing transaction costs, and eliminating informational barriers, intelligent systems make value creation faster, leaner, and more widely distributed. As productivity accelerates across every sector, the supply of goods and services expands, gradually driving costs down. As the price of essentials, housing, healthcare, food, education, falls dramatically, sustenance becomes less dependent on full-time employment.

In this new economy of abundance, the human role evolves toward orchestration, curation, strategy, and ethical validation, functions that align intelligence with meaning and keep technology accountable to human purpose. Knowledge flows more freely, services become more accessible, and survival is no longer the ceiling of human ambition.

In such a society, work transforms into a space of self-realization. Citizens with AI co-pilots can free time, cultivate new skills, or dedicate energy to projects that reflect their own idea of the good life. The liberal consequence is profound: freedom expands beyond the economic realm and enters the terrain of meaning and purpose.

AI does not merely transform labor; it reshapes the very meaning of human value. If developed with a humanist lens, the co-pilot of freedom can open a horizon where prosperity, autonomy, and creativity form the living core of democratic life. Work becomes less about survival, more about self-realization.

Recognizing the Dystopian Risk

The future of Artificial Intelligence is not linear, nor is it inevitably positive. The same technology that can serve as a co-pilot for prosperity, democracy, and freedom can also mutate into an instrument of control. The path is not predetermined; it depends on the political courage with which societies govern and deploy these systems.

The most visible danger is surveillance capitalism: corporations that hoard personal data and manipulate behavior through opaque algorithms. Simultaneously, there looms the specter of the controlling state, armed with systems that monitor populations, censor dissent, and punish deviation. Both logics converge into the same hazard: an AI designed as a supervisor, an omnipresent eye that reduces human beings to programmed obedience. In such a world, prosperity is hollow, democracy fragile, and freedom an illusion.

Control rarely arrives with tanks. It arrives with convenience. Dystopia does not announce itself with thunder; it seeps in like humidity, corrodes like slow poison, erodes silently under the guise of efficiency and safety.

Europe must consciously reject this drift. The challenge before us is not technical, it is political, cultural, and deeply human. The question is not how to code better algorithms, but how to defend the very idea of freedom against the seduction of absolute control.

The liberal response must be proactive: shaping institutions, laws, and norms that bind AI to the principles of consent, accountability, and individual sovereignty. Only then can Europe ensure that the co-pilot remains what it was meant to be, a partner in human flourishing, not a master of human destiny.

Framework for Freedom

Freedom is not a byproduct of technology. It must be fixated at its core. The future of Europe in the age of Artificial Intelligence cannot be reduced to technical manuals or bureaucratic rules. At stake is not a regulatory exercise, but a political and cultural choice: will AI expand human freedom, or will it diminish it?

A Framework for Freedom is best understood as a compass rather than a checklist. Its purpose is to guide Europe through uncertainty with a steady principle: the spirit that must prevail is freedom, not control. Regulation should accompany innovation, not suffocate it. Oversight must be proportionate and adaptive. And one rule must remain non-negotiable: in moments of doubt, the last word belongs to human beings, not to machines.

At the heart of this compass lie citizens' rights. Each person should be able to count on a private co-pilot, free from surveillance or coercion. Data must remain portable and reversible, so that no individual is trapped in the hands of a single actor. Transparency is not a technical upgrade; it is a civic safeguard. And Europe must be unyielding in drawing red lines: no social scoring, no subliminal manipulation, no mass surveillance without strict judicial oversight.

But freedom is inseparable from prosperity. A liberal vision demands that the benefits of AI be shared widely, not hoarded by the few. Entrepreneurs, cooperatives, and small businesses should be able to experiment without being crushed by disproportionate burdens. The State itself should lead by example, adopting AI responsibly, cultivating open markets for talent, and making AI literacy a civil right as fundamental as education. In this way, citizens can enter the digital era not as passive users, but as active shapers of their destiny.

Institutions, too, must evolve. They should not paralyze innovation with fear but accompany it with judgment. Independent evaluation bodies, shared records of incidents, and light-touch oversight can ensure accountability

where risks are real, not imagined. Equally important is a culture of dialogue: governments, companies, and civil society co-creating evolving standards. Fragmentation weakens freedom; only a coordinated Europe can sustain it.

And we must look beyond economics. AI will not only redefine work, it will reshape the way we live together. Civic co-pilots of public access could stand as allies against disinformation and guardians of critical thought. Their architecture should protect dissent, nurture plurality, and foster open debate, so that technology strengthens the democratic sphere rather than hollowing it out. Every synthetic creation circulating in public space must be identifiable, ensuring that trust remains intact in our shared reality.

The Framework for Freedom, then, is not an administrative exercise. It is a civilizational stance. The EU AI Act marks an important step in regulating the consumption and deployment of artificial intelligence, but regulation alone is not governance. Compliance frameworks can set limits, yet they do not define purpose. True governance is not the management of technology, but the articulation of a political vision for a human-centered world. Europe must move beyond administering innovation toward guiding it, transforming regulation into public policy, and procedure into purpose.

Europe can choose to treat AI not as a mere tool to be managed, but as a general force to be governed, a transformative layer of reality that reshapes how we think, create, and coexist. By weaving freedom into the very fabric of its technological future, Europe can demonstrate to the world that innovation and dignity are not adversaries but partners, and that prosperity, democracy, and human dignity can advance together as inseparable pillars of a renewed liberal project.

The Choice Ahead

Artificial Intelligence is not, in its essence, a technological challenge. It is a cultural and political one. The real question is not how we design algorithms, but how we choose to design our shared life. Technology is only the mirror reflecting the kind of society we are willing to build.

Europe has faced crossroads like this before. Athens once imagined democracy; the Enlightenment redefined human rights; 1989 reopened the promise of liberty to millions. Each of those moments was more than a chapter of European history, they became turning points for humanity as a whole. In 2050, the same possibility stands before us: to show that freedom can survive, and even thrive, in the algorithmic age.

The question is simple. Will we be a community of free individuals, accompanied by co-pilots that amplify our creativity, resilience, and autonomy? Or will we drift into a continent of supervision, where algorithms prescribe behavior and citizens shrink into obedient subjects? These are not abstractions. They are the choices that will shape daily life: how we learn, how we work, how we govern ourselves.

The future remains unwritten. It will depend on the decisions we dare to make today, on the courage with which we defend liberal principles against the temptations of control, and on the clarity with which we understand that freedom is fragile if not constantly renewed. To embrace a human-centered AI is not a technical preference. It is the foundation of a liberal, resilient, and prosperous Europe, one that turns intelligence, both human and artificial, into a force for abundance, a school for critical thought, and a guarantee of dignity.

And yet, this is not only about prosperity or governance. It is about legacy. What kind of freedom will we leave to those who come after us? Will they inherit tools that expand their horizons, or systems that close them? Will they live as authors of their own lives, or as subjects of invisible architectures of control?

The real question, then, is not technological, it is civilizational. Who do we choose to be? A Europe of co-pilots, where technology is domesticated in the service of dignity, consent, and accountability? Or a Europe of supervisors, where technology commands and citizens obey? The answer will determine not only our place in history, but the meaning of the freedom we pass on to generations yet to come.

The true legacy of Europe is not what it builds, but the freedom it dares to preserve – and renew.



Frida Fernanda García Saavedra
Mexico/Spain

Proud to be born in Mexico and now based in Spain, I studied Economics at UNAM and completed a Master's at the Complutense University of Madrid. I have worked in central banking and development finance institutions, with a deep interest in economic research and inequality. Europe inspires me because its free movement and openness across languages and borders represent a living example of freedom in practice, this reflects the kind of open and dignified life I believe everyone should access.

Reimagining European Identity: Diversity, Freedom, and Belonging in 2050

At Madrid airport, a traveler passes through border control. No line. No stamp. Not even a physical passport. Their identity is verified within seconds through an interconnected European system, integrated into their personal device. This gesture, so ordinary in 2050, symbolizes the end of an era, the era of visible borders and physical paperwork marking the beginning and end of a journey. The transition began years earlier: in 2024, Spain stopped stamping passports thanks to the Entry/Exit System (EES). Today, that step has evolved into the European Digital Passport, a single document that not only proves identity but also guarantees residency, political rights, and access to services anywhere on the continent. This essay envisions a liberal and bold Europe in 2050: from the consolidation of the Digital Passport to a fully integrated labor market open to digital nomads; from massive transcontinental cultural exchange programs to a renewed narrative positioning Europe as a living bridge between continents, cultures, and ideas.

Beyond Identity, the Passport Becomes Infrastructure for Trust

By 2050, it will no longer be a document but a living digital companion, a secure wallet built on interoperable standards, privacy by design, and self-sovereign identity. With it, residents share only what is necessary – age, qualification, license – all anchored in transparent, public-interest data spaces. Every algorithm shaping mobility or access to services is explainable, auditable, and overseen by independent authorities.

What once was paperwork has evolved into a continuous flow of rights across member states, reducing friction and creating a genuine single market of belonging. Yet technology alone cannot sustain legitimacy. Democratic trust remains its foundation. Europe has learned to combine digital innovation with human oversight: randomly selected citizen juries audit platforms and processes, while artificial intelligence, blockchain, and civic technologies ensure transparency and resilience against manipulation. Thus, the European Digital Passport illustrates the transformation required: it does not matter where you were born, but how you contribute.

The Digital Euro and the Economy of Inclusion

That same spirit of trust extends into the economy. By 2050, the digital euro is more than a currency: it is a symbol of sovereignty, inclusion, and solidarity. Conceived in the 2020s and backed by the European Central Bank, it guarantees universal access to secure transactions in a world where cash has almost disappeared. The IMF shows that responsibly designed digital currencies strengthen macroeconomic stability, while the World Bank highlights their power to foster financial inclusion when anchored in solid institutions.

For Europe, this means that every person can send, receive, and invest with speed and confidence. Linked to blockchain-based community currencies and green finance tokens, the digital euro channels resources toward renewable energy, civic participation, and social innovation. In 2050, even money reflects Europe's enduring values of openness, fairness, and sustainability.

Continuous Democracy: Belonging Through Participation

Democracy, too, has ceased to be an episodic ritual and has become a continuous practice. A student in Warsaw can help shape education policy from their campus; a digital nomad in Tallinn can deliberate on environmental regulations while working abroad. In 2050, being European is no longer defined by geography but by active participation in a shared future. Technology provides the tools, but community gives them meaning. This is not merely a technical innovation – it is a political statement: a Europe that dismantles physical and bureaucratic barriers also opens the door to a more inclusive common identity.

A Europe that imagines itself as a living, plural, and open space, where trust becomes its most stable currency, and freedom its most enduring value. For centuries, citizenship was tied to the nation-state: legal status, passport, census. But in a continent of cross-border lives, this framework falls short. Thus, digital passports are not just a symbol of belonging, but a tool to rejuvenate society and sustain the economy. It facilitates mobility, eliminates administrative duplication, and allows millions to feel part of a shared political project. A lived citizenship, not merely a legal one.

Recognition Unlocks Contribution

Mutual recognition of qualifications, EU-wide micro-credentials, and portability of social entitlements turn mobility into a continuum rather than a sequence of starts and stops. Talent pathways for essential sectors – healthcare, education, green tech, care – combine fast-track recognition with language support and mentoring. A portable European social rights portfolio – covering healthcare access, pension accrual, and unemployment insurance – travels with each person, aligning incentives to move where skills and opportunities meet.

The challenge is compounded by the demographic winter. By 2050, one-third of Europe's population will be over 65. The Spain 2050 report already warned in 2021: Spain, like many EU countries, will be among the most aged territories in the world. Without migration and active integration, pension and health systems will collapse. The European Commission agrees: without demographic rejuvenation, Europe will see its labor force shrink, limiting innovation and competitiveness. To understand what is at stake, imagine two paths. In one, Europe closes itself, resisting migration and diversity. By mid-century, its workforce shrinks dramatically, social systems strain, and innovation stagnates. In the other, Europe embraces openness: the digital passport integrates newcomers, residents contribute fully, and demographic decline is mitigated. The difference between these futures is not fate – it is choice.

Learning Becomes the Engine of Belonging

A continental compact for lifelong learning ensures every resident can upskill or reskill within weeks, not years: modular programs, stackable credentials, and public scholarships for transitions into shortage occupations. Regional learning hubs turn towns and cities into open campuses. Inclusion policies (childcare, housing, mobility stipends) make participation feasible for women, caregivers and newly arrived families.

For too long, European politics oscillated between those who saw diversity as a threat and those who merely tolerated it. The IOM, in its World Migration Report 2024, shows that societies that manage diversity well are more innovative, productive, and resilient. Europe in 2050 has understood this: diversity is not tolerated – it is cultivated. Here, digital nomads and freelancers are not “visitors” but part of the ecosystem. Cities like Tallinn or Barcelona have created connection zones: hybrid spaces of coworking, housing, and services where itinerant professionals contribute to the local economy and cultural vibrancy. Lisbon, for instance, already anticipated this trend in the 2020s with policies to attract teleworkers. The World Bank notes that when migrants’ skills align with market needs, benefits multiply. Europe, facing a shrinking labor force due to low birth rates, cannot afford to forgo this talent. Diversity is not a challenge to manage – it is a competitive advantage.

Pluralism Translates into Capability When Knowledge Circulates

Pluralism becomes power when knowledge circulates freely. Open science, multilingual platforms, and cross-border creative funds allow ideas to travel as easily as people, turning diversity of origin into diversity of solutions. Public-interest technologies – secure digital commons, open-source civic tools, and shared European data spaces for health, mobility, and energy – give startups, researchers, and communities a common foundation to build upon.

In this environment, creativity is not the privilege of a few but the product of collaboration. Consider a startup in Berlin in 2050: its team includes a coder from Lagos, a designer from Mexico City, and a project manager from Germany. Their different perspectives allow them to design products for markets on three continents simultaneously. Europe is not an island. Its future depends on its ability to be a bridge between continents.

The European Commission, in its Strategic Foresight Report 2025, anticipates a world of fierce competition for talent, technology, and resources. In this context, Europe's power lies not in size but in its ability to weave global networks. One emblematic program is Erasmus Global, enabling students and researchers to move between continents. A young person starting in Lisbon may study in Nairobi, collaborate in Singapore, and finish a project in Helsinki. This not only strengthens cultural cooperation – it ensures that Europe remains an attractive hub in the global knowledge economy. Being a bridge also means responsibility. Europe must not only receive, but also share: knowledge, technology, and values.

The Green Bridge

Interconnected grids, offshore wind basins, and hydrogen corridors – from the North Sea to the Western Balkans and the Maghreb – anchor a climate partnership that trades electrons, know-how and standards. Climate clubs coordinate carbon pricing and green procurement, making decarbonisation a shared market rather than a race to the bottom. Migration here is not framed as a “problem,” but as a structural necessity. With Europe aging, inflows of young talent are the only way to balance the demographic pyramid. By 2050, Europe will have recognized migration as a cornerstone of its vitality, not a burden.

And being a bridge means cultural leadership. European theaters staging plays co-created with African writers, research centers pooling expertise with Asian labs, climate initiatives jointly led with Latin American partners – these are not exceptions but the fabric of daily cooperation. In doing so, Europe strengthens not just its external influence, but its internal cohesion. A continent open to the world is a continent more secure in itself. This model was designed to include those historically excluded: migrants, students, digital nomads.

A Social Europe That Travels with You

A truly social Europe in 2050 moves with its citizens. Portable pensions, care credits, and cross-border apprenticeships recognize the realities of mobile lives and the unpaid work that sustains them. Programs such as a “civic Erasmus” allow older Europeans to contribute their experience across borders, linking generations and strengthening community life. Belonging is not defined by passports but by participation – in shared stories, languages, and everyday encounters. Europe’s identity no longer depends on treaties or institutions but on lived experience: on the freedom to move, the creativity born of diversity, and the civic engagement that connects people beyond geography. As Spain 2050 reminds us, Europe will thrive only if it can renew its social contract and inspire a common imagination for the generations to come – a story not written in Brussels, but woven in the daily interactions of those who call Europe home.

A Mediator in a Multipolar World

Europe’s soft power grows from reliability: de-escalation diplomacy, standard-setting in tech and climate, and fair-trade partnerships that privilege value creation over extraction. By convening science, cities and civil society alongside states, the Union acts as a platform for solutions – on health security, AI safety and oceans governance – turning convening capacity into strategic influence.

To sum up, future will not be the product of chance, but of deliberate choices. Europe’s greatest strength lies in its dazzling variety: a mosaic of languages, cultures, faiths, and perspectives; of universities and laboratories pushing the boundaries of discovery; of companies and foundations shaping economies; of villages, cities, and nations, each carrying its own story yet woven into a larger whole. This diversity is not a weakness to be managed but the raw material of Europe’s creativity.

Even though, the demographic winter is real: fewer births, longer lives, and a shrinking work force. But it is also an opportunity to embrace mobility, pluralism, and openness as sources of resilience. Two paths lie ahead. One of retreat: an aging continent closed off, nostalgic, fearful, smaller. Another of openness: a Union dynamic, youthful, innovative, a hub of global cooperation. The difference lies in whether Europe dares to imagine without fear. To secure the second path, Europe must think beyond its current frameworks.

Innovation will also come from reimagining sustainability and inclusion. By mid-century, Europe could pioneer “green mobility visas,” encouraging the migration of workers specialized in renewable energy, climate adaptation, and sustainable agriculture.

These are not utopian fantasies. They are concrete possibilities rooted in Europe’s traditions of integration and innovation. The European Commission has already signaled that resilience requires turning vulnerabilities into strengths. In 2050, Europe could redefine prosperity not only in terms of GDP, but also through measures of social well-being, environmental health, and cultural vitality. The Europe of 2050 will not emerge by inertia – it will be built by those bold enough to transform today’s weaknesses into tomorrow’s opportunities, and to imagine a community where freedom, diversity, and belonging are not slogans but lived realities.

Amidst this plurality there are values that bind us together – an openness to people and ideas, a refusal to conform to imposed uniformity, and a profound sense of solidarity. Equality of opportunity, the freedom to speak, to believe, to move, to innovate – these are not abstract principles but the living foundations of our identity. In recent decades, we have also come to recognize sustainability as a shared moral compass: the responsibility to preserve our planet for generations yet to come.

Equally fundamental is the value we place on knowledge. Research, education, and innovation are not peripheral pursuits; they are the very fabric of what it means to be European. Knowledge is the common thread that unites disciplines, regions, and generations.

Looking ahead to 2050, thirty-five years may seem distant, but the choices we make today – rooted in these values – will determine whether Europe becomes a beacon of openness, creativity, and resilience. The future is not an abstract horizon; it is shaped in the present, paying dividends not only to our prosperity, but to our collective well-being and sense of belonging.

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Mohamed Jdia

Morocco

Mohamed Jdia is an ESP instructor and researcher at Moulay Ismail University, focusing on youth civic engagement. As a youth task force analyst with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation Morocco, he is committed to fostering intercultural dialogue and participatory democracy in Europe and the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The Afro-European Agora: Building the World's First Transcontinental Liberal Democracy

In the bustling heart of Marrakesh, under a sky sparkling with dazzling lights, Laila stood barefoot on her rooftop, hands shaking, not with fear but with sheer excitement and anticipation. Tonight was far from an ordinary evening in 2050. From Africa's western edge to the northern glowing shores of Finland, millions of youths across 90 nations assembled not to watch a football game, but to mark a revolutionary moment in history: the establishment of the world's first transcontinental liberal democracy.

Amazed with pride and honoured with responsibility, Laila appeared on-screen confidently not as a student in a school council, but as an official elected member of the Afro-European, youth-led parliament, grounded in a digital agora. With steady, calm breath, Laila started to weave her words like one silk thread in the fabric of her speech:

"Two decades ago, Europe and Africa were exclusively defined by conventions and formal institutions alone, but today we celebrate the birth of a new, liberal movement led and empowered by the civic leadership of its youth. Today, I speak not only as an African Moroccan citizen but as an official member of an unprecedented transcontinental assembly. The Digital Agora we have been fighting for throughout these two decades is no

longer a utopia in idealistic hopes; it is a reality that we will all defend and unconditionally uphold. It is both an honour and a privilege to be part of this decentralized space where youth rise above divisions, and the digital generation redefines liberal values. The Afro-European Agora will make both continents not a fortress of the past, but a democratic beacon of inspiration for future generations and countries worldwide”.

Laila concluded her speech with heartfelt gratitude to all those who voted for her and believed in the power of youth, not simply to spice up political discussions, but to revolutionize the entire Afro-European community. The courage and commitment of her words bloomed my heart with a burning fire of hope and resolve.

Laila’s voice, image, and beautiful smile suddenly dissolved into a blurry shape of a bedroom ceiling. My eyes fluttered open on a pale calendar marking the dawn of September, 2025. For a moment, I couldn’t recognize whether it was a dream or a vision of reality. But shortly, within me lay an unwavering truth, the truth that her speech was not a whisper lost in the Sahara Desert; it was a beautiful drumbeat echoing the symphony of youth, from Rabat to Paris, Lagos to Brussels.

Have you ever dreamed of a liberal democracy that flows like a river, not confined by geopolitical borders or personal interests, but extending across continents and generations? Can democracy be truly liberal if it is strictly chained to the grand halls of old capitals without formal youth participation?

The Myth of Participatory Democracy

Amidst the howling Sahara wind and under the Savannah’s scorching sun, youth from Pretoria to Tangerang are rising like a golden dawn, kindling the African soil, where seeds of democracy are buried and forgotten. Traditional democracy in the 21st century is no more than an elegant illusion, promising representation, justice for all, and equal opportunities.

Today, these faulty narratives no longer fit in with the fast-evolving nature of democracy. As a pivotal report from the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) revealed, "*young people in Europe and Africa are **standing outside looking in** when it comes to decision-making processes of the AU-EU partnership*". Thousands of initiatives launched, hundreds of advisory boards, assemblies, and platforms established, claiming to institutionalize youth voices in decision-making processes, yet young leaders are often featured as painting shadows in the real political sphere.

The conviction that current platforms offer an outside observer position to youth was proven beyond policy reports. I was once officially selected to participate in an international forum as a panelist in a session addressing youth participation in decision-making. During the online preparatory session, I expressed my concerns about the hollow formalities and superficial inclusion of youth voices as side entertainment for the real show. I raised questions about how to truly translate our consultations into binding policies; otherwise, our participation, per se, would be as symbolic as many other initiatives. After a month of preparation and overbrimming excitement, I received a frustrating email from the communications team, stating regrettably that they are unable to confirm my participation without clearly explaining why. Such arbitrary exclusion is a small-scale example that further proves the tokenistic involvement that youth today are still grappling with.

We can no longer afford the narrow perception of youth being the "interns of democracy", energetic but inexperienced, passionate but politically naïve, sharp-minded but irresponsible. In forums and assemblies, young leaders are featured as background scenes for the nicely dressed senior political actors, silenced for the "more knowledgeable other" to speak. In elections, youth are invited to smell the coffee of public opinion, but never to sip from the cup of plenary authority.

In addition, as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe reported, the nation-state model is "*being eroded*" and "*perceived as outdated*". The virtues once attributed to such democratic practice are

ill-suited to confront global challenges such as climate change, energy crisis, and digital governance that transcend any imaginary borders or sovereign policy decisions.

Democracy has continually blazed like a phoenix rising from the ashes of the majestic Palaver Tree and the vibrant Agora of Athens, where freedom of speech broke like an untamed fire engulfing the entire world. Europe and Africa have always been the battlefield where human dignity is reimagined, rebuilt, and maintained through the sombre canals of autocratic leadership. Such European institutions as the EU, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights are living embodiments of Europe's commitment to its liberal heritage. Nonetheless, the surge of far-right populism, political fragmentation, and digital manipulation constitute a major threat to the core democratic values that Europe has always celebrated as its national identity.

Furthermore, given the United States' high tariffs on the European Union, it is evident that Europe cannot base its future on the unpredictable winds of protectionism. While the US retreat might be regarded as a detrimental setback, we must champion this pathway as "a unique opportunity" for the emerging economies in the global south to step forward (Paqué). Thus, the proposed Afro-European Digital Agora (AUDA) will mark a new liberal economic shift from controlled globalization to effective "**Trans-continentalization**", a process through which the two continents prosper together in shared governance, culture, and markets, diverting from protectionism toward an unmatched transcontinental leadership.

This shift will be realized by coordinating policies and actively involving young professionals in joint investment programs on energy, trade, and digital infrastructure. To produce integrated markets across Africa and Europe, the Agora would harmonize regulatory standards, including customs, quality, and digital commerce. This transition will be translated through the Agora operating scope, focusing on digital infrastructure, youth participation, and energy resource management

Accordingly, merging African and European youth voices will resonate globally as one powerful melody echoing in a new liberal light. As allies of a meaningful democracy, together, we can inaugurate a new paradigm shift in history not simply by redefining liberal values, but also by breaking the national and continental frontiers that restrict their fine virtues and impact reach.

Even though we stem from different shores, the storm that engulfs us is the same. When the thunder of climate change or energy crisis strikes, it does not see the geographical borders we created, or the geopolitical trajectories each nation claims to take. Despite the different economic contexts and cultural differences, Europe and Africa share a history and, most importantly, a promising future together. Hence, a joint democratic approach is the most effective mechanism to combat the transboundary nature of such interconnected challenges as climate change, migration, and the energy resources crisis.

The Inverted Pyramid: Liberal Democracy Reimagined

Picture the Afro-European Digital Agora as a decentralized compass of a new transcontinental democracy, blending the two continents as one ship sailing in one ocean for the same noble, liberal mission. It is a digital, multilingual, legally-binding assembly, enabling European and African youth to negotiate, deliberate, and cast their votes on shared policies and common pressing challenges with cybersecurity, transparency, and accountability.

The Agora strives to construct a modern model of participatory democracy by moving youth from the outcast margins of politics to the center of governance. That's why this platform is a multidimensional space for verified young adults, youth-led NGOs, and participatory institutions. It is designed to represent multicultural voices based on equality, integrity, and fair representation.

The AUDA partnership will bloom as the modern embodiment of the classical Agora Square, with digital Palaver Tree roots spreading across the two continents. Firstly, AI-powered translation systems will be enabled to ensure clear communication and to preserve the cultural features of each state member. Secondly, to ensure transparency and security, all deliberations and binding consultations should be based on a distributed blockchain ledger, which will guarantee a decentralized governance of the platform.

To bring the Agora on its feet, it is essential to establish a founding committee composed of a **transcontinental elected team** of youth leaders, governance, policy, and legal experts, youth-focused NGOs, digital advisors, an advisory board, and representatives from the European Union and the Pan-African Parliament. The Committee should be entrusted with the responsibility of drafting a foundational charter, outlining the centrality of youth leadership, powers, legislative processes, inclusive membership, equitable representation, funding, and resources, as well as amendment procedures. Before the ratification process, it is also imperative to go through a public consultation phase to collect feedback from citizens, youth, as well as minority groups.

The governing system of the Afro-European Agora is built on four main pillars: the Youth Assembly, the Youth Executive Commission, the Advisory Council, and the Justice & Innovation Tribunal.

The legislative branch is represented by the Youth Assembly as the sole law-making body. It is composed of young people elected by citizens aged 16 and above from Africa and Europe. The youth electorate is defined as individual citizens between 16 and 35 years of age. This age range ensures the inclusion of emerging leaders who are developing civic awareness and young professionals who have accumulated the experience necessary to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions. Additionally, to champion experience and intergenerational dialogue, 30% percent of the seats will be reserved for members above the age of 35. Youth representatives in this model are not echoes of superficial consultations; rather, they are active members who draft policy proposals in collaboration with experts, and

vote on legislation, especially that concerns significant global, long-term, shared challenges. Membership size must be defined through proportional representation to ensure the multiplicity and diversity of youth voices across different communities.

At the heart of the Agora is the Youth Executive Commission, a bold vision of reimagining democracy in the digital age. It is composed of young ministers, directly selected by the Youth Assembly and confirmed by all citizens with a majority vote via an Agora E-vote Platform (AEP). To ensure continuity and stability, elected ministers would hold office for four years, renewable for one consecutive term. Through strategic leadership, the Commission serves as the engine that converts parliamentary vision into action. Its role is not only limited to policy implementation and resource management but also extends to the reinforcement of civic engagement and digital innovation.

The Agora E-vote Platform is an online voting system that enables all citizens of the Afro-European community to suggest new law ideas, comment, and vote on proposals, which will guide the Youth Assembly's decision-making. Online citizen engagement and transparency will build a solid bridge between the public and the policymaking process.

The Advisory Council is a melting pot of experts from non-governmental organizations and civil society institutions. As a bridge between tradition and innovation, it involves appointed delegates from the governments of each state member. They mainly fulfil consultative roles by ensuring that state perspectives are considered. The delegates are in charge of facilitating diplomatic coordination across member states. It would also offer substantial guidance and policy expertise, especially with issues that may overlap with national governance.

You might ask: how can we prevent the platform from being chaotic? Here comes the Justice and Digital Innovation Tribunal as an interdependent power with supervisory roles. Its first judges are selected by the Founding Community. They should act as the guardians of justice by maintaining the rule of law, ethical governance, and fair dispute resolution. This body will stand up as a shield from potential youth authoritarian governance

or arbitrary digital manipulation. The Youth Assembly, by its role, should reflect youth leadership vision through direct legislative mandates that can be reviewed or overturned by the Justice and Innovation Tribunal, in case of legitimacy or constitutional issues.

From the birds' eye view, the Digital Agora is the compass that places emerging leaders at the helm, governments charting the ship course, and the justice chamber ensuring the true direction.

Beyond the Conventional

This unprecedented initiative is substantially different from existing platforms, since it gives direct decision-making power to youth. Such mechanisms as the Africa-Europe Youth Platform (AEYP) remain valuable as an advisory body fostering dialogue, cooperation, and youth empowerment, yet its consultative role restricts its influence on policies and decisions. Confining youth impact to reports and recommendations with limited binding power prevents their genuine voices from resonating in the real political sphere.

The AUDA acts as a transcontinental legislative partner, designed to complement existing institutions rather than undermine their national sovereignty. Its authority would converge with such legislators as the African Union Assembly, the European Union, and national parliaments. The forum's scope covers cross-border, future-oriented, shared challenges that neither bodies can address alone. While the AU and the EU function primarily within their regional frameworks, the Agora operates as a **youth-led bridge institution**, harmonizing policies and accelerating action in joint areas. Its power extends to domains of strategic convergence, specifically green transition, youth mobility, energy resource management, and digital governance.

In practicality, the AU and the EU could endorse an investment strategy to construct solar and wind infrastructure in North Africa to supply energy to Afro-European markets. However, the implementation phase across dozens of countries is often fragmented and inconsistent. Through binding mandates, the Agora can harmonize project standards across state members, ensure accountability, and monitor progress digitally through real-time platforms

Through conventional youth advisory mechanisms, Africa–Europe youth communities might express their concerns toward the alarming energy security crisis in Germany, Poland, or South Africa, but their input would rarely translate into legally binding decisions. However, youth in the Agora have the power to draft innovative solar, wind, and energy storage systems, and even design training programs for technicians to ensure equitable capacity building across both continents.

Additionally, the Agora could harness immediate transcontinental policy implementation; project proposals can move directly to pilot programs. Further, due to the advanced operational framework and the institutional collaboration of this ecosystem, it will also provide real-time crisis response through direct and instant coordination for emergencies. Unlike traditional youth advisory platforms, a devastating flood in Sudan or wildfires in Portugal can be dealt with easily through youth task forces, structured volunteer mobilisation, and resource allocation.

To ensure sustainability and effective implementation, resources for the AUDA would originate from direct financial contributions from member states. Secondly, a portion of the AU and EU budgets for regional cooperation can be allocated to the Agora to support strategic initiatives. It is also essential to include private sector investment for potential future social or economic returns.

As opposed to traditional parliaments that pose physical, administrative, and logistical challenges, the advanced AI-powered infrastructure of the Digital Agora will facilitate maximum inclusivity of a substantial number of delegates from all over Africa and Europe. The combination of Africa's growing civic energy with Europe's institutional experience will induce

an unbreakable testament to a partnership focused solely and exclusively on amplifying youth voices through democratic participation and representation in decision-making processes. Further, the foundation of a youth-led parliamentary system will instill such liberal values as inclusivity and freedom of association. It will also foster intergenerational equity through the reinforcement of youth political agency.

Moreover, we should stand unshaken to an arsenal of obstacles that may impede the implementation of this project. Initially, the complexities of cultural pluralism and political resistance from populist actors may be one of the hurdles that we have to break through. To guarantee a seamless flow of this democratic current, it is imperative to rise above the toxic skepticism around youth participation. Youth are the first social category that feels the horrifying sting of every social, economic, or environmental problem. That's why they should be at the center of every liberal movement or democratic upheaval.

Infrastructure inequality and digital divides across Africa and Europe can be surmounted effectively if faced with strong political will. In this regard, the **EU Global Gateway Initiative** can be exceedingly helpful in bridging this gap through direct investments in digital connectivity, infrastructure, and cross-regional partnerships, which will accelerate Africa's economic transformation as we approach 2050. The Global Gateway Initiative in this context can also serve as a foundational enabler for the Digital Agora. As for privacy risks and surveillance issues, robust cybersecurity regulations should be enacted by governments. Technology providers are expected to make every effort to offer strong authentication techniques.

Within the tapestry of tomorrow, Laila's speech was never meant to be a dream but a prophecy that shall empower African and European youth as the spark of innovation. It is our shared responsibility to equip young adults with 21st-century skills, a global perspective, and digital leadership. Never before has the moment been so ripe for young people to act and break free from the manacles of exclusion and misrepresentation.

Twenty-five years from now, this generation may no longer be as youthful as it is today, but we should never stop watering the Agora seeds that, someday, will inevitably blossom into towering Palaver trees. If we wish to relish the shade, the fruits, and the pure oxygen of this forest, it is high time to cultivate the soil where diverse cultures, ethnicities, and identities blend for one noble mission: democracy, inclusivity, and prosperity.

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Garik Khachatryan

Armenia

Garik Khachatryan is a Content QA Project Manager at TheSoul Group with over four years of experience in editing and content verification. Passionate about journalism, he's dedicated to factual accuracy and high-quality storytelling. Garik is strongly committed to Europe's cultural and democratic values, shaped by his work with international teams and his belief in open, inclusive societies. Outside of work, he proudly geeks out over Harry Potter and Greek mythology.

Perspectives for Europe 2050

Virginia Woolf's tragic story, ending in 1941 when she walked into the River Ouse with stones in her pockets, has always haunted me.

Her choice wasn't just a personal tragedy; it was a profound **failure of the world** to see her. This haunting question of visibility and despair became deeply personal in August 2020, when, as a man hiding my sexuality, I was forced to decide between two forms of self-erasure: revealing my sexuality to my conservative family and becoming a generational embarrassment, or joining a mandatory, harsh two-year military service and pretending to be one of the "killing machines." I chose the latter, trading personal truth for familial safety. My choice, like Woolf's final walk, proved that real freedom is not measured by law, but by the weight of what we are forced to conceal.

I chose my family. This is often what we do when we feel we have no choice. My mandatory two-year military service began. In my second month as a soldier, war began in the area where I served. On the 23rd day of the conflict, I again thought of Virginia Woolf. I thought that this might be the end because, for many, it indeed was the end. But little did I know where the end was. And the time passed. The war ended. In August 2022, I returned home to my aged parents who were incredibly proud of their son. I thought I had won; I would never be the black sheep, the outcast, or the family embarrassment. Yet, time kept passing, even after two years of service.

Now, again, Virginia Woolf's tragedy haunts me day and night. I don't even know why. It's been more than three years since I've been back home, but I keep reading her works and letters to her loved ones. I still can't forgive

what the world has done to her! She was a soul who felt every breath of the world. I think Virginia knows how hard it is to tell the sea how unkind it is to drown on land. The sad thing is, I used the word "drown" both factually and metaphorically. That's the cruelty of neglect, of invisibility. No law could have saved her if no one had seen her pain.

Would Virginia Woolf walk into the river with stones in her pockets in a truly liberal Europe? Would I go against my true values and neglect my beliefs in a truly liberal Europe?

To me, real freedom isn't just about what's written in a law book. Let's be real, by 2050, Europe must get it through its head that freedom includes our mental health, too. That means therapy isn't some dirty little secret you have to whisper about; it's just a normal thing you can afford and actually get. And why shouldn't we be teaching our kids about their feelings and how to handle them, right alongside their math and history lessons? We need communities where people can be seen, truly seen. A world where heterosexuality isn't the default, where killing people isn't the norm, and where bullying the unique isn't tolerated, not in the name of some bland vision of utopia.

For me, the struggle for mental health feels like a quiet, personal war. In my family, for example, it's a total myth (something that just doesn't get talked about, a legend, a mystery). But I'm hoping for a Europe in 2050 where it's as normal to get help for your mind as it is to see a doctor for a fever. I'd want a place where your boss cares about your well-being as much as your productivity, and where schools teach kids about self-awareness and how to support each other. That's the kind of world I want my own kids to grow up in, a place where they can live their lives without so much fear. It is not just about our minds, either.

I can imagine Kafka sitting next to his statue in a small Prague café. He's staring at a laptop full of reports. He seems to know how laptops work. He'd probably sigh. Because even in 2050, if the systems that run our lives are still cold and faceless, freedom will feel like a lie. I mean, an AI can decide who gets a loan or a scholarship, or who gets to see a doctor first. If those systems don't have a shred of empathy built into them, we're only

free on paper. **Maybe we need to program them the way queer people have always had to program their lives? With sensitivity to difference, with chosen empathy instead of default bias! Because freedom isn't just access; it's being seen without needing to explain yourself first.**

Our modern age has this weird paradox: we're more connected than ever but still feel so isolated. I can watch what everyone's doing on Instagram, but getting friends together for a simple game of UNO feels like a major win these days. And I bet Kafka's ghost would be whispering in our ears about all the digital breadcrumbs we're dropping everywhere. He'd say we're letting these cold-as-ice systems build a data profile on us that makes decisions for us without a shred of human feeling. By 2050, Europe must face this problem directly by making sure the people who've lived outside the default settings, who've been misread, overlooked, or marginalized just for being themselves, get to help shape the systems that decide everyone else's lives. The ones who know what it's like to be seen as "different" or "other" can make sure these systems actually care about real people, not just numbers on a screen. If they're part of the process, maybe our digital world won't feel so cold, and maybe we'll start feeling like freedom actually means something again.

Let's be honest, freedom isn't a simple journey. It's full of little fights and tiny victories that add up over time. **Women's health absolutely shouldn't be decided by men**, because the people living the experience know best what brings them comfort, safety, and happiness. We need technology that actually serves us, not a cold system we exist to feed; we should be the ones deciding how our lives run, with a little kindness built in at every click. And yes, this includes making space for gay people, queer folks, and anyone who's ever felt "different," because a world that leaves out anyone can't truly be free. It's a fight for human scale in a world that moves at the inhuman speed of automation, a fight to make sure life is about real smiles, real laughter, and real moments of joy.

Albert Camus would probably shake his head and smile, the kind of wry smile that says, "Yes, life is absurd, but that's exactly why we must keep struggling." I hope he quits smoking in Europe 2050. Liberal life isn't a

walk in the park because it asks us to make choices all the time: **who we love, how we work, what we believe in**, without ever giving us a map. It's messy, confusing, and sometimes heartbreaking (just like most real people), because freedom comes with responsibility, and responsibility comes with mistakes, awkward moments, and the occasional heartbreak. But maybe that's also where happiness hides: in the courage to keep trying anyway.

The other day I was having a difficult morning. You know, the one when your soul makes it hard for your body to wake up. My neighbor (Mrs. Rita) must have noticed my tired face because she brought over a cup of coffee she'd just made. She didn't say a word, just gave me a nod. And that, I think, is what real freedom feels like. It is not just written in a bunch of laws. It is a neighbor helping you out or a teacher listening when you need to talk. By 2050, Europe has to be about these kinds of daily acts, not all those fancy constitutions and treaties.

Camus would say that the real work of freedom happens in quiet, small acts of rebellion against an indifferent world. He would find it not in the halls of power, but in a shared meal or a deep conversation. That's the messy, human heart of a free society that refuses to let the absurdity of life get the best of you and knowing that our collective responsibility to one another is our most powerful act of all. This is what happened to my lovely Virginia Woolf.

The human-centered Europe I want to see

When I walk through the imagined streets of Brussels in 2050, I'm seeing more than just cool technology. I'm seeing a liberal Europe that's finally living up to its name. Electric busses glide silently, green rooftops are everywhere, and kids ride bikes on streets where cars used to dominate. This isn't just about efficiency; it's a commitment to shared space and well-being, the core of a liberal society that values everyone. People actually

know their neighbors, and neighborhoods thrive on collaboration (and not isolation). Public spaces aren't just for getting from point A to point B anymore; they're for living. The whole place just feels alive.

Imagine an elderly man sitting on a park bench, sharing his knitting skills with a group of children. Or a teenager patiently helping a newcomer family understand the public transport system. **Or a family celebrating their son's bravery in coming out to them.** These small gestures build trust and empathy. **Woolf's tragedy reminds me of what happens when we fail to notice these quiet struggles.** Kafka's work warns us that even the best systems can become traps. Camus says that hope and persistence are all that matter. Europe in 2050 must learn all these lessons. **It's a Europe built on the foundation of shared purpose.** Europe 2050 is alive. **The technology is smart, but the society is wise.** It's a world where innovation serves humanity, not the other way around.

I don't want to make this sound cliché, but yes, again, mental health care is woven into everything in this future. Schools have counselors and wellness programs. Workplaces provide support and flexibility. Therapy is a normal part of life (not some secret you'd be ashamed to talk about). People feel safe to get help without being judged. That means citizens have the freedom to really live, to fail without fear, and to chase their dreams beyond just surviving. Health, work, and community are all part of the same puzzle when it comes to human freedom. A society that cares about your mental health as much as your physical health is a place that can actually thrive. A place where love actually wins. In this kind of world, being vulnerable is a real strength, and asking for help is an act of pure courage. My poor Virginia.

And get this, even the fight against climate change becomes a story of community and hope. Liberal freedom in 2050 is about having a real say in your world, not just a single vote. We get to help create a more sustainable and fair world. This comes from finally realizing that the planet is our shared home, and its health is all of our responsibility.

What would Kafka, Camus, and Virginia say in liberal Europe, 2050?

I picture Kafka, Woolf, and Camus in a conversation. They're at a table (I myself can sense the smell of fresh pain au chocolat). Kafka looks out at everything. "It's all so clean, so orderly," he says. "But I still see the same old chains. All the digital identities, the algorithms, the data. It's just a more elegant cage, a prison built of code instead of stone."

Woolf nods slowly. "But the cage is not the only thing," she says softly, her voice like the rustling of paper. "I feel the human hearts beating. I see the little gestures. The knitting circle. The shared meal. These are the threads that unravel the chains, Kafka, love. These are the small rebellions of the spirit against the cold indifference of the system."

Camus pours a cup of tea for each of them (I remember Woolf doesn't really like coffee). "And that's precisely the point," he says. "We build the systems, and then we must live in them. It is absurd. But our freedom is not in the perfection of the system. Our freedom is in the struggle. It is in the choice to reach out, to help, to connect, even when the world is designed to make us feel alone."

Woolf looks directly at him. "Then we must be more clever still. We must listen for the quiet cries for help. We must build bridges of empathy between the isolated islands of our lives. The laws can protect us, but only kindness can save us from ourselves. **I love Europe 2050.**"

Camus raises his cup in a toast. "Exactly! The work is never done. The struggle is the thing. We do not fight for a world without absurdity, but for a world where we can face that absurdity with courage and with solidarity. Where we can look at a broken world and say, 'And yet, I will choose to be human.' That is the greatest freedom of all. **Cheers to the liberal Europe!**"

So, their conversation just goes on and on. But the one question they always come back to is this: **how, in the name of democracy, do we prevent despair?** And how do we build a life that's actually worth getting up for?

People finally get it: freedom isn't just the absence of bad stuff; it's the presence of opportunity, safety, and a real connection to others. This is the Europe they're dreaming up, a place that finally learns from their mistakes. And hey, freedom shows up in our relationships, too. Families, neighbors, friends, and even strangers are all chipping in with the shared responsibility of life.

You know, real respect and care? They aren't a performance you put on. They're part of your daily routine. Think about it. Those little things become a quiet but powerful promise that you're not going to go through life's hard parts by yourself. I mean, the whole thing is really only as strong as the connections people have with each other. It's that simple.

So what's the big promise of Europe 2050?

I think about Virginia again and what could have been. In a Europe that truly prioritizes mental health, community, and being human, would anyone have ever felt so alone that they had to get into a river with stones?

"But in your time, Virginia, you walked into the river with stones in your pockets. In 2050, would a truly liberal Europe have let anyone reach that point?" Kafka asked.

"No," said Woolf.

By 2050, Europe is not perfect, but it is improving in meaningful ways. The biggest change is simply how we treat each other. LGBT rights are not just recognized; they're genuinely protected, which means people can finally live their lives openly, proudly, and without that nagging fear. The days of anyone feeling like an outsider or the black sheep are

thankfully long gone. That sense of cooperation starts right at home. Education is less about just memorizing facts and more about shaping engaged, capable adults. It's all about critical thinking, teaching practical skills, and getting people involved in their community. Technology is finally working for us, not the other way around. Instead of machines designed to replace people, we're seeing tech that's there to assist and support. There are strong rules and human-centered policies in place to make sure of it. Meanwhile, mental health care isn't a privilege; it's just a given, thanks to good public programs and supportive neighborhood networks. As for the climate, we've got realistic rules that actually stick, but the real power comes from people getting involved: things like local recycling drives and turning concrete areas into beautiful urban green spaces. Ultimately, communities feel closer. People are consistently supporting each other, not just when things are bad, but in the normal, messy flow of everyday life.

This imagined Europe balances large-scale systems with small-scale human connection. Governance is transparent and accountable. Public spaces are vibrant. People are engaged, not just passive observers. Freedom is emotional, social, political, and environmental. No one feels invisible, trapped, or hopeless. Hope remains a constant companion, and every life is valued.

As my grandma once said to me, "Garik, even the smallest can make a big difference." These small gestures (helping a neighbor, teaching kindness, caring for the environment, and standing against injustice) become the quiet rituals that sustain freedom. **This is the freedom of Liberal Europe 2050, a state of being that people live out every single day. Love is love, and because there are no wars, no one has to go to war.**

And maybe that's what real freedom is: messy, human, everyday, and hopeful. It's in the quiet acts, the small gestures, the neighborhoods that lift each other up. It's in the struggle, mistakes, and resilience. Europe in 2050 can be alive, connected, and seen. Hope matters. Life is lived fully. And no one ever feels invisible enough to carry stones into a river. That is the liberal Europe I dream of.



Dr. Jong-Sue Lee
South Korea

Dr Jong-Sue Lee is Director of the European Union Policy Institute in Seoul, Research Professor at Jungwon University, and Senior Research Fellow at the Polar Research Institute of Kyung Hee University. Trained in international politics and European studies, he has published widely on EU integration, trade, city networks and regional policy, and his research focuses on a liberal, democratic and rules-based Europe grounded in pluralism and civic solidarity.

Reclaiming Europe from Below: Solidarity Cities and the Democratic Horizon of 2050

A Continent in Crisis: Challenges to European Democracy

Cities build solidarity across difference, turning global complexity into local action. Europe faces entrenched inequality, climate risk, exclusionary nationalism, and a new surge of far-right populism, misaligned algorithmic governance, and platform-driven polarization. A liberal answer pairs rights and the rule of law with digital civic capacity and open, fair, inclusive markets. The result of neglect is clear: frayed trust and democratic slippage, Europe's defining condition.

Traditionally, state-centric integration has struggled to meet overlapping crises, even as co-decision/OLP has moved the EU beyond pure intergovernmentalism. As Hannah Arendt famously argued, democracy flourishes in shared public spaces where citizens meet in speech and action, building mutual recognition and political presence. Those spaces, urban and rural, should not be operated by Brussels; the Union's task is to equalize access and connectivity, ensuring smaller towns are woven into trans-local civic networks.

The concept of “Solidarity Cities” emerged as a bottom-up response to the dual crises of humanitarian emergency and democratic erosion, revealing the limitations of the nation-state model in Europe. These cities counterbalance top-down, nation-centric logics by adding inclusive, rights-based, participatory layers. In its place, they advance inclusive, rights-based, and participatory frameworks grounded in local agency, shared responsibility, and everyday democratic practice. As grassroots political actors, Solidarity Cities champion pluralism, transnational cooperation, and a reimagined model of urban citizenship that reflects the lived realities of contemporary Europe. Far from being mere administrative entities, these cities operate as living laboratories of democratic experimentation and as engines of transnational solidarity, presenting scalable, actionable alternatives to the status quo.

Political theorist Benjamin Barber, in *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2013), argued that cities, anchored in everyday problem-solving and pragmatic cooperation, carry a democratic potential nation-states can no longer match. As national institutions falter under complexity and disconnection, cities step in not as substitutes but as innovators of democratic renewal, convening diverse voices, forging solidarity across difference, and translating global challenges into participatory local action. In Athens, the Open City Forum enables migrants and residents to co-design policies for shared urban life; in Amsterdam, citizen climate assemblies have generated community-driven renewable energy initiatives. Linked to surrounding small towns and rural communities through shared forums, participatory budgets, and inter-municipal network, these urban laboratories form a polycentric ecosystem where democratic practice can scale. These are not symbolic gestures, they show how democracy survives and evolves through active practice, even amid continental fragmentation and declining trust in national governments.

Today, over 75% of EU citizens live in urban areas. This is not merely a demographic fact, it is a political reality with transformative implications. Cities are no longer peripheral to governance; they have become the arenas where policy directly intersects with daily life, where inclusion or exclusion is felt most acutely. The emerging proposal of a European Urban

Solidarity Framework Act underscores a critical shift toward recognizing cities as full-fledged democratic actors within a post-national European polity. Over 200 cities have joined forces to tackle shared challenges in migration, climate adaptation, and social inclusion, not through national mandates, but through collective, bottom-up collaboration. This is more than a policy proposal; it signals the emergence of a new political horizon, driven by cities committed to participation, pluralism, and a revitalized urban citizenship.

The Emergence of Solidarity Cities: From Local Response to Transnational Vision

The rise of Solidarity Cities began not in Brussels, but on the ground, during the 2015 refugee crisis, when the moral failure of many European nation-states became undeniable. As national governments sealed borders and tightened asylum regimes, cities across Europe chose a different path: they opened their doors, provided shelter, and defended human dignity. In these acts of defiance and care, cities revived what many feared had been lost, Europe's liberal democratic soul. The 2016 Milan Declaration gave this bottom-up movement a strategic anchor, asserting that solidarity is not charity but a political responsibility rooted in shared humanity.

By 2024, over 60% of European cities had institutionalized frameworks for refugee integration, not as temporary measures, but as long-term commitments to inclusion. In Barcelona and Ghent, joint language programs enabled newcomers and locals to build mutual understanding. In Athens and Berlin, cities co-developed housing solutions that avoided the failures of centralized planning. These were not abstract policies; they delivered measurable results: a 30% rise in migrant employment and significant gains in social cohesion. While national responses remained fragmented, cities demonstrated what inclusive governance looks like in practice.

Germany provides an instructive case. In Berlin, integration was not managed, it was *co-governed*. Each district maintains its own Integration Council, ensuring migrants are active participants in local governance. Berlin was also the first European capital to adopt the Diversity Charter, now embraced by over 3,000 organizations. This is more than symbolic politics, it embeds liberal democratic values through participatory governance.

The solidarity agenda extends beyond progressive strongholds. In Lisbon, the BIP/ZIP program funds neighborhood-level initiatives that empower local actors to build inclusive spaces. In Strasbourg, migrants directly shape cultural policy through the Intercultural City Plan. Despite differing political contexts, cities converge on a shared democratic logic: participation, proximity, and pluralism must anchor policy.

When the war in Ukraine triggered a new wave of displacement, it was again cities, not states, that moved first. From Warsaw to Prague to Budapest, municipalities mobilized emergency plans, formed solidarity coalitions, and provided housing, education, and psychological support to Ukrainian refugees. In doing so, they practiced not only humanitarian responsibility but also a form of urban diplomacy rooted in speed, proximity, and moral clarity.

Unlike rigid, hierarchical nation-state systems, Solidarity Cities operate through horizontal, agile networks. They co-design policies with citizens, speak in unified voices across borders, and push for a bottom-up reconfiguration of Europe. This goes beyond service delivery, complementing existing sovereignty with coordinated, bottom-up practice in civic responsibility and democratic possibility. In Bologna, *Pacts of Collaboration* enable citizens to co-manage public goods alongside local authorities, a model praised by UN-Habitat and the European Commission. In Ghent, the Refugee Task Force coordinates integration across sectors and levels of governance. These are not anomalies, they mark a structural shift in how democracy is practiced from the ground up.

Participation as Infrastructure: Digital Democracy and Urban Belonging

At the core of Solidarity Cities is a radical commitment to participatory democracy, not as abstract theory but as lived infrastructure. In cities like Barcelona, Helsinki, and Madrid, digital platforms such as D-CENT and Decidim have become the democratic commons of the 21st century. These tools empower residents to propose policies, monitor public spending, and deliberate on citywide issues in real time. In Barcelona alone, more than 50,000 people participated in digital assemblies, resulting in a 42% increase in public trust toward municipal governance, according to the 2023 evaluation of Barcelona's Decidim platform. This is not simply e-governance, it is democracy re-engineered for the digital age.

These platforms are not neutral technologies. They are democratic infrastructures, embedding principles of transparency, inclusion, and civic equality into local governance. By enabling continuous public input, they rebuild trust and expand the boundaries of who counts as a political actor. In Helsinki's diverse districts, undocumented migrants were actively included in urban planning forums, helping reduce social tensions by 25%, as reported in Helsinki's 2022 Urban Inclusion Study. Inclusion here is neither rhetorical nor symbolic, it is measurable and transformative.

Digital democracy is also reshaping how belonging is experienced and enacted. In Amsterdam, smart infrastructure reduced refugees' barriers to public services by 35%, based on the 2023 Amsterdam Smart City Annual Report. In Ghent, inclusive policies have increased migrant civic engagement by 20%. These are not marginal gains, they mark a profound shift, from citizenship defined by legal status to belonging rooted in daily co-creation and shared responsibility. Urban belonging is no longer just emotional, it is political.

Political theorist Iris Marion Young argued that justice demands communicative inclusion, the recognition of voices historically excluded from democratic life. Solidarity Cities translate this principle into

institutional practice. Urban citizenship is not conferred by passport, but by presence, participation, and contribution. It transcends the exclusions of national belonging, advancing a model of democracy rooted in lived experience, local engagement, and mutual care.

Innovations like D-CENT's social currency tools push the boundaries of democratic experimentation even further. Blockchain-based systems such as Freecoin and proof-of-engagement protocols enable cities to reward participation, not with money, but with social value. Time, care, and cooperation become currency in ecosystems that recognize civic engagement as central to democratic life. Scalable across borders, these tools lay the groundwork for a European civic web, linked by shared democratic practices rather than bound by shared bureaucracy.

Yet digital innovation does not equal universal inclusion. Elderly residents, undocumented migrants, and economically marginalized communities often remain excluded, lacking digital literacy, access, or language support. Without intentional design, digital platforms risk replicating the very inequalities they aim to overcome. The promise of digital democracy will remain unfulfilled unless its architecture is designed for justice as well as efficiency.

To close this gap, Solidarity Cities are designing hybrid systems of participation. They deploy community tech mediators, develop multilingual interfaces, install mobile voting booths, and reintroduce analog forums to ensure no one is left behind. In Bologna and Helsinki, public libraries now function as digital literacy hubs, while participatory budgeting is being brought offline to reach underserved communities. Closing the digital divide is no longer optional, it is a democratic imperative for Europe's 2050 horizon.

From Local Norms to European Transformation

What began as local experimentation born of necessity has evolved into a laboratory for democratic transformation across Europe. Solidarity Cities are no longer isolated initiatives, they are interlinked through transnational networks such as Eurocities, Fearless Cities, and the Urban Citizenship Pact. Through these alliances, cities co-develop common policy frameworks, engage in peer learning, and advocate before EU institutions to amplify urban voices. Crucially, they are also pressing for structural change: the formal recognition of urban citizenship within the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This is not symbolic, it aligns Europe's legal architecture with the political reality that democracy is most alive in its cities.

Some legal scholars argue that cities increasingly exercise a delegated form of sovereignty – especially in areas where nation-states have failed to respond adequately: refugee protection, digital democracy, and climate resilience. Solidarity Cities are not passive implementers of EU directives. They are co-producing rights, designing new governance frameworks, and shaping transnational norms from below. In doing so, they co-produce not only where sovereignty resides, how it is exercised in democratic life.

This bottom-up institutional creativity questions the notion that democratic authority must flow only downward from the nation-state. Instead, it shows that authority can be horizontal, relational, and rooted in shared practice, built through coordination, deliberation, and mutual accountability among cities. This is not a technocratic adjustment; it reflects a deeper redefinition of political legitimacy and collective agency in 21st-century Europe.

The European Green Deal offers a clear example of how urban leadership is shaping continental agendas. Cities have not waited for top-down mandates, they have pushed for ambitious climate targets, aligned with the Paris Agreement, and pioneered practical frameworks such as Amsterdam's Doughnut Economics and Paris's 15-Minute City.

These are not pilot projects; they serve as blueprints for community-centered, ecologically grounded governance, already scaling through transnational alliances.

The challenge ahead is not to prove that cities matter, they already do. The task now is to institutionalize municipal agency within the EU's legal and political frameworks. Rather than granting cities formal co-decision overnight, the Union can phase this in: upgrade the Committee of the Regions from a merely consultative body by giving it assent or suspensive powers in migration, climate, and digital governance; hard-wire mandatory municipal participation in sectoral legislation and comitology; and link EU funding to partnership clauses that ensure urban and rural authorities are embedded in trans-local networks. Such reforms would not merely acknowledge existing realities, they would operationalize the city's role as a central actor in Europe's democratic future. The Committee of the Regions will audit urban-rural balance and trigger reconsideration when participation skews urban-only, ensuring subsidiarity and equity across territories.

Solidarity Cities are no longer merely reacting to crisis, they are proactively reshaping the architecture of European governance. As norm entrepreneurs, these cities are influencing broader institutional ecosystems from the ground up. Through initiatives like *Moving Cities*, more than 120 urban programs have emerged that align with EU objectives, but innovate through local experimentation and participation. These efforts have resulted in a 15% increase in inter-city policy coordination, as noted in the 2024 Eurocities Impact Assessment, and directly contributed to national-level migration reforms in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands.

Across Europe, city-led innovations now inform national and EU agendas, Berlin's Diversity Charter is emblematic. Democratic legitimacy and innovation need not flow solely from Brussels; as Seyla Benhabib argues, democratic authority rests on overlapping communities of accountability, not the nation-state alone. Legitimacy requires inclusive design: pair open channels with sortition-based citizens' assemblies (with stipends,

childcare, and transport support), hybrid offline/low-bandwidth formats, equity-weighted participatory budgeting, and mandatory reasoned responses with public dashboards to ensure participation is representative, accessible, and auditable. To ensure urban-rural parity, participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies will include outreach quotas for rural communes, with travel/childcare stipends and low-bandwidth participation guaranteed.

Simulations by the 2024 European Policy Simulation Model show that reallocating just 10% of EU cohesion funds to city-led initiatives could double integration outcomes. This would be achieved not through austerity or punitive conditionality, but through participation, care, and proximity, under a rights-based floor requiring non-discrimination, inclusive sortition-based citizens' assemblies (with stipends, childcare and transport support), and open-data accountability. Where cities fail to meet these inclusion standards, funds are reallocated within the region or released upon corrective action, ensuring that public money never underwrites exclusion.

Within this emerging framework, Germany's federal tradition shows how municipal liberalism can bridge EU-level ambitions and on-the-ground democratic renewal. Liberal municipal traditions rooted in German federalism have provided fertile ground for Solidarity Cities. Partnerships between Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich and liberal foundations as well as international city networks have accelerated policy innovation in refugee integration, digital governance, and climate adaptation. These collaborations embody civic freedom and pluralism and demonstrate how Germany's tradition of local governance can connect Europe's urban experiments to the broader liberal-democratic project. Embedding these practices in EU-wide frameworks would help German-led innovations inform a continent-wide democratic renewal.

Conclusion: The Future Starts in the City

Critics warn that stronger municipal powers could splinter sovereignty, uneven standards, or public finances. But this assumes a zero-sum city-state trade-off. In practice, complementarity works when local agility is nested in state (Länder) guardrails and EU/federal frameworks. Germany shows the design: constitutionally protected municipal self-government operating under Länder primacy, with cohesion pursued through standards, equalization, and joint tasks, an ongoing policy goal, not a settled fact.

Europe stands at a crossroads. The traditional institutions of liberal democracy, once hailed as the guardians of unity and rights, now struggle to respond to a rapidly fragmenting reality.

Across the continent, citizens feel alienated, trust is eroding, and the democratic promise grows increasingly fragile. Yet even in this climate of uncertainty, a different horizon is emerging, not from above, but from below.

Solidarity Cities offer more than symbolic hope. They rebuild democracy where it is most tangible: in daily life, in neighborhoods, and in decisions about housing, education, and climate. They democratize technology, politicize belonging, and institutionalize participation. They show that governance need not be distant, hierarchical, or exclusionary, it can be relational, proximate, and pluralist.

Democratic competence grows through participation, not passive representation. When citizens co-design policies, manage public goods, and debate priorities in spaces they inhabit, they do not merely vote, they govern. This is where identity is formed, where belonging is built, and where the future of European democracy must take root.

The path to 2050 will require deliberate milestones. By 2030, cities should move beyond mere consultation in EU law-making: working through the Committee of the Regions, introduce early-stage involvement, reasoned-opinion duties that require legislative replies, and subsidiarity/equity

checks with a reconsideration trigger when participation is skewed. By 2040, urban-citizenship principles, already tested in cities like Bologna and Ghent, could be embedded in national constitutions and backed by EU cohesion-fund incentives for inclusive implementation. These interim steps would lay the legal and institutional groundwork for full recognition of urban citizenship by mid-century, making the 2050 horizon both visionary and attainable.

By 2050, a reformed EU Charter would formally recognize urban citizenship as a complement to national citizenship. Residents in Warsaw, Athens, and surrounding rural regions access EU services via a shared civic wallet, while city and regional/rural councils hold co-decision seats on climate-mobility funds. Such recognition would not merely codify what already exists; it would state that Europe's democratic future lies not only in Brussels or national capitals, but across its cities, towns, and countryside. It would affirm that democracy is not just a legacy of the past, but a living, evolving practice rooted in proximity, inclusion, and care.

By mid-century, Europe's democratic heartbeat will be polycentric, shared by urban and rural communities alike.



Giacomo Leombruni

Italy

Giacomo Leombruni is an Italian student and activist involved in European youth organisations and liberal networks, engaged in civic and European participation. He views Europe as a space of freedom, opportunity and shared democratic values.

Legalize Freedom: Europe's Drug Policy Revolution by 2050

Introduction - The Smell of Change

It's 2050 in Berlin, where a couple sits in an outdoor café, sipping a coffee and sharing a neatly rolled cannabis cigarette. Down the street, a small kiosk sells jars of locally grown "European Heritage" cannabis, alongside fresh bread, artisan cheese, and olive oil; nobody stares, calls the police or moves away, this is simply a normal part of life, regulated, taxed, and safe. Digital screens on the kiosk provide lab results, THC/CBD content, and recommended dosages alongside age limit, therefore providing safe products to the citizens of Europe; everything is under control, balanced.

Back in 2025, this scene would have been unthinkable in most of Europe, where hundreds of thousands of people each year faced fines, criminal charges, or police records for consuming a substance less harmful than a strong whiskey, available freely in any supermarket. In fact, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 22 million Europeans aged 15–64 use cannabis annually, and almost all of it comes from the black market, worth over €30 billion per year. In essence, each year thousands end up in overcrowded prisons for carrying consistent amounts with personal use thanks to European and national policies, the same policies that are channeling billions to organized crime.

Once again, prohibition has failed. It did not protect citizens, worse, it made them more vulnerable by denying access to safe, regulated products and support systems. If Europe can stand for freedom of speech, of love, of identity, why not the freedom to choose what we consume? By 2050, this choice could become a reality; we have the chance to realize that freedom is not at odds with safety but fully integrated with it. Therefore, we now have the opportunity to take part in what could be an important revolution of our century, working for a better Europe under the name of freedom and safety.

The Patchwork Problem

The big issue that separates us from this reform is Europe's wide range of cannabis regulations, which is a confusing map of contradictions. Cross a border, and what was legal on one side of the map becomes a criminal offense on the other side. In our continent, few are the nations that are trying to change something in this market, like the Netherlands, famous for its open coffeeshops, yet still forbidding production, allowing organized crime to dominate the supply. Then we have Portugal, which decriminalized all drugs in 2001 with an impressive decrease in overdose deaths. We can also mention Germany, Malta and Luxembourg, where the policies against drugs softened with time; yet those are singular cases, because the rest of Europe remains largely under prohibition, making it hard for someone to build a business or even to move from one country to another. Sadly, this inconsistency is not unique to cannabis, it reflects a broader European struggle to harmonize policies on individual freedom and public health, something that we need to change if we want to improve our economical and social situation.

This patchwork is more than bureaucratic inconvenience: it fuels smuggling and exposes the inconsistency of our approach to freedom. A joint bought legally in Berlin can become a criminal offense just hours later in Warsaw. Similarly, a person traveling from Lisbon to Madrid risks

unknowingly crossing legal boundaries, only because we are not able to create a European policy to address this. And even in countries adopting more progressive policies, excessive bureaucracy or high taxes keep the illegal market alive. Those types of fragmentation ensure that organized crime always finds the weakest link, while citizens struggle to navigate a confusing legal landscape, without being protected and with the risk of being seen as criminals depending on which country they are in.

This complicated puzzle gives us a clear message: to achieve a Europe-wide regulated market, we must harmonize laws, ensuring not only consistency but also fairness, safety, and accessibility all over the continent. It is now obvious that the challenge is not only political, but also cultural: governments must communicate effectively with their citizens, building trust in a system that replaces criminalization with regulation.

Lessons from the World

We do not have to reinvent the wheel, countries around the globe provide evidence on what works, but also on what fails, showing us how to move in order to legalize this market. Uruguay pioneered full legalization of cannabis in 2013, controlling distribution through pharmacies, government licenses, and home cultivation limits; and, as expected, the results were impressive, with the illegal markets collapsing while tax revenue was redirected to education and public health programs. By recognizing the importance of individual freedom, Uruguay implemented a single, decisive reform, building a clear regulatory framework that supports citizens while undermining organized crime.

Canada's 2018 legalization of recreational cannabis through the *Cannabis Act* marked a significant shift in drug policy. By 2022, legal sales accounted for 64% of total cannabis consumption, up from 22% in 2018, reflecting growing public confidence in the regulated market. Similarly, in the United States, states that legalized cannabis have collectively generated over

\$20 billion in tax revenue since 2014, funding education, healthcare, and infrastructure projects. Colorado alone contributed more than \$2.3 billion, with a substantial portion allocated to schools.

The impressive economical impact was not the only achievement, with this legalization process all the fears of increased youth usage were crushed. In Colorado, youth cannabis use declined from 19.7% in 2013 to 12.8% in 2023 according to the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, 2023). By introducing these simple but effective laws the member states who decided to follow a more free and just law system managed to protect their citizens while crushing illegal markets, producing billions through tax revenues for education and health care.

As already said, learning from other countries means analyzing systems in which the legalization worked, but also systems in which it failed, such as the recent Thailand's "Weed Wild West": their uncontrolled legalization attracted many investors, which could be something good for a growing economy, but in their case they had such a fast increase on the production and selling market that they were unable to control it, facing many difficulties in international movements and youths substance use, showing that when a reform effects the entire population it needs to be slow and truly organized.

As we can see, the pattern shown by those countries is clear: when legal cannabis is safe, affordable, and well regulated, organized crime cannot profit anymore. On the other hand, over-regulation, high prices, and inconsistent laws are the ones sustaining illegal markets, as proven in Europe. Those examples show how legalization not only generates money from tax revenues, but it also allows governments to test, monitor, and educate, capabilities that are impossible under prohibition. Europe now has the chance to synthesize these lessons into a continent-wide model that maximizes freedom, public safety, and social benefit.

Europe 2050 – The Freedom Framework

If we moved in the right direction, by 2050, the European Union could operate under a unified European Drug Regulation Framework (EDRF), a EU-wide system that harmonizes the cultivation, distribution, and consumption of cannabis and other soft drugs by building a law network shared by all member states, not only simplifying the movement between those states but also setting a European view of freedom. This framework would allow citizens everywhere in Europe to have access to safe, quality-controlled products, while simultaneously contributing to the dismantling of organized crime networks that previously dominated the market. Thanks to this system, cultivation would be licensed and monitored, combining high standards of safety and sustainability with the freedom for individuals and cooperatives to participate, creating an organized free market accessible to anyone. Home cultivation could also be allowed within clear, regulated limits, striking a balance between personal liberty and public oversight.

Distribution would be transparent and accountable, a must for a consumer-oriented and protected society. Under this framework licensed shops, pharmacies, and verified online platforms would provide consumers with all the information they need, just like they did in Uruguay. THC and CBD content, lab testing results, recommended dosages, and health advisories would all be indicated in those shops. In addition, child-resistant packaging, potency guidelines, and strict age verification would ensure that products are consumed responsibly, informing all citizens about what they are consuming without limiting their freedom, just like we are doing with alcohol and cigarettes.

Even more, a coordinated EU taxation system on cannabis could redirect billions of euros into healthcare, addiction prevention, and education. At the moment, the European Union plays mainly a strategic and supportive role in these policy areas, but a shared fiscal framework would allow member states to pool part of their tax revenues into a common fund, specifically dedicated to public health and social programmes.

This could not only strengthen initiatives already in place, such as EU4Health or Erasmus+, it would also produce enough money to implement new European projects, supporting initiatives related to themes such as the sensibilization on the use of drugs or the fight to addictions. By turning a market once dominated by organized crime into a tool for collective progress, Europe could set a global standard for smart, freedom-oriented policy making. The economic impact of such a reform was proven to be impressive by economist, in fact, while the existing fragmented legal market is already projected to reach approximately €6.1 billion in 2025 (Statista), comprehensive EU-wide legalization and harmonization could elevate tax revenues to an estimated €15–20 billion according to other market analyses, which would be an immense boost for our economy.

This picture shows how legalizing cannabis would not only redirect billions from criminal networks to public coffers, but it would also create a thriving legal economy with new and legal job opportunities. From licensed growers and quality-control laboratories to retail shops, online platforms, and educational programs, the sector could employ tens of thousands of people across Europe, in times when the young generation is often scared about their future. For example, imagine small cooperatives in rural areas cultivating strains with sustainable methods, young entrepreneurs launching delivery platforms, and pharmacists or educators joining a regulated network to provide guidance and support. These are not abstract possibilities, they are concrete ways a legal market can foster innovation, social mobility, and economic resilience while reinforcing the principles of freedom and responsibility.

In this vision, cannabis could be treated much like wine: cultivated with care, enjoyed responsibly, and integrated into society with respect and oversight. By combining freedom, regulation, and investment in social welfare, Europe could demonstrate that legalizing drugs is not about promoting consumption, but about creating a safe, equitable, and enlightened approach to substances that have long been driven underground.

The Roadmap to Reality

Because of how hard and revolutionary such an ambitious reform is, it will require years of careful planning. The first phase of the project would focus on research: assessing health, economic, and criminal impacts. Pilot programs in cities such as Berlin, Lisbon, and Amsterdam could increase and improve their test regulatory models, combining licensing, taxation, and public education, trying to predict in the best way how society and markets would react to such a reform.

A harmonized approach across the EU would bring consistency and fairness to drug policies, eliminating the legal patchwork that currently fuels confusion and crime. By building on Article 114 of the TFEU, cannabis regulation could be fully integrated into the internal market, allowing member states to coordinate enforcement, share best practices, and collectively weaken organized crime networks that exploit fragmented laws, making movements less confusing and providing real support to the citizens.

Finally, the EDRF would launch as a permanent EU agency. Its objective won't be to create a new layer of bureaucracy, it would be a coordinating and supervisory body working closely with existing institutions such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). It would also establish public-private partnerships with universities, certified laboratories, and research foundations to foster innovation and ensure quality control at minimal administrative cost. We would therefore create an agency focusing on research coordination, policy evaluation, and cross-border awareness campaigns, ensuring that every euro collected from legalization is reinvested transparently and efficiently in key topics such as the public health system and education. It is obvious that success is not instantaneous, this is a gradual, evidence-driven transformation, learning from the missteps and successes of countries that pioneered legalization aiming to create a more liberal and therefore freer continent.

Facing the Fears

Skepticism is natural, and it is a reality that citizens worry about youth consumption, health risks, and societal messages because of personal experiences or beliefs. Yet evidence contradicts these fears, and our objective must be to show that evidence to the citizens, aiming to create a system that is compatible with its population. As mentioned, the examples are many, with Portugal's decriminalization showing no surge in teenage use, Canada and U.S. states reporting stable youth consumption, even as adult legal access expands. We just need to "translate" those statistics into something valuable for all citizens.

The idea is to show how regulation makes risks manageable: potency limits, strict age verification, lab testing, and school programs all reduce harm. Prohibition, on the other hand, leaves youth exposed to untested substances and criminalized communities, pouring money that could be used for health care and schools into the organized crime market. The real "wrong message" is pretending that prohibition works while prisons overflow, tax money is wasted, and young people access unsafe products.

Moreover, public campaigns can cultivate a culture of responsible consumption, similar to alcohol or tobacco, ending this taboo that surrounds drugs. Europe could pioneer a model where liberty and safety are not contradictory, but complementary.

Conclusion – Legalize Freedom

This essay is not about promoting cannabis, it is about promoting freedom, justice, and pragmatism. Europe now has the opportunity to reclaim control of a market that has long existed in shadow economies, and it existed because the citizens themselves wanted that market to exist; we can, with this reform, redirect billions to public goods, giving the possibility to set a global standard for drug policy while making everyone's life

more free and good. Europe has the chance to protect its citizens while upholding the fundamental principle that adults are capable of making responsible decisions about their own bodies, sending a message of trust to its population and breaking the ethical state system that we have.

The benefits shown in this essay are more than clear, from safety improvements to dismantling crime, but what we truly need to understand is that legalization does not mean laissez-faire indulgence, it means trust in people.

By 2050, Europe could lead the world by demonstrating that liberty and security are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing in an organized society. Imagine cities where adults enjoy substances safely, schools where children receive factual education about drugs, and rural communities thriving with cooperative cultivation initiatives. This vision, that shows how regulation and freedom can coexist, proves that smart policy creates both liberty and societal benefit.

The choice is ours: continue pretending that outdated, ineffective laws protect us, or embrace a future where freedom is legal, guided, and responsible. Europe now has the chance to legalize freedom, to finally accept the freedom of its citizens to consume what they want to consume while legalizing a black market that surrounds them, because at the end this is the main issue: people want to be free and will forever be free in a democratic system, we just need to accept it legalize what's around them, we need to legalize their freedom.



Tamirirashe Mudzingwa
Zimbabwe

Tami is a multidisciplinary professional with a passion for unlocking value and building transformative partnerships across public, private and non-profit ecosystems. He thrives on turning ideas into tangible realities, bringing a builder's mindset with a storyteller's approach to drive engagement and create lasting value.

In a multipolar world, Tami believes Europe remains strategic for Africa's economy, geopolitics and future bargaining power.

Africa and Europe – Towards Shared Prosperity in 2050

The holographic display flickered to life while Marie stood at the podium, her voice resonating through the European Parliament chamber. High powered delegations from European and African nations listened intently. It was 2050 and she was presenting the annual report on the Africa-Europe Prosperity Partnership – a collaboration that had transformed both continents over the past twenty years.

“Solar energy from the Sahara now powers 40% of European industry,” she announced, watching the statistics dance across transparent screens. “African universities produce more engineers annually than Europe and North America combined. Our joint ventures have created 200 million jobs across both continents. Migration flows freely in both directions, not as crisis, but as opportunity.”

Behind her, Adama Kone, now Mali’s Minister of Technology and Innovation, nodded approvingly. His children attended school in Paris while European students filled lecture halls in Bamako. The Mediterranean had become a bridge, not a barrier.

Marie smiled at the achievements. This was the world she had fought to build – where abundance replaced scarcity, where partnership eclipsed exploitation, where...

Suddenly, in mid-speech, an ear-piercing noise shattered her vision into pieces. That noise was her phone alarm jolting her into consciousness. Now awake in her cramped up Marseille apartment, her only vision was

the grey light of 2025 filtering through worn out curtains. At twenty-five, she was a pending unemployment statistic – the refugee centre where she worked was closing in a few months due to funding cuts. Her dream dissolved like morning mist, leaving behind the dark clouds of present reality.

Habitually, she reached for her phone, scrolling past news of another migrant boat capsizing in the Mediterranean. Twenty-three dead. Among them, perhaps, an engineer who could have changed the world.

The anxiety gnawed at her: if Europe continued on its current path, 2050 wouldn't bring the dream she had just witnessed. That bright vision of the future would be something much darker.

The Weight of History

To understand Marie's concerns and the future that haunts her sleep, we must journey backward through time – to moments that shaped the present challenges between Africa and Europe.

In 1884, in a room somewhere in Berlin, European powers gathered to “carve-up” Africa. No African voices were present but as they clamoured amongst themselves, pens and pencils sliced through African kingdoms, communities and families as casually as one slices through cake. The lines they drew would become the chains that still bind the continent today.

Effia's great-grandmother lived through the aftermath. British officials arrived in her Ghanaian village demanding taxes in currency she'd never seen, for land her family had farmed for generations. When she couldn't pay, they forced her to grow cocoa instead of the yams and plantains that fed her children. The cocoa went to ships bound for Europe, transformed into chocolate her family would never taste.

Across the Mediterranean, Hans' great-grandfather owned one of the factories where that cocoa arrived. The profits bought him a larger house, better education for his sons, and shares in more African ventures. He never questioned where his prosperity came from – silence was more convenient.

This pattern repeated itself across the continent. Gold from Ghana built banks in London. Rubber from Congo paved roads in Brussels. Diamonds from Southern Africa adorned engagement rings in Paris. Each transaction seemed fair on paper, but the wealth accumulated in European cities while African villages remained trapped in poverty.

Then came March 6, 1957. Ten-year-old Effia stood in a crowd stretching beyond her small eyes could see, watching grown men weep as Ghana's new flag rose to the apex of the pole. Red, green, and gold flew in the Atlantic breeze, and someone cried out, "Free at last!" The words rippled through thousands of voices until the streets of Accra vibrated with a single thunderous declaration.

But this freedom proved to be a mirage.

Kwame Nkrumah raised Ghana's flag believing political independence would bring economic freedom. Within a decade, he was overthrown. Patrice Lumumba lasted seventy days as Congo's first prime minister before assassination. His crime? Wanting to use Congo's mineral wealth for schools and hospitals instead of European bank accounts. Thomas Sankara transformed Burkina Faso in four years, achieving food self-sufficiency and declaring colonial debt illegitimate. His reward was a bullet in 1987.

The pattern sent a clear message: independence was acceptable, but sovereignty over resources was not.

Hans watched these events unfold as brief news segments between advertisements for products made from African materials. The contradictions never occurred to him. Why should they? His prosperity depended on his ignorance.

For Effia, now approaching eighty, these weren't distant political events, they were personal tragedies. The cocoa farms outside Kumasi still ship their harvest to European chocolate factories. The gold mines in Obuasi still send precious metal to London vaults. The university graduates in Accra still submit applications to companies headquartered in Berlin, Paris, and Amsterdam. The flag changed, the anthem changed, but the flow of wealth? That river still runs north.

Freedom had indeed been attained but it was superficial. Thus for Effia, that air once saturated with joy and victory now carried the bitter taste of disillusionment.

The Scarcity Trap

In 2000, as economists proclaimed "Africa Rising," Adama Kone was born in Bamako, Mali. His parents believed he would inherit the prosperity that independence promised but never delivered.

Twenty-five years later, Adama sits in an internet café scrolling through job listings for positions he's overqualified for but can't get. He has an engineering degree, speaks three languages fluently, and has designed water systems for rural villages. But mining companies extracting Mali's gold prefer to import European engineers for management positions, relegating Africans like him to manual labour.

The irony burns: Mali produces enough gold annually to transform its economy, but most Malians have never held a gold ornament. Mining profits flow to offshore shareholders while environmental damage and poverty remain in Mali.

Adama's options are grim: remain swimming in Mali's poverty or join thousands of young Africans making the dangerous journey across the Sahara and Mediterranean in search of hope.

This waste, multiplied across millions of young Africans, represents one of the world's greatest squandered resources. Africa's supposed demographic dividend risks becoming a demographic disaster.

The root of this dysfunction lies in how both continents think about wealth. European economic theory, shaped by centuries of competition over limited resources, treats prosperity as zero-sum: more for you means less for me. This scarcity mindset justified colonialism and continues to shape trade relationships today.

Hans embodied this thinking for decades. His cocoa imports from Ghana were profitable precisely because Ghanaian farmers remained poor. Higher prices would eat into his margins, so keeping producers weak seemed rational. He never considered that wealthier African consumers might buy more German products, creating bigger markets for everyone.

When Lumumba tried to claim Congo's copper for Congolese development, European leaders saw it as theft of "their" resources. When Sankara rejected debt payments, creditors saw it as stealing money they were "owed." The possibility that shared prosperity could benefit everyone never entered the calculation.

This scarcity thinking creates self-fulfilling prophecies. European firms keep African suppliers dependent to maintain low costs. African countries remain poor and can't afford European goods. European markets stagnate. African frustration grows. Migration increases. Political tensions rise. Everyone loses.

Meanwhile, reality forces change whether both sides are ready or not. China has become Africa's largest trading partner. Russia provides military support. Unable to find opportunities in Mali's French-dominated economy, Adama is learning Mandarin and applying for Chinese scholarships. The language of opportunity is changing.

Europe's traditional dominance is withering. Marie sees this clearly at the refugee centre: Europe can either evolve its relationship with Africa or watch others fill the vacuum. Her generation understands that their continent's future prosperity depends on getting this relationship right.

Hans, now over eighty, admits it's time Europe considered humility as a strategy or risk irrelevance in a multipolar world.

The Abundance Alternative

But what if the entire relationship were rebuilt from a different premise? What if Africa and Europe approached each other assuming abundance rather than scarcity?

The Sahara Desert receives more solar energy in six hours than the world consumes in a year. Properly harnessed, this energy could power both continents while creating millions of jobs. Instead of competing over finite fossil fuels, they could collaborate on infinite renewable energy.

Africa's vast agricultural potential could feed both continents while providing livelihoods for hundreds of millions. Instead of dumping subsidized European food that destroys African agriculture, Europe could invest in farming technology and infrastructure, creating bigger markets for European agricultural equipment and expertise.

Africa's young population and Europe's aging demographics aren't problems to be managed, they're complementary assets to be leveraged. African workers could fill European labour shortages while European experience could accelerate African development. Migration could become a blessing, not a crisis.

By 2050, Africa's population is expected to exceed 2.5 billion – mostly young, educated, and connected. Europe's population will be three times smaller and older, economically stagnant without new sources of growth and labour.

These demographics create both opportunity and risk. If Europe invests genuinely in African education, innovation, and infrastructure today, it gains 2.5 billion partners, consumers, and collaborators by 2050. If not: instability, migration pressures, and shrinking global influence.

The choice is binary: genuine partnership or gradual decline.

Embracing abundance requires both continents to turn their backs on zero-sum competition and march towards positive-sum collaboration. Europe must consider lower margins on African resources in exchange for larger markets and genuine partnership. Africa must move beyond grievance politics to focus on building mutually beneficial relationships.

This vision revives the unfinished agendas of Lumumba and Sankara. Their lives were cut short, but their ideals remain vital. An abundance-based partnership honours their legacies, transforming their dreams into tangible realities.

For Effia, abundance thinking is the legacy she wishes to leave. For Adama, it's the future he desperately needs. For Hans, it offers redemption for a lifetime of unconscious exploitation. For Marie, it's the chance to bridge the gap with her peers across the Mediterranean. Although they might never meet, their lives are connected by invisible cords, in ways they might never conceive.

The good news is that there's traction.

Despite historical baggage and current tensions, examples of genuine partnership are emerging. European renewable energy initiatives partner with African governments on solar and wind projects benefiting both continents. Young professionals like Marie and Adama are building relationships that transcend their grandparents' colonial history.

These developments remain small-scale, but they point toward possibilities – the very possibilities that haunt Marie's dreams and fuel her anxiety...

Vision 2050

Once again, Marie stares at her phone screen; the image of the capsized boat; twenty-three dead. She thinks of those she meets at the refugee centre, much like Adama – brilliant, hopeful, frustrated. She thinks of her grandfather, who worked in the Marseille port where ships arrived carrying African cocoa, coffee, and minerals for decades, building her family's middle-class comfort through invisible global connections.

Marie closes her eyes and sees the choice clearly: Europe can continue its current path – high margins, low wages, migration tensions and waning global influence or it can choose transformation. Not out of charity, but out of recognition that its future depends on getting this relationship right.

The dream returns to her. In her mind, she sees Adama crossing the Mediterranean not on an overcrowded boat but on a high-speed train, traveling freely for trade and cultural exchange. She sees Effia's grandchildren inheriting the prosperity independence once promised. Hans' factories are transformed into African-European joint ventures. She envisions her dreams shaped into reality if her generation chooses abundance over scarcity, partnership over exploitation, wisdom over wilful ignorance.

The holographic displays and prosperity reports were fantasy. But the choice between futures is real.

Marie begins to type: "An open letter to European leaders: Why our future depends on Africa's present..."

Outside her window, the Mediterranean stretches endlessly – still a barrier, but perhaps not forever. Marie types faster, her words flowing across the screen – a bridge being built, one keystroke at a time, across the divide between what is and what could be...

Twenty-five years until 2050. Time enough to choose wisely. Time enough to build the dream. Time enough to make it work.



Fungai Mutimodyo

Zimbabwe

Fungai Mutimodyo is a journalism lecturer, freelance reporter and human rights activist committed to ethical storytelling and social change. She mentors aspiring journalists while contributing to human rights discourse. A Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Womentorship alumna and local coordinator for African Students for Liberty, she reports from Zimbabwe, drawing on European values of democracy, equality and sustainability to amplify marginalised voices and promote justice.

A New Vision, Europe Africa Collaboration Advancing Democracy and Rights

It begins with a single story. Not the kind that makes headlines for its shock value, but the quiet, persistent truth that seeps into the cracks of a society and slowly, relentlessly, changes everything.

Imagine a Europe and Africa bound not by treaties inked in boardrooms, but by the electric current of independent journalism, stories told boldly, without fear or favor, across borders and languages. In this world, journalism is not just a profession; it is the pulse of freedom and democracy, a living force that shapes destinies and topples walls.

Picture a young journalist in Lagos, her fingers flying across a battered keyboard as she pieces together evidence of corruption siphoning funds from a rural health project. Her story, published by a pan-African-European digital newsroom, ignites a chain reaction. In Warsaw, a student reads her exposé and recognizes echoes of his own city's struggles with transparency. In Marseille, a retired engineer donates to a grassroots watchdog group inspired by her courage. In Nairobi, a local councilor, shamed by the glare of public scrutiny, pushes for reforms.

This is not fiction. It is the future we can build one where journalism is the connective tissue between continents, the bridge over the chasms of history and misunderstanding. Here, the Europe-Africa partnership is not a slogan but a living network of storytellers, fact-checkers, and citizen

witnesses. Their stories travel at the speed of light, but their impact is measured in the slow, steady heartbeat of democracy: a new law passed, an election made fairer, a voice once silenced now heard.

A young mind in rural Malawi, Chiseka Village, armed with nothing but a radio set, waiting for the hourly news to garner inspiration and be connected to the broader world. The only success story he has ever heard is that of a distant cousin who has travelled overseas. Here, independent journalism has the power to shift perspectives. It is vital for young people to see a future for themselves in Africa, in both rural and urban areas. A bright young mind deep in the heart of Germany, discerning the right solution for this specific area, turns to that journalist he knows. His voice, full of promise and the charisma of his age, seeps through the radio set, igniting hope.

Journalism as a catalyst

In this world, journalism is fiercely independent, yet deeply collaborative. Newsrooms in Berlin and Dakar swap leads and share data, using artificial intelligence not to manipulate, but to uncover hidden truths and patterns of injustice. Algorithms are trained not on clickbait, but on the values of accuracy, fairness, and the public good. Every story is a thread in a vast, intricate tapestry of accountability. A tapestry that cannot be unraveled by censorship or propaganda.

There is not one solution, one plan, one best way of achieving the greatest Europe 2050. The faceless force with undeniable power, independent journalism remains. Something that has a record of never failing. It makes us hear our tomorrow today. Not just simplified versions or vague hints. A future not hidden in figures or scientific terms. One that leaves people to choose their path, no jargon, no unnecessary statistics, just the full story, who, what, when and how.

Freedom is not an abstraction here. It is the right of a farmer in Zimbabwe to know where her taxes go. It is the right of a teenager in Athens to question his leaders without fear of reprisal. It is the daily act of journalists, seasoned and new, who refuse to look away when power abuses power, who shine a light in the darkest corners and refuse to let the truth be buried.

A democratic Africa would be the most natural equal partner for Europe. Without press, there is not much freedom or democracy to talk about. Independent journalism is the crucial plug powering this future partnership, championing Africa's journey toward full democracy. Now more than ever investing in journalism that nurtures critical thinking is vital. Journalists who read between the lines in spaces, fact checkers who ask the right questions and reporters immersed in every pivotal space, working in collaboration across the two continents. This partnership extends beyond strengthening transparency in government to include a united front against disinformation, ensuring that truth prevails in the public sphere. Together these efforts amplify Africa's voice, enabling it to stand as an equal partner alongside Europe in shaping a shared, democratic 2050.

Democracy, too, is not just a word. It is the living, breathing outcome of a society that values information over ignorance, debate over doctrine, and participation over passivity. When journalism thrives, so does democracy. When stories are told honestly and bravely, citizens are empowered to act, not as subjects, but as stewards of their own destinies.

Challenges and Resilience

But this future is not inevitable. The forces of censorship, disinformation, and intimidation are real. Imagine a world where a single tweet can unleash a storm of hate, where deepfakes muddy the waters of reality, where journalists are threatened for doing their jobs. This is the shadow side of our digital age, and it is why the fight for independent journalism

is the fight for freedom itself. Yet hope persists. Across Europe and Africa, new generations are rising, digital natives who wield smartphones as both shield and sword. They form networks, share encrypted tips, and build platforms that outpace censors. They are relentless in their pursuit of truth, and they know that the story is never truly over. Every revelation sparks another question, another investigation, another step toward justice.

In this future, journalism is not just about reporting the news. It is about creating the conditions for freedom and democracy to flourish. It is about giving voice to the voiceless, holding the powerful to account, and reminding us that our stories are interconnected. One story can inspire a movement. One truth can topple a regime. One voice can change the world.

As dusk falls over a city square, be it in Lisbon or Kigali, a crowd gathers, not for a protest, but for a public reading of stories uncovered by journalists from both continents. They listen, they debate, they imagine new possibilities. In these moments, the line between fiction and reality blurs, and the power of storytelling becomes undeniable.

In the buzzing control rooms of Europe 2050, the brightest minds work tirelessly to keep the continent powered not just by clean energy grids or advanced technologies, but by the indispensable current flowing from independent journalism. Journalism serves as the essential plug, the steady charge connecting citizens to democracy, transparency, and action.

The persistence of truthful voices, fearless in telling stories with clarity and depth, is what makes liberal democracy thrive. It is not secrecy or stifling jargon that fosters freedom; it is the open conversation that journalism makes possible. It illuminates the who, what, where, when, and how, not merely the raw data of policy, but the human stories beneath.

In 2050, journalists don't merely report facts; they unravel the tangled wires of misinformation circulating in digital shadows. They expose complex power dynamics, challenge official narratives, and fight disinformation with the rigor of cyber-knights on the frontlines of the information age. Through their investigative work, they hold governments

accountable, ensuring transparency and integrity in decision-making. Europe's liberal values, open markets, human rights, cooperation, are maintained not only through legal frameworks or economic treaties but through continuous public engagement and vigilance. Independent journalism is the lifeblood that sustains these ideals

Future of Democracy

Without freedom of expression, democracy risks becoming a hollow process, distant from citizens' lived realities. The continuity of free press, robust inquiry, and fact-based storytelling ensures that policies reflect the public interest and that citizens' voices shape their futures. The importance of independent journalism extends beyond Europe's boundaries. The crucial partnership between Europe and Africa finds one of its strongest channels in free, collaborative media ecosystems. Newsrooms from Accra to Amsterdam share raw information, expertise, and insights that transform international relations into human narratives.

This partnership combats the lingering legacies of mistrust, colonial narratives, and stereotypes by presenting nuanced perspectives powered by local journalists. African journalists lead in defining their realities with complexity and dignity, while European counterparts expand their understanding beyond simplistic headlines. Coordinated media initiatives, fact-checking networks, and joint investigative projects expose falsehoods that could otherwise fracture trust, hinder cooperation, or destabilize democratic processes. The shared commitment to truthful reporting forms a critical foundation for the equitable partnership envisioned for 2050.

Independent journalism operates as a real-time translator for government actions and policies translating bureaucracy into stories with meaning, consequence, and urgency. As digital governance increases data availability, journalists distill intricate legislation and technical language into accessible narratives for the public. This role is vital to strengthen

accountability. Investigative reports on financial management, procurement contracts, or environmental decisions empower citizens to demand integrity. Crowd sourced journalism initiatives further amplify voices monitoring local governments, making democracy more participatory and less hierarchical.

In turn, governments learn to anticipate and welcome oversight, seeing transparency not as a threat but as a partnership with informed publics. This culture of openness supports not only functional democracies but fosters innovation in policy-making, responsive to real societal needs.

Beyond political oversight, journalism sustains the very social fabric of liberal Europe through storytelling that captures diversity, ambition, and resilience. Newsrooms tell stories of ordinary people entrepreneurs, activists, farmers, and artists who shape everyday realities. The collaborative journalism ecosystem, from metro dailies to independent podcasts and interactive platforms, brings these stories to life, linking communities across geographic and socio-economic divides. This shared knowledge enriches the collective understanding that democracy depends upon.

Stories of African clean tech innovation inspire European audiences adapting to climate challenges. Profiles of European social enterprises resonate with African youth developing grassroots economic solutions. These narratives build empathy, shared purpose, and a sense of global citizenship.

Europe-Africa Media Partnership

As Africa and Europe deepen their ties, independent journalism plays an indispensable role in demystifying complex agreements, highlighting opportunities, and spotlighting obstacles. Europe and Africa deepen their economic ties not merely through formal agreements, but through an interconnected web of storytelling and journalism that brings transparency

and accountability to the forefront. Independent journalism acts as a bridge, connecting diverse experiences from the bustling markets of Lagos to the innovation hubs in Berlin. By exposing both opportunities and challenges within economic partnerships, journalism empowers citizens, policymakers, and businesses with knowledge rooted in real-world impact. This dynamic flow of information nurtures trust, facilitates dialogue, and fuels collaborations that go beyond trade, encompassing technology transfer, sustainable development and shared social progress.

Moreover, the economic partnership flourishes when media cooperation supports the exchange of expertise and amplifies local innovations that might otherwise remain invisible. Journalists play a pivotal role in capturing stories of resilience and adaptation, such as African climate solutions inspiring European green initiatives or joint ventures in digital services enhancing connectivity. Through sustained media collaboration training, shared platforms, and mutual protections for press freedom the relationship becomes resilient, anchored in mutual respect and a shared vision for prosperity. This narrative driven connection ensures that economic ties between Europe and Africa are not static contracts but living partnerships built on informed societies and empowered citizens. It helps citizens and businesses grasp the terms of trade deals, the benefits of market integration, and the stakes of regulatory reforms.

Journalists profile entrepreneurs on both continents, narrating innovations in manufacturing, agriculture, and digital services that benefit from cooperation. This storytelling humanizes big economic data, translating the abstract into concrete realities that foster trust and optimism. Moreover, journalism spotlights skills exchanges: European experts learning African climate adaptation techniques, African innovators adopting EU clean tech advances illustrating mutual benefit and shared progress in the partnership.

Ongoing and emerging challenges may persist with economic pressures, political interference, digital platform monopolies, and shrinking public trust threatening sustainability. To keep the plug firmly connected, Europe and Africa continues to invest in diverse funding models that support

editorial independence. Legal protections that shield journalists from censorship or intimidation, tech innovations that safeguard privacy, combat harassment, and enable secure communication. Education that nurtures journalistic skills is attuned to future challenges. A Europe 2050.

Cross-continental cooperation enhances these efforts. Joint training programs, journalist exchanges, and shared digital infrastructures building resilience and professional standards. Media literacy campaigns empower citizens to discern quality journalism and support trustworthy outlets. This civic engagement is a key line of defense against fragmentation and misinformation.

In 2050, the impact of independent journalism is tangible daily. Citizens access clear, reliable reporting on health initiatives, climate adaptation measures, urban development projects, and social justice campaigns. Media platforms are interactive, enabling dialogue between reporters, experts, and the public. From urban centers to remote villages, community radio and digital networks ensure local stories feed into continental conversations, empowering populations previously marginalized from mainstream discourse.

Journalism shapes not only what people know but how they engage in stimulating participation in elections, community forums, and policy consultations. It's helping them navigate a fast-changing world with confidence and agency. As Europe looks toward 2050, the most advanced technologies and infrastructures alone cannot secure liberal democracy's future. The true power lies in the continued vitality of independent journalism, the plug that energizes informed citizenship, government transparency, and equitable partnerships.

Journalism: The Pulse of Democracy

The media's role in Europe and Africa's shared story is profoundly facilitating a free exchange not only of goods and services but of knowledge, values, and aspirations. It is the human current that flows beneath the circuits of progress, ensuring that democracy remains vibrant, inclusive, and adaptive.

In a world awash with complexity and misinformation, journalism must never go silent. Its pulse is the steady heartbeat of freedom, connection, and hope a switch that keeps the lights on for every citizen to find their path and shape a future worth living. This is the world I believe in, a world where journalism is the beating heart of freedom and democracy, where every story matters, and where the future is written not by the powerful, but by those brave enough to tell the truth. And as long as there are stories to tell, there will be hope for a freer, more democratic world.



Ahmet Öztopkara

Turkey

Ahmet is a senior Philosophy student at Middle East Technical University. He is 24 years old and has been a member of the 3H Movement (Turkey's first liberal youth association) for over four years, where he has served in various roles including Secretary General and International Officer. He also works part-time as a journalist and occasionally contributes opinion pieces to various outlets.

Reverse Mentorship 2050: Lessons for Europe's Future from Kyiv to Belgrade

It's the year 2050, and Europe is facing a profound paradox. Once the cradle of freedom, social justice, and prosperity, Europe has now fallen prey to populism, nationalism, and worn-out institutions. The world is now looking at Europe, once the primary champion of liberal values, with questioning and critical eyes. Values that cherish individuals simply because they are individuals, such as the rule of law, human dignity, and pluralism, are now being questioned by European citizens as well. But the paradox begins here: freedom has not vanished or disappeared from Europe. Freedom is no longer in Brussels or Berlin, at the heart of Europe, but in Kyiv and Belgrade, cities that have been waging an honorable struggle for liberal values for decades, carrying this struggle to their streets and even to the front lines. Only one question remains: Will Europe learn from the struggles around it to uphold its values?

Today, there is no doubt that liberalism faces serious challenges. This is most evident in Europe, the bastion of liberal values. The rise of populism and a shift to far-right politics are eroding Western institutions, established on centuries-old foundations that have fostered social and individual liberties. In a globalizing world, economic systems have never been independent of one another, and crises such as global pandemics and incessant armed conflicts can destabilize economies. In the face of this situation, populist and far-right leaders who adopt a policy based on the

distinction between friend and enemy claim to be acting on behalf of their people by creating an enemy (immigrants, of course) for themselves, from Paris to Budapest, from Rome to Berlin.

Meanwhile, the new generation of European citizens, who have grown up prosperous under liberal values for centuries, who have experienced liberal values from birth, and who, fortunately, have not had to struggle for them, have the privilege of living politically indifferent lives, and they blame liberalism for the loss of prosperity they experience due to the major problems created by authoritarian states globally.

Although, the historical evidence is not that far away, the lessons learned from the loss of millions of lives three or four generations ago and the costs of achieving these entrenched liberal values have been forgotten. In addition, the European Union, which successfully resisted the authoritarianism, dictatorship and oppression that came with the 20th century with its strong institutions, seems disconnected from the people today because it cannot provide the order it once promised with its lengthy procedures, agreements and new laws. The younger generation, having lost their enthusiasm and grappling with inequality and environmental problems, views liberal values as the root of their problems rather than embracing them. The idea of freedom that held the continent together has now become an empty promise offered by elites disconnected from society to lull the public.

While this is the case in the Western world, a very different example of struggle is unfolding in neighboring countries, where individuals have lived for years under authoritarian and oppressive regimes, forcibly swayed from liberal values, the rule of law, pluralism, and democracy. There is a widespread mass struggle, particularly in Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, and Turkey, that has been ongoing for decades, to defend and embrace liberal values. The far-right and populist political atmosphere that has increased, especially after the COVID-19, in Western European countries, which are always cited as epitomes of liberal values, is being followed with astonishment by individuals from countries that have been part of the freedom struggle against authoritarian states for years.

In Serbia, people have repeatedly taken to the streets against corruption, electoral manipulation, and rising authoritarianism. In Turkey, the history of the struggle for civil and political liberties has continued for over fifty years through civil society and public movements. The Ukrainian people are perhaps paying the heaviest price for their freedom as they fight for independence. A protester in Tbilisi holding a battered EU flag tells a more powerful story than any treaty signed in Brussels. It reminds us that freedom is most treasured where it is most at risk. However, this struggle serves as an example to their Western neighbors. They are writing a story of heroism, willing to sacrifice their lives for their independence and liberal values. The ultimate guardian of freedom is the individual, and unlike the EU, these countries exhibit an instinctive commitment to freedom of their own. This is precisely why, by 2050, we are likely to see an EU that examines the achievements of its neighbors' struggles for freedom and questions where it has lost its commitment to the rule of law, social justice, and pluralism.

Imagine Europe in 2050. The countries once cited by opposition groups, as examples of their prominent countries returning to their former glory, are no longer Brussels or Berlin, but Ankara, Belgrade, or Tbilisi. The slow and aging institutions of lawmaking and enforcement must be replaced by a more dynamic EU that draws lessons from neighboring countries and demonstrates this capability with tangible reforms. The European Union, a liberal democratic project based on pluralism, the rule of law, and the value of the individual, may need to learn from the struggles for freedom experienced in neighboring countries to sustain this future.

Where freedom is most severely tested, it is also most deeply valued. Liberal values, the achievements of the struggle for freedom that emerged from places where opposition resulted in imprisonment, death, or exile, and the adjustments individuals made to preserve these gains, along with the stories of heroism that emerged from this situation, may inspire future EU citizens, not only to understand how the founders of these values were gradually led to abandon them, but also to better understand the value of the freedoms they once sacrificed for a secure life under the influence of populism or the authoritarianism of the far-right.

By 2050, the story of Europe may be a tale of reverse mentorship where lessons on resilience, civic engagement, and liberal renewal flow not from the West to the East, but from the streets of Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Belgrade back to Brussels. Liberalism's most significant characteristic, distinguishing it from other ideologies, is its dynamic and changing nature. It can be shaped by the active norms of society and has the most rapid capacity to take action. This potential future is not supposed to be depressing but instead hopeful for liberal democracy. The stories written by those who sacrificed their lives to protect their freedom demonstrate that liberalism is not stable and static, but vibrant and ever-renewing. The EU will provide the best answer to the globally trending fairy tales that the far-right constantly cite, such as the implausible ideas that the European Union is not working, has finished, and European integration is impossible. They will do this by listening to their neighbors, by forming a solidarity network with the people who have fought against authoritarianism for liberal teachings, and, if necessary, by remembering how to fight for freedom and bringing the dreamed-of European liberal democracy to life.

In shaping Europe's future, the biggest question that needs to be answered, from the smallest building block of society, the individual, to state institutions, is: has the end of history truly arrived? Approaching this question with a presupposition of "yes" unfortunately means overlooking the dynamism and change inherent in liberal ideology. This, in turn, will likely lead to problems like far-right and populist politics, which I mentioned earlier, by 2050. While there are still twenty-five years to go to prevent these problems, taking the right steps can ensure that the image that comes to mind when we think of Europe today is preserved.

First and foremost, the European Union must carefully embrace the innovative nature of liberalism. The top-down approach, coupled with the Kantian understanding of policymaking and legislative enactment, often results in long bureaucratic cycles such as the EU's delayed response to migration crises or its fragmented stance on climate policy which are difficult to explain to the public. Instead, Europe must learn from the struggles in its neighboring countries. This means opening political dialogue with civil society actors in Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia,

and the Balkans through structured forums, joint research initiatives, and EU-funded cultural and educational exchange programs that foster mutual understanding. Europe's liberal future should not be considered independently of Tbilisi, Kyiv, or Ankara. The voices emerging from these countries, perhaps rarely heard today, will take their place on the dust-free shelves of history as cries for freedom that should serve as models for Europe's liberal democracy in the future.

Secondly, Europe must invest in increasing dialogue between its neighbours and young people. Fortunately, young people in Western Europe, who were not born into the struggle for freedom, can learn much about protecting freedom from their peers living in border countries who took to the streets to understand the value of their freedoms and fought against authoritarianism. Instead of romanticizing these street movements in Serbia or Georgia, the EU together with its member states should be recognized and supported through educational programs, exchange networks, and digital platforms that enable young Europeans to learn from one another. Ultimately, a continent that truly values freedom should create spaces where its youngest citizens shape narratives together, beyond national borders.

Thirdly, Europe must embark on a new revolution in storytelling. The European Union is undoubtedly a unique project, and this project has achieved many successes, both economically and through treaties. From Lisbon to Athens, there is unprecedented integration. However, what motivates people and compels them to take action is the narrative behind it. While it is undeniable that this success has been achieved through the enactment of laws and regulations, the question of how and what was achieved will unfortunately remain unclear to the public without an effective storyteller. One of the biggest problems is that European citizens currently fail to recognize their immense privileges compared to the rest of the world. The liberal values implemented during the achievement of these distinctions are not recognized by the public. To address this, Europe must better explain how it succeeded by using social media, public education, and cultural initiatives to tell the story of liberal democracy's concrete achievements. At the same time, the heroic struggle waged in

Kyiv and the slogans put forth by young people against authoritarianism in Tbilisi are part of the price Europe has paid for liberal democracy, a shared legacy. It is essential to properly evaluate this legacy, to recount the struggles waged today, and to present a compelling narrative, as well as to demonstrate how liberal achievements and the ideology of freedom can be applied across the European continent today.

Fourthly, Europe must not succumb to the arrogance of “we have succeeded.” There is always a struggle for freedom, and this struggle may be in a neighboring country, sometimes within its own country, or sometimes overseas, but the continuity of the struggle is one of the most crucial building blocks of liberalism’s dynamism. Learning from others is not a weakness, but a significant strength. Ultimately, Europe’s embrace of its freedom is linked to its capacity for self-criticism, its renewal, and its dynamism. A Europe, seeking to uphold its founding philosophy and moral purpose, must first acknowledge the current situation and engage in greater dialogue with its neighbours, where liberal values are being fought for. Because the European Union is a solidly founded structure capable of solving potential future problems well in advance by demonstrating to its own society the consequences of the loss of liberal democracy and by adapting to the transformations of the age.

As a result, by 2050, Europe will face two distinct paths. Either Europe will succumb to populism, nationalism, and tired institutions, or it will listen to its neighbors and embrace its founding values with greater dynamism, remaining a symbol of freedom to the rest of the world while preserving its proud legacy. Europe has not lost its commitment to liberty; freedom still exists in the streets of Tbilisi, Kyiv, or Belgrade. The answer to this paradox lies in whether Europe can learn from these struggles. Liberalism’s strength lies not in perfect stability; rather, it stems from its capacity to offer diverse solutions to the various crises that arise over time. If Europe embraces this dynamism, it can rebuild a sense of shared purpose among the people, rather than making empty promises. If this is achieved, liberal values will emerge not as abstract products crafted by elites, but as concrete achievements fought for a common goal. If Europe dares to humbly confront its weaknesses, connect with those fighting for freedom

on its borders, and invest in a new culture of solidarity, it can once again become the epicenter of liberal democracy. Europe's story is not yet over; it is still being written. The question is whether it will be one of surrender or regression, or one of courage, renewal, and hope.

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Moadh Qarouani

Morocco

Moadh Qarouani is a Moroccan political science student at UM6P whose work focuses on governance, education policy, and youth rights. He has participated in several international academic and professional programs and has advocated for education in global forums. He cares about Europe because its democratic heritage offers principles and practices that continue to guide his research and long-term vision for public policy.

The Sentimental Contract: Feeling Our Way into Europe's Future

We feel our way into the future. Feelings decide whether we lean into a timeline or walk away. Pride or humiliation, hope or resentment: these emotions can be a compass, guiding us toward a future worth choosing. To hold a vision of Europe's tomorrow is to recognise that these emotional undercurrents are not private moods but part of the informational fabric of public reasoning. Institutions endure not for their structural elegance, but because they cultivate trust, an achievement that is inherently emotional. In this sense, feelings are not peripheral to politics, but they are its currency. They shape how markets function, how legitimacy is sustained, and how belonging is felt. A vision of an institution that ignores recognition, dignity, and social esteem will find itself destabilised by the very people it leaves unseen. Public reasoning cannot be separated from emotional resonance, and institutions must not only be just in their logic but affirming in their effect. In uncertain times, it is trust, earned and renewed, that offers the most durable architecture for a collective future.

Emotions are not distractions from reasoned debate; they are what make it possible. Pride invites participation, recognition deepens loyalty, and trust is not the result of good policy, it is policy. Liberal democracies endure not because they are efficient but because they are felt, they affirm dignity, reward contribution, and create belonging. If Europe forgets this and builds only for logic, it risks institutions that feel distant or hostile. A future imagined without emotional resonance will be fragile, no matter how rational it looks on paper. Liberal democracy cannot survive through

procedures alone, it must be lived as legitimate in the daily lives of ordinary people. Progress cannot be measured only in machines or data; it must also be measured in how societies learn to feel together, to recognize one another, and to turn empathy into shared life. Throughout history, emotions have driven revolutions and liberation, showing that the pulse of progress is as emotional as it is rational. If Europe imagines its future only through technology or power, it mistakes the tool for the goal. Meaning, not machinery, sustains civilisation. One need only recall the women who filled the streets of Paris in 1945 to vote for the first time, when democracy was not merely procedure but recognition made visible and felt.

Europe's political imagination has always grown as much out of philosophy as out of power. The path to 2050 was shaped not only by new challenges but by the foundational ideas that once gave meaning to political life. For generations, Europe learned that sovereignty is not grounded in force but in a pact freely made between citizens. It is a form of recognition, where each person, no matter how humble, holds equal dignity and gives legitimacy to the collective. Yet this vision left a question that continues to test modern democracies: how does recognition endure in societies shaped by difference? Over time, it became clear that democracy weakens not only under tyranny but when emotions are misdirected. When fear, resentment, or shame replace empathy, solidarity begins to erode. We saw this when migrants were called "swarms" or "contaminants," words that erased their dignity and turned difference into threat. In such moments, the social contract was no longer a bond but a script, followed in form but empty in meaning. Rules alone could not create belonging when they were not supported by shared emotion. This also revealed the limits of older notions of unity, which can silence difference instead of embracing it.

During the mid-twenty-first century, the "Sentimental Contract" emerged, a new social covenant that built legitimacy not only on rules but on feelings of recognition and love that turned diversity into community rather than threat. Just as disgust could be wrongly projected onto groups, love could be expanded into civic life. Not the private love we keep for family and friends, but a civic love that moves outward toward strangers, binding people together in recognition and care. Love as a civic emotion does not

erase difference but weaves it into a shared story. It asks us to see the stranger not as danger but as part of who we are. Without this emotional foundation, freedom and rights risk sounding abstract. If people feel tolerated but never embraced, democracy becomes cold. In 2050, Europe learned that extending empathy and love across religion, class, gender, and origin did not make it sentimental but stronger, because belonging became something citizens felt as much as they knew. This contract did not replace the older social contract of law and duty but added to it by connecting legality with recognition. The first contract created order through rules, while the second created belonging through dignity. Rules could exclude or restrict minorities, but dignity spoke to everyone and could not be withheld. In this vision, rights without feelings were empty, because a citizen who has equality in theory but feels invisible in daily life is not truly included. The sentimental contract gives freedom a new meaning: not just as the absence of domination, but as the presence of recognition. This sentimental contract rests on three duties: justice you can feel, recognition you can see, and care you can use. Together they redefined freedom itself as the lived sense of belonging in democracy.

The first duty of the sentimental contract is “justice you can feel,” where rules and decisions are not only fair in principle but also experienced as fair in daily life. Between 2025 and 2050, Europe slowly began to understand that justice was not only about law or procedure but also about how people felt when they faced institutions. The idea of a sentimental contract grew during these years, meaning that rights were not only written on paper but also lived in real experiences. In 2025, many citizens, especially minorities, felt justice was distant and cold, something that treated them like numbers instead of human beings. European institutions were too focused on efficiency and forgot about the emotional side of people, which made them lose legitimacy. Over time, this changed when courts became places of dignity, and judges were trained not only in law but also in how to communicate with care. They explained trials in simple language, and even when someone lost a case, they left feeling respected. Governments began publishing a yearly “Fairness Report,” showing not only budgets or growth but how many citizens felt

recognised, how many humiliations were prevented, and how much trust was restored. Humiliation itself came to be understood as a civic wound, a violation that could damage democracy deeply. When someone was denied housing or assistance without reason, it was no longer seen as an administrative mistake but as a failure of dignity that had to be repaired. Institutions were redesigned with this in mind. Welfare offices had workers trained to listen with empathy, and schools created spaces where students could speak freely. Storytelling became part of the justice system, with testimonies kept in public archives so that laws remained close to lived experience. Justice appeared not only in courtrooms but in hospitals, social offices, and border-crossings, where citizens were treated as equals and decisions were explained clearly. What began as reform became transformation. By 2050, justice in Europe was no longer defined by correctness alone but by how it was felt. The sentimental contract gave the law a new soul, one where fairness was measured not only by procedure but by dignity.

The second duty of the sentimental contract is “recognition you can see,” the visible proof that belonging is real and not only promised. In 2050, Europe discovered that recognition had to move beyond abstract rights or ceremonial speeches. People needed to see themselves in the story of Europe, and when they did not, trust collapsed. In 2025, many young people and minorities felt that democracy spoke a language that excluded them. Europe preached equality, yet the faces in textbooks, monuments, and parliaments reflected only a narrow part of its society. Over the following decades, this began to change. The sentimental contract turned recognition into a civic practice that shaped the spaces people inhabited each day. Cities created “The Mirrors,” living digital walls displaying the languages, contributions, and cultural presence of residents, ensuring that no group remained unseen. Parliaments introduced rotating citizens’ assemblies where ordinary people spoke and their words were streamed across Europe, making participation a democratic ritual. Schools stopped teaching history only from books and connected to neighbourhood archives through a continental Memory Cloud, allowing children to trace how their families’ stories shaped Europe’s journey. Recognition

also entered architecture. Metro stations, bridges, and squares were renamed after workers, artists, and care-givers whose labour had once gone unnoticed. Hospitals and courts displayed transparency boards that revealed how decisions were made and whose voices were missing, turning visibility into accountability. Public squares became Commons of Belonging, where light installations intertwined the voices of multiple generations and cultures, creating shared remembrance that could be walked through and touched. Recognition became part of daily life, not a speech but a sight, not a claim but a presence. By mid-century, recognition had become the second foundation of the sentimental contract, ensuring that no one lived unseen. Democracy had gained a face that was plural, ordinary, and human.

The third duty of the sentimental contract is “care you can use,” services that do not humiliate but provide real security. In 2025, many Europeans experienced welfare, healthcare, or migration systems as cold machinery, waiting rooms where people felt small, or offices where a single missing paper could strip away dignity. Care was treated as charity, fragile and conditional, rather than as the foundation of democracy. This neglect produced humiliation, and humiliation was not a private wound but a civic fracture. It ate away at trust and left citizens feeling unseen. Over time, the sentimental contract transformed care from a welfare programme into an infrastructure of belonging. Care became as essential as roads or energy grids. Hospitals were evaluated not just by medical outcomes but by the emotional dignity they preserved. Border stations opened care corridors where newcomers were greeted not only by guards but also by mediators who offered translation, food, and a hand of welcome. For many, the first moment on European soil was no longer suspicion but recognition. Schools also changed when “care hours” were built into the curriculum so that listening to students was as important as teaching them, making voice itself a right in education. Public digital systems used gentle algorithms to detect bad feelings, triggering outreach from civic workers who visited or called. Across Europe, governments began publishing annual Care Reports alongside budgets, showing not only how money was spent but how many humiliations were prevented, how many acts of recognition were delivered,

and how much trust was restored. Cities built Care Hubs, one-stop centres where healthcare, childcare, and elder support were provided together, free of stigma. They were designed not as emergency shelters but as civic landmarks, reminders that care was as public a good as any bridge or parliament. By 2050, Europe had come to see care not as a burden or a gift but as the quiet architecture of democracy. This transformation proved that inclusion could never be completed through laws or speeches alone. It had to reach the school corridor, the hospital bed, the welfare desk, the border-crossing. Only when Europe learned to bind law with love and reason with compassion did it endure. Care was no longer charity but citizenship itself, the everyday heartbeat of a democracy that finally learned how to hold its people.

In the early 2020s, pluralism too often resembled quiet erasure. Migrants were expected to assimilate, minorities to remain invisible, and difference was tolerated only when silent. But by the following decades, Europe began to redefine identity as a shared emotional narrative that was plural, painful, and proud. The sentimental contract did not ask citizens to forget their pasts; it invited them to carry their languages, wounds, and hopes into public life, not as burdens but as building blocks. It recognised that the emotional core of Europe had long been fractured by war, colonisation, and displacement, yet it also saw that these very feelings of grief, pride, and longing could become the foundation of a collective future. The sentimental contract transformed art into a civic language through which communities could remember without bitterness, grieve without isolation, and change without erasure. Through culture and expression, the emotional distance between citizens began to narrow. Diversity was no longer treated as a tension to manage but as a wellspring of meaning. The lines between private story and public memory softened, and Europeans started to see identity not as a single tale but as a shared archive of becoming. Pluralism became more than tolerance; it became a practice of recognition.

Toward the year 2050, citizens once fatigued by distant politics had become architects of democratic imagination. Europe's annual Assembly, now granted binding powers over public policy, reflected a new

understanding that legitimacy cannot survive when anyone is excluded. The Assembly had become a civic space open to every person across Europe, and artificial intelligence made this inclusivity real by transforming participation into a living process. Individuals could contribute by speaking, writing, or recording their experiences, while the AI system listened, translated, and preserved the emotional weight and meaning of every voice. It did not erase difference but organised it. Behind each submission was a story, a need, a vision, and the system treated these not as noise but as knowledge. It grouped contributions by themes such as education, employment, and social inclusion, tracing patterns across languages and regions to reveal common ground that humans often overlooked. From this shared emotional archive, it helped Europe to create policy drafts not as generic reports but as textured reflections of what a generation saw and felt. Decision-makers no longer relied solely on abstract statistics; they engaged with a collective memory that was emotional, precise, and alive. This was not the automation of democracy; it was democracy learning how to hear clearly and loudly. For instance, the Assembly had responded to a quiet crisis that had gone unheard for decades. The system began detecting a wave of emotional burnout among care workers across Europe. Nurses, teachers, transit staff, and social workers were not just asking for better pay but were saying things like “I feel like a machine” and “no one sees what we carry.” Their words revealed something deeper than exhaustion; it was about dignity. In response, the Assembly passed an Act that created a right to emotional repair for all frontline public workers. The law guaranteed paid recovery time after emotionally intense work, brought psychological support into every public workplace, and introduced national ceremonies to honour care work as the foundation of civic life. For the first time, emotional labour was no longer invisible; it was seen, named, and protected.

The sentimental contract, however, was not without danger. Europe learned that emotions could be manipulated as easily as they could be nurtured. Fear could be weaponized to divide, and even love, when turned into loyalty, could exclude. In the late 2020s, moments of emotional politics had already shown how civic empathy could become spectacle, with

leaders performing compassion while deepening inequality. Later, some governments tried to turn recognition into branding, filling public spaces with the language of inclusion while limiting real participation. These distortions revealed how fragile the sentimental turn could become when emotion was managed from above rather than lived from below. The lesson of the early decades was clear: emotions must be democratized, not monopolized; civic love must remain plural, and recognition must never descend into propaganda. Without vigilance, the sentimental turn could become yet another technocratic performance, emotion without accountability. What saved it was the persistence of citizens who insisted on transparency, plurality, and shared responsibility. The emotional turn did not soften democracy but returned it to its hardest and most necessary task: learning how to feel together without falling apart.

By 2050, Europe had learned that democracy cannot survive on rules alone. It must be lived as trust, seen as recognition, and felt as care. Justice you can feel, recognition you can see, and care you can use were no longer poetic luxuries, but they had become the new foundations of legitimacy. The sentimental contract taught Europe that humiliation is political, invisibility corrodes loyalty, and indifference can be as dangerous as tyranny. By turning rights into lived experiences, the sentimental contract gave Europe a new kind of strength: not cold or technocratic, but emotional and human. The future was secured not by walls or markets, but by the quiet force of civic love, the force that turns strangers into neighbours, difference into belonging, and Europe into the future.



Anna Vindics

Hungary

Anna is Policy Director at Momentum, in which role she provides advice to local, national and EU level decision makers. Anna is a proud European and passionate about reimagining policies and politics for a Europe that reclaims its role as a global leader of social and democratic innovation. She spent seven years at the OECD, providing policy advice on economic, employment and social issues. She holds a master's degree in International Social and Public Policy from the London School of Economics.

Civic Fridays: Reclaiming Democracy as a Shared Practice Though Dedicated Citizens' Time

By 2050, democracy could be embraced by Europeans as a weekly shared practice instead of something they mostly criticize from the sidelines. Imagine a Friday morning: across the continent, millions step into their civic role for the week. In Lisbon, an accountant joins a citizens' assembly on healthcare priorities before starting her weekend. In Warsaw, a student deliberates climate policy with peers from Athens and Helsinki on an EU-wide digital platform. In Berlin randomly selected citizens review tax policy proposals providing inputs to a parliamentary working group. By then, Europe has embedded public participation into weekly life through a four-day workweek paired with dedicated day for civic duties called simply as Civic Fridays or citizens' time. As a result democracy is no longer a distant ritual of elections or a noisy clash on social media, but a lived practice: shared, regular and tangible. Citizens trust their institutions, politics draws people from every walk of life, polarization has declined and authoritarian populism is a relic of the past. Stronger democracy has also translated into better governance, longer-term decision-making, stability and greater prosperity for all.

In 2025 however democracy is facing a legitimacy crisis across Europe despite delivering unprecedented levels of prosperity, peace, and well-being. Europe remains the leading region worldwide, with 18 of the

world's 25 most peaceful and prosperous countries located here¹. These rankings take into account multiple dimensions such as safety, personal freedom, governance, economic quality, education, healthcare, and living conditions². The US is the 19th while China is only the 54th. According to the World Happiness Report, European countries consistently dominate the top spots "highlighting Europe's overall well-being leadership"³. Still, satisfaction with democracy has fallen since the 1990s⁴. Only around four in ten Europeans now trust their national governments, with trust lowest among the young and the economically insecure⁵. This might be tied to political underrepresentation of these groups. The Trust-in-Europe project highlights that among those with low institutional trust, satisfaction with democracy typically plummets creating fertile ground for disillusionment and populist or authoritarian appeal. Indeed, surveys show a worrying openness among some young Europeans to authoritarian rule under certain circumstances. The paradox is stark: democracy delivers, but it no longer inspires.

The core issue in my opinion is partly a design problem, an institutional lag that can be overcome. Our political institutions and processes were designed for a less educated, industrial-era electorate and they were never fundamentally retooled to match the society we live in today. They are under pressure due to the volatility generated by the current stage of technological development and global interdependence. Public and political institutions still mostly offer infrequent, top-down participation for citizens in the form of elections and rare consultations.

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4. University of Cambridge, Global Satisfaction with Democracy
5. OECD. (2024). *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment*. Paris. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html.

These institutions, which were built for slow, mediated public discourse now operate in a chaotic, unfiltered and fast-paced environment. Climate disasters, AI breakthroughs, pandemics, and financial shocks can evolve in days or hours. Deliberating how we handle these changes can no longer take decades or even years. Politics feels outdated, bureaucratic, and unresponsive compared to how communication and problem-solving works in other parts of life. This mismatch makes people feel alienated, frustrated and mistrust the political system leading to the temptation of strongman leadership. Populists frame democracy's checks and balances as obstacles to getting things done and promise speed over safeguards, deliberation and process. Currently these narratives manage to capture the hearts and minds of citizens even if data confirms that authoritarian populists do not deliver.

"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand!"

As a Hungarian I experienced the downfall of authoritarian leadership first handed since 2010. The lack of oversight, transparency and deliberation breeds instability, incompetence and corruption. Even if I had my own frustrations with democratic governance beforehand, I understand now why it delivers better governance and social outcomes. My own experience also taught me that doing is the key to understanding and trusting democratic leadership. As a student, I was furious at the leaders of my association who seemed slow and indecisive. When I was elected to the board myself, I discovered the missing pieces: the additional information, the trade-offs and limited resources. Later, as a policy analyst, I found myself frustrated again with lack of political will to enact structural reforms. I became the policy director at a party and learned first-hand how constraints, compromises and path dependencies shape decisions. I still think there is space and opportunity for more bold reforms and brave, value-driven decisions, but things came into perspective. With experience came more understanding, and with that came more trust. I wonder what would it mean for our societies if everyone could go through similar experiences? Dedicated citizens' time could close that gap by letting

millions live the realities and responsibilities of decision-making. I believe if people do democracy, not just watch it, they will trust it, and protect it much more.

To renew democracy's appeal for 2050, we must go beyond defending it, we must reimagine it. Europe could lead by piloting a four-day workweek, reserving the fifth day for civic duties akin to jury duty in the US, but devoted to democratic contribution in various forms. Shared responsibilities, regular participation, and a deeper understanding of governance would help rebuild trust, improve representation, and reduce polarization. Research shows that citizens who take part in assemblies or participatory processes report stronger support for decisions, higher trust in democratic institutions and greater confidence in their fellow citizens. Civic Fridays would also foster social cohesion by creating shared spaces, where people from very different backgrounds work together on common challenges. By widening decision-making beyond a narrow political elite, such models amplify the voices of underrepresented groups, making outcomes fairer and more legitimate. Such a reform would also make institutions more effective by establishing faster feedback loops, enabling clearer communication of trade-offs and improving transparency. At the same time, regular civic practice would strengthen people's democratic skills, making them more capable of judging parties, manifestos, and policy proposals, and less vulnerable to populist easy fixes. Dedicated citizens' time would not only connect people with democracy but also deliver better representation, better outcomes, and better governance.

Civic Fridays would not be introduced overnight, but gradually developed over the next 25 years until they became a fully-fledged part of European democracy. Participation would take many forms. Citizens might serve for two to three months on assemblies tasked with shaping policy on local, national, or European challenges. Randomly selected working groups could sit alongside parliaments to provide input, while supervisory bodies of citizens could oversee government spending or state-owned companies. The intention is not to replace elected representatives but to complement them. Politicians would continue to negotiate, legislate and lead, while citizens would provide informed

perspectives, oversight, and legitimacy. These citizen bodies would remain consultative but empowered: participants would receive clear information, time to deliberate, and a structured process to form recommendations. Crucially, they would also receive feedback on how their input was incorporated. Responsibilities would rotate, mostly by random draw ensuring real diversity and preventing gaming or lobby activities. To ensure universality, citizens would be compensated and supported with childcare, transport, or translation. Doctors and business leaders would take part just as students or retirees would with adjustments for different life circumstances, but equally bound by the shared duty.

Citizens' time would be a flexible platform for both democratic input and public solidarity. The design would balance responsibility and reward: part civic duty, part free day. There would be breaks between the assignments, making sure the additional non-work day also be used for rest and leisure. To introduce efficacy and the element of choice, every second or third assignment could involve community service for example helping the elderly, tutoring, or serving meals in schools. Even retraining programs could be part of the scheme in areas of social need such as childcare, healthcare or digital skills. In a labor market reshaped by automation and rapid change, citizens' time could also be used for adult education, improving both personal prospects and Europe's competitiveness. And while Friday captures the one day a week idea, participation could be spread across the week wherever more practical. The result would be a system at once ambitious and simple: a Europe where democracy is not distant or occasional, but woven into the weekly rhythm of life.

Like any bold reform, Civic Fridays would face practical questions that must be addressed for the idea to succeed. The most immediate question is perhaps the finances: how can participation be fairly rewarded without reducing people's income or overburdening employers? Funding could come from a mix of national budgets, integrating costs into social insurance schemes, or earmarked EU resources. A dedicated Citizens' Time Fund could be created to support pilots across member states. Another innovative revenue source could be a robot tax that would tie

democratic renewal to the gains of automation. Some might worry that involving “ordinary” citizens could dilute expertise. Experience from past assemblies shows that with accessible information and professional facilitation, citizens are more than capable of grappling with complex issues. Another concern could be the impact on economic competitiveness. Trials of the four-day workweek show that reducing working time does not necessarily reduce output. Moreover the most competitive countries are typically the ones with the highest institutional quality suggesting that strengthening democratic participation, trust and stability could ultimately improve competitiveness through improved efficiency and good governance. Innovation in how we organize work and civic life can enhance, rather than undermine, economic performance. Finally, there is the question of public acceptance. Would people want to do this? Evidence suggests yes: despite falling party and union membership people are in search of meaningful ways to participate in democratic decision-making. Surveys show that for example many young people express a desire to engage in politics but cannot find suitable channels.

Elements of Civic Fridays already exist in familiar institutions across Europe and beyond that could serve as examples. Institutions we now take for granted faced similar doubts when first introduced. People questioned whether ordinary citizens could judge court cases fairly, or whether conscription would ever be accepted as a civic duty. Over time, both became normalized and respected, precisely because they were universal and rooted in the idea of shared responsibility. Jury duty in the US shows how millions of citizens can be randomly selected, temporarily relieved from work, and compensated – albeit modestly or with the contribution of employers – while fulfilling a civic obligation that is broadly accepted. Compulsory military service, still in place in several European countries, is one of the oldest and most widely recognized examples of state-organized civic duty. It offers a clear precedent for making such obligations a legal requirement, with adults stepping out of the labor market to fulfil a responsibility financed and coordinated by the state – sometimes for extended periods. Finally, Austria’s paid adult education leave provides a model for how the state and employers can

cooperate to grant financial support and temporary leave from work for upskilling purposes. The *Bildungskarenz* program allows workers to take up to a year off for education and reskilling, with state-funded allowances covering lost income⁶. Taken together, these examples show that every core aspect of citizens' time – compensation, legal obligation, protected time off, fair selection, and state support – already has a tested analogue. The challenge is to combine and adapt these existing mechanisms into a new democratic institution fit for the 21st century. Civic Fridays could be a bold innovation today, but a democratic common sense tomorrow.

Citizen participation in public decision-making is gaining real momentum across Europe and there is ample evidence of its benefits.

In Belgium's German-speaking region, the parliament has constitutionally embedded a permanent Citizens' Council and recurring assemblies to advise lawmakers, making it among the most advanced cases of institutionalized deliberative democracy in Europe⁷. This demonstrates how deliberative processes can be given a clear legal status and a defined in relationship to elected representatives. Initiatives like participatory budgeting in Paris strengthened community ownership as it lets residents directly allocate part of the municipal budget. At the EU level, the Conference on the Future of Europe engaged thousands of randomly selected citizens across all member states, producing concrete proposals on climate, digital transformation, and democracy, many of which are now under discussion by EU institutions⁸. Citizen participation has been building since the 1980s but gained significant momentum from the 2010s onward. More than a dozen different formats

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8. futureu.europa.eu

exist, ranging from citizens' juries to large-scale assemblies, with many of the most trusted approaches using random selection to create diverse, representative groups of citizens. Evaluations consistently show that such processes foster informed, thoughtful policy recommendations, increase legitimacy, reduce polarization, and rebuild trust in democratic systems⁹. Still, challenges remain: deliberative processes are often costly, require considerable time commitment from participants and not well-integrated into policymaking. This is precisely where dedicated citizens' time could add value, by lowering participation costs, ensuring time availability for everyone, and embedding citizen voices alongside elected institutions in an impactful way.

The four-day work week is a credible policy direction, that could be the foundation for extending time toward civic and democratic engagement. Such schemes usually reduce hours from around 40 to 32 without cutting pay, focusing on reorganizing workflows and trimming inefficiencies instead of squeezing five days of work into four. Trials across Europe confirm it works. A key trial in Iceland between 2015–2019 that involved over 2,500 workers found that productivity held steady or improved, while well-being rose and burnout declined¹⁰. The UK's 2022 pilot with nearly 3,000 employees showed similar results: 92% of companies continued with a 4 day workweek even after the trial, reporting stable or higher performance, a 57% drop in resignations, and 65% fewer sick days¹¹. In Germany, the IG Metall union has championed a 32-hour week as a fair way to share work in industries reshaped by automation. More broadly, debates from France to South Korea highlight that as AI

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10. Haraldsson; Kellam. (2021). *Going Public: Iceland's Journey to a shorter working week*. Reykjavík. https://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ICELAND_4DW.pdf.

11. Lewis et. al.. (2023). The results are in: The UK's four-day week pilot. Hampshire. <https://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-results-are-in-The-UKs-four-day-week-pilot.pdf>.

and robotics lift productivity, societies must choose whether the gains concentrate at the top or are redistributed for example as more free time. The benefits of shorter workweeks are clear: better health, stronger work-life balance, and lower turnover, with firms maintaining or boosting output. Challenges remain in sectors with rigid schedules like healthcare or manufacturing and for small businesses, but phased support could ease the transition. Shorter weeks free the time; Civic Fridays give that time a democratic purpose.

What will Europe look like in 2050 with Civic Fridays? In this vision, Europe reclaims its role as a global leader of democratic innovation, showing the world that liberal democracy can renew itself for the challenges of the 21st century. Europe would spearhead a new democratic model, where people are not just consumers or occasional voters but active shapers of public life. Citizens' time would anchor this transformation, giving every European a structured role in deliberation, oversight, and solidarity. Once a week, Europe would meet itself – nurses and engineers, students and shopkeepers – deliberating, deciding, and serving together. That is freedom with substance, democracy as a shared practice and prosperity with purpose. The effect would be democracies that are both stronger and more faire: representative of society's diversity, trusted by its citizens and capable of addressing crises with legitimacy and resilience. Creative reorganization of work and civic life would enhance economic performance, social cohesion, and liberal freedoms. Such a Europe would no longer be a fertile ground for authoritarian populism, because its citizens would know from experience that democracy delivers. Civic Fridays may sound bold today, but by 2050 they could be as natural as weekends or jury duty: a weekly reminder that democracy belongs to all of us, and only thrives when we all take part in it.

Project Europe 2050: A Liberal Vision for the Future

When I became active in politics in the late 1970s, Europe stood at the beginning of a remarkable journey. The first direct elections to the European Parliament had just taken place, and we believed this would set us on the path toward a true European government, one representing all citizens of Europe.

We believed that a European passport and a European currency would bring us closer together. And indeed, we achieved both, the passport (or at least a common cover), the euro, and Erasmus, which opened the minds and hearts of a generation.

Then, everything changed.

The Berlin Wall fell, and we briefly believed the “End of History” had arrived. It hadn’t. The World Wide Web emerged, social media took over public life, migration became a defining challenge, a pandemic upended our societies, and war returned to our continent. Meanwhile, the European ideal seemed to fade under the weight of bureaucracy and Euroscepticism.

When the Union doubled in size, welcoming the formerly communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, we gained diversity, but lost some of our sense of common purpose. Europe became more preoccupied with

self-preservation than with progress. For too long, we have been on the defensive, overtaken economically and politically by others while our own narrative of freedom and optimism weakened.

And yet, there are signs of renewal. Slowly, Europeans are rediscovering that freedom must be defended, not assumed, and that we must find our own voice in a world transformed by technology, great power competition, and climate change.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom – Europe Office in Brussels has launched Project Europe 2050 to reimagine what Europe can and should be in this transformed world. It is both a vision and an invitation, a platform to collect fresh liberal ideas about the kind of Europe we want to build together.

Learning from the New Frontiers of Freedom

Ahmet Öztopkara reminds us that liberalism's future may not lie in Brussels or Berlin alone, but in places like Kyiv, Belgrade, and Tbilisi, where people fight for freedom with urgency and courage. Europe must have the humility to learn from these frontiers of liberty, to rekindle our solidarity and remember that freedom thrives where it is defended, not where it is taken for granted.

This is not sentimentality. It is strategic wisdom. The energy, the clarity of purpose, the willingness to sacrifice for democratic values that we see in Ukraine today is what animated Western Europe's own postwar reconstruction. We must listen to those who are fighting for what we risk forgetting we have.

What Is The European Way of Life?

We speak of preserving and enhancing “The European Way of Life,” but what does this mean? Not a single culture, language, or tradition, Europe’s diversity is its greatest strength. Rather, the European Way of Life is a commitment to shared values that manifest differently across our continent:

2. **The Rule of Law:** Where power is accountable, justice is independent, and rights are protected regardless of who you are or where you come from.
3. **Social Market Economy:** Where capitalism serves society, not the reverse, combining economic dynamism with social solidarity, environmental responsibility, and worker dignity.
4. **Pluralism and Open Society:** Where difference is celebrated, debate is vigorous, media is free, and no single ideology, religion, or identity dominates public life.
5. **Cultural Openness:** Where we take pride in our distinct traditions, Sicilian, Scottish, Bavarian, Catalan, while remaining curious about and engaged with the world beyond our borders.
6. **The Dignity of Every Person:** Where healthcare, education, and opportunity are not luxuries but expectations, and where societies are judged by how they treat the most vulnerable.

This is not a closed identity but an open commitment, one that welcomes anyone willing to embrace these principles, regardless of where they were born. It is what makes Europe worth defending and sharing with the world.

Renewing Democracy and Belonging

Anna Vindics imagines a Europe where democracy becomes a weekly habit, with “Civic Fridays” for citizens to engage directly in decision-making. Frida Fernanda Garcia Saavedra envisions a borderless Europe defined not by nationality but by active participation and trust. And Jong Sue Lee’s vision of Solidarity Cities offers a Europe where democracy grows from below, where Ghent, Barcelona, and Berlin model a people-centered, digital democracy rooted in proximity and care.

Together, they point to a Europe that moves beyond defending its institutions to reinventing them, transforming democracy from a distant procedure into a shared daily practice.

But let’s be honest: many Europeans today feel disconnected from EU institutions, not eager for more of them. The challenge isn’t simply to create new structures but to bridge the gap between Brussels and the town square, between policy and lived experience.

This means democracy must become more tangible, more local, more participatory. It means young people, the Erasmus+ generation who grew up without borders, must see themselves reflected in European leadership. It means regions and cities must have genuine power to experiment, innovate, and shape their futures within a common framework.

Democracy in 2050 cannot be something that happens to people every five years. It must be something people practice, shape, and own.

The Liberal Spirit of Innovation

Giacomo Leombruni’s call to “Legalize Freedom” captures a broader liberal insight: that trust, transparency, and responsibility achieve more than prohibition. His vision of a European Drug Policy Reform symbolizes a mature society that balances freedom and safety, a metaphor for the Europe we must build across all fields.

Similarly, Jaime Figueres envisions a Europe where Artificial Intelligence becomes a partner in human progress, a “co-pilot for freedom” guided by consent, dignity, and innovation. A Europe that leads not by fear of technology, but by humanizing it.

This is the liberal spirit Europe must recapture: the courage to experiment, to trust citizens with freedom, to solve problems through innovation rather than restriction. A Europe that asks not “how do we control this?” but “how do we empower people to flourish?”

A Europe of Empathy, Humanity, and Hope

Garik Khachatryan and Moadh Qarouani remind us that the heart of Europe must remain human. Freedom without empathy, they argue, becomes hollow. Their visions, of a “Sentimental Contract” and a Europe grounded in mental well-being, visibility, and care, challenge us to think of liberalism not only as a political system but as a culture of recognition, compassion, and dignity.

This matters profoundly for how we approach one of Europe’s most divisive challenges: migration.

Decent migration management cannot mean either closed borders or unlimited entry. It means legal pathways that are functional and humane. Integration programs that work. Honest conversations about capacity and social cohesion. And above all, treating people, whether they’re fleeing war, seeking opportunity, or building new lives, with dignity.

A liberal Europe recognizes that immigration has always been part of our story, that diversity strengthens societies, and that managed migration is both morally right and economically beneficial. But it also acknowledges legitimate concerns about pace, integration, and social solidarity. The answer is not walls or wishful thinking, but competent governance that earns public trust.

Europe in the World – Partnership, Not Paternalism

Nowhere is Europe's renewal more urgent than in its relationship with Africa. Mohamed Jdia's Afro-European Agora and Fungai Mutimodyo's call for cross-continental journalism both imagine a democratic space that unites our continents in truth, accountability, and collaboration. Tamirirashe Mudzingwa speaks of moving from extraction to shared prosperity, powered by renewable energy, education, and mobility.

What would this look like in practice?

First, trade relationships based on genuine partnership, not dependency. European investment in African manufacturing, technology, and infrastructure, not just resource extraction. Second, educational and research collaboration that builds African institutions rather than draining talent. Third, mobility frameworks that allow talented Africans to study, work, and invest across both continents without losing connection to home.

Finally, joint governance of shared challenges: climate change, migration, security, public health. Not Europe deciding for Africa, but both continents deciding together.

This is enlightened self-interest. Africa's success is Europe's success. Africa's instability becomes Europe's crisis. A prosperous, democratic, connected Africa is the greatest gift both continents could give each other.

Building a European Political Space

To achieve any of this, Europe needs genuine political capacity, not to replace national governments, but to complement them. We can learn from federal systems like Australia, Canada, and the United States, where states and provinces exercise real power while the federal government focuses on what only it can do: defense, foreign affairs, currency, and protecting citizens' rights.

By 2050, Europe should have:

- 7. A European Army**
 - Not to replace national forces but to provide collective defense and strategic autonomy. Because freedom that cannot be defended will not survive.

- 8. A European president, directly elected by European citizens**
 - To give our Union a democratic mandate and accountable leadership. Not a bureaucrat appointed behind closed doors, but a leader chosen by and answerable to the people.

- 9. A European Foreign Service with EU embassies**
 - Representing all Europeans in a world of great powers. Small member states gain voice; large ones gain partners. Together, we become capable of shaping global events rather than merely reacting to them.

- 10. Europe-wide candidate lists alongside local representation**
 - European elections should include both pan-European lists (so we vote for continental visions) and local constituencies (so we have representatives who know our communities). Multi-member constituencies could ensure diverse voices are heard.

- 11. And eventually, European citizenship itself**
 - Not replacing national citizenship but complementing it, creating direct relationship between individuals and the Union they belong to.

Unity and Diversity: Resolving the Tension

Some will ask: doesn't deeper integration threaten the diversity that makes Europe special? Won't a stronger Brussels weaken Bavaria, Scotland, Catalonia, Sicily?

The answer is no, if we design it right.

The lesson from successful federations is that strong regions and strong central institutions reinforce each other. Canadian provinces have more autonomy than most EU member states. Australian states guard their powers jealously. American states are "laboratories of democracy," free to experiment with different approaches.

What makes this work is clear division of powers: the center does only what cannot be done locally, while regions control everything that can be. Defense, monetary policy, trade, fundamental rights, these benefit from continental scale. Education, culture, healthcare, local economic policy, these thrive with regional variation.

In a proper European federation, Scottish, Catalan, Bavarian, and Sicilian identities wouldn't be threatened, they'd be empowered. They would participate in European decisions while controlling their own affairs more fully than they do today, liberated from both Brussels micromanagement and national capitals that often understand them poorly.

Diversity isn't the obstacle to European unity. It's the point.

The Path Forward: Strategic Autonomy with Liberal Values

Europe needs what others call "strategic autonomy," the capacity to defend our interests, shape our future, and uphold our values without depending entirely on others. But let's be clear what this means for liberals.

It does not mean becoming an imperial power or dominating others. It means being capable, capable of defending ourselves, capable of projecting stability, capable of being a reliable partner to democracies worldwide. In a world where authoritarian powers set the agenda, capable democracies must answer.

Europe in 2050 should be confident, not aggressive. Open, not naive. Principled, not preachy. We should lead by example, by building societies that work, economies that innovate, democracies that include, and communities that care.

Here's to the Dreamers

Steve Jobs once said: "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently... Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."

That spirit, that willingness to imagine differently, to challenge the status quo, to believe that better is possible, is what Europe needs now.

We know the obstacles. Euroscepticism is strong. National interests often trump common purpose. Reform is difficult. The path from here to there is unclear.

But incrementalism has failed. Playing it safe has left us weaker. The greatest risk now is timidity.

Project Europe 2050 is a call to thinkers, creators, citizens, and dreamers to contribute to a shared liberal vision. We don't need everyone to agree on every detail. We need serious people willing to imagine seriously what Europe could become.

A Europe that values ambition and excellence. A Europe that is assertive without being arrogant. A Europe that takes pride in producing goods, services, and ideas that are state of the art. A Europe that is cosmopolitan

and free, with an open society and the drawbridge down. A Europe whose institutions operate on a human scale, close to citizens. A beacon of democracy and the rule of law.

A Europe that, by 2050, is not just surviving, but shining.

That is the Europe worth fighting for. That is the Europe we can build.

Let's begin.

Project Europe 2050: A Liberal Vision for a Sustainable Future

In 2023, the Brussels office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom launched Project Europe 2050, an initiative dedicated to envisioning a liberal and forward-looking Europe in the year 2050.

The project began with a comic exhibition designed to raise environmental awareness and encourage public engagement with key challenges such as climate change, sustainability, and the European Green Deal.

The artistic works highlight the importance of technological innovation and open societies in shaping Europe's green transition. By presenting liberal approaches to environmental policy and economic transformation, the exhibition demonstrates how liberal values can contribute to tackling environmental challenges while ensuring an innovative and socially balanced future for all Europeans.

Through creative and accessible storytelling, the exhibition translates these complex ideas into compelling visual narratives.

A New Breath

Bosque Azul

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1876
2037
EPA OF THE
INTERNAL
COMBUSTION
ENGINE

Auto-car

Jenny Robins

Technological advancement can make life easier for everyone, but that improvement does not hit everyone equally. In this scene four friends are deciding to take the new automatic transport across town. Thanks to advancements in AI assisted translation, they are able to talk to each other even though they don't share a language – the little coloured squiggles by their ears represent their 'Earbits' doing the translating for them. The "Auto-car" isn't as advanced as the technology they have in their ears, and can't recognise Armenian, so one of the friends is forced to speak in English. Another type of technological inequality shown here is the cost barrier of accessing technology without being bombarded by advertisements. One of the friends is being advertised to by the Auto-car, but the other 3 can't see or hear the messages because they can afford adblockers. These characters are clearly able to get along, and help each other, even though their status and privileges are not equal, but the world in 2050 is still learning how to make things actually fair. It's worth keeping on trying and learning.

<LET'S TAKE AN AUTOCAR INTO TOWN.>

<IT'S CHEAPER WITH 4 OF US!>



WELCOME TO AUTOCAR!
PLEASE STATE YOUR PREFERRED LANGUAGE.



DEUTSCH

PORTUGUÊS

FRANÇAISE

Հայերեն

LANGUAGE SET: GERMAN

LANGUAGE SET: PORTUGUESE

LANGUAGE SET: FRENCH

LANGUAGE NOT RECOGNISED.

PLEASE TRY AGAIN.

<WORTH A TRY.>

<I THINK THEY STILL DON'T RECOGNISE ARMENIAN.>

<THAT'S SO STRANGE.>

<OUR EARBITS ARE FINE WITH IT!>



GUESS I'LL GO FOR ENGLISH.

LANGUAGE SET: ENGLISH

<PLEASE SELECT A DESTINATION>

<I CAN TAKE YOU ANYWHERE IN EUROPE>

JUST THE TOWN CENTRE TERMINAL, PLEASE.

STADTZENTRUM-TERMINAL, AUSGEWÄHLT

TERMINAL DO CENTRO DA CIDADE, SELECIONADO

محطة وسط المدينة، مختارة

TOWN CENTRE TERMINAL, SELECTED

<IT'S SO LOUD IN HERE.>

<OH, HANG ON!>

<I CAN SHARE MY AD-BLOCKER WITH YOU.>



<THANK YOU! THAT'S SO MUCH BETTER!>



<ARE YOU SURE THAT YOU WANT TO DISABLE ADS?>

YES!

SIMI

JA!

OUI!



HAHAHAHA

HAHAHAHA

HAHAHAHA

HAHAHAHA



City Submersion

Marta Okrasko

An illustration depicting renowned European cities like Venice or Amsterdam grappling with the rising sea levels. I can portray how streets and buildings are gradually submerged in water, while people strive to adapt to this new reality with effort and determination.

And I want to link it with AI.

Smart City : An illustration depicting a submerged city where artificial intelligence systems are used for swift detection and warning of impending disasters, aiding in the evacuation of people and minimizing losses.

On this illustration, I would like to present a natural disaster somehow influenced by human activity like flood, as well as the rescue effort, which in the form of artificial intelligence, was also created by humans.

The Nature of Technology

Stépánka Jislová

Humanity's hunger for innovations, our core need to improve things, is one of the most precious parts of us. But we should remember that the reason we innovate is to have more time to appreciate what's already here. To live life more fully, not fill the void with more work or obsessing over what kind of shiny machine will be available next. With all the technology and inventions created everyday, the real luxury they can bring is the ability to switch off from them, to, paradoxically, go back in time before we had them. Technology should be our invisible friend, not a filter through which we are forced to observe life. The connections and the options they bring might be wonderful, but exploring one's mind is a huge gift and a luxury as well. With technology being the number one hope of humanity to save the environment, I want to emphasise the joy only nature can bring and the contemplation that is born not out of loneliness, but through an introspection only a natural environment can produce. In the end, the borders of our countries are just another human invention – we are most of all citizens of the planet Earth.

