Transponder

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About The Transponder
The Transponder is the Bertelsmann Foundation's biannual publication focusing on issues that impact the transatlantic relationship. The magazine features short-form and long-form articles, interviews, infographics, and photo essays that explore topics related to democracy, technology, and geopolitics through a transatlantic lens.

About the Bertelsmann Foundation
The Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), Inc., established in 2008, was created to promote and strengthen the transatlantic relationship. Through research, analysis, forums, audiovisual and multimedia content, we seek to educate and engage audiences on the most pressing economic, political, and social challenges facing the United States and Europe. Based in Washington, DC, we are an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank and the U.S. branch of the Germany-based Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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The Future is in Our Hands

EDITOR'S NOTE

As the pages of this issue unfold, we invite you on a journey to the future — a destination shaped by the choices we make today. Across these articles, we explore emerging dynamics and their profound implications.

From the geopolitics of space exploration to the race for rare earth minerals, the global stage is expanding beyond the confines of Earth. Space, once the realm of science fiction, is now a contested frontier. Countries and private entities are vying for dominance, not only to explore the cosmos but to secure resources critical for technological advancement. The question is no longer whether we will go, but who will lead and how we will govern this vast new territory.

Rare earth minerals underscore another pivotal challenge. These resources, essential for renewable energy technologies, electronics, and more, are becoming the foundation of the global economy. As demand surges, so too does the potential for conflict, environmental degradation, and geopolitical tension. The choices we make in sourcing and managing these minerals will define whether they become a tool for cooperation or division.

Artificial intelligence stands as the defining innovation of our era. In this issue, we examine AI's progress dilemma. This technology's potential to revolutionize industries, economies, and societies is immense, but so too are the ethical dilemmas it poses. How do we ensure AI serves humanity rather than dividing or diminishing it?

Meanwhile, we bring you the voices of young people from Taiwan and South Korea who share their perspectives on the "democratic" future. Despite the challenges their nations face, these young voices are filled with optimism. Their stories underscore the vital role of youth in building a resilient and inclusive tomorrow.

This issue also takes you to France, where we explore "The Dream of a Renewed Republic". In the face of evolving political, social, and cultural challenges, the vision of a reinvigorated republic inspires debates about identity, unity, and the future of democracy in the country.

We also journey to the Balkan region, examining the impact of historical collective memory and how it shapes Europe today. As nations in the region strive toward EU membership, the weight of historical narratives and the waging of memory wars profoundly shapes their paths, posing both obstacles and opportunities for integration and progress.

These critical topics are all woven together by a single thread: the future is not a distant horizon but an immediate reality. Each decision we make today — as individuals, communities, and nations — ripples outward, crafting a legacy for generations to come.

At the heart of this issue is a call to action: The future is in our hands. We stand at a crossroads, with the opportunity to forge a path that is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. Let this be a future where innovation is led by wisdom, ambition with empathy, and progress with justice. Together, let us shape a world that benefits all.

Happy reading!

*Irene Braam
Executive Director
Bertelsmann Foundation*

Transponder

Under Pressure

Youth democracy in Taiwan and South Korea

Written by
Marshall Reid

"How often do you think about a Chinese invasion?"

The question comes from an older man in the back row, who speaks with clear concern in his voice. His target, a young Taiwanese scholar discussing digital democracy, pauses a moment, then speaks: "Not that often." The audience murmurs briefly, and the conversation moves on.

It's an interaction that seems to unfold at every Washington, DC event focused on Taiwan. Well-meaning outsiders, worried by the steady drumbeat of Chinese provocations and geopolitical crises, assume that Taiwan is a society under siege. They imagine an island constantly at arms, eternally watching the skies for Chinese warplanes. Almost invariably, they seem taken aback to learn that for most Taiwanese, China remains on the periphery, ever-present but rarely in focus. If they worried about an invasion every day, I've heard many Taiwanese say, how would they live?

For the residents of Taiwan and South Korea — two democracies shaped by their close proximity to authoritarian adversaries — the threat is undeniably real. Just across their borders, China and North Korea rattle their sabers and array their missiles, endlessly preparing for confrontations they claim are inevitable. But this has been commonplace for decades. In the United States, such provocations would be intolerable; in Taiwan and South Korea, they are the norm.

This reality is particularly evident to Taiwanese and South Koreans under the age of 30, who have lived their entire lives in states of geopolitical uncertainty. Over the past few decades, they have seen the respective threats from Beijing and Pyongyang grow in credibility, heard countless forecasts of imminent war, and felt the pressure steadily mount. At home, however, they have experienced many of the same challenges as members of their generation in other democracies around the world. They have seen prices rise, wages stagnate, and job prospects dwindle — even as macroeconomic indicators have ostensibly improved. In both states, democratic systems have struggled to adapt to technological developments, resulting in growing polarization and partisan gridlock. Social systems have failed to adjust to increasing societal fragmentation, resulting in epidemics of loneliness and isolation. For younger voters, these problems have become increasingly acute, leading many to push thoughts of national defense to the back burner.

In conversations, members of this younger generation do not mince words. They are troubled by their countries' political and economic shortcomings and concerned about their uncertain futures. Nevertheless, they are far from hopeless. In fact, they are intensely proud of what their democratic nations have accomplished, and confident that they will overcome their present challenges.

Parallel pasts

For all of their differences (and there are a great many), Taiwan and South Korea have traced similar political trajectories for the better part of a century. Both states endured Japanese colonization — albeit to very different degrees — and emerged from World War II scarred and underdeveloped. In the following years, the two states found themselves dominated by U.S.-backed dictators, who used brutal tactics to suppress dissent and consolidate power under the guise of combating communism. Nevertheless, each experienced rapid economic growth throughout the 1950s and 60s, transforming them from rural backwaters to industrial giants. In both countries, this period remains controversial, as

memories of human rights abuses have cast a pall over economic improvements.

In the late 1980s and early 90s, following decades of increasingly ossified authoritarianism, first South Korea and then Taiwan peacefully transitioned to democracy. Unlike many other newborn democracies, both were able to develop strong, sustainable democratic institutions, backed by vibrant and active civil societies. Since democratization, the two have each completed several peaceful transitions of power, and both have seen popular demonstrations translate to political change. As a result, Taiwan and South Korea have consistently ranked near the top of international democracy indices, surrounded by nations with far older democratic traditions. For citizens of both countries, these accomplishments are sources of immense national pride.

In 2024, the two states once again find themselves in parallel positions. Both boast strong economies and stable political systems, powered by highly educated populations and advanced infrastructure. At the same time, however, each faces intense external and internal pressures, from the aforementioned military threats to rising demographic challenges, with both reckoning with aging populations and falling birthrates. The prosperity and upward mobility of previous years have become elusive, as inequality and political inertia have undermined progress. For younger generations, who are expected to carry their democracies into the future, the burden feels heavier than ever before.

Taiwan's island democracy

In 2021, The Economist famously deemed Taiwan "the most dangerous place on Earth". While many commentators were quick to deride the title as sensationalized and poorly considered, the fact remains that Taiwan occupies a tenuous position. Since 1949, it has existed in a sort of geopolitical purgatory, forced by China to operate on the fringes of the international system. Deprived of representation in bodies like the United Nations and the International Civil Aviation Organization, Taiwan has been unable to effectively protest as Beijing has sent aircraft and naval vessels ever closer to its shores. Though far from being cowed into submission, the island has felt the pressure rise.

For Henry, a 23-year-old policy researcher, however, this state of affairs is nothing new. While he notes that there is growing interest in civil defense among some members of his generation, he emphasizes that most younger voters are focused on domestic challenges rather than Chinese provocations. As in so many other democracies, the economy
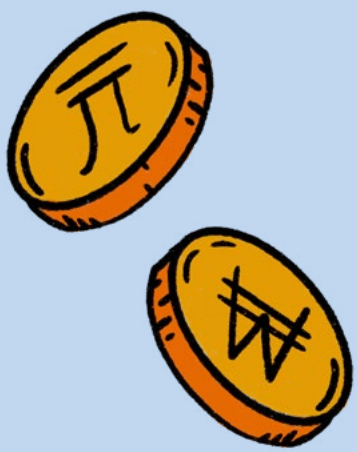
remains the foremost concern. During the eight-year administration of President Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan received widespread international praise for its strong economic performance, even as the COVID-19 pandemic devastated markets around the world. However, as Henry explains, many younger individuals believe that this economic growth "did not trickle down", citing rising housing and cost-of-living prices as especially galling. As a result, he remarks that a sizable contingent of younger voters feels increasingly "discontent with the current system", leading some to abandon Taiwan's two traditional political parties in favor of the upstart Taiwan People's Party.

While he acknowledges these concerns, Henry is quick to clarify that he remains optimistic about Taiwan's future. For younger Taiwanese, he argues, democracy is more accessible and transparent than ever. In support of this, he cites his experiences participating in local, grassroots political organizing, noting that Taiwan's diverse civil society ecosystem has helped facilitate this: "There are an explosive amount of NGOs emerging in Taiwan right now. I think this is a very positive development, getting involved with your local politics has never been easier."

Not all Taiwanese I spoke to were so sanguine about the future. For Cathy, a 27-year-old student, Taiwan's prospects are considerably more mixed. Like Henry, she observes that domestic concerns continue to trump geopolitical issues for most younger people — even as she is personally anxious about Taiwan's defensive vulnerabilities. For members of her generation, she notes, the threat of a Chinese invasion remains remote and abstract, out of sight, out of mind. By contrast, everyday issues like high rent, low wages, and insufficient housing are far more immediate and pressing, particularly for less established, younger individuals.

Nevertheless, Cathy knows that her cohort (those in their late twenties and early thirties) is deeply invested in Taiwan's democratic system. They have seen their country build its democracy from the ground up and watched it mature into what it is today. Many of them, including Cathy, are directly involved in the political process, working to address challenges from within.

However, Cathy cautions against thinking of Taiwan's younger generations as monolithic. Unlike her peers, the youngest voters (those in their late teens and early twenties) are far less enmeshed in the democratic system. For them, she argues, democracy is an expectation, not an accomplishment in itself: "They were born and grew up in a mature democracy — they don't know that democracy is not a given." According to Cathy, this indifference toward democracy, combined with the widespread popularity of apps like TikTok, has left many younger Taiwanese vulnerable to Chinese influence. Inundated by a flood of disinformation, rumors and outright lies, a growing number have difficulty discerning the benefits that democracy provides.

Youth democracy in South Korea

Compared to Taiwan, South Korea occupies a less precarious position. It is fully recognized by the international community, maintains a longstanding formal alliance with the United States and can freely advocate for itself in bodies like the UN. In short, it is a "normal" state, and enjoys the privileges that status entails. However, one feature of South Korea's geopolitical circumstances is decidedly abnormal. Since the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, Seoul has existed in a state of cold war with its neighbor to the north for over seven decades, with tensions regularly escalating to the precipice of open conflict. For generations of South Korean leaders, the conflict with North Korea has been a defining feature, influencing nearly every aspect of Korean policy. This preoccupation

continues today, as Pyongyang has once again ratcheted up its inflammatory behavior and rhetoric.

For many younger Koreans, however, the threat of North Korea remains distant and indistinct. As graduate student Shane, 24, notes, most younger voters in South Korea prioritize issues pragmatically, making decisions based on what impacts them directly. For all its fire and fury, Pyongyang has little influence on day-to-day life. Instead, Shane argues, younger Koreans are primarily concerned with domestic challenges, relegating North Korea to the fringes.

Once again, economic issues rise to the top of the heap. Like Taiwan, South Korea has experienced respectable economic performance in recent years, relying on its highly educated workforce and booming technology sector to drive growth. As Shane notes, however, this growth has been uneven at best, as the system has largely benefited older, wealthier segments of Korean society. For younger Koreans, meanwhile, the economy has felt increasingly unfair and exclusive. Even as macroeconomic indicators have risen, younger citizens have experienced soaring housing prices, crippling mortgage payments, and mounting unemployment.

In Shane's view, these economic challenges have contributed to disillusionment with the democratic system writ large. For many younger Koreans, the government feels disconnected, insulated from the needs of those who will carry the country into the future. However, Shane is not without hope. He observes that the opportunities are there for younger Koreans to participate in the political system, though they often go unnoticed.

Like Shane, Jinwan, a 23-year-old policy researcher, has deep reservations about the current state of Korean politics. As in many other democracies, South Korea's legislature is dominated by older politicians, many of whom have been in office for decades. As Jinwan explains, this has resulted in a widening gulf between the needs of younger Koreans and the priorities of their aging representatives. "There are less and less legislators who can truly understand the decision-making processes and mindsets of younger voters," leading both groups to view each other with distrust. In Jinwan's view, this estrangement has had vast consequences. Politicians, perceiving younger Koreans as disengaged and unlikely to vote, have tailored policies to appeal to older constituents. In turn, younger Koreans have seen politicians consistently disregard their needs, further eroding their belief in democracy as a means of achieving objectives.

Reflecting on these concerns, both Shane and Jinwan are uncertain about the future. From their statements, it is clear that the current state of affairs is frustrating for them. Both believe in South Korea's democracy and remain optimistic about its potential. They see its many strengths and wish they could wipe away its weaknesses. This distinctive mix of optimism and pessimism has only grown more pronounced since December 3, when President Yoon Suk Yeol embarked on his ill-fated attempt to impose martial law to circumvent legislative opposition to his agenda. Throughout that night of chaos and confusion, Korea's democratic institutions held strong under immense pressure. In the months that have followed, however, Yoon's refusal to resign and determination to stymie investigations have paralyzed the nation's political system and intensified partisan bickering. Despite the president's efforts, Korean democracy persists, but at what cost?

What's next

In recent years, the term "democratic backsliding" has become a favorite of commentators attempting to describe the rise of populist, anti-establishment movements and their corrosive effects on democratic systems. Even in the most venerable of democracies, longstanding norms have come under attack, fueled by frustration with democracy's perceived inefficiency and corruption. For many supporters of democratic governance around the world, these movements have been as disheartening as they have been difficult to resist. In this age of polarization and partisanship, how can democracy persist?

As these conversations with younger Taiwanese and South Koreans make clear, the vibrant democracies of East Asia are not immune to these frustrations. Without exception, all of the individuals I spoke to are disappointed with the state of democracy in 2024. They each see the challenges before them, from authoritarian neighbors to out-of-touch politicians. However, they are also unwavering in their belief that democracy is the means by which they will overcome them — particularly as they have watched China and North Korea intensify their authoritarian repression. Given their countries' histories, they know that democracy cannot be taken for granted, just as they know that the call of authoritarianism must be resisted. For each of these individuals, the future is unclear. One thing seems certain, though: if they have their way, it will be a democratic one. ●

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Dreams of a Renewed Republic

Written by
**Chloe Ladd &
Therese Mager**

"I've decided to give you once more the opportunity to decide your parliamentary future by vote. I am therefore dissolving the National Assembly tonight." In a televised address watched by over 11 million citizens on June 9, 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron made the historic decision — on the heels of the European election results — to call for snap legislative elections.

"The president's relative independence from parliament and outsized power places a premium on charisma and a penalty on cooperation."

On July 7, following the shortest election campaign period in French history, the results were in. Rather than delivering the "clarity" called for by Macron, the elections yielded a three-way split in the National Assembly, with the left-wing coalition known as the New Popular Front (NPF), Macron's party and its centrist allies, and the far-right National Rally each winning large shares of the chamber's 577 seats. As the largest bloc, the NPF submitted a candidate for prime minister, a little-known civil servant named Lucie Castets. Despite his own party's deep losses, President Macron leveraged his influence as president and immediately rejected their proposal, suspended the talks until the Parisian Olympic games were over, and hand-picked his own choice for prime minister: Michel Barnier of Les Republicains, a struggling right-wing party representing just around 6% of the vote in this election. At the time, Macron hoped to unite the government around the personality of Barnier, a well-known Brexit negotiator for the EU who was unlikely to oppose the president's most controversial reforms. Three months later, the decision to disregard what the largest bloc in the Assembly wanted came back to haunt Macron: Prime Minister Barnier was voted out.

Macron's televised appeal last June asking citizens to vote for their democratic future now seems like a bad joke to many voters. Thousands of citizens took to the streets to protest the new government following its formation, emphasizing what they saw as executive abuse of power and disregard for their democratic wishes. Macron has been no stranger to using his executive power, but his surprise decision to call snap elections and apparent disinterest in compromise this past summer have pushed the French electorate over the edge. The Barnier government's collapse in early December following a parliamentary no-confidence vote has drawn even more attention to governmental institutions. A fraying republic finds itself exposed to an uncertain future.

The royal presidency

These events, no matter their outcome, have revived a question that has haunted the Fifth Republic since its earliest days: does the president have too much power? Unlike the parliamentary systems in neighboring Germany, Belgium, or Spain, the French political system depends on an independently elected president,

leaving less influence for the parliament and office of the prime minister. This configuration reflects the wishes of General Charles de Gaulle, the Fifth Republic's first president and the mastermind of its constitution. He believed that France must be led by a strong, solitary figure who could intervene quickly and decisively in times of crisis. De Gaulle's overhaul of the previous constitution is generally hailed as essential, as the unstable Fourth Republic (1946-1958) is largely remembered as an abject failure.

In 2000, a constitutional reform shortened the presidential term and adjusted the electoral calendar, scheduling legislative elections to follow just weeks after presidential contests, with both occurring every five years. This reform was meant to diminish the possibility of a "cohabitation" government, where the president and the prime minister hail from two different parties. The change has virtually guaranteed 21st century presidents a parliamentary majority from their own party, while also encouraging them to take a more "hands-on" approach in the hopes of securing their reelection and preserving their legacy.

This top-down system of government clearly comes with a few pitfalls. The president's relative independence from parliament and outsized power places a premium on charisma and a penalty on cooperation. The French party system is therefore highly prone to fracturing, especially in the lead-up to presidential elections, as various figureheads compete with one another to build up momentum. Party leaders angle each election cycle to win everything at the risk of winning nothing. Most famous for leading with his charisma and personality is Macron himself.

Over the course of his notoriously top-down presidency, Macron has taken numerous actions that have drawn even more attention to the powers reserved for the French executive, and whether he might be abusing them. French media and popular debate is now filled with demands that something be done about "la monarchie présidentielle", or the presidential monarchy.

Macronian overreach

In a 2016 interview, Macron — who went on to win the presidential election in 2017 — emphasized *his* view on the role the executive should play in France. In response to then-President François Hollande's assertion that he aspired to be a "normal" president, Macron famously remarked, "I don't believe in a normal president." He argued for a "Jupiterian" presidency characterized by

authority, grandeur, and the ability to rise above the situation, citing de Gaulle as an inspiring historical figure. These core values have paved the way for how Macron has steered the government throughout his two terms, playing out in both his attitude and his policy.

Over the past several years, Macron has widely been perceived as out of touch with the average French citizen. Most famously, his government's plan to raise the carbon tax on gas when many consumers already felt financial pressure led to the turbulent Yellow Vest protests, which erupted across France in 2018 and 2019. The projected price hike was canceled in response to the blowback, and Macron spent the following months holding town halls across the country to try to appease his constituents. This strategy proved effective, and he secured a second term in office in 2022. Yet, his reputation for being arrogant and aloof has persisted.

Furthermore, Macron's prime ministers have repeatedly used clause 49.3 of the French constitution, pushing the boundaries of legislative normalcy. The 49.3 provision allows the premiership to bypass the National Assembly and adopt legislation directly. In close collaboration with Macron, former Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne used this tool in April of 2023 to codify pension reform into law, bringing the retirement age up from 62 to 64. This move resulted in coordinated strikes and protests that mobilized trade unions and millions of protesters across the country in a "rare show of unity". The decision to flout what French citizens wanted and force through legislation brought fears of a "presidential monarchy" back to the forefront of political discussions.

However, Macron's dissolution of the National Assembly in June 2024 may be the clearest example yet of his exuberance in wielding executive power. His unilateral call for snap elections astounded nearly all of his allies, including then-Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, and forced officials to whip up another election campaign right as the summer holiday season was beginning. Despite the inopportune timing, French voters did their best to participate, with a record 3.4 million voters applying to vote by proxy. While the hung parliament that resulted from the snap elections left voters and party leaders scratching their heads, it also introduced new possibilities for cooperation.

Rather than encourage parliamentary factions to work together, however, Macron personally took over negotiations with the different parties, closely

> *"Even if Macron has not acted illegally, his boundary-pushing policy maneuvers and arrogant manner have damaged the legitimacy of his office."*

managing the process for building a cabinet. Ultimately, he appointed Barnier and secured a center-right coalition by extracting a tenuous (and ultimately broken) promise from the far-right National Rally that it would not try to topple the new government. This unlikely arrangement infuriated millions of voters, who felt that their wishes were not only ignored, but actually *contradicted*: many had held their noses to vote for left-wing or center candidates that they disliked precisely to *prevent* the National Rally from gaining more power.

Even if Macron has not acted illegally, his boundary-pushing policy maneuvers and arrogant manner have damaged the legitimacy of his office. The outcome of this saga, even post-Barnier, is the common lament that there's no point to voting if the president can override the election results, disregarding the will of the people and the elected parliament in the process.

The future of the republic

In the face of Macron's executive encroachment, calls for a sixth republic have been growing louder.

Notably, the NPF incorporated the establishment of a sixth republic in their recent government roadmap. But do the French really need to tear the whole system down, or is it simply time for a recalibration of the Fifth Republic's institutions?

The underlying issue is one that's not unique to France — namely, a lack of trust in government institutions, in tandem with an apparent trend of executive overreach. In the case of France, only 28% of citizens polled in January 2024 trusted the government. This number has been dropping year to year. In order for French leaders to reverse this depressing trend, they must reset checks and balances and restore trust in the system.

Fortunately, there are steps that can be taken to bolster faith in French democracy — and some have even been pioneered by Macron himself. Below are two possible scenarios that could play out in the coming years.

Scenario A: A deliberative democracy

It's 2027, and French citizens head to the polls for the final round of voting in the presidential election. It's the Socialist Party versus the National Rally. Both present different visions for France. Both present different visions for Europe. While neither candidate represents Macron's party, his legacy has impacted how and why voters go to the polls. It's not a protest vote, as was expected. Voters feel reinvigorated and connected to their democracy. In the final years of his presidency, Macron engaged with his constituents in various town halls, passed legislation aimed at addressing the concerns of the average French citizen, and worked to implement the recommendations put forward by various citizens' assemblies held during his time in office.

Scenario A doesn't tell us whether citizens vote for the left or the far right. But it does describe a democracy in which citizens feel inspired to be a part of the process and vote for the right reasons.

Macron doesn't have to start from scratch; in addition to the town halls he effectively organized during his first term, his government has also already spearheaded the use of citizens' assemblies. For instance, a proposed law on the End of Life through euthanasia is now before the National Assembly after first being deliberated upon in citizens assemblies in 2022 and 2023. If the recommendations are accepted, the citizens that took part in this process will feel more closely connected to their government. Instances of positive citizen engagement serve as democracy amplifiers. Yet, these opportunities will only work if Macron simultaneously abandons the overuse and exercise of executive power, which continues to leave voters feeling powerless.

Scenario B: A dull dystopian democracy

It's 2027, and French citizens head to the polls for the final round of voting in the presidential election. It's the Socialist Party versus the National Rally. Both present different visions for France. Both present different visions for Europe. While neither candidate represents Macron's party, his legacy has impacted how and why voters go to the polls. It's a protest vote, and people want drastic change. The majority of voters decide to stay home on election day.

Scenario B shows a dramatically different outcome, and one that isn't impossible. The 2022 election featured a runoff between Marine Le Pen and Macron. The second round recorded 13.3 million votes for Le Pen, who lost to Macron. But in reality? Macron and Le Pen both failed to win over the 13.6 million voters who stayed home that day. Many have argued that Macron did not win in 2022 because of his platform, but rather by default. The growing threat of abstention in presidential elections risks undermining French democracy in ways that should not be underestimated. As democratic legitimacy declines, elections become a forum for the loudest, most extreme voices. A smaller group of citizens ends up determining policy for the entire country, further eroding the foundations of democracy.

A free and fair Fifth Republic demands democratic imagination for finding new, innovative solutions to long-term problems. With a little thinking outside the box, and a willingness to step outside of it, French leaders can seize the opportunity to re-engage citizens and ensure a bright future for the republic. ●

> *"Instances of positive citizen engagement serve as democracy amplifiers."*

Battery Valley

Written by
Samuel George

Can lithium cells power the future of European manufacturing?

Metal cylinders poked into the sky, some billowing thick white smoke. Others belched a thinner, black fog. Faded beige buildings five or six stories high, without a single window, connected long metal passages across the landscape. Rusted pipes extended across the sky. Piles of coal sat on the side of the road, left behind from a previous lifetime.

And yet, the port of Dunkirk is not what most people imagine when they close their eyes and think of France.

I arrived after passing through downtown Dunkirk, with its expansive parking lots and the remnants of 19th century working class housing. At the port's entrance, I met Daniel Deschodt, the Chief Commercial Officer, a man with an affable smile and impeccable English, spoken with a heavy British accent.

"I'll tell you why I'm excited personally," he said as the port's mechanized gates creaked open. Inside, we were met not by ships and containers, but rather a massive, sprawling industrial complex. "I was born and raised here in Dunkirk, and my father worked here on the shipyard. We've lived through the rough years."

We drove past colossal, rusted red industrial equipment. While some of it still seemed operational, other sections looked long abandoned. Deschodt continued, "In the 1980s, the shipyard closed down. We all had to leave this area. By the time the last refinery closed, we had lost tens of thousands of jobs."

Deschodt's experience was not unique. Across Northern France, the country's manufacturing, mining, and industrial heartland, cycles of booms and busts had left generations bereft of jobs. Coal towns such as Douai, Lens, and Hénin-Beaumont faced stiff unemployment figures in the 21st century as mines closed and industries left. Their local economies adrift, shops, salons, and restaurants shuttered shortly thereafter.

"Across Northern France, the country's manufacturing, mining, and industrial heartland, cycles of booms and busts had left generations bereft of jobs."

There's nothing left

For much of the 21st century, French unemployment has hovered between 8 and 10%. The northern Hauts-de-France region has averaged over 11% unemployment since 2010. "There were factories that employed between 8,000 and 10,000 people," Stéphanie Maurice, the French newspaper Libération's correspondent in the north told me. "Now entire towns are unemployed."

"When you've been here for 30 years like me, you've seen a lot of plants close down," Maurice, continued. "This is a working-class region. It gets a bad reputation in France. It seems gray and sad. A lot has been said about unemployment, deindustrialization, industrial wastelands, factory closures, the end of coal. Practically all the factories have closed. There's nothing left."

This deflating trend left many locals frustrated and pessimistic about their futures. At the Thursday market in Hénin-Beaumont, residents pointed to the evidence around town. "Everything around here is closed," one fruit vendor said with contempt. "The town center is dead. We have only one café that is open, and that's just because they sell lottery tickets." Today, 60% of the town's population earns so little that they do not have to pay taxes.

Another vendor set up used clothes for sale. "I worked in the metal industry before doing this," he told me. "We sold to all the factories here. But when they all closed, we had to close too."

Historically, the region was politically left-leaning, stemming from its history of organized labor. Even as late as 2012, Socialist presidential candidate François Hollande secured well over 50% of the Haute-de-France vote. But in recent years, populist and right-wing candidates have made major headway in the north. Marine Le Pen, the National Front stalwart, invested significant time in Hénin-Beaumont and the surrounding region. Steeve Briois, the town's mayor since 2014, is a leading figure in Le Pen's movement. In the 2024 legislative elections, the National Front performed strongly in the Haute-de-France region, even as it suffered setbacks elsewhere around the country.

"In the north, the right-wing vote isn't driven by concerns over immigration, or racism, as it might be in the south," Maurice told me. "It's really a feeling of being forgotten and abandoned by the state. The National Front exploited that feeling of decline and abandonment."

Inside the Port of Dunkirk.

Deschodt stands in front of a gigafactory in production.

"Today, 60% of the town's population earns so little that they do not have to pay taxes."

A process of deindustrialization, economic stagnation, and voters swinging right may sound familiar to an American audience. But what does all this have to do with the future of European manufacturing?

Battery valley

As I drive through the port of Dunkirk, Daniel Deschodt talks me through what I see. After passing football fields' worth of heavy industry, we began reaching newer, simpler buildings. Large, white facilities that looked like oversized storage units, or perhaps indoor sports arenas.

"You've heard of Silicon Valley, maybe?" Deschodt asked. "Well, this is Battery Valley. We have four gigafactories in construction, all within 80 kilometers of Dunkirk." A gigafactory refers to a lithium battery plant with a footprint over 100 hectares, over one billion euros in investment, and 1,000 employees.

France's emerging "Battery Valley" is part of an effort to reindustrialize the region. At Dunkirk, this

dates back to 2010, Deschodt explained, when the port's leaders realized they needed something new. "We were looking for a new industry. And we found this entire new ecosystem. And we have built it in just a few years."

Deschodt rolled to a stop in front of a colossal building under construction. Workers on cranes plugged away at the areas still incomplete. This was the Verkor gigafactory; a lithium-ion battery plant that — when complete — will produce 300,000 electric vehicle (EV) battery cells per year.

Verkor's gigafactory is a key component of northern France's gambit to become Europe's heartland for all things EV, to reduce battery dependency on China, and to help the EU meet its self-imposed requirement to eliminate the sale of fuel vehicles by 2035. And if that was not optimistic enough, local authorities are hoping the effort will bring mass employment back to the region. Deschodt pointed towards the construction with a glint in his eyes, "This is new business!"

Playing catch-up

As in the United States, leaders in the European Union are concerned that they are behind the curve on developing a domestic supply of critical minerals and batteries. Like the U.S., Europe currently relies on China for both.

The EU learned a harsh lesson in 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. Prior to that, the EU imported nearly 50% of its natural gas from Russia. Moscow's latest incursion into Ukraine resulted in a diplomatic collapse between the EU and Russia, with Russian President Vladimir Putin cutting gas exports to Europe, resulting in shortages, inflation, and the specter of energy rationing through the European winter.

Thus, the effort to develop Battery Valley in Northern France is not only an effort to revitalize the local industrial belt, but also part of a broader international strategy to pursue a future of energy independence in the EU. But building such an ecosystem from the ground up is not as easy as simply throwing money at it.

"We are creating an industry that does not exist in Europe," explained Matthieu Hubert, the General Secretary of the Automotive Cells Company (ACC) battery gigafactory, located a 20-minute drive northwest of Hénin-Beaumont. "We're finally asking what we have to do to build, develop and design batteries for Europe, in Europe. But it is 10 or 15 years after we should have. We are trying to catch up. We are late."

A manufacturing renaissance?

The biggest bottleneck is perhaps neither money nor technology, but rather a lack of workforce training. European battery companies already have a demand for upwards of 60,000 skilled laborers. Experts from Fraunhofer ISI forecast that figure to spike to 200,000 by 2030. The broader labor demand will be even higher, with Fraunhofer ISI predicting that up to 800,000 jobs will directly or indirectly be linked to the battery value chain by 2025.

While Europe may have the bodies for these jobs, those bodies do not yet have the skills. To meet the moment, the EU must ramp up workforce capacity. This is no secret, and efforts to do so are evident across northern France. Just a five-minute drive from the Port of Dunkirk sits the Dunkirk campus of the Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale, where entire curricula are in the process of redevelopment to prepare students for careers in batteries and related fields.

Students at Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale prepare for new careers in battery manufacturing.

A battery comes off the production line at ACC.

"While Europe may have the bodies for these jobs, those bodies do not yet have the skills."

I met students Devon and Lucy as they worked with a professor on a laboratory computer tucked into a small room in the university's basement. Various machines cluttered the space, and they stood at a computer the size of a mini-fridge. "We're working on a fuel cell," Devon explained. "It's a cell that uses hydrogen and oxygen to produce electricity which we can then store in batteries for different uses."

"This is a great opportunity for young people," Lucy said. "This is the best sector to be in, because it's the sector where we will have the most work."

The training is not just for young people. Across France — and especially in the north — government-subsidized battery training centers have popped up in the vicinity of the gigafactories. They are part of an effort to create a pipeline to reskill workers to fill the new jobs. At the training camp in the shadows of the ACC plant near Hénin-Beaumont, apprentices rotated from classrooms to bespoke laboratories designed as spitting images of the real thing across the street. Inside, they practiced in full white liberatory attire and personal protective equipment, just as they would eventually in the gigafactory.

While at ACC, I met with Quentin, a 26-year-old who transitioned from working on fuel engines to the ACC plant. "A battery is very difficult. I had to go to the training center for one year to learn how to work the new machines. But thanks to that, I changed from something very old, to something very new."

The success of these training centers is critical to the future of Europe's automotive economy. Ramping up the domestic capacity is vital for the EU to meet its ambitious 2035 goal of making all new cars electric. As Forbes Senior Contributor Neil Winton writes, "European Union auto manufacturers haven't the capacity to reach these targets , but the Chinese do." As of now, to hit the 2035 date, consumers would need to lean into the cheaper Chinese EV options, which would — in Winton's words — "deal an existential blow to European automakers."

The true challenge on Europe's horizon will be to dramatically improve the continent's internal market capacity for batteries. Failure to do so could leave "Battery Valley" unable to compete with Asian manufacturers, and this risks rendering the shiny new factories as just the latest in a series of economic disappointments for the region.

After visiting the education centers, I toured the ACC plant itself. I passed an endless series of hermetically sealed labs, each manned by specialists covered head to toe in white coats, lab hoods, and facemasks. I passed through cavernous rooms the size of theaters, filled with machinery and tubes. At the end of the tour, I saw mechanized claws pulling completed batteries off the production line, each with a clean sheet of metal covering the complicated internal amalgam of lithium, cobalt, and nickel, among other minerals.

Here was the culmination of years of investment and huge amounts of labor. Here, one by one, coming off the production line, was the hope for a cleaner Europe and a greener future. ●

In Flesh and Blood

The impact of historical collective memory on the future of Balkan accession to the European Union

Written by
Lauren Letizia

The stadium reverberated with soccer fans' zealous shouts. As the clock ticked closer to 90 minutes, the match remained tied at 2-2. Despite the nervous tension and the passionate desire for their respective teams to triumph, united chants began to circulate through the crowd: "Srbija Srbija jebi se (Serbia, Serbia, f*** you)!" and "Ubi, ubi Srbina (kill, kill the Serb)!" On June 19, 2024, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) 2024 Euro tournament soccer match between Croatia and Albania devolved into enmity between historical adversaries. Three days before, Serbian fans ignited outrage when they displayed a nationalist flag during the Serbia-England match. The banner showed the outline of the Republic of Kosovo imprinted with the Serbian national crest and the phrase "Нема предаје (No Surrender)." The Balkans' ethnic fault lines were once again spotlighted on the world stage.

The Balkans is one of the most tumultuous regions in Europe. Mired in millennia of wars and fallen empires, the Balkan countries' histories are inextricable from their national identities. Since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, Croatia and Slovenia have been the only ex-Yugoslav nations to have successfully joined the European Union. Other Balkan nations, such as Greece (1981), Bulgaria (2007), and Romania (2007), are also EU member states. The remaining West Balkan countries of Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina have applied for EU candidate status between 2009 and 2020. At the time of writing, all are still waiting for their turn to accede. Controversially, Kosovo — not recognized by EU member states Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Cyprus, and Greece — formally submitted its membership application in December 2022.

After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU adopted a more responsive position to enlargement and the accession processes of Eastern European and former Communist states. However, unlike some of their fellow nations in the waiting room, the Western Balkans are continuously plagued by their complex ethno-religious history. Though internationally brokered peace agreements like the Dayton Peace Accords have enveloped the region in a general truce, the West Balkans' propensity to clutch national identity through collective memory hampers its inclusion into the European community. As with many memory wars, the debate is not focused on the historical implications but on the sociopolitical symbolism of accepting one story over the other.

Shared past, shared memory

Different terms such as historical memory, collective narrative, and social memory are often used interchangeably. Dr. Katherine Hite, a political science professor at Vassar College, wrote that historical memory — also known as collective memory — "refers to the ways in which groups, collectivities, and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events. Historical memories are foundational to social and political identities and are also often reshaped in relation to the present historical-political moment." Indeed, memory is pliable and incomplete. We do not accurately remember every event of our lives; some events are altered to fit certain narratives. The same is true in collective memory construction.

Collective memory is significant because it is how entire populations define themselves culturally, politically, and religiously. Thus, the collective "truth" is not typically the whole, complex historical truth — though it is based on fact. Historical collective memory can be especially prickly when a nation or group of people interpret traumatic events such as wars, genocides, and political violence within the context of a country's whole history. Traumas like slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, and Soviet Communism have become cultural cornerstones for survivors, witnesses, and their descendants.

American writer and critic Susan Sontag contends that collective memory "is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, that this is the story about how it happened". A nation's collective memory is typically tied to the ideological, political, or sociocultural message it wishes to project to its people and the world. In this sense, the Balkans

is the prime region to investigate this form of memory construction and its impact on the region's future role in the international community.

The name game

If one were to ask any country waiting for EU accession what it is like to be in such a position, they would likely say it requires exorbitant patience. Some EU bureaucratic requirements, such as stabilizing national economies and rooting out government corruption, are vital to the success of the EU and its member states. The simmering name war between the West Balkan nation of Macedonia and the EU member state of Greece epitomizes the obstacles to future Balkan accession.

The dispute began in earnest when the Republic of Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Greece vehemently objected to the new republic's use of Macedonia in its constitution, insisting that the term only applied to the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon and its descendants in northern Greece. On the other hand, the government of the Republic argued that the region was incorporated into the Macedon Kingdom in the 4th century BC and was considered a part of the larger Roman province Macedonia in the 2nd century BC.

Greece claimed that the Republic of Macedonia was trying to usurp Greek history and sovereignty by using the terms "Macedonia" and "Macedonians". That same year, Greece blocked Macedonia's accession to the United Nations, making its anger clear to the nascent republic and the world. After bitter vitriol from both countries, a compromise was reached in 1993. Macedonia would be accepted into the UN, and its sovereignty would be internationally acknowledged under the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM). Still, Greece refused to recognize the nation and imposed a trade embargo until 1995. This severely damaged the Macedonian economy, which — as a landlocked country — relied on Greek ports. In 1995, both countries signed an Interim Accord that normalized socioeconomic relations. The FYRM agreed to remove the Vergina Sun, which was made a Greek national symbol in 1993, from its national flag. FYRM also amended its constitution to explicitly deny aspirations for Greek territory. In return, Greece swore to no longer block Macedonia's accession to international organizations as long as it was accepted under the FYRM name. Greece lifted the embargo in 1995 and became a vital economic partner. However, the name game was far from over.

At the 2008 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit, Greece rejected all the Macedonian government and UN mediator Matthew Nimetz's name dispute proposals, including suggestions of "Republic of Macedonia" or "Skopje" after its capital city. Greece then vetoed Macedonia's NATO accession bid despite Macedonia agreeing to do so under the FYRM name. This was a clear breach of the Interim Accord. One year later, Greece blocked Macedonia-EU membership negotiations.

The countries remained at an impasse for almost a decade before reaching a compromise in 2018. Known as the Prespa Agreement, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his counterpart Zoran Zaev agreed to rename the country the "Republic of North Macedonia". Article 7 of the agreement acknowledges that "Macedonia" and "Macedonian" are not isolated to one region but can be understood in distinct ethnic and cultural contexts within the Republic and Greece. Greece informed the EU and NATO that it did not object to North Macedonia's accession processes. Later that year, the EU approved the commencement of the accession talks, and North Macedonia became a NATO member in 2020. Yet — like many other agreements in the Balkans — peace proposals are seasonal leaves, while the original grievances are stubborn roots.

In May 2024, North Macedonians ousted the center-left Social Democratic government that negotiated the 2018 compromise in favor of the conservative Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). During her inauguration speech, the newly elected President, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, referred to the country as "Macedonia". Greece angrily responded to this alleged slight, calling it a "gross violation" of the Prespa Agreement. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis threatened to veto North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations again. "If some believe they can disregard the agreement, they should understand that their path to Europe will remain closed," he warned. In June, North Macedonian Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski repeatedly used "Macedonia" in a speech and said his country's new name was "shameful". In response, Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis declared North Macedonia's EU accession would be "unimaginable and unacceptable" without its "full and unconditional" respect of international law, including the name agreement with Greece.

The threats continue to fly, and a solution remains unclear. It does not appear either side is willing to compromise or let go of their historical claims to

> " The collective "truth" is not typically the whole, complex historical truth — though it is based on fact. "

Macedonian identity. This 21st century war of words has real consequences for the European geopolitical landscape, defining EU accession and significantly hindering cooperation. If the disaffection spurred over 2,000 years ago has not dissipated in Greece and North Macedonia by 2024, it will surely not evaporate in the next decade.

The blame game

Serbia has been the Balkans' problem child since President Josip Broz Tito founded the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from the ashes of World War II. Tito proclaimed Serbia the former country's economic, industrial, and military center. Consequently, Serbian society quickly coalesced around a virulent pan-Serbian nationalism stemming from centuries of oppression by the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. Because of its war crimes and genocides throughout the region against various ethnic groups during the Yugoslav Wars, Serbia is deemed a threat to many West Balkan countries' sovereignty. Serbia has succeeded in growing anti-West sentiment among its citizens as its leaders play overtures to Russia and advertise economic openness to China. Serbia is currently engaged in numerous memory wars and controversies over its culpability in the crimes of the Yugoslav Wars.

To the west of Serbia sits Croatia. Croatia became a NATO member in 2009 and was one of the first West Balkan countries to join the EU in 2013. It has positioned itself as an example for its fellow ex-Yugoslav nations to achieve Western integration. Under the leadership of President Franjo Tuđman, a fierce Croatian nationalist, Croatia engaged in a bloody war against President Milan Martić's Serbo-Croatian army from 1991 to 1995, which sought to maintain Yugoslavia as a country and Serbia as its center. This began the war that would seep into other ex-Yugoslav nations in April 1992. Ignited and supported by bitter ethnic hatreds, the Yugoslav Wars provided futile soil for the weaponization of history and collective memory controversies. Despite the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTFY) prosecuting both Serbs and Croatians for crimes against humanity and genocide, the memory war and denials continue in each country. In short, each country irrefutably believes the other to be at fault. On top of that, the Croatia versus Serbia blame game for their respective 1990s atrocities quickly dredges up the horrors of World War II.

In the 1930s, Croatian exile Ante Pavelić returned from fascist Italy determined to free Croatia from Yugoslavia through fascism. He formed the

Croatian Revolutionary Organization or "Ustaše (Insurgency)". They modeled their objectives, prejudices, and violence after Benito Mussolini and sought to overthrow the interwar Croatian government. When Nazi Germany and Italy invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, the Ustaše created the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which included Serbia and parts of Bosnia. Following the Hitlerian playbook, the NDH "purified" the land by persecuting Jews, Serbs, and Roma. Infamously, the Ustaše began constructing the Jasenovac death camp in August 1941. Jasenovac was just one of numerous concentration camps in Croatia, but it was the deadliest. From 1941 to 1945, it is estimated that the Ustaše murdered between 77,000 and 100,000 prisoners, mainly Serbs, in Jasenovac.

In 1989, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman publicly questioned the number of victims murdered in Jasenovac, diminishing the total number to 30,000 to 40,000 people. He claimed that the Serbs were exaggerating Ustaše atrocities to justify their ongoing war against Croats.

Decades later, in the 21st Century, Jewish and Serb organizations, Croatian historians, antifascists, and international observers have consistently warned about historical revisionism and Holocaust denial in Croatia. Since 2016, anti-fascist groups, leaders of Croatia's Serb, Roma, and Jewish communities, and former top Croat officials have boycotted the official state commemoration for the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp because they allege that the Croatian authorities refused to denounce the Ustaše legacy explicitly.

The Jasenovac death camp and the Ustaše regime have become inextricably linked to the Yugoslav Wars and are used by both Serbia and Croatia to justify their respective crimes. Serbia claims that because Croats murdered Serbs in World War II, Serbians were justified in killing Croats in the 1990s. Conversely, some right-wing Croatian politicians used the Serbs' heinous crimes in the 1990s to prove that Serbs had been a threat to Croatia for decades, justifying Serbian deaths in World War II as a national security measure.

As Serbia is a contender for EU membership, the tension exacerbated by the continued controversy weakens its stance. In 2016, Croatia blocked the European Commission's decision to open accession chapters with Serbia. It cited concerns over Serbia's lack of cooperation with ICTY proceedings, the mistreatment of Croat minorities, and Serbian-proclaimed universal jurisdiction over Serbian war crimes perpetrated throughout ex-Yugoslavia. This argument sparked Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica

Dačić to say, "If Croatia is the one to decide if Serbia becomes an EU member, then I have suddenly lost interest."

Meanwhile, pro-Western perspectives among the Serbian population have dropped precipitously since the country entered the EU waiting room in 2009. In a February-March 2024 poll conducted by IRI, only 40% of Serbians would vote to join the EU if a referendum was held today; this is a 4% decrease since 2022. Like the memory war between Greece and North Macedonia, Croatia and Serbia have defined their political and diplomatic bilateral interactions through subjective interpretations of a shared history.

The future

History is the present and the future for many Balkan countries. Though the last major bloodshed in the region occurred almost three decades ago, the Balkans have yet to accept and understand their overlapping pasts. Whether it is soccer fans screaming slurs at an international tournament or Balkan EU members purposely impeding accession processes, memory wars have robust tentacles wrapped around the region's sociopolitical identity. Serbia, Croatia, Greece, and North Macedonia are examples of how collective memory controversies have interrupted inclusion in the international community. As nationalist leaders rely on the past to shape societal identity, the EU accession process becomes more of a long-awaited hope than a definitive future. •

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The Future of Trust

Written by
Andrew Keen

How to fix democracy? Over the last six years, as the host of the eponymous Bertelsmann Foundation podcast, that's the question I've been posing to notable figures like the former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Booker Prize winning author Margaret Atwood, and Nobel Laureates Maria Ressa and Angus Deaton. How, indeed, to fix democracy? It's a question premised upon the brokenness of contemporary democracy. It implies that our political system needs fixing.

So how, exactly, is our democracy broken? Of course, it is a complex problem, a multifaceted political Rubik's cube, which is why we've now recorded over a hundred interviews in our long running podcast series. But one subject has come up in almost every "How to Fix Democracy" conversation: trust.

The most serious problem with contemporary democracy, guest after guest on the show have insisted, is a scarcity of trust. Democracy is broken, they warn, because many of us no longer *trust* its ideas, politicians, or institutions. Many of us don't even trust our fellow citizens, believing that those of other political persuasions represent an existential threat to our own freedom.

Trust today

Trust is, by definition, a social thing. It is about managing successful relationships, mostly with others, sometimes even with ourselves. And so, as all the great theorists of democracy — from Aristotle and Machiavelli to Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Hannah Arendt — have noted, democracy is dependent on social trust. High trust cultures, like the mid 20th century United States, generally make good democracies; the reverse is mostly true for low trust societies like 19th century Italy or Brazil.

The metrics on today's trust crisis are unambiguously worrying. Data from research groups like the Pew Research Center demonstrate sharply decreasing public confidence in core democratic institutions like legislatures, political parties, and the mainstream media across many democratic nations. For example, Pew's research shows that trust in government in the U.S. has plummeted from over 70% in the 1960s to under 20% today. Studies also show dramatically declining membership in civic organizations and labor unions in many democracies — institutions that historically helped connect citizens to democratic processes and knit together social trust.

"This growing isolation is changing our personalities, our politics, and even our relationship to reality."

We now live in what The Atlantic magazine dubs an "Anti-Social Century". It is a time of social isolation, individual alienation, and growing epidemics of mental illness — particularly affecting young people. A blanket of anxiety shrouds our increasingly therapeutic culture, manifested in the popularity of evangelical Christianity and in secular theories of an imminent apocalypse. This is a condition that many guests on "How to Fix Democracy", like best-selling writer Anne Applebaum and media historian Richard Stengel, have associated with the ubiquity of "social media", a viral type of digital network that is, in fact, deeply anti-social.

On and off the internet, Americans are now spending more time alone than ever. The share of U.S. adults having dinner or drinks with friends on any given night, for example, has declined by more than 30% in the past 20 years. As The Atlantic magazine's Derek Thompson argues, this shift toward solitude is "rewiring American identity", splintering us off from our communities, our friends, even our families. And this *rewiring* is undermining the social qualities of citizenship which theorists like Alexis de Tocqueville considered essential to a viable democracy. We are, to borrow the oft-repeated phrase of another previous guest on our podcast, Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam, "bowling alone" through life. And this growing isolation is changing our personalities, our politics, and even our relationship to reality.

One particularly corrosive feature of our anti-social age is the rise of what the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche defined as "ressentiment" — a deep frustration aimed at the perceived source of one's problems. In its 2025 Trust Barometer, PR firm Edelman warned of a profound shift to acceptance of aggressive action, with political polarization and deepening fears giving rise to a widespread sense of frustration and hostility. The trust barometer continues to drop precipitously, Edelman warns, entitling this 2025 report "Trust and the Crisis of Grievance".

This age of vitriolic distrust is a surreal spectacle. The people, for whom democracy is supposedly designed, have lost trust not just in its institutions and traditions, but also, oddly enough, in itself. We no longer even seem to trust the existence of something we once confidently identified as "reality". In the pre internet age, trust in mainstream media went along with a trust in the concrete institutions and narratives of democracy. Today, as rumor and innuendo have replaced verifiable fact as the cultural currency of our democracy, reality itself has been subjectified. So anyone can claim anything and — in their minds, at least — nobody can prove them wrong. Thus our reliance on outlandish conspiracy theories and our binging addiction on television series dependent upon bizarre murders, sinister plots, secret agents, traitors, and moles.

Fed by an always-on media, this hysterical reading of the world has become an increasingly conventional narrative, the supposed operating system of contemporary life. And it fuels the popularity of populist politicians — neo-authoritarians like Trump and Modi — who treat reality as if it's indistinguishable from the fictional script of a reality-television show. If we can't even agree on the facts about how our societies operate, then there's no room for either creative debate or disagreement about policy. By devaluing conversation, we wreck the plumbing of democracy.

Trust tomorrow

Forget democracy for a moment. Perhaps it's reality that is actually broken. To borrow the chillingly surreal title of a 2014 book about Putin's Russia by Peter Pomerantsev, "Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible". If nothing is indeed true, then the world we think we see might, in fact, be the greatest deceit of all. And so we have become enshrouded in a dense epistemological fog, a hall of endless mirrors, a place of deepening mistrust in which we, lacking self-confidence, layer ourselves in ever increasingly intricate disguises.

A viable democracy depends on agreeing upon a common set of ontological rules about reality. If those rules are always changing, then nobody trusts anything or anyone. Relinquishing our masks becomes essential if we are to find our way out of this fog and we can then begin to fix democracy. That's why we are dedicating the entire 2025 series of "How to Fix Democracy" to the question of trust. Beginning with political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who in 1995 published a prescient book entitled "Trust", I will be hosting a year-long series of podcast conversations investigating why mistrust now rules our politics and is corroding our democracy.

Our 2025 podcast show will offer strategies to counter mistrust in our anti-social age. We will be broadcasting episodes on the past, present and, above all, future of trust. Individual episodes will focus on how to rebuild trust in government, media, science, education, political parties, labor organizations, and the law.

We will investigate grassroots solutions to the problem pioneered by groups like Weave, the social fabric project launched by the New York

"By devaluing conversation, we wreck the plumbing of democracy."

Times columnist David Brooks. We will examine the role of organized religion in our distrustful age and ask if an evangelical faith in an all-powerful God is a solution or a hindrance to a democracy premised on a clear division between church and state. And, of course, will we ask if new technology, particularly the revolutionary artificial intelligence of Silicon Valley start-ups like OpenAI and Anthropic, might offer a way to address our trust deficit in democracy.

Trust in ourselves

One person who, regretfully, won't be appearing on our 2025 show is Bruce Springsteen. That's because we don't traditionally think of Springsteen as an authority on democracy. But in his intimately autobiographical 2017 "Springsteen on Broadway" show, he — as only Bruce can — encapsulated all the problems and promise of trust in a few memorable anecdotes. Having invited his beloved wife Patti Scialfa onto the stage, Springsteen gave an introduction to the 1987 hit "Brilliant Disguise", a song mourning the way in which we hide behind masks to disguise ourselves from others.

"Trust in a relationship's a fragile thing," Springsteen, who has struggled throughout his life with depression, began. "It's always been a little complicated for me 'cause trust requires allowing others to see as much of our real selves as we have the courage to reveal. But I mean, I don't wanna see my real self, why would others want to?"

The *fragility* of trust, Springsteen suggests, is caused by an absence of self-confidence. We don't want others to see us, he confesses, because we don't want to see ourselves. This is a vicious cycle of self-hatred that compounds our crisis of distrust and mistrust. It is, I'm afraid, the modern condition, our contemporary blight. It's what is broken, not just about democracy, but about the world.

So, how to break this cycle? How to make trust — that most social thing — less fragile?

In that "Springsteen on Broadway" show, Bruce had an answer. "It means allowing others to see behind our many masks, masks we wear, over-comin' that fear, or rather learning how to love and how to trust in spite of it," he explained, putting his arm around his wife Patti. "It takes a little courage, and a very strong partner."

Forgiveness and love, Springsteen suggests, is what will break today's vicious cycle of mistrust and transform it into a virtuous circle of trust. In political terms, this is captured in new theories of love developed by contemporary thinkers like the Italian feminist Silvia Federici and Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran. In her latest book, "Together", Temelkuran even lays out a political manifesto of love, encouraging us to build trust and faith in our fellow human beings.

How to fix democracy? How to rebuild trust in our politics? As Bruce Springsteen warns, it takes a little courage. It requires the trust in ourselves to take off our masks and the strength to make ourselves vulnerable. That's how we can transform today's vicious cycle of mistrust into tomorrow's virtuous circle of trust. It's how to fix democracy. ●

Will society grow with AI or be broken by it?

The Progress Dilemma

Written by
Murat Vurucu

Progress has replaced traditional beliefs, evolving into a powerful ideology that shapes our aspirations, values, and vision of the future. The shared awareness of progress is a modern concept born from the rise of science and industry. It shapes how we perceive success and envision the future. However, this belief carries blind spots and risks, as it often assumes that progress — especially technological or material — is always positive. This assumption can lead to what author Ronald Wright calls "progress traps", where the pursuit of advancement brings short-term gains but creates long-term harm. Today, artificial intelligence (AI) forces us to question whether rapid development is worth the risk of stepping into a progress trap.

In the context of capitalism, progress is often synonymous with economic expansion and technological innovation. Historically, capitalism has moved through cycles of accumulation — beginning with the Genoese cycle in the 15th century, followed by the Dutch, British, and American cycles — each marked by increasing productivity, the extraction of resources, and global economic dominance. These cycles were deeply intertwined with colonial practices, which relied on the appropriation of land, resources, and labor from colonized regions, fueling economic growth for imperial powers at the expense of human suffering and environmental destruction. This exploitation reshaped societies but left a legacy of entrenched social inequality, such as extreme wealth disparities and widespread environmental degradation.

Central to both the capitalist system and the notion of progress is the concept of efficiency. Initially tied to specific technical domains like thermodynamics, efficiency expanded during and after the Industrial Revolution to encompass all areas of life, from factory production to household management. This "mantra of
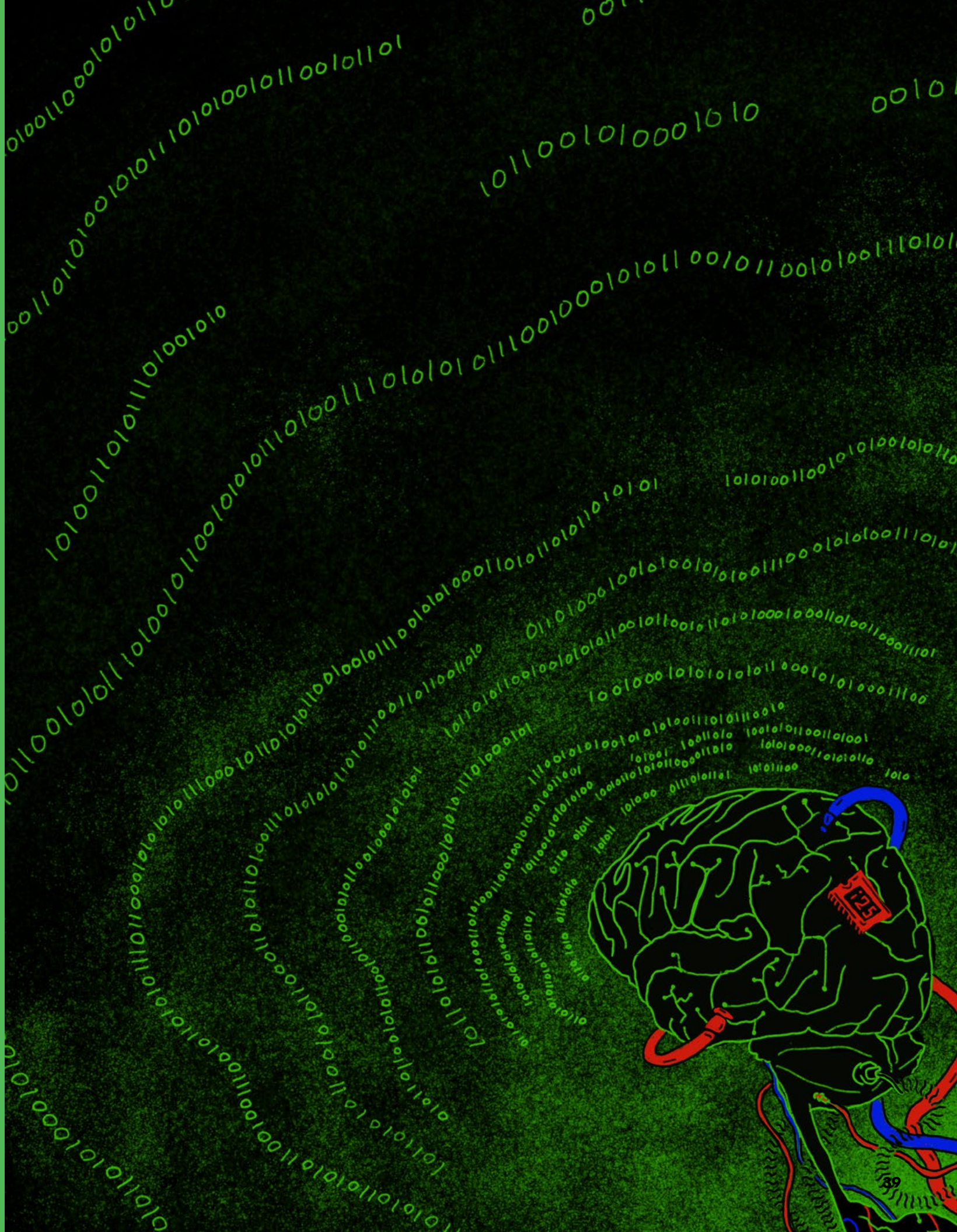
"As data becomes the most valuable resource, those who control it — tech giants and platform owners — will increasingly hold the real global power."

efficiency" promised a kind of certainty — if systems could be optimized and made more efficient, limitless progress would follow. Efficiency became the cornerstone of capitalist ideology, tying it to survival, competition, and the maximization of profits.

Wright argues that, in many ways, the push for efficiency deepens the risks of progress traps. AI, for instance, is often seen as a tool for efficiency, promising to make jobs and economies more productive. However, the growing reliance on AI is already disrupting labor markets, raising data privacy concerns, and concentrating power in the hands of tech corporations. While these trends may not yet have reached their full potential impact, reports and studies highlight that they are well underway.

The future may see a new phase, defined by data-driven capitalism, where the exploitation of data as a form of capital mirrors the colonial practices of earlier cycles. In this evolving system, digital platforms, surveillance, and data control could become the primary engines of economic growth. While governments are confined to national boundaries, their reliance on international tech corporations shifts power and weakens their centralized authority, marking the decline of traditional state sovereignty. As data becomes the most valuable resource, those who control it — tech giants and platform owners — will increasingly hold the real global power.

When progress collides

As our world undergoes a rapid transformation, it is essential to differentiate between technological and social progress, for each has distinct goals, methods, and outcomes. Technological progress often centers around efficiency and the development of new tools or systems — such as the printing press or the Internet — that enable its users to perform tasks faster or at a larger scale. Key players in this realm include inventors, scientists, engineers, and corporations, all of whom work to push the boundaries of what can be achieved.

By contrast, social progress is aimed at improving human wellbeing and societal structures. It focuses not on the tools we create but on how we live together in society and how we ensure equity, justice, and a better quality of life for all. Social progress is typically driven by social movements, activists, labor unions, and government policies, which work in tandem to reform systems of power and create lasting change.

One example that highlights the difference between the two forms of progress is the creation of the weekend. While technological advancements of the industrial revolution from the mid 18th century increased productivity by automating manual labor, it was collective action — led by religious bodies, trade unions, and workers advocating for better living conditions — that resulted in the establishment of the weekend as a period of rest. It was not technology itself that granted this benefit,

but over a hundred years of a social movement that prioritized human wellbeing over relentless efficiency. This hard-won social movement established the two-day weekend, giving people time to rest, connect, and recharge.

The intelligence trap

As AI advances, conversations around technological and social progress are at the center. Most notably, it reintroduces historically charged issues related to the role of intelligence. Intelligence, far from being neutral, has often justified power hierarchies and dominance throughout history. From Plato's philosopher-king to colonialism, intelligence has been used to legitimize oppression, by reinforcing racial and class-based divides. The notion that some are "naturally" suited for rule and the wielding of power while others are destined for subjugation has long been tied to intelligence. The originator of eugenics, Francis Galton, linked intelligence to heredity, leading to scientific racism, coercive state programs, and exclusionary practices that still influence IQ tests today.

AI brings with it a new era of intelligence, one that scales beyond human limitations. AI systems expand their performance and capabilities with each generation, moving beyond specialized tasks to broader domains. These cyclical improvements enable them to tackle challenges requiring reasoning, creativity, and adaptation, increasingly surpassing human abilities in precision and scope. While thinkers like Stephen Hawking argue that AI

can push human intellect to solve problems like disease or poverty, this "fetishization" of intelligence risks deepening social divides. AI's ability to scale intelligence amplifies its power, reinforcing biases and marginalizing already disadvantaged groups, such as women, minorities, and low-income workers. This occurs because Large Language Models (LLMs) are trained on vast datasets that often reflect societal biases, underrepresenting marginalized voices and perspectives. As a result, these systems can perpetuate and even amplify inequalities embedded in the data.

With AI, the ability to scale intelligence — performing cognitive tasks such as analysis, decision-making, and problem-solving across vast domains — could exacerbate hierarchies unless society acts to ensure fairness, inclusion, and equitability. All must be allowed to participate in these evolving power dynamics. Movements for labor rights, civil rights, and gender equality have all emerged in response to systems of power that privilege profit over human dignity. Take as an example the biased output of LLMs when presented with African American English (AAE). While subtler than overt racism, the model bias disadvantages speakers of the dialect. This bias stems from training data that encode raciolinguistic stereotypes, reflecting societal prejudices that devalue dialects like AAE and associate standardized language with intelligence and competence. In a world where decisions are AI driven, algorithmic discrimination based on language amounts to systemic racism on an

"Digital platforms and data control have become the engines of global economic growth…

…concentrating authority in and through tech giants that undermine state sovereignty."

unprecedented scale, as these biases, and the inequalities they reinforce, will be embedded into automated systems affecting millions. Without transparency, accountability, and a focus on wellbeing, AI risks repeating the exclusionary patterns of the past.

Navigating the European AI revolution

The question is no longer whether AI will change the world — it already is — but how society will respond to that change. While technological progress often seems to accelerate predictably, social progress cannot be dictated: it evolves. History shows that we cannot predefine what will be "good" or equitable, we can only ensure mechanisms are in place to adjust rapidly. Societies must be able to iterate quickly to address imbalances, maintain peace, and create conditions for equitable growth as they adapt to new realities. As a case study of an underdog in the global AI race, the EU exemplifies what it takes for a supranational entity to catch up to the United States and China without falling apart. The complexity it must navigate could set a powerful example for equitable and democratic AI governance worldwide. In this light, the European Union has an opportunity to shape a governance framework that aligns AI development with societal resilience and long-term wellbeing. This requires bold action in three key areas:

1. Setting clear outcome targets for AI-driven wellbeing:

The EU must shift its focus from regulating specific AI technologies to setting clear, measurable outcome targets prioritizing citizen wellbeing. For instance, the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) offers a robust model by accounting for income, education, and healthcare disparities. This adjusted metric can ensure that policies focus on equitable distribution of benefits across society. By aligning AI with a goal function, the EU can incentivize innovation that reduces the marginal costs of essential resources like food, water, transport, and energy — driving societal stability.

2. Preventing data colonialism:

In the age of data-driven capitalism, national borders are losing relevance as data — not territory — increasingly defines power. Digital platforms and data control have become the engines of global economic growth, concentrating authority in and through tech giants that undermine state sovereignty. China and the U.S. pursue expansionary data strategies in collaboration with their home-grown tech companies, leaving the EU vulnerable to external dependence and unable to shape its future without inference. To counteract data colonialism, the EU must adopt policies that ensure a net influx of data into the union while restricting its exports unless governed by equitable trade agreements. Instead of rigid regulation, the EU

should establish an evolving framework that allows the union's societies to make their needs heard. The EU could establish a specialized AI court under Article 257 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) to provide dynamic, case-by-case decisions, ensuring adaptive governance. This would replace rigid regulation with purposeful guidance, fostering a competitive environment.

3. Empowering citizens to trade data for value with EU companies:

A thriving AI industry requires fair and transparent mechanisms that allow citizens to trade data for tangible value. The EU should enable individuals to benefit directly from their data's use while ensuring that transparent consent frameworks safeguard privacy. For instance, citizens could gain financial or service-based compensation when their data contributes to public research or private innovation. Rising AI players must operate within the EU under European legal entities to support this emerging industry and adhere to tax obligations to access user data. These tax revenues should be reinvested into social programs to enhance wellbeing. To enforce accountability, the EU could require public disclosures of AI-generated outcomes, ensuring transparency for citizens while deterring exploitation. This approach ensures that Europe reaps the benefits of its continental data while building international trust in its AI ecosystem.

A new doctrine for a new world order

The EU must confront three defining shifts in the global trajectory: national borders are losing relevance, data colonialism is resurging in exploitative resource extraction, and AI has become the primary engine of economic growth driving these changes. To remain unified and competitive, the union must adopt a new doctrine that strips AI from its premature shackles and allows European societies to evolve dynamically. Social progress cannot be frozen or dictated from above via rigid regulations — it must emerge through mechanisms that enable rapid iteration, empowering citizens to shape how they want to live.

Without a vision that allows competitive European tech companies to emerge, the EU risks irrelevance and disintegration. With a strong vision and dynamic framework, Europe can at least sit at the table and be a force that shapes the new world.

Our future with AI is uncertain. Will we grow with it or be broken by it? The answer lies not in the machines we create but in the society we build alongside them. ●

ASTROPOLITICS

In the beginning

"It is difficult to say what is impossible, for the dream of yesterday is the hope of today and the reality of tomorrow."

—Robert H. Goddard, Aerospace engineer

Since the moment humans first emerged on Earth, they have had a fascination with the heavens. Stars, planets, and life beyond our planet have captivated the imaginations of scientists, explorers, daredevils, policymakers, artists, authors, and screenwriters for generations. Our story begins, not with Yuri Gagarin, Neil Armstrong, or even Stanley Kubrick, but with a little-known Chinese government official named Wan Hu during the Ming Dynasty.

Though the date is inexact, at some point around 1500, Wan, a notorious celestial enthusiast, turned his gaze upward and decided to explore space as man had endeavored to do on Earth. The fruit of his labor, a "spaceship", was both ingenious and rudimentary by today's standards, but laid the foundation for generations of space explorers to come. Wan's ride into space would begin on a wicker chair with 47 gunpowder-filled rockets strapped to it, while two kites assured this contraption's descent back to Earth. When it was time to launch, 47 of his servants — one for each explosive charge — approached his chair with torches lit, ignited the fuses, and quickly scurried away.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, BANG!

According to the legend, once the smoke had cleared, Wan and his chair were gone. Whether Wan made it to his destination above or was scattered into pieces below remains an open question, but it was the beginning of one of the most enduring projects in human history — with economic and geopolitical implications that have grown exponentially to this day.

For all mankind

"We came all this way to explore the moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered Earth."

—Bill Anders, Apollo 8 Astronaut

In the centuries following Wan's experiment, governments from all over the globe would make tremendous leaps in the exploration of our planet, outer space, and everything in between. From Robert H. Goddard's liquid-fueled rocket launches in the 1920s to the Americans and Soviets racing to be the first to orbit the Earth and ultimately set foot on the moon, two elements have historically been at the core of space exploration: great power competition and the struggle for military advantage.

During the second half of the 20th century, the heavens were dominated by governments who had the resources to invest and innovate, and would spare no expense to gain an edge over their Cold War rivals. Today, the playing field looks quite different. Of the 90 countries which have national space programs of varying size, resources, and success, two distinct blocs have emerged. An alliance led by the United States includes transatlantic partners across the European Union (France, Italy, and Germany, among others) and the United Kingdom, and also features Pacific partners in the form of Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia. The competing bloc is led by China, with Russia now along as a junior partner in that dynamic.

As is the case on Earth, securing the high ground in space is a strategic advantage. In this new space race, which means controlling low earth orbit to host surveillance satellites, geo-positional satellites, anti-satellite weapons, and — perhaps most importantly — the key route between the Earth and the moon. On the moon (the highest of high grounds), it means not only controlling cis-lunar space below, but also its natural resources and its capacity as a launching pad into deep space.

The United States is the preeminent power in space. Through NASA, Space Force, and its

partners in the private sector, more than $73 billion is spent annually on a range of space-based capabilities. From weather and imaging satellites to tracking objects in orbit and missile launches on Earth, the United States uses these resources for strategic advantage on Earth.

As with nearly any technology deployed in space, many of the assets currently racing around Earth's orbit at 17,500 miles per hour have the potential to be used for both military and civilian purposes. And while the United States continues to build a coalition around the peaceful use of space, there are threats looming from Beijing and Moscow that require Washington to sharpen its dual-use options.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) "Space Threat Assessment 2024", China set a new record by conducting 67 space launches in 2023 — sending more than 200 satellites into orbit. The report assesses that "similar to the United States, Chinese military leaders aim to secure the full use of space for China, while at the same time preventing adversaries from using their own space capabilities." China's accomplishments in space are increasingly diverse and include launch capacity, its own GPS system, missile warning systems, intelligence collection, and the list goes on.

The news out of Moscow on the space front has produced mixed reactions in Washington and European capitals. Gone are the days when Russia was leading the way in space exploration. Also in the rearview mirror are the times when the U.S. and Europe relied heavily on Russian Soyuz launch capability to catch a ride into space for cargo and for missions to the International Space Station. Russia's economic woes and the sanctions related to its 2022 invasion of Ukraine have not only reduced investment in the country's space program, but isolated Russia from its partnerships with the West. Moscow is now forced to grudgingly accept its position as a junior partner in the Sino-Russian space alliance.

Still, Russia has the ability to be a disruptive force in low earth orbit and beyond, as it demonstrated in early 2024 when reports of Russia's development of a nuclear-armed anti-satellite weapon caused significant alarm. Moscow's ongoing efforts to interfere with the Starlink satellite constellation, which has been used to assist Ukraine in the defense of its territory from Russian aggression, constitute another serious offensive capability in space. Its counter-space activities include jamming, dazzling, and orbiting satellites that release smaller "daughter" satellites to conduct close proximity — and possibly hostile — activity in low earth orbit.

In March 2021, China and Russia formalized their cooperation in space through the Beijing-driven International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) project — a counterweight to the West's own moon exploration Artemis Accords. The ILRS envisions three phases of moon exploration to be completed by 2036. Currently in its first phase of reconnaissance, there is a clear focus on landing technologies and exploring locations for work on the moon. The second phase, due to commence in 2030, has set a goal of establishing in-orbit facilities and a presence on the lunar surface, along with a regular channel of cargo shipments from Earth to the moon. Once construction is complete, Chinese and Russian partners will commence scientific research and further exploration of the moon and beyond.

"Two elements have historically been at the core of space exploration: great power competition and the struggle for military advantage."

"We want to open up space for humanity, and in order to do that, space must be affordable."

—Elon Musk, Founder and CEO of SpaceX

What is truly unique about the current state of affairs, however, is the growing presence of private sector actors in the space race. Elon Musk's SpaceX is the undisputed leader at the moment, but other companies such as Blue Origin, United Launch Alliance, Airbus, or Arianespace are competing — and sometimes cooperating — fiercely in the launch, satellite, and exploration businesses.

"Will space give humans the opportunity to work together in ways that they have heretofore been unable to do on Earth?"

As the number of both public and private actors in space grows, so too do the risks and opportunities that emerge in the geopolitical and commercial realms. As we look to the future, there is one overarching question to keep in mind: Will space give humans the opportunity to work together in ways that they have heretofore been unable to do on Earth?

In 2011, the cost per pound of payload on NASA's space shuttle was about $30,000. More than a decade later, SpaceX has brought that cost down to $1,200 per pound, and with it, opened the floodgates to public and private sector opportunities in space. Launching satellites of all varieties (climate imagery, GPS, intelligence) finally became cost effective — not just for governments, but for space entrepreneurs as well. According to a McKinsey report, the space economy could be worth $1.8 trillion by 2035, with industry growth reaching 9% per year. Of the approximately 9,000 active satellites in space, SpaceX's Starlink accounts for more than 6,000 of them. But launching satellites into low earth orbit is not the only commercial use of space. The falling launch costs have reduced the barrier to entry for a wide variety of space startups around the globe, and they're jumping in with both feet.

From growing organs extraterrestrially to manufacturing drugs at zero gravity, using space to solve problems on Earth is within reach. On the environmental front, companies are seeking to harness the power of the sun using satellites equipped with panels and the ability to beam energy down to Earth, giving momentum to the nascent space-based solar industry. Other climate-adjacent opportunities are ripening, as we've seen with the France-based company Thales, and its pioneering efforts to move data centers into space. Given that data centers are responsible for 2% of the world's energy consumption, this is not just going to be beneficial but ultimately a necessity.

As private sector actors join an already-crowded list of state-sponsored players in space, the potential challenges are numerous. What constitutes an act of aggression? Who is responsible for it? What is a proportional response? Must that response be confined to space? The fog of activities in space creates a situation in which conflict is easy to imagine; the question is whether that outcome is avoidable.

Human nature

"The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us the less taste we shall have for the destruction of our race. Wonder and humility are wholesome emotions, and they do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction."

—Rachel Carson, Author

From the earliest exploration of Earth, humankind has demonstrated an inability to break a cycle that has defined it as a species. It explores new lands. It lays claim to that land and subjugates (or kills) the indigenous population on that territory. It exploits that land for every conceivable economic and political advantage. And often, it goes to war to defend what it has stolen from others. Without stretching the metaphor too far, one can see how the predispositions of our nature are already present in our exploration of space. We have fired satellites into low earth orbit. We have planted a flag on the lunar surface. We have sent rovers to Mars. Low earth orbit is a finite space or resource and great powers are already testing weapons in those contested lanes. The U.S., China, and other nations have mapped out where they intend to extract water and critical minerals on the dark side of the moon and set up colonies. Elon Musk and others dream of a human colony on Mars, and may one day get there. With all of the pieces set, the risk of conflict is increasing with each day.

Even in the midst of global turmoil and conflict, space is still one of the few topics about which enemies continue to engage. Perhaps the view of the pale blue dot that is Earth from space allows Brussels, Washington, Beijing, and Moscow to recognise that we're all in this together. At least for now. ●

"With all of the pieces set, the risk of conflict is increasing with each day."

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