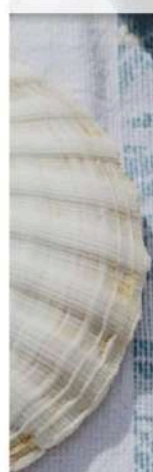




BullsEye
The magazine of European Democrat Students

EMPOWER EUROPE'S YOUTH





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Letter from Chairman

Francesco Sismondini

Dear friends,

As we reach the halfway point of this exciting term, I want to take a moment to reflect on all we have accomplished together. EDS continues to grow stronger, and I am deeply proud of the energy, creativity, and commitment that each of you brings to our shared mission.

Over the past months, our organisation has been more active than ever. We had the privilege of participating in the EPP Congress in Valencia, an unforgettable moment where BullsEye was distributed directly into the hands of Europe's leading political voices. I had the honour of taking part in a compelling panel discussion on one of the defining challenges of our time: the demographic crisis.

We then travelled to Vienna and Bratislava for an in-depth study visit, where we further explored this urgent issue in dialogue with the parliamentary group of the ÖVP. These encounters remind us of the importance of grounding our debates in the diverse realities of our great Union.

Another critical priority we have tackled is the housing crisis, a growing challenge across Europe. It is a battle we must face with greater determination. Young

people deserve a future where they can live, work, and thrive with dignity. EDS must continue to be at the forefront of shaping solutions and pushing forward this debate.

BullsEye is one of our most powerful tools in this mission. Its quality must remain high, and its pages must stay open—open to new voices, bold ideas, and the diverse perspectives that define our generation. I encourage more of you to contribute and make this platform truly your own.

Thank you for your tireless work, your vision, and your dedication. Together, we are building something meaningful not just for EDS, but for the future of the EPP, and the future of Europe.

I look forward to seeing many of you soon in the beautiful city of Genoa, where our Summer University will bring new opportunities for discussion, engagement, and inspiration on the most pressing issues of the European agenda.

With warm regards,

Francesco Sismondini
Chairman



Letter from Secretary General

Vladimir Kljajic

The first half of the year has been truly special for EDS. We began 2025 with an inspiring Winter University in Sofia, where we met the Prime Minister of Bulgaria, representatives of GERB, and other key regional leaders. The event, filled with energy and debate, was made possible thanks to the outstanding efforts of Vice-Chairman Stefan Arsov.

In April, at the EPP Congress in Valencia, we welcomed part of the new leadership of our political family. The election of Dolors Montserrat as Secretary General, alongside President Manfred Weber, brings new energy to the EPP. On this occasion, Vice-Chair Sotiris Paphitis successfully presented and passed a resolution on behalf of EDS.

Our Study Mission to Vienna and Bratislava in May was eye-opening. We visited the UN headquarters and learned about the IAEA's work in nuclear safety. We also explored Vienna's public housing system, which manages over 500,000 units with a focus on affordability and social equity. Special thanks to ODM Slovakia and Alex Zamborsky for their support.

June brought new opportunities. In Utrecht, our delegation, led by Chairman Francesco Sismondini and me, spent a productive day with Jong Sociaal Contract. We discussed youth engagement, AI, and European cooperation. Sincere thanks to Jan-Bauke Telgenhof for his excellent coordination and hospitality.

Later that month in Portugal, we met with two centre-right youth organisations to discuss shared priorities, including education, innovation, and youth participation, paving the way for future collaboration.

Thanks to Vice-Chair Damjan Konjanovski, we successfully closed the Erasmus+ 2014 project and continued with Erasmus+ 2025 implementation. Vice-Chair Marina Christaki expanded our media team and strengthened our online presence, primarily through the creation of video content. Meanwhile, Vice-Chair Filip Gajic has consistently led our Policy Working Groups, now focusing on the upcoming Summer University in Genoa.

All eyes are now on Genoa. For over three months, our team, led by Chairman Francesco, has prepared what promises to be one of our strongest editions yet. With over 70 delegates from more than 30 countries and four new member organisations expected, the Summer University will be a milestone in our growth.

In this edition of our magazine, our editors explore how AI is transforming higher education, the impact of migration on universities, and what it means to build unity in a divided world.

As we enter the second half of 2025, let's continue to move forward with purpose and ambition. On behalf of the Secretariat, thank you for being the heartbeat of EDS.

With warm regards,

Vladimir Kljajic
Secretary General.

THEY FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM

Would We?

 Sotiris Paphitis

Seventy years ago, in 1955, a group of young Greek Cypriots began their fight to unify my home country, Cyprus, with Greece. Their organization was named EOKA—an acronym that, when translated from Greek, means the National Organisation of Greek Fighters. Their armed struggle lasted four years. It took the form of guerrilla warfare in the Cypriot mountains, targeted attacks against colonial infrastructure, and public demonstrations by ordinary citizens.

This resistance brought them face to face with the might of the British Empire, which ruled Cyprus as a colony at the time.

I will not delve into the geopolitical or historical complexities of that period in my homeland's history. What I want to write about is far more personal.

One of EOKA's fighters was my grandfather, Yiannis. Born in 1931, he was only slightly younger than I am now when he joined the armed struggle. Due to his technical knowledge of metalworking—skills he had acquired as a student—he was tasked with making grenades to supply his fellow fighters.

But his most significant contribution came in 1956, when he was involved in an attempt to assassinate the British Governor of Cyprus, Field Marshal Sir John



My grandfather and six of his seven children in 1970

Harding. Harding had been appointed by the British government in response to the EOKA uprising. Among Greek Cypriots, he was deeply unpopular due to the oppressive measures he oversaw: emergency laws enabling curfews, mass arrests, detentions without trial, and strict press censorship. Most infamously, he authorized the execution of EOKA fighters, including teenagers.

Under these conditions, my grandfather and four other EOKA fighters were ordered to carry out an assassination attempt during a ball hosted at one of the capital's largest hotels. They cut the electricity





My grandfather at the age of 17 in circa 1948

during the event and hurled grenades toward the area where the governor was seated. Unfortunately, Harding escaped unscathed.

My grandfather was arrested shortly after the attempt. Following his capture, he was tortured and then imprisoned for the remainder of the conflict in one of the concentration camps established by the British for EOKA fighters and sympathizers. He was released in 1959, when the armed struggle came to an end and negotiations led to Cyprus becoming an independent republic.

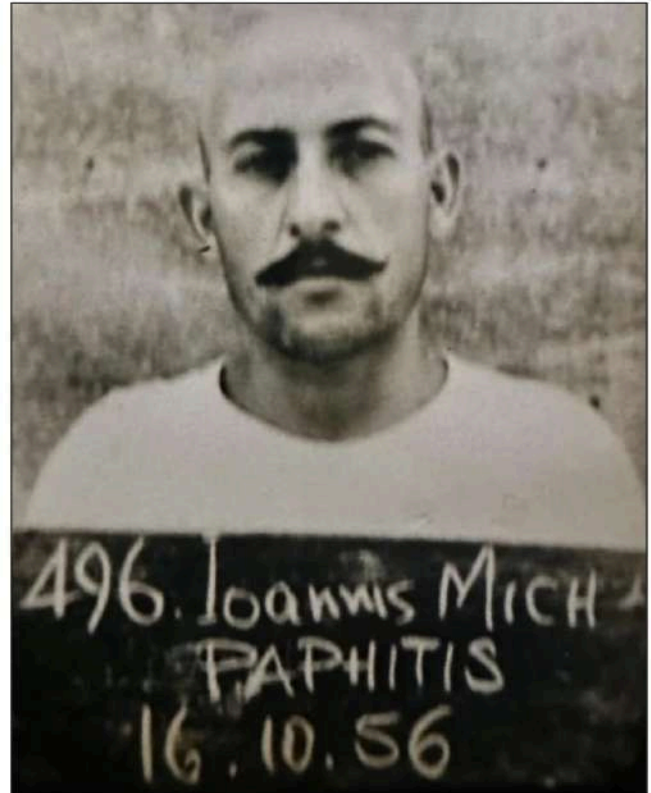
I can only imagine what was going through his mind when he threw that grenade. Worse still, what he must have felt when he was being tortured or held prisoner. Like many men of his generation, my grandfather rarely spoke in emotional terms. Even when he recounted his time as a fighter, either to us or to journalists who occasionally interviewed him, he never shared how he had experienced those years on a personal, emotional level.

One thing, however, is beyond doubt: though that period must have left him deeply scarred, his love for his country never wavered. Until his final days in 2008, I remember him as a stern and unwavering patriot.

Thinking about him now, I can't help but admire his courage and determination. I honestly wonder whether I, or most young people today, would have had the strength to do the same. The prospect of taking up arms feels almost unimaginable in our time... or at least, it did until the war in Ukraine reminded us how quickly that reality can change.

Even if we speak only in analogies, it is still difficult to picture young people today making such sacrifices for a cause. Fighting the world's largest colonial empire with little more than raw will and national pride—this is what those young fighters in 1955 committed themselves to. And they did so fully, despite the odds.

I can only hope that our generation has not lost that mettle. I hope we will never have to prove ourselves in armed conflict—but if we must, or even if we are only called to confront the more abstract demons of our time, I hope we will rise with the same courage, resilience, and sense of purpose that they did.



Mugshot of my grandfather shortly after his arrest by the colonial authorities

SAUDI ARABIA'S VISION 2030

Ambitious Transformation Amid a Global Balancing Act

 Vladimir Kljajic



For decades, Saudi Arabia was known primarily for its vast oil wealth and conservative social order.

Today, the kingdom is undergoing a dramatic self-reinvention under the banner of Vision 2030 - an ambitious strategy championed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to diversify the economy, modernize society, and harness technology for a post-oil future. As Saudi Arabia pursues these sweeping domestic reforms, it is also navigating a shifting geopolitical landscape. Riyadh finds itself balancing historic alliances and new partnerships with global powers - from a long-standing bond with the United States to burgeoning ties with China - all while managing a rivalry with Iran and maintaining relations with Europe. This delicate juggling act raises a crucial

question: can Saudi Arabia achieve its transformative Vision 2030 at home while successfully balancing its relationships abroad amid rising global polarization?

Vision 2030: Diversifying the Economy and Society

Launched in 2016, Vision 2030 outlines an ambitious roadmap to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, foster new industries, and implement social reforms. The plan's core pillars aim to build "a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation". Key goals include reinforcing investment and non-oil trade, expanding the private sector's role, and even promoting a softer, more modern image of the

traditionally conservative kingdom. Saudi leaders aim to propel the country into the top ranks of global indices, for example, elevating it from the world's 19th-largest economy to the top 15 and increasing the private sector's GDP contribution from 40% to 65%. Achieving these targets will require the development of new sectors, including tourism, entertainment, technology, and renewable energy. Indeed, technology is seen as a key enabler of transformation, with major investments planned in digital infrastructure and smart-city projects, such as the futuristic NEOM city.

Equally significant are the social changes underway. Vision 2030 is accompanied by unprecedented social liberalization in Saudi society. In recent years, women have been allowed to drive (since 2018) and no longer require a male guardian's permission to work or travel. Public cinemas have reopened after decades, and concerts and cultural events are now commonplace. These changes are gradually reshaping the social fabric and are intended to cultivate a more vibrant, inclusive society in line with Vision 2030's goals. While political power remains tightly centralized under Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the social and economic openings are attracting foreign investment and talent, signaling to the world that Saudi Arabia is open for

business and social progress, albeit on its own terms.

Geopolitical Repositioning: From Washington to Beijing (and Brussels)

As it transforms at home, Saudi Arabia has also recalibrated its foreign policy to support Vision 2030's ambitions. A top priority is maintaining an investment-friendly global profile and securing diverse partnerships. Historically, Riyadh's closest ally has been the United States, with a security-for-oil partnership dating back decades. This bond was especially warm during the Trump administration, when President Donald Trump offered strong backing to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and signed major arms and investment deals with the kingdom. However, in recent years, the dynamic has shifted. Under President Biden, Washington's relationship with Riyadh has faced strains over issues such as human rights and oil policy. Notably, in 2022, Saudi Arabia defied U.S. pressure to increase oil production amid a global energy crunch – a move that signaled a more assertive Saudi stance in line with its own economic interests (and cooperation with Russia in OPEC+). While the U.S.-Saudi security alliance still



endures, Riyadh has made it clear that it will chart an independent course when needed, as it pursues the Vision 2030 agenda of economic diversification and “Saudi-first” development.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia is expanding its cooperation with China, reflecting a pivot to new partners in a multipolar world. Beijing eagerly aligned its Belt and Road Initiative investments with Saudi priorities after Vision 2030 was announced. Chinese leaders immediately endorsed Vision 2030 and framed Chinese projects within that context, with President Xi Jinping supporting the plan and signing \$65 billion worth of agreements during King Salman’s 2017 visit to China. Between 2016 and 2024, China poured tens of billions of dollars into Saudi infrastructure and energy projects, part of a total of \$53.8 billion invested since 2005, with a focus on Vision-aligned sectors like power and transport. The two countries have coordinated closely to synergize Vision 2030 with China’s Belt and Road, deepening cooperation in energy, finance, and technology. For Riyadh, China represents a significant source of capital, technology, and even tourists – Saudi Arabia aims to attract 150 million visitors annually by 2030, including a substantial 3 million from China. This growing Saudi-China partnership also suits Beijing’s interests, giving it greater influence in the Gulf. Importantly, Riyadh has pursued these ties while avoiding political friction with China, for instance, steering clear of criticism on sensitive issues, in order to keep economic cooperation on track.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s engagement with Europe has also been on the rise, though it receives less fanfare. European Union countries recognize that Saudi Arabia has become an “increasingly important economic and diplomatic partner” – not only as an energy supplier, but as a pivotal player on issues like regional stability and climate initiatives. In 2022, the EU released its first-ever strategic partnership plan for



the Gulf, signaling Europe’s interest in deeper ties with Riyadh in areas such as clean energy, infrastructure connectivity, and investment. European leaders have frequently visited Riyadh in recent years to court Saudi investment and cooperation, even as they occasionally express concerns about human rights. For the Saudi leadership, relations with Europe offer additional diversification of partnerships and technology transfer, complementing its U.S. and Asian ties. Riyadh’s approach is clearly one of building transactional relationships across the board – securing investment and political capital wherever it can, from Washington to Beijing to Brussels, in service of its national development goals.

Long Rivalry with Iran and a New Regional Dynamic

A critical regional factor influencing Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia’s long-standing rivalry with Iran. For decades, Riyadh and Tehran have competed for influence across the Middle East, backing opposite sides in conflicts from Yemen to Syria. This rivalry, rooted in sectarian (Sunni-Shia) divides and geopolitical competition, has periodically flared into direct confrontations and proxy wars, threatening regional stability. Such instability is anathema to Vision 2030’s success, which depends on a secure environment for investment and tourism. Recognizing this, Saudi Arabia has in recent years moved to de-escalate tensions with Iran as part of a strategy to safeguard its economic plans. In March 2023, Riyadh and Tehran agreed to restore diplomatic relations in a breakthrough deal brokered by China after seven years of severed ties. This détente was driven in large part by Saudi Arabia’s pragmatic calculation: continued conflict with Iran would jeopardize the implementation of Vision 2030 by scaring off foreign investors and draining resources, whereas a modus vivendi could bring a measure of peace conducive to development.



The regional recalibration appears to be paying off. With Chinese mediation, Iran reportedly agreed to curb support for Houthi militants in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia halted its own hostile media campaigns against Tehran. The easing of the Saudi-Iran feud has already facilitated a ceasefire in Yemen's war and opened the door for more stable Gulf security arrangements. For Saudi Arabia, a cooler relationship with Iran means fewer immediate security threats, allowing Riyadh to focus more confidently on its economic diversification and mega-projects. Still, the rivalry is far from resolved. Deep suspicions linger, and any backsliding by Iran could reignite tensions. Yet for now, Saudi Arabia's ability to reduce regional conflicts and foster stability, from mending fences with Qatar in 2021 to engaging with Turkey and Syria, is directly reinforcing the Kingdom's Vision 2030 objectives, creating a more favorable environment for transformation. Regional calm provides breathing room for the bold economic and social changes the Saudi leadership seeks to achieve.

Balancing Great Powers in a Polarized World

Saudi Arabia's rise as a self-proclaimed "middle power" has coincided with an increasingly polarized international order. As competition intensifies between the U.S.-led West and the China-Russia axis, Riyadh is determined to avoid being trapped in either camp. Instead, it has adopted a strategy of strategic multi-alignment, pursuing flexible partnerships with all major powers to maximize its national interests. The Kingdom still values its U.S. alliance – for defense equipment and security cooperation – but it is no longer willing to follow Washington's lead unquestioningly. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia is deepening ties with China (and to a lesser extent, Russia) without severing its Western links. This extreme hedging was evident when Riyadh joined China-led groups, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, as a dialogue partner and considered involvement in BRICS initiatives, even as it also engaged in U.S.-backed projects, like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced at the 2023 G20.

So far, Saudi Arabia has navigated this high-wire act with deft skill. Its "opportunistic actionism" in foreign policy – making deals with various powers based on immediate interests – has given the kingdom greater leverage on the world stage. By leveraging its economic clout (especially as an energy giant during the Ukraine-war oil crunch) and financial heft (through its \$700+ billion Public Investment Fund), Riyadh has secured a

seat at many tables from global investment summits to climate talks. Saudi officials are confident they can continue reaping benefits from all sides without alienating any one partner, effectively "extracting gains from diverse partners" while staying out of the brewing Cold War between great powers. This confidence stems from the kingdom's unique position: as the world's top oil exporter and a leading investor, Saudi Arabia is courted by both East and West.

Nevertheless, maintaining this careful balance will become increasingly challenging as global rivalries intensify. Riyadh faces the test of managing contradictions – for instance, expanding technology sharing with China while not jeopardizing security ties with the U.S., or coordinating oil policy with Russia without harming relations with Europe. Any sharp escalation in U.S.–China tensions or other global crises could pressure Saudi Arabia to take sides, potentially undermining its multi-aligned stance. For now, the kingdom bets that a multipolar world allows it to play all sides and advance its Vision 2030 with help from all quarters. The next few years will be critical to determine whether Saudi Arabia can indeed prosper from every camp and remain above the fray of polarization, or if it will be forced into difficult choices.

Halfway to 2030, Saudi Arabia's transformation is in full swing, with glitzy new projects rising from the desert, social norms evolving, and foreign investors taking note of the new opportunities. The Vision 2030 blueprint has not only charted an economic and social overhaul at home but also driven a more assertive and versatile Saudi foreign policy abroad. Riyadh's ability to harness global partnerships while avoiding entanglement in great power conflicts will be crucial for the Vision's ultimate success. So far, the kingdom has shown a knack for this balancing act, leveraging its strategic importance to maintain strong ties with Washington, deepen cooperation with Beijing, engage Europe, and calm regional rivalries, all at once. If it can continue to do so amid a polarized international climate, Saudi Arabia may well emerge in 2030 as a transformed nation: one that is economically diversified and socially modernized, and that has secured a prominent, independent place in a multipolar world. The stakes are high, but the course set by Vision 2030 reflects a bold wager that Saudi Arabia can achieve profound change at home and a nuanced equilibrium abroad – a combination that could redefine the kingdom's role on the global stage for decades to come.



DEALS, DRONES, AND DIPLOMACY

Unpacking U.S. Engagement in the Gulf, 2025

 **Andrea Mghames**

In May 2025, the United States reaffirmed its central role in Gulf geopolitics through President Donald Trump's state visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The tour, marked by billion-dollar deals, high-level summits, and symbolic pageantry, underscored the strategic alignment between Washington and its Gulf partners. More than a personal tour, the visit highlighted the enduring influence of U.S. defense, technology and diplomacy across the region.

Strategic Stops and Ceremonial Signaling

President Trump's visit began in Saudi Arabia, where he was received by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with full honors. The two countries announced a new "strategic economic partnership"

spanning defense, energy and advanced technology, including a multibillion-dollar agreement to upgrade Saudi defense systems using American hardware and expertise.

At the Saudi-U.S. Investment Forum, the U.S. delegation, comprising leaders from tech and defense sectors including Elon Musk, participated in discussions on artificial intelligence, aerospace and infrastructure. A landmark deal between Saudi AI firm Humain and U.S. semiconductor companies such as Nvidia and AMD reflected deepening tech cooperation amid global supply chain competition.

Starlink also unveiled its aviation and maritime internet service in the Kingdom, expanding U.S. strategic

tech reach in the region. This rollout will enhance Gulf intelligence and communications infrastructure, supporting surveillance efforts against threats from Iran and its regional proxies.

In a significant diplomatic moment, President Trump met with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, the first direct U.S. engagement with Damascus in years. Though not tied to any formal announcement, the meeting signaled a conditional openness from Washington to re-engage with Syria under a framework that limits Iranian influence. Gulf leaders saw the outreach as aligning with their own efforts to stabilize the region.

Qatar: Aerospace, Defense, and Regional Mediation

President Trump's next stop was Qatar, where the focus shifted to aerospace and defense cooperation. Qatar Airways signed a record-breaking order of 210 Boeing aircraft, reinforcing U.S. leadership in global aviation and its manufacturing base.

In parallel, over \$20 billion in defense agreements were signed, particularly in counter-drone systems and unmanned aerial capabilities, signaling a strategic pivot toward defending against asymmetric threats, including those posed by Iran-backed militias and regional non-state actors.

The U.S. also encouraged Qatar to continue its role as a neutral intermediary in Gulf-Iran talks.

While no outcomes were publicly disclosed, the discussions reflected Washington's preference for regionally led diplomacy that complements its own de-escalation efforts.

UAE: Innovation, Interdependence, and Clean Energy

In the UAE, the emphasis turned to digital innovation and sustainable energy. The UAE announced plans to build the largest AI data center outside the United States, in partnership with local firm G42. The initiative reflects the Emirates' ambitions to lead the AI revolution, supported by American technology and capital.

More significantly, the UAE committed \$440 billion in investments into the U.S. energy sector by 2035. The agreement covers renewables, hydrogen, and grid infrastructure, cementing a shared long-term vision for energy transition and highlighting growing economic interdependence between the Gulf and the U.S.

Strategic Messaging and Public Criticism

Though firmly positioned as a diplomatic and economic mission, the visit was not without controversy. Human rights organizations criticized the emphasis on military sales and elite partnerships while humanitarian issues, particularly in Gaza, received little public attention. Critics argued the tour reflected a transactional approach that prioritizes strategic deals over democratic values.

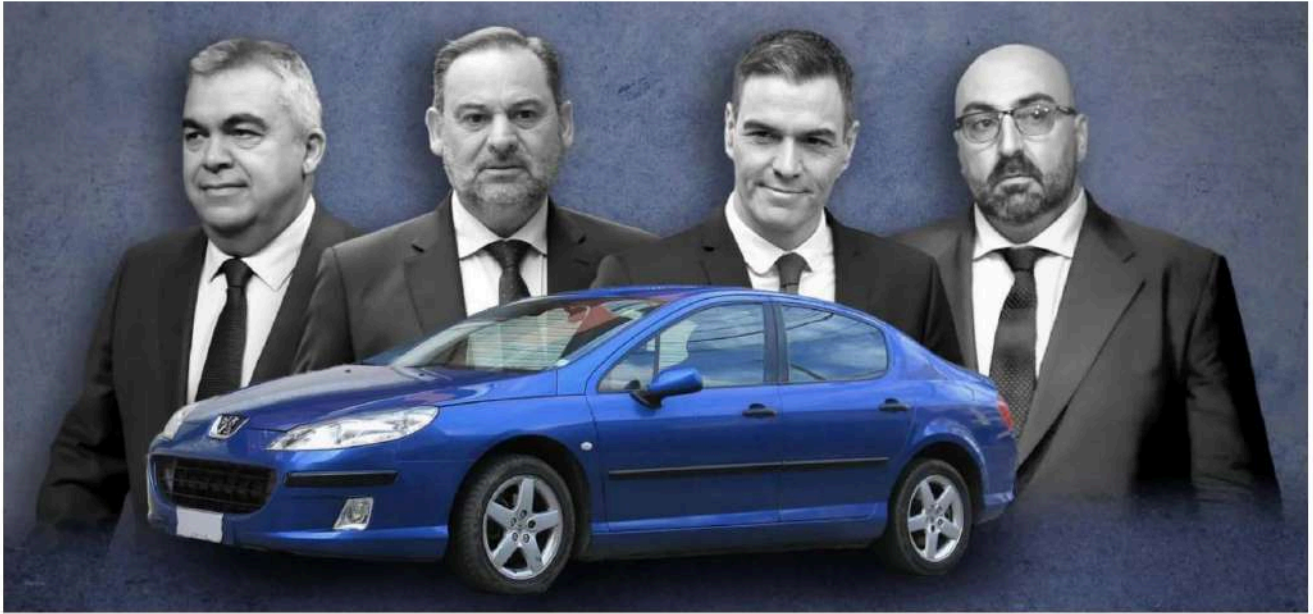
Nonetheless, for Gulf states, the visit was clear confirmation that the U.S. remains an indispensable partner in a multipolar world, able to deliver security assurances, economic opportunities and global visibility.

U.S. Presence Beyond Personalities

President Trump's 2025 Gulf visit was not merely a reflection of one administration's priorities, but a reaffirmation of the United States' enduring strategic footprint in the Middle East. Through defense, diplomacy, and deepening economic ties, Washington continues to shape the regional order, now through a blend of traditional statecraft and modern partnerships in AI, energy, and surveillance.

As the geopolitical landscape shifts, one thing remains constant: the Gulf states are looking to Washington not just for protection, but for partnership, and the U.S., regardless of administration, remains ready to engage.





WELCOME TO EUROPE'S VENEZUELA : FROM KOLDO TO BEGOÑA

Mapping the Socialist Web of Power and Corruption

 Lara Ghanoudi

In today's Spain, corruption no longer hides in the shadows — it rules from the presidential palace. What started as whispers of irregular contracts and pandemic profiteering has unravelled into the most far-reaching scandal since the democratic transition, dragging down ministers, operatives, family members, and perhaps the Prime Minister himself.

The Mask That Fell: Koldo, Ábalos & Cerdán — Anatomy of a Corruption Triangle

The unravelling began with masks.

In early 2024, Spanish police arrested Koldo García, a former nightclub bouncer turned top aide to Transport Minister José Luis Ábalos. He was charged with orchestrating a kickback scheme tied to COVID-era emergency mask contracts: €24.2 million for 8 million units on March 21, 2020, followed by €12.5 million for another 5 million just six days later. Both contracts were fast-tracked with minimal oversight.

The supplier, Soluciones de Gestión, had no experience in medical logistics — yet secured tens of millions in state funds. Prosecutors allege Koldo helped steer the contracts in exchange for commissions. Tellingly, Soluciones had already signed deals with third-party brokers before the government tenders were announced.

A sweeping February 2024 raid uncovered shell companies in Luxembourg and Brazil, over €1.5 million in properties, and millions in offshore assets. What started as a mask scandal soon exposed a broader contract-rigging network dressed up as crisis management.

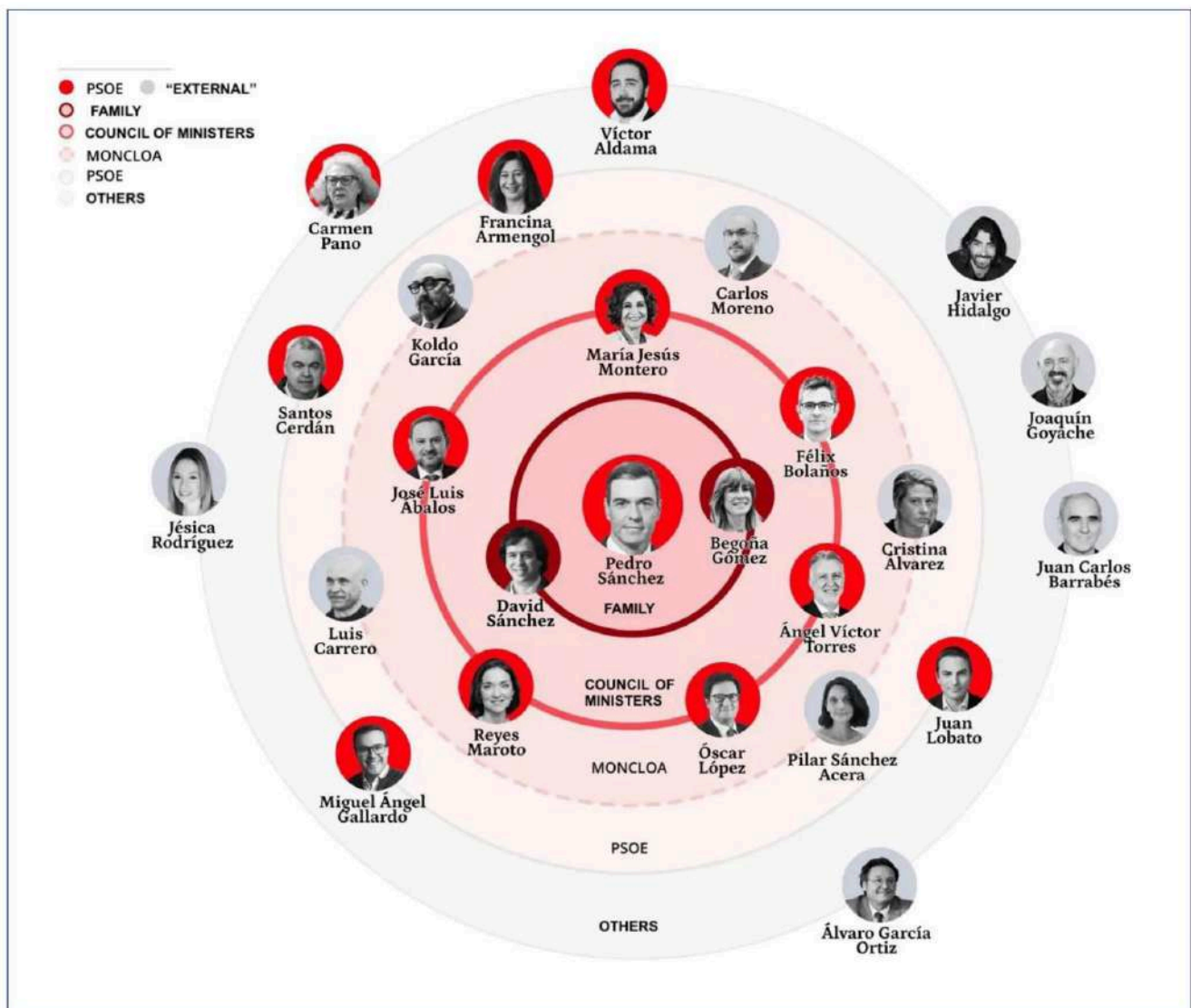
A 490-page report from the Civil Guard's elite anti-corruption unit soon tied the scheme to Ábalos and Santos Cerdán, the PSOE's then-Secretary of Organisation and effectively its number three. Evidence included intercepted messages, internal memos, and financial trails pointing to a systematic operation: public contracts laundered through intermediaries, commissions routed via ghost companies, and party insiders securing strategic appointments to lock the system in place.

At least €620,000 in commissions were identified – €450,000 of which was still pending when the case broke. On June 12, 2025, Ábalos and Koldo were summoned for questioning. Just weeks later, the Supreme Court ordered the detention of Cerdán, who resigned from all party posts and now faces charges of running a criminal network and abusing public institutions for personal gain, whilst in prison with no bail.

However, Cerdán denied wrongdoing, claiming he had been "used by Koldo for 15 years." If true, it suggests institutional blindness. If false, it confirms rot at the party's core.

Investigators have since broadened the investigation to cover infrastructure contracts involving major firms, such as Acciona, Sacyr, and Ferrovial – all of which are alleged to have benefited from insider access and rigged bidding linked to PSOE figures. COVID, it seems, wasn't an outlier – it was the blueprint.

Parliament's inquiry commission begins with "the Koldo case," but its scope now threatens to unravel the political machinery of Sánchez's era. And with the Prime Minister refusing to condemn Ábalos or demand his resignation from Parliament, the silence may prove the loudest indictment of all.





Family Ties & Corrupt Appointments: The First Lady and the Invisible Brother

If the corruption triangle of Ábalos, Koldo, and Cerdán revealed how public institutions were bent for political cronies, the next chapter is even more personal — and more damning.

Now, the spotlight shifts to Pedro Sánchez's own family. The Prime Minister, once hailed as a modern reformer, now faces investigations engulfing his wife, Begoña Gómez, and brother, David Sánchez. What was once dismissed as opposition noise has morphed into formal judicial proceedings. And what was once framed as technocratic governance now stands accused of nepotism, privilege, and impunity at the highest level.

First Lady Begoña Gómez: From Ivory Tower to EU Contract Scandal

Begoña Gómez, Spain's First Lady, stands at the centre of an unfolding judicial storm.

In April 2024, she was formally named in an ongoing investigation for influence peddling and private-sector corruption, related explicitly to EU-funded contracts. At issue is her dual role: as co-director of a master's program at Madrid's Complutense University and as a behind-the-scenes power broker linked to government tenders.

Court records show that Gómez penned recommendation letters in 2020 for a business consortium involving tech entrepreneur Juan Carlos Barrabés. The same consortium went on to secure €10.2 million in public contracts from Red.es, the Spanish government's digital innovation agency, outbidding 20 competing offers.

The catch? A June 2025 audit by Spain's State Intervention Board flagged the process, revealing that "subjective criteria" were suspiciously used to override the mandatory 60% price-based scoring system. In plain terms: Barrabés' bid was unfairly elevated, and Begoña's intervention may have tipped the scales.

Days later, the European Public Prosecutor's Office indicted Barrabés for violating EU tender rules. The connection to Gómez became undeniable.

While Spain's Civil Guard (UCO) initially held back on formal charges against Gómez — citing insufficient evidence — the investigation remains open. Critics see this as the classic blueprint of elite impunity: delay, deflect, dilute.

Adding fuel to the fire, leaked documents revealed that Gómez has been using an official government email address ending in @presidencia.gob.es — typically reserved for state officials. The Sánchez administration waved it off as a matter of "security coordination." Still, the optics were unmistakable: the First Lady appears to have embedded herself deep within the machinery of power.

In one particularly explosive revelation, UCO logs showed that Gómez exchanged direct internal messages with David Sánchez, her brother-in-law, raising fresh concerns about informal family influence over public institutions.

David Sánchez: A Job with No Title, and a Paycheck with No Purpose

If Begoña's dealings cast doubt on the ethical boundaries between private lobbying and public contracting, David Sánchez's saga shatters them outright.

Since 2016, the Prime Minister's younger brother has held a little-known position within the Diputación de Badajoz, a provincial body controlled by the PSOE. The title? A custom-created role to lead a cultural music program. The reality? A phantom job, tailor-made to provide a salary, prestige, and no real responsibilities.

A police report concluded that the position had been "artificially designed to accommodate David Sánchez's personal preferences" — including a remote-work setup that allowed him to live across the border in Portugal, far from the institution allegedly employing him.

When summoned for testimony, Sánchez Jr. couldn't

describe what his job entailed. He couldn't explain what the office did – or even where it was located. His responses painted a picture not just of incompetence, but of deliberate obfuscation.

Worse still, when journalists and watchdog groups filed transparency requests for his contract, pay slips, and work logs, they were systematically denied. The alleged enabler? Álvaro García Ortiz, the very same State Attorney General who has been accused of shielding Sánchez allies from legal scrutiny.

What emerges is not just a family benefitting from public largesse, but an institutional architecture built to conceal it, defended at the highest prosecutorial levels.

From Clean Hands to Dirty Deals: Sánchez's Grand Illusion

Pedro Sánchez came to power in 2018 by leading a no-confidence vote that ousted Mariano Rajoy over the Gürtel corruption scandal. With just 84 seats in parliament, he cobbled together a patchwork alliance – from communists to separatists – under the banner of ethical renewal. "Corruption," Sánchez proclaimed at the time, "is a corrosive and profoundly harmful force." He promised "zero tolerance," transparency, and moral leadership. For a while, the illusion held.

But fast-forward seven years, and the self-declared reformer now presides over a government mired in systemic corruption: mask procurement scandals, judicial meddling, family enrichment, and influence peddling at the highest levels. The same PSOE that once claimed to clean up Spanish politics now resembles the very machinery it condemned – only slicker, more insulated, and more shameless.

Rather than accept responsibility, Sánchez has chosen deflection and gaslighting. He attributes the scandals to a "media-judicial offensive" orchestrated by the right. He apologised generally for corruption, while simultaneously defending Santos Cerdán in

parliament as chants of "¡dimisión!" echoed around him. He reassured the public that "all mechanisms are being activated," as if mere procedure could remove the rot.

This isn't reform – it's a playbook borrowed from Venezuela's Maduro: deny, distract, weaponise institutions, and vilify dissent. With taxpayer-funded media spinning damage control, and key allies embedded in the judiciary, Sánchez tells Spaniards to look away. "Nothing to see here," he implies, while the socialist edifice quietly crumbles behind him.

A Republic of Privilege, Not Principles

What Spain is witnessing under Pedro Sánchez is not merely a corruption scandal – it is the collapse of political credibility. From Koldo's million-euro mask kickbacks to Begoña Gómez's entanglements in EU contract favouritism, and David Sánchez's ghost job funded by public money, the rot runs deep – and upward. This isn't the work of rogue actors; it's the blueprint of a political culture that thrives on opacity, rewards loyalty over merit, and treats public institutions as spoils of power.

Sánchez may still wear the mask of a reformer. Still, the evidence speaks louder than his press conferences: the rule of law is bending to political convenience, the judiciary is under siege, and the lines between government, family, and profit have all but disappeared.

Europe must take note. The Spanish case is not an outlier – it's a warning. When those in power exploit crises to entrench themselves, when watchdogs become lapdogs, and when corruption is excused as partisan persecution, democracy itself becomes the casualty.

From Brussels to Berlin, from Strasbourg to Madrid, the message must be clear: Europe cannot afford a Venezuela in its ranks. Spain deserves better. And so, does the European Union. The time for silence is over – the time for accountability must begin.





EUROPE'S ECONOMIC WAR

EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia

 **Andia Homata**

Anctions are Europe's primary non-military tool in responding to Russian aggression. Since 2014, and especially post-2022, the EU has leaned on its most powerful non-military instrument: economic sanctions. At the heart of this response are Council Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 (Regulation 269) and Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 (Regulation 833). These legal frameworks form the core of the EU's effort to weaken Russia's war-making capacity. In turn, understanding their effectiveness is key to evaluating Europe's strategic posture and its credibility.

Despite EU sanctions targeting Russia's financial system, energy exports, and defence sector, the actual economic impact has been mixed. While sanctions have hurt Russian long-term economic prospects, they have not decisively constrained its ability to finance and continue the war.

The key question is no longer whether sanctions can

hurt Russia, as they already have. The real issue is whether they can influence the trajectory of the war.

Regulation 269 and Regulation 833

Regulation 269 contains a list of legal and natural persons who are subject to asset freeze restrictions.

Regulation 833 imposes various trade and sectoral restrictions on financial institutions, dual-use goods, energy exports, defense materials, luxury goods and technology. In addition, it imposes bans on the import of Russian coal, oil and gold.

Together, these measures aim to degrade Russia's economic and military capabilities, isolate it from global markets and demonstrate EU unity.

Sanctions have disrupted trade, investment, and access to Western technology. Importantly, Russia was cut off from SWIFT, its central bank reserves

were frozen and thousands of Western companies exited the Russian market.

However, one major problem is enforcement. Many prohibited goods still indirectly end up in Russia through Central Asia or the UAE. Sanctioned goods, particularly high-tech and dual-use components continue to reach Russia through such intermediaries. Consequently, the implication is clear: re-export and evasion networks are thriving.

Without stronger enforcement tools, Regulation 269 and Regulation 833 risk becoming performative rather than punitive.

As a result, despite the sanctions, Russia maintained its military production and avoided financial collapse. To this end, this shows a key limitation of sanctions: they disrupt and delay, but not dismantle. Their true power lies not in immediate regime change, but in gradual attrition over time.

EU Unity and Sanctions Fatigue

Effective sanctions require political consensus. It is important to note that while the EU has stayed mostly united through the initial sanctions packages, by mid 2024 cracks have begun to show. Countries like Hungary have delayed or diluted key proposals. Meanwhile, public frustration is growing due to high energy prices and inflation, especially in more vulnerable EU economies. Sanction fatigue is a real risk. Sustaining momentum will require more than legal tools. It demands transparent public communication, shared long-term goals and political resilience. Without this, enforcement will weaken, and the political price of unity may begin to outweigh its

perceived benefits. As the war continues, maintaining unity around Regulation 269 and Regulation 833 becomes harder and enforcement may erode further.

Weakening Russia

Taking a zoomed out view, Regulation 269 and Regulation 833 have definitely hurt Russia's economy and they also display that the EU is serious about opposing the war. Furthermore, they have imposed significant costs on Russia and symbolized Europe's collective response to aggression. However, sanctions alone are not a strategy - they are only one piece of a much larger geopolitical puzzle.

Their real strength lies in shaping the long game: forcing Russia to pay a high economic price for aggression, limiting its access to critical technologies, and isolating it diplomatically. But for sanctions to achieve more than symbolic success, they must be part of a coordinated, long-term strategy that includes diplomacy, military support for Ukraine, and sustained public engagement.

In the end, Europe's credibility doesn't just rest on its laws or its currency, it rests on whether it can turn principles into outcomes, and maintain pressure when it counts most.

On 20 May 2025, the Council of the European Union adopted the 17th package of sanctions against Russia. Further tightening restrictions on advanced technologies and expanding the list of sanctioned individuals and entities, a reminder that the EU's pressure campaign continues to evolve in response to ongoing aggression.





TIME TO STAND FIRM

 **Helge Ytterøy L'orange, President of EPPride**

Today truly European values like freedom and equality are being challenged in ways not expected years ago. As EPPride – the LGBTIQ+ network of EPP working with minority rights and within a minority we can see and feel that very clearly.

Over the last decades tolerance for diversity have gained significantly and improvement of the legal situation for LGBTIQ+ have followed in many European countries. Now we experience negative developments in several countries, also EU-member countries. The climate has changed in a more confrontative direction, not only towards the LGBTIQ+ community, but also towards other minorities. We see it clearly in Hungary with similar steps taken in Slovakia and worrying tendencies in Bulgaria, the newly elected president in Polen. We see how the new US administration attacks our shared values and basic rights, not only in the US, but on a global scene. And of course, the constant attacks on these values since many years in and from Russia.

We should all be pleased that EPP in the presidency's resolution on EPP's path forward, adopted at the Congress in Valencia, confirmed that our values are based on respect for each individual and human rights for all. The resolution clearly states that diversity and equal opportunities for all are integral parts of our common European way of life. These are important confirmations that we as a political

family, even in uncertain times, stand firmly behind our values and will include and defend minorities and vulnerable groups.

The President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, delivers when it comes to implementing strong policies for diversity and equal opportunities for all. In her mission letter to the new Commissioner for equality there is a clear commitment: Regarding a renewed LGBTIQ+ Equality strategy as well as the intention to strengthening and intensifying the efforts to combat hate crimes and hate-related violence across Europe including a strive to ban conversion therapy practises.

Pride in the Future

Two basic understandings are important to recognise and follow to create a positive way forward and to guide the work in the upcoming years.

Firstly, the EU is a Union of values, where respect for and protection of human rights are at the core, including LGBTIQ+ rights. This should be non-negotiable both towards current member countries and when discussing future enlargement.

Secondly, the Commission must be clear in rejecting the notion that being LGBTIQ+ is some form of an ideology. To see and recognise the individual, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the multitude of characteristics, including sexual orientation and/or gender identity as any other characteristics.

EPPride has developed a broad political platform based on policies implemented from different centre-right governments and parties connected to EPP. For the upcoming new EU LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy we have contributed with six important priorities:

1. In EPP's latest electoral manifesto our political family stated a commitment to creating 'The

best conditions for everyone to start a family'. A prerequisite for free movement of all EU citizens in the Union must ensure all families and their children the same legal and social rights and protection, regardless of their form.

2. The European Parliament has already called for a ban on so-called 'conversion therapy'. The European Union should encourage member states to follow countries like Germany, Cyprus and Norway, who have implemented legislation that can be used as models for others.
3. Several European countries are currently working on legislation to ensure transgender persons the right to self-determination. It would be of great importance for the EU to address self-determination of trans persons in the strategy, focusing on cross-border recognition of their legal status inside and outside the EU.
4. Hate speech that encourages violence against the LGBTIQ+ community as well as for other minorities has risen over the last years. We have seen serious consequences including deadly attacks in cities such as Oslo, Bratislava and Dresden. The EU must raise awareness of hate speech and hate crime and take further initiatives to make this a European crime.
5. On the local and regional level, it is important to develop safe areas for young people, safe for everyone to be themselves without any fear of discrimination. This is important both in public and private spaces. The EU must be an arena for local authorities to exchange and develop measures for this.
6. At the international arena, the EU has two main possibilities: In the context of its migration and asylum policy, the EU should emphasise the need to protect vulnerable asylum seekers, such as LGBTIQ+ people. It is also important to be a clear voice against criminalisation on a global level, and explicitly support LGBTIQ+ rights in relations with other countries and international organisations such as the UN, pointing out that LGBTIQ+ rights are human rights.

One of the important matters that divides us from the more authoritarian ideologies, is that we have respect for each individual, the uniqueness and value of each and one of us.

The development over the last years makes it even more important for us to be clear and stand firm on our values and ideological compass. The EPP statement from the election congress in Bucharest 'United in diversity' must stand strong.





LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Transport Poverty in Rural Europe

 Schwarcz Kiefer Patrik

Transport poverty is not a classic theoretical concept from Brussels, it is a daily, harsh reality. Far too often, European policies speak in abstract terms about mobility, carbon neutrality, and sustainable and green transition. But for millions of people living in rural areas of the European Union, “mobility” is not about choosing between a diesel or an electric car. It is about whether they can move at all.

I recently visited a small village in my home region in southern Hungary. It is so close to Pécs, Hungary's fifth-largest city, that you can literally see its skyline from the end of the gardens. Yet the village is almost completely cut off from the city. There are only 4 direct buses per day, 3 of them in the early morning. If you miss them, you cannot get to work, to school, or to the doctor. Or by using connecting lines the ride lasts 2-3 times more.

That is transport poverty.

I have seen it with my own eyes countless times. It wasn't a unique case, after a long day, I stopped for a man walking home along the roadside. He had just finished eight hours of physical work and faced another long walk because no bus was running. His only choice was to walk, exhausted, for nearly an hour to reach his home. I gave him a ride, simply so he could rest a bit more that day. In places like this, if you do not own a car, usually an old, polluting diesel vehicle, because that is what people can afford, you have no mobility at all.

The Rural Challenge

Across rural Europe, we see the same patterns: bus lines cancelled, train services reduced, costs going up, infrastructure crumbling. Young people cannot stay

because they cannot reach education or jobs. Elderly people cannot visit a doctor or shop for groceries. Families struggle with the cost of running an old car. Just an example: the average age of a Hungarian car is 16 years. Without affordable, reliable public transport, these people are being left behind and the demographic crisis in rural areas will be even stronger.

We must also be honest: the green transition is essential. We must cut emissions also in transport. But the transition must be fair. If somebody expects people to abandon older diesel vehicles or switch to cleaner options, it must be guaranteed they have real alternatives. Because if you cannot even reach a bus stop, you certainly cannot afford a new electric car.

Europe needs to get serious about fair mobility. That means investing in local public transport, including rural buses and regional trains. That means supporting on-demand services and flexible timetables, using digital tools to connect people more efficiently. And it means making sure no region - however small, however remote - is forgotten when we build the mobility system of the future. That's why I stress: affordable cars are also essential for this future system.

If we ignore the problem of transport poverty, we risk losing public support not just for the entire climate transition, but our European project as well. People will understandably reject green measures if they feel these measures punish them, cut them off, or make their daily life even harder. This turns them to the extremist parties and against the EU. The European People's Party has rightly put this principle at the centre: cleaner, more sustainable transport, yes, but not at the cost of creating new forms of poverty.

We shouldn't forget, mobility is not a luxury. It is a basic right. The right to go to school, to work, to see a doctor, to meet family and friends. Without mobility, there is no real equality of opportunity. No future for



young people. No dignity for elderly people. No fair transition.

The man I picked up that evening, after his shift, was simply trying to get home. It is a small thing, but it says everything about what is at stake. If we cannot guarantee people even a bus to reach their homes, how can we ask them to embrace big European projects?

Two Birds One Stone: Social Mobility & Green Transition

I know it is easy living in a city to say, why do you drive a car, if you have 8 buses an hour to get you to your destination. But we shouldn't forget those who have 4 buses a day to their destination. We must answer their concerns.

It is time to put an end to transport poverty so that the green transition is not only ambitious, but fair. So that no one, in any rural community, is left behind. And so that Europe can truly stand for equal opportunities for all its citizens, not just those living in big cities.



SHAPING EUROPE'S MIGRATION FUTURE

A Student-Led Perspective on Reform and Responsibility.



 **Marios Konstanteas**

Immigration remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting Europe in the 21st century. For the youth of Europe, it is not only a humanitarian issue but also a political reality demanding thoughtful, forward-thinking policies. From university campuses to parliamentary chambers, students and policymakers alike confront a fundamental question: How can Europe balance compassion with control and inclusion with integrity?

A Continent at a Crossroads

Over the past decade, Europe has faced migratory

pressures, driven by conflict, persecution, climate change and economic hardship. The moral obligation to protect refugees and vulnerable migrants remains firmly rooted in Europe's democratic values and international commitments. Yet, these ideals must be paired with effective policymaking and governance that guarantees security, social cohesion and sustainable development.

In this context, both national and EU-level immigration frameworks have come under intense scrutiny. The discourse often swings between the extremes of open borders and a fortress Europe. However, innovative

solutions are beginning to emerge, with one of the most notable being Greece's recent reform of its Immigration Code.

The Greek Model. Reform with Purpose and Consistency

Greece, as a frontline country, has long been at the heart of migration flows into Europe. In response to the increasing complexity and fragmentation of its migration system, Greece has initiated a comprehensive legislative overhaul aimed at streamlining, humanizing and modernizing its immigration policies.

This reform addresses key inefficiencies, such as the redundancy of document submissions across different agencies, while providing greater flexibility for migrants already residing legally in Greece to adjust the purpose of their stay. These updates reflect a pragmatic yet progressive shift in policy that is both necessary and timely.

Security Without Sacrificing Solidarity

At the core of the Greek reform lies the recognition that security and humanitarianism are not mutually exclusive. Enhanced border management and digitized processes improve tracking and verification, ensuring that migration remains safe, legal, and manageable.

Equally important is the focus on integration. By granting access to work, education, and legal clarity, the reform helps prevent the marginalization that often leads to social tensions. This approach demonstrates

that immigration is not a threat to European identity but rather a testament to its resilience and adaptability.

A Call to Our Generation

As the student wing of the European People's Party, European Democrat Students carry a unique responsibility. Our generation will shape the future of European policy, and with it, the future of migration governance. We must advocate for reforms that are both principled and practical, grounded in our commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

We must also recognize the urgency of cross-border cooperation. Migration is not a national issue; it is a European issue. This requires working together, sharing responsibility, and supporting frontline countries like Greece in a spirit of solidarity.

Future Ready Immigration Policies

The future of European immigration policy cannot simply be about walls or open doors. It must be about designing smart, fair, and future-ready systems that protect our borders without closing our hearts. Greece's legislative reform represents a significant step forward for European immigration policymaking. It is now time for the rest of Europe to follow suit.

Let us lead with both conviction and compassion. Let us show that young democrats across Europe are ready to confront complex challenges, not by choosing sides, but by finding balance.





COALITIONS, CRISES AND POLITICAL REBIRTH

Romania's 2025 Verdict

 Bianca Giurgescu

Romania faced one of the most tumultuous elections in modern Romanian history, stalked by annulments, far-right surges and a comeback of sorts for the political center. This wasn't just an election. It was a stress test for Romania's democratic institutions and, some say, for democracy's resilience in Eastern Europe.

To appreciate the stakes in the 2025 elections, one has to go back to the fall of 2024, when Romania's first-round presidential election was annulled by its Constitutional Court. The finding, unprecedented in Romania's post-communist history, cited irregularities running the gamut from campaign finance violations to rampant digital disinformation. Questions of social media manipulation, especially on TikTok,

and even foreign meddling were at the center of the scandal. Public outrage was immediate and fierce. Demonstrations broke out in Bucharest and other large cities. Its citizens expressed frustration not just over the election process but over years of political dysfunction, corruption and broken promises. Disillusionment was deepening, and populists were ready to take advantage of it. George Simion's nationalist far-right rhetoric had an anti-establishment ring that was finding favour with a rising section of the electorate. In the rescheduled first round of voting in May 2025, he stunned onlookers by winning over 40% of the vote making him favourite.

But it wasn't over yet. Nicușor Dan, an independent-leaning reformer endorsed by a coalition of centrist

and pro-European camps, became Simion's runoff opponent. Campaigning on a platform of institutional integrity, fiscal reform, and European values, Dan cast the election as a straightforward choice: Europe or chaos, democracy or demagoguery. The strategy worked. At a clip of about 65% presence, the largest turnout in years, voters pushed back against extremism at the ballot box. Dan won with just over 53% of the vote, edging out Simion in what international observers called an important victory for democracy in Eastern Europe. Brussels had been concerned that Romania may go the way of Hungary or Slovakia, where far-right populism had made serious inroads. But Dan's victory was just the start of Romania's mountain to climb.

A Marriage of Convenience?

There was also a swift reshuffling of the political scene after the presidential vote. The center-right PNL, beside PSD, USR and UDMR formed a new pro-European government on 23 June, due to the center-left PSD failure in elections, and Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu, under pressure, quit. The ruling PSD-PNL coalition, an unlikely marriage forged just two years before, collapsed under the strain of electoral defeat and internal tensions. After weeks of negotiations, a new coalition was created, based on a centrist bloc and led by liberal Ilie Bolojan (PNL). The new government had won a large vote of confidence in parliament, with the aim to heal internal divisions and restore credibility with European partners. It involved a rotating prime ministership, commitments to fiscal sobriety, and vows of tough love against corruption and disinformation. But critics cautioned that it was more a marriage of convenience than conviction. Made largely to prevent the far-right from picking up more institutional power, the alliance included former adversaries.

Even with the loss of Simion, AUR is a powerful political player, the leading party in the sovereigntist bloc, alongside SOS and POT. With approximately 30% of parliamentary seats and considerable social media momentum, the far-right bloc is now the official opposition. It has kept portraying itself as the 'real representative' of the people —ruing growing inflation, falling wages and popular lack of confidence in institutions. Observers say AUR's popular base is among the young and in rural areas — highlighting a growing split along urban-rural and generational lines in Romanian politics. Simion has been a politicized but enduring figure. His anti-globalist, sovereignty-oriented, culturally conservative platform touches genuine grievances.



President Dan and Prime Minister Bolojan must conquer an arduous economic reality. Romania currently boasts the largest budget deficit in the European Union — close to 9.3% of GDP. Credit rating agencies have waved red flags, and Brussels has threatened sanctions if Romania isn't good about undertaking structural reforms. Dan, a former mathematician and NGO activist, has promised not to increase taxes and to streamline public expenditure and speed up the absorption of EU funds. His government is also calling for improved digital transparency, anti-corruption reforms and modernization of the civil service. Investor reactions to date have been positive, but as for the road ahead — who can say. And Romania's role in regional security, particularly with the war in Ukraine, further complicates matters. Dan has echoed his support for Kyiv and NATO, but at home nationalist voices keep asking whether Romania is overconfined in Western security policy.

Democracy in Romania

Ultimately, the 2025 election was not only a race between two candidates. It was about whether Romanians still have faith in liberal democracy, rule of law and the European project. The findings suggest that while the system's faith is frail, it is not shattered. Nicușor Dan's presidency is a relief — but not a solution. His governing prospects will hinge on sustaining a fragile coalition, meeting economic promises and holding off populists. The social and economic tensions are still smouldering, and the risk of a democratic retreat has not disappeared, it has just been postponed. Romania teeters on a knife's edge, as so many democracies do these days. Its next steps might help determine not just its own future course but also provide a wider lesson for a continent struggling with burgeoning extremism, disinformation and polarization.



DO WE NEED ANOTHER NORA?

Young Women in Politics and the Door Still Left Ajar

 **Nora Strømme**

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* finishes with a scene that is definitely one of the most memorable in the history of theatre: Nora's door slam, a symbol and a physical act of leaving her husband and kids. Besides that, Nora is not only leaving her family but also a life of restrictions, silence, and assumptions that a patriarchal society has imposed on her. That slam has become a kind of a symbol for a changing identity and the call of independence through ages.

This is the time though, more than a hundred years later, and society is supposedly different, but is it really so? More specifically, politics still is an area where young women find themselves facing the same kinds of stereotypical expectations, resistance, and limitations. Hence, we come to the main question: Are we in need of another Nora to do

the same again?

The Political Dollhouse

Young women who enter politics still have to face institutions that are conditioned by tradition, hierarchy, and implicit prejudice. Women may have gained the right to vote and to run for office in nearly all nations, but the deeper structures of power, who is listened to, who is taken seriously, who gets to command, remain firmly gendered.

The character of Nora resonates so powerfully here. Like her, many young women politicians are in positions where they are considered symbolic rather than substantive, where their presence is welcomed but their voice is restricted. They are praised for being young and new but disqualified

for being "inexperienced." They are told to be bold, but not too bold; confident, but not too loud. Nora's action of walking out, to decline the system that reduced her to a role, speaks directly to the courage it still takes for women to claim space on their own terms.

Leaving and Rebuilding

But there is a limit to the metaphor. Nora leaves, but young women in politics are not leaving, they are arriving. What they are refusing is not politics itself, but rather the type of politics that has excluded or marginalized them for far too long. They are not escaping, they are changing.

Around the world, we are seeing a surge of young women political leaders who are not waiting for permission to be heard. They are rewriting the narrative: confronting climate complacency, advocating for reproductive rights, uncovering corruption, and demanding systemic change. From Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US to political leaders in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, these women are redefining what political leadership looks like.

Yet, a Door to Slam

Still, the barriers remain. Online abuse, gendered media representation, differential access to finance, and the constant surveillance of appearance and conduct are all modern dollhouses, subtle but potent mechanisms that keep women in their place. In so many ways, young women in politics continue to have to "slam the door" on the expectations that try to shape them into acceptable models of leadership.

Yet what we may require now is not so much a different Nora, but an army of Noras, not doors slamming, but opening. The door's slamming sound now takes on a new form: in speeches that defy injustice, in party-line-crossing votes, in candidacy announcements that defy expectation. Liberation is no longer exiting the room, it's remodeling it.

Nora's Future?

Ibsen's Nora teaches us the cost of silence and the courage of selecting oneself. Young women in politics

are doing the same today, not by rejecting society, but by confronting it head-on. In their efforts, we hear not just the sound of the door slammed shut, but the sound of new ones opening, on their own account, and on behalf of those to come.





A SOUTHERN TRANSATLANTIC

Why the EU's Future Lies with Latin America

 Nahuel Nicolas Herz

Introduction

It has become apparent since the pandemic that the era of the Washington consensus of free trade and open markets is ending as illiberal regimes, and their state-capitalist economies increase in their share of the global economy. While the US has been the traditional defender of the WTO and other open market institutions, their commitments have waned, leaving Europe as the largest economic power still firmly committed to the principles of free trade. Strategic autonomy does not imply isolationism or disengagement. Rather, it means reducing overdependence on any one partner, whether the US or China, and diversifying through stable, like-minded alliances. As the US turns inward and the balance of power becomes increasingly multipolar, the EU

must reimagine its transatlantic partnerships. With their common political cultures, and complementary economic systems, Latin America offers an enticing path forward.

Erosion of the US-EU Bond

Since the annexation of Crimea, the dangers of EU dependency on any one state have become apparent, a danger which extends to traditional allies as much as to strategic competitors. Obama's 'Pivot to the Pacific' was the first sign of US strategic priorities evolving from the traditional emphasis on a strong EU partnership. Trump's first presidency was a turning point in the transatlantic relationship, and the Biden failed to fully restore it, despite Biden's trans-Atlanticist vision. The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) was one



A Southern Transatlantic: Why the EU's Future Lies with Latin America

of the most consequential bills in US history, indicating bipartisan support away from the famed Washington consensus and towards an ever more protectionist policy. The return of tariffs in Trump's second term reaffirm that the US no longer believes in the principles of the Open Market to pursue economic growth, as it erects borders to international trade. The concept of strategic autonomy has become omnipresent in all aspects of EU policy making.

Why Latin America Matter's

The Americas are by far the region of the globe with which we share the most cultural links. Despite the horrors of the colonial era, in the 200 years since, Latin America and the EU maintain strong economic ties through trade and investment, especially with the Mercosur countries. Many resources crucial to future-proofing the EU economy are found in Latin America, the famed Lithium Triangle, Hydrogen Gas, LNG, and many more resources. Javier Milei's election in Argentina could present a strategic opportunity for the EU to cooperate with a state previously closed to international markets, under successive Peronist governments. While many European leaders are wary of empowering a leader aligned with the radical right, pragmatic engagement along the common interest in free markets may damage the European radical right.

Furthermore, preservation of the amazon rainforest is crucial in any attempt to halt climate change and mitigate the effects which are increasingly felt by Europeans. Cooperation with governments across Latin America to ensure environmental conservation and more sustainable agricultural practices serve the EU's long-term interest.

A Renewed Transatlantic Vision

A transatlantic relationship in the 21st century

must move beyond the traditional confines of the northernmost countries. By including Latin America as a central aspect of the transatlantic alliance, the EU can rebalance and expand its external partnerships to better reflect the shared values on both sides of the Atlantic. This also helps dismantle the lingering Eurocentric view of the transatlantic relationship as a purely North Atlantic construct, an outdated framework in a multipolar world.

While international relations increasingly take on a transactional tone, the EU remains uniquely positioned to offer a credible, rules-based partnership. Latin America is one of few regions still pursuing engagement based on values, a rare opportunity in the current geopolitical situation. However, time is not on Europe's side. The region has already begun to show signs of protectionism and political fragmentation. Swift action is needed to prevent a further drift and to secure the EU's long-term interests.

Finalizing the EU-Mercosur trade agreement should be viewed not just as an economic goal, but as a geopolitical necessity. It would signal that Europe remains committed to open markets, liberal democracy, and equitable cooperation. Moreover, EU-Latin America cooperation should go beyond trade. Shared work on sustainable infrastructure, digital connectivity, and climate governance, particularly protecting the Amazon rainforest, would reinforce a broader strategic alliance under the Global Gateway framework.

EU-Latin American Cooperation

In a world where liberal democracies face increasing pressure, both externally from authoritarian competitors and internally from illiberal trends, the EU cannot afford to anchor its foreign partnerships in nostalgia. The US, though historically a close ally, is increasingly unpredictable. Meanwhile, cooperation with the Middle East or Southeast Asia is constrained by widening normative gaps. Even neighboring partners like Serbia, Turkey, and Israel are experiencing democratic backsliding.

A recalibrated strategy that centers Latin America as a preferred partner doesn't mean replacing the United States, it means reducing overreliance on any one actor. Strategic autonomy rests on a diversified network of alliances rooted in shared values and mutual benefit. Latin America, with its diversity, dynamism, and commitment to democratic norms, must be central to that vision.

WHERE IS EUROPE'S FULBRIGHT?

The Transatlantic Talent Imbalance

 Danilo Nastic

Every year, some of the most promising young Europeans board flights to the United States with Fulbright scholarships. They take part in world-class graduate programs, connect with American policymakers, and build networks that will shape transatlantic relations for decades. It's one of the most successful instruments of soft power the world has ever seen, and it's entirely American.

But what is Europe doing in return?

For all its talk of global relevance the European Union has no Fulbright of its own. Yes, Erasmus+ connects students across Europe, but none of these build deep political, academic, and cultural bonds with future American leaders.

It's time to fix that. Europe must stop being a passive player in the transatlantic talent game. We need a bold, EU-led scholarship and leadership program for Americans, one that brings the best U.S. students and young professionals to study and live in Europe.

A One-Way Exchange

The Fulbright Program was created in the aftermath of World War II to promote mutual understanding between the United States and other countries through education and cultural exchange. Over 400,000 people have participated, including prime ministers, presidents, and heads of international organizations.

But this exchange is not balanced. While Europe has always sent students westward in large numbers, the same cannot be said for the reverse. The number of American students in Europe through equivalent EU programs remains limited. This imbalance isn't just a technicality, it's a strategic blind spot.

Soft Power by Design

The U.S. has understood this for decades: education is foreign policy. Every Fulbright scholar becomes an unofficial ambassador. The EU should learn from this. American students studying in Berlin, Paris, Warsaw,





or Belgrade should not be a rare exception. They should be the norm.

Imagine a “Schuman Scholars” program, named after one of Europe’s founding fathers that selects outstanding American graduates and mid-career professionals to spend a year in European universities and institutions. They could take part in a common curriculum on European integration, intern in the European Parliament or Commission, engage in diplomacy simulations and learn European languages. They would leave as friends and partners of Europe not just as tourists who visited once.

A Strategic Imperative

The next decade will likely be marked by sharper competition between democratic and authoritarian powers, including Russia and China. While Europe rightly strengthens its military readiness and economic resilience, it must not neglect the battlefield of ideas. That’s where a new generation of transatlantic leaders will be shaped not in Brussels briefing rooms, but in classrooms.

If Europe fails to engage the next generation of American decision-makers, it risks becoming less relevant in Washington. Many rising U.S. leaders know more about Asia than Europe. They may admire Europe’s history, but not necessarily see it as a crucial partner. Without first hand experience, they are less likely to advocate for transatlantic cooperation or prioritize Europe in global strategy.

A Europe-backed leadership program for Americans would counteract this drift. It would ensure that,

in the coming decades, there is a cohort of U.S. policymakers, analysts, journalists, and entrepreneurs who understand European institutions, share democratic values, and are invested in our success. They don’t have to agree with us on every issue but they should care enough to engage.

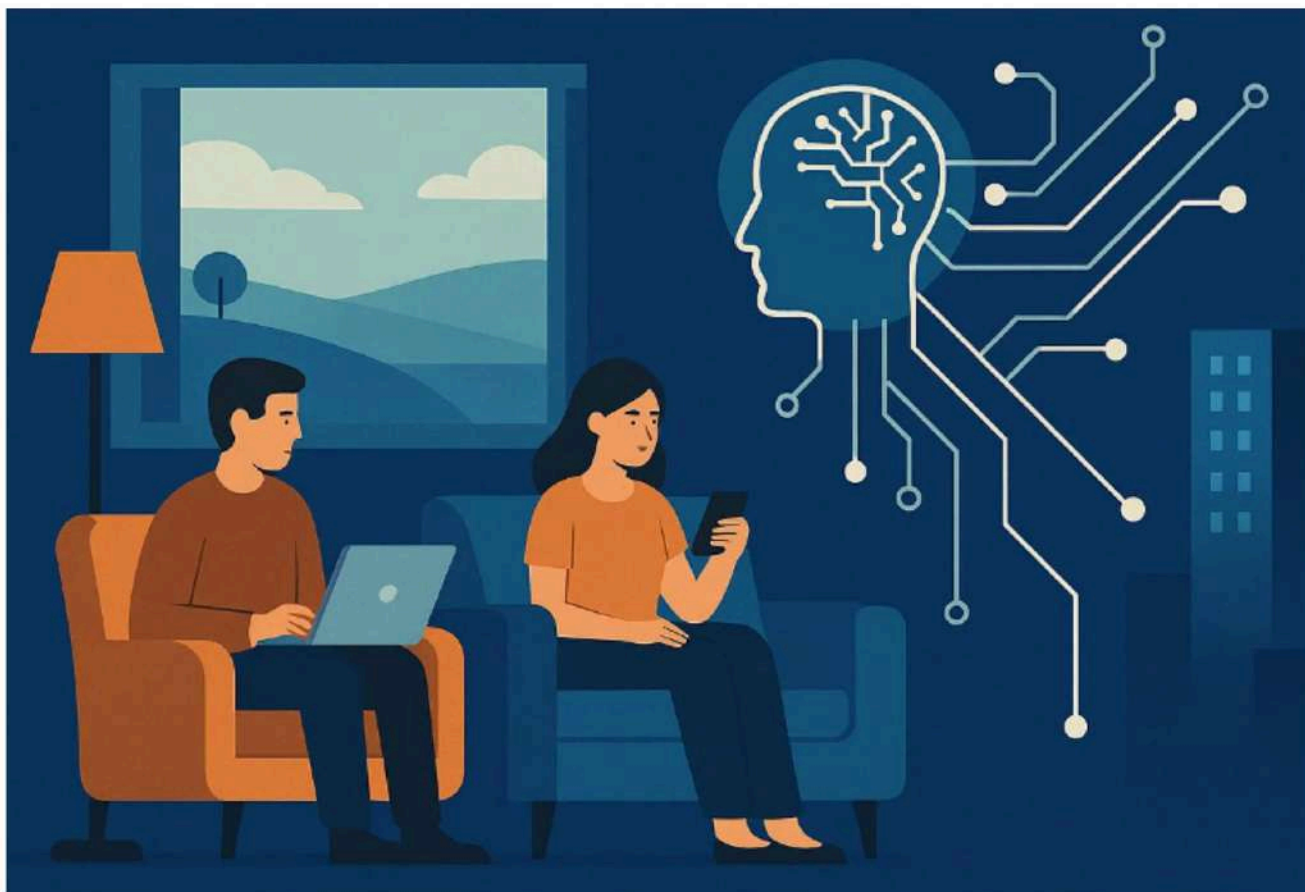
And the returns would be mutual. Europe, too, would benefit from welcoming new perspectives, strengthening its English-language academic space, and building stronger intellectual links with American universities and think tanks. In a world of global challenges climate change, AI regulation, disinformation having allies who understand each other deeply is not a luxury. It is the foundation of effective action.

The Moment Is Now

The idea of a European Fulbright for Americans is not far-fetched. The infrastructure exists. The EU already funds world-class research and mobility schemes.

Launching such a program would send a powerful message: that Europe is ready to act as a confident global actor. It would affirm that the EU is not just a project of internal integration, but a contributor to global stability and intellectual exchange.

Above all, it would ensure that the future of the transatlantic relationship is not left to chance, nostalgia, or inertia. It would be built person by person, idea by idea, by those who have walked both sides of the Atlantic. The United States already understands this. The question now is... when will Europe?



NO INTELLIGENCE WITHOUT ACCESS

Why AI's Future in Europe Depends on the Last Mile.

 **Finlay Thacker-McPherson**

The benefits of Artificial Intelligence, and the tools that it powers and supports, are significant. In every sector and facet of life, improvements will be felt, and efficiency will be gained. The development of AI is moving in a way that ensures that those who have access to AI tools will be better off than before such tools were commonplace. In this, Europe can play a major role in shaping and guiding a positive way forward for AI development, but its benefits will only be felt if everyone in Europe has access to stable, robust broadband. Not only this, but digital literacy remains increasingly disparate between generations and geographical locations, with this gap only at risk of growing with the increasing adoption of AI-powered tools across all sectors.

Without proper care and due haste given to a project to expand accessible and strong internet access to all areas, whilst strengthening digital literacy, there is a real risk that Europe enters a digital future with two tiers of accessibility and understanding. If Europe wants to lead in the AI age, it must first ensure no one is left buffering in the dark.

AI-powered tools are hugely beneficial and increasingly becoming totally pervasive in almost every sector and institution. They are also largely bandwidth-heavy and designed for environments that have consistent and strong Wi-Fi connections. While this is the case for most of Europe, there remain swathes of rural and low-income areas that do not have such access.

There is a clear difference in the access levels afforded to those living in urban areas and those living in rural regions 'In 2023, 95% households in EU cities had internet access, compared with 93% in towns and suburbs and 91% in rural areas' (Eurostat, 2024). While this disparity has 'closed at a steady pace' (Eurostat, 2024), there is still more work to do to ensure that rural areas can access and utilise AI tools with the same capacity and efficiency as their urban counterparts, with ensuring strong internet access being a vital pillar of this mission.

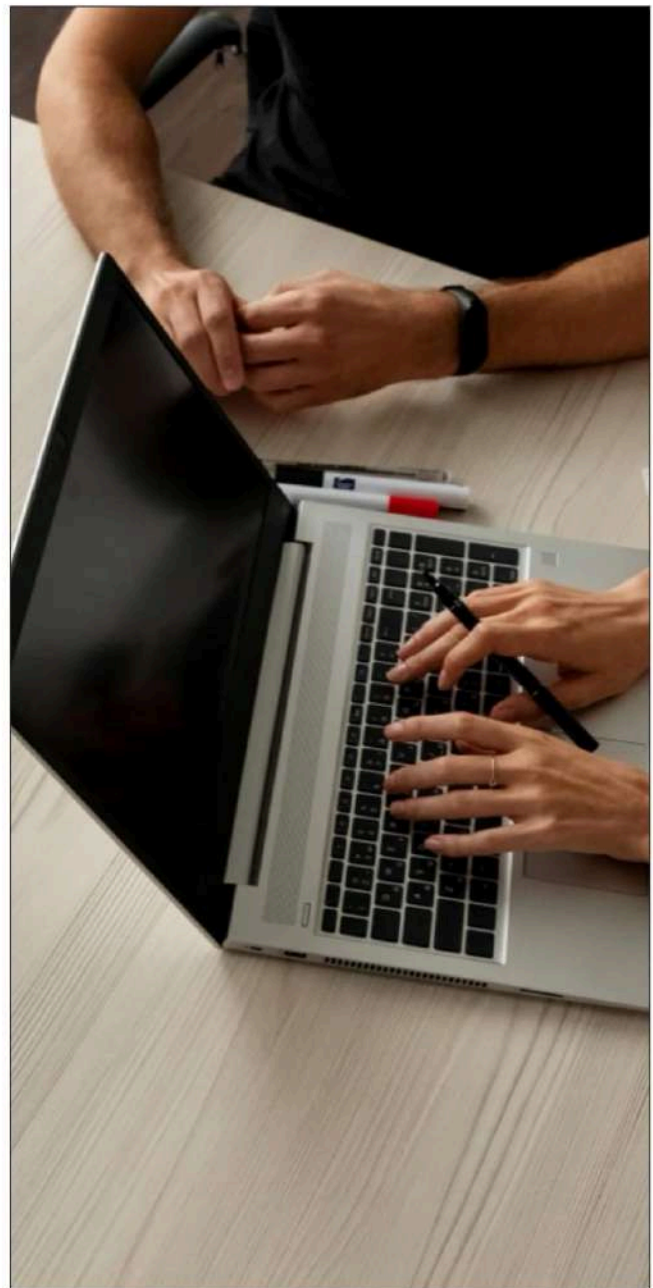
In order for Europe to best utilise AI and reap its benefits, there is a clear need for increased access to strong internet services. There is also an equally strong need for increased digital literacy in Europe; this is true now more than ever before in human history. Lack of digital literacy proves a significant danger to the ability of Europeans to benefit from AI development and contributes significantly to the increasingly two-tiered nature of European interaction with AI. There must be steps taken to reverse it. Around '56% of people in the EU aged 16 to 74' (Eurostat, 2023) have basic digital literacy skills, which will not suffice when it comes to ensuring equitable access to AI tools. The areas with the highest digital literacy are 'the Netherlands (83%), followed by Finland (82%), and Denmark (70%)' (Eurostat, 2023), and the nations with the lowest are 'Romania (28%), followed by Bulgaria (36%) and Poland (44%)' (Eurostat, 2023) highlighting the disparity amongst EU countries and the crucial need for increased digital literacy across the European Union. The level of digital literacy in rural areas is lower than in urban regions, mirroring the disparity that exists in internet access, '48% of rural residents have at least basic digital skills, compared to 62% of the urban population' (European Commission, 2021). The digital literacy disparity will only grow as AI becomes more widely adopted, leading to unequal access to AI tools and further reinforcing existing inequalities.

Addressing the digital literacy challenges in European nations has been a key component of the EU's Digital Decade initiative, but AI readiness goes further and demands more as tools become more tailored to the exact sectors they are being used for.

To ensure that the AI age does not leave behind the citizens of EU nations, and that there is not two-tier AI access within Europe, there must be meaningful investment and emphasis placed upon bridging the digital divide. EU initiatives based on internet and broadband accessibility

must be focused on the 'last mile' of development,

finally bringing rural and urban areas together in terms of internet access equality. In addition to this, AI fluency and literacy should become a hallmark of education efforts across Europe, by integrating this into curriculums across the continent we can ensure that citizens are receiving satisfactory education in how to use AI tools efficiently, equipping them with the base skills and foundational knowledge to make the most of the AI revolution. 'AI will give people tools to solve hard problems and help us add new struts to that scaffolding that we couldn't have figured out on our own' (Altman, 2024) and through the development of the 'last mile', Europe can ensure that this is true for all.





IRAN–ISRAEL: A STRATEGIC RECKONING

not a Regional Quarrel

 Rodolph Zgheib

The latest escalation between Iran and Israel should not be misread as another regional flare-up in the already combustible Middle East. What has unfolded since April 2024, and culminated in a large-scale military exchange in June 2025, is a strategic reckoning that redefines deterrence doctrine, shifts the balance of regional power, and puts the international community, particularly Europe, before a sobering set of political choices.

The End of Ambiguity

For over a decade, Iran and Israel operated in a “shadow war”, cyberattacks, assassinations, proxy militias, and airstrikes, carefully avoiding open conflict. This ambiguity served both: Israel delayed Iran’s nuclear

and missile programs; Iran built regional deterrence via Hezbollah, Hamas, and others. But Iran’s direct missile strike on Israel in April 2024, following the killing of Iranian and Hamas figures, ended that balance. Israel’s June 2025 response, “Operation Rising Lion,” struck deep inside Iranian territory, hitting nuclear sites, IRGC bases, and missile factories. Iran’s counter, “Operation True Promise III,” launched hundreds of drones and missiles. Many were intercepted, but some caused real damage. Both sides sustained losses and the psychological rupture was profound.

Strategic Objectives, Not Symbolic Gestures

Israel’s objective was twofold: first, to restore strategic deterrence by demonstrating its capacity and political

will to inflict damage inside Iran; and second, to degrade Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities while international diplomatic efforts remain stalled.

Iran's response, while intense, revealed more about the current limitations of its regional influence than any deliberate effort to contain the conflict. Tehran's ability to rely on its traditional proxy network is significantly diminished. Hezbollah, once Iran's most powerful asset in Lebanon, remains weakened after its latest war with Israel, facing military exhaustion, declining public support and logistical challenges. The Houthis in Yemen are under continuous Israeli airstrikes and struggling to maintain their position in the Red Sea. Iraqi militias are constrained by internal political pressure and growing scrutiny from both Baghdad and external actors. Most critically, Iran has effectively lost Syria as a reliable base of operations. The collapse of the Syrian regime as a functioning state has dismantled the infrastructure that once enabled Iran to transfer weapons and funds to Hezbollah and other allies. As a result, the limited proxy involvement in this latest escalation was not a sign of calculated restraint, it was a reflection of Iran's reduced capacity to mobilize its network. In other words, Iran didn't choose to hold back, it was forced to.

Beyond the Bilateral: Regional and Global Stakes

This conflict now transcends the Iran–Israel binary. It has exposed the paralysis of regional institutions, and neither the Arab League nor the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has taken a clear stance. Gulf states, caught between hostility to Iran and caution toward Israel, remain frozen. Globally, trade and energy routes are threatened: Iran signals possible disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, while Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have resumed. Militarization of Gulf waters could impact Europe's economy, raising pressure for energy diversification. On the legal front, Israel cites preemptive self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter; Iran claims proportional retaliation. But rising civilian casualties and attacks on dual-use infrastructure blur legal boundaries. The EU, so far, has issued only vague calls for calm, without a diplomatic path forward.

Europe's Strategic Paralysis

What's most striking is Europe's political hesitance. The EU continues to issue statements affirming the need for calm, dialogue, and return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action framework. But this rhetoric now rings hollow. The geopolitical landscape

has changed and the tools of yesterday no longer meet the urgency of today.

If Europe still considers itself a normative power committed to upholding international law, preventing nuclear proliferation, and preserving regional stability, then its current position is untenable. A reactive stance no longer suffices. The Iran–Israel conflict requires proactive diplomacy, high-level shuttle engagements, and the reconstruction of regional security dialogues that go beyond US or Russian mediation.

Moreover, Europe must revisit its strategic energy interests. Over-dependence on Gulf oil and narrow maritime corridors has repeatedly proven fragile. Investment in regional resilience through support for independent civil society, conflict mediation mechanisms, and energy diversification, must become part of a long-term geopolitical strategy, not just a humanitarian impulse.

A War Without Exit?

What makes this confrontation especially perilous is the absence of an endgame. Israel cannot destroy Iran's nuclear knowledge base through strikes alone. Iran cannot dismantle Israeli deterrence without inviting existential retaliation. Both regimes now face domestic pressures to escalate, but lack clear political pathways to disengage without losing face.

If this standoff becomes normalized, if periodic missile exchanges and strategic bombings become routine, it will erode the norms of state conduct. Future conflicts will be measured not by legal frameworks or international mediation, but by sheer endurance and technological superiority. That would set a dangerous precedent, not just for the Middle East, but for global conflict resolution as a whole.

The Post-Cold War Stress Test

The Iran–Israel confrontation of 2025 is not merely a bilateral war. It is a stress test for the post-Cold War international order. It reveals the erosion of deterrence boundaries, the limits of diplomatic inertia, and the need for a rethinking of regional engagement strategies.

Europe, in particular, faces a choice: to remain a commentator or to become a credible actor. Either way, the costs of passivity are rising and the Middle East's instability will not remain regionally contained for long.



YOUTH AND POLITICS IN AFRICA AND EUROPE

The importance of education, sports, and political empowerment

 **Isam lamini**

Despite the geographical distances and historical differences between Africa and Europe, the youth in both continents face similar challenges when it comes to political empowerment and active participation in decision-making. While there are aspirations for a more inclusive democratic future, these are complicated by a complex reality shaped by economic and security priorities, with youth often relegated to the role of passive observers rather than active partners in the democratic process.

However, areas such as education, student movements, and sports can serve as bridges for political cooperation and democratic partnership across the Mediterranean.

Education is a key gateway to building political awareness among the youth. While European universities provide spaces for open discussions and curricula that include civic education, human rights and democracy, higher education in many African countries still falls short in fulfilling this role. That being said, it is undeniable that a significant portion of African youth is engaged in public discourse through university debates and digital platforms. However, the lack of institutional support and the weak educational content related to civic and political engagement limit the development of a critical political awareness capable of transforming energies into action, proposals, and programs.

Alongside education, social and student movements have historically played a central role in both Africa and Europe in challenging unjust policies and demanding comprehensive reforms. In Senegal, for example, the "Y'en a marre" movement has served as an inspiring model for defending democracy, while movements such as "Fees Must Fall" in South Africa led to protests against the rising costs of education. On the European side, youth protests around climate change, social justice and equality have been constant, showing that youth today refuse to view politics as an area closed off to elites. However, despite the momentum these movements generate, the lack of sustainability and institutional support remains a barrier to turning them into effective lasting instruments of change.

To transition from a transactional relationship between African and European youth to a true strategic partnership, mutual trust and respect must be at the core. This means including youth in the design of cooperation policies, rather than limiting their role to mere execution or superficial engagement. Establishing a permanent African-European Youth Council as an institutional platform for dialogue and the development of recommendations would be a significant step toward democratizing the relationship between the two continents. Additionally, supporting joint youth initiatives in areas such as education, climate

change, and human rights can strengthen the bond and provide youth with practical tools to make a collective impact.

In this context, sports emerge as a soft diplomatic tool that can help bridge distances and break down stereotypes. Hosting the 2030 FIFA World Cup jointly between Morocco, Spain, and Portugal is not only a sporting achievement but also a political opportunity. This major event can be leveraged to build parallel youth programs that include cultural and educational exchanges, as well as platforms for discussions between young people from both continents on global issues such as climate change, migration and sustainable development. Sports can bring together what politics often divides and inspire where institutions fail.

In sum, the future of Africa-Europe relations will inevitably involve the youth. However, this future will only be fairer and more inclusive if the perception of the youth is transformed: from being seen merely as a group that needs employment and education to being recognized as political partners with a say in shaping both the present and the future. Today, the challenge is to turn education, sports, and civic engagement into tools of action, not just fields for expression and to make the partnership between the two shores an opportunity to build a democratic project that spans continents.



THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE

and their view of the recent political situation in Slovakia.

Bystřík Borodovčák, Richard Horkavý

The beginning of the year 2020 was a hopeful time for Slovak politics. Newly elected president Zuzana Čaputová brought new hope that Slovak politics may transform into a less confrontational, more consensus-seeking one. The anti-corruption movement won elections held in February, and its leader, Igor Matovič, subsequently became the leader of a relatively broad four-party coalition and hence the Prime Minister. Much hope was poured into a coalition that promised to uphold the rule of law, extinguish corruption, and untie the hands of justice so that the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner, as well as high-profile corruption cases tied to the previous government, mainly those of Robert Fico and his SMER-SD party, could be investigated thoroughly. This initial enthusiasm was quickly brought down by skirmishes inside the coalition, public disagreements, and scandals of the then-new government coalition. Coupled with a poorly managed COVID-19 pandemic, the period of 2020-2023 was a tumultuous time of political instability, growing polarization, and violence in society.



Coalition Frictions and a Mishandled Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia has had a significant impact on the mental health of young people. Feelings of loneliness surged, and a growing number of young people began to experience psychological issues and emotional distress. Also, cyberbullying increased during the pandemic, and more young people encountered online sexual harassment. Within the first year alone, anxiety levels rose fivefold.

While digitalization, which has been on the rise, brings many benefits, it also exposes young people to risks associated with social media and the internet. During the pandemic, youth online activity grew rapidly, coinciding with a sharp increase in disinformation and conspiracy theories. Much of this misinformation was focused on COVID-19, vaccination, and later the Ukraine War. Young people demonstrated higher internet literacy, which helped them avoid believing in these false narratives at the same rate as older generations.

However, signs of radicalization are increasingly visible among the youth. Although a majority of young people hold progressive values, a notable portion has supported the entry of extremist parties into parliament. In the 2016 elections, for instance, first-time voters formed the majority of the neo-Nazi LSNS party's support. In last year's Simulated Student Elections to the European Parliament, the liberal party Progresívne Slovensko (PS) won by a landslide with over 38% of the vote. SMER was second, followed by the far-right party Republika, liberal SaS in fourth, and fascist LSNS in fifth. Other established parties like KDH, Hlas, and the "Slovensko" movement (formerly OLANO) did not make it into the European parliament.

The political climate in Slovakia has been brutal in



Political Whiplash: The Return of Fico and a Rightward Shift

recent years. In the past four years, young people have witnessed the collapse of an anti-corruption, pro-western government and the return of Robert Fico, who has radicalized and turned socially sharply to the right and geopolitically to the east. According to the "Chcem tu zostať" ("I Want to Stay Here") initiative, young people are increasingly frustrated by limited opportunities and a perceived lack of government interest in their needs. As a result, many are leaving Slovakia, with a large percentage not planning to return, feeling disheartened and ashamed of their country.

This exodus risks the future of Slovakia, as many talented young people seek opportunities elsewhere. Despite the essential role of youth in shaping Slovakia's future, their needs appear sidelined by government priorities, which focus on changing the national anthem, changing the legislation so that politically affiliated criminals can be free, recalling opposition politicians from their posts, or investigating the handling of the pandemic—which some officials deny even happened in Slovakia.

The pro-Western orientation of the Slovak foreign policy is also in jeopardy. Surveys by IPSOS and FOCUS reveal that young Slovaks mostly favor NATO and EU membership and are more supportive of democracy and human rights. But, they remain divided on military aid to Ukraine, and the opinion on the aggressor in this war is split.

Bridging the Gap Between Young Slovaks and Their Leaders

The last four years have been nothing but brutal. Not only were young people globally confronted with the worst pandemic in 100 years, and with it, the accompanying effects, but the political situation further burdened Slovak youth. In four years, Slovakia has gone from being a pro-Western, Ukraine-supporting, solid member of the European Union to a wannabe Hungary. Every day, we're confronted by new outrageous stunts pulled by the members of the governing coalition. Attacks on the opposition and their family members, undermining of the legal state, dangerous gambling with the economic future of this country, and many more. Young people don't have to be particularly politically active to notice the political situation in Slovakia. And for many, unfortunately, the less difficult decision between staying in Slovakia and leaving is the latter.



INTERVIEW WITH FAREED ALJAWHARI,

CEO of Micropolis Robotics

Vladimir Kljajic

From Digital Twins to Autonomous Patrols: Building the Future in Dubai

Vladimir Kljajic: You've had a background in design and product development. How did the idea for Micropolis begin?

CEO Fareed Aljawhari: I always wanted to build a digital twin of Dubai, something that would reflect reality in real time on a computer screen so decision-makers could visualize what's happening. Back in 2011, I had the idea to combine that with AI to analyze and predict. In 2014, I founded Micropolis, which combines "micro" (meaning small) and "polis" (meaning city), based on that vision.

Vladimir: What was your first breakthrough?

Fareed: We initially pitched the digital twin concept to Dubai Police, and in 2017/2018, we had the opportunity to present it directly to the Commander-in-Chief. To our surprise, he immediately grasped the potential and called the Crown Prince of Dubai that same day. That moment changed everything, it marked the beginning of real collaboration and gave us credibility at the highest level. After several challenging years trying to explain a concept that was ahead of its time, we finally found visionary partners who understood the value of what we were building. It was a combination of persistence, timing, and being in the right place with the right idea.

Vladimir: And that led directly to robotics?

Fareed: Exactly. We brainstormed how criminal organizations often have access to advanced tech before the police do. So we asked: why not create autonomous police patrols? That's how the first patrol robot was born in 2020, following many challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. We built it from scratch, literally starting with wood. (laughs)

Vladimir: And now Micropolis is on the NYSE. That's a huge leap.



Fareed: It took a decade, and I didn't expect it to take that long. But we made it. Today, we specialize in edge computing, IoT, advanced AI, and, yes, we're now a public company.

Vladimir: How are your patrol robots designed to function?

Fareed: They drive like a patrol officer would, and they think like a policeman. They're fully autonomous, connected to an operations center, and report incidents in real time. They don't rely on facial recognition unless needed, we use a safer system that distributes alerts city-wide if someone's behavior triggers a red flag.

Vladimir: Micropolis is also developing robots for climate applications. How did that start?

Fareed: We split our technology into two core components: a mobility platform and an application-specific pod. This modular approach allows us to build different types of robots on the same base, whether it's environmental robots that support reforestation, where the rover prepares the soil and the drone plants the seeds, or autonomous delivery units. We now use supercapacitor batteries manufactured right here in Dubai, which are safer, faster to charge, and more efficient than traditional lithium batteries.

Vladimir: What's the talent strategy behind your engineering team?

Fareed: Talent is incredibly hard to find, so we decided to grow our own. We design complex tests that even today's AI models can't easily crack (at least not yet, laughs), and we look for candidates who are naturally curious and think critically. We're not impressed by credentials, we're impressed by problem-solving. Our company is built on a flat structure, with no management layers or bureaucracy. Just engineers working together, directly and transparently. Our engineers are very straightforward, practical people. The last thing we had to learn, believe it or not, was how to file a listing application for the New York Stock Exchange, on our own. That tells you everything about the kind of team we've built.

We also take an unconventional approach to solving technical challenges. For example, with our most recent closed-source controller software, we had three independent teams developing solutions in parallel. After the first round of testing, one team's solution takes the lead, but the other two continue refining and experimenting. It's a competitive yet collaborative environment that pushes everyone forward and often leads to unexpected breakthroughs.

Vladimir: Do you cooperate with universities?

Fareed: Not much. I must say that most of academia is somewhat outdated. We prefer hands-on training. It takes six months to turn someone into a great engineer if the environment is right. Honestly, I believe many universities will struggle to stay relevant in the AI era unless they radically adapt. My advice to students: start using AI tools ASAP as productive tools but not the main source of knowledge, use it to nurture your brains not as a shortcut to achieve scores..



Vladimir: You've lived in the UAE your whole life and witnessed Dubai's incredible transformation firsthand. How has that shaped your perspective, and why is Dubai the right place to build a tech company today?

Fareed: Dubai sells lifestyle better than anyone. You can live well, focus on your work, and move fast. There's very little bureaucracy; the government is highly efficient, and the semi-government model here is a real game-changer. That's one of the reasons over 6,700 millionaires chose to move here in 2024 alone. For us, it's not just talk, we're currently building a new factory that will allow us to scale up to 5,000 robotic units annually. And we're proud that a large percentage of our components are manufactured right here in the UAE. "Made in UAE" means something to us.

On a personal level, I spent my youth in Sharjah before eventually moving to Dubai. Growing up there in the '80s and '90s, every trip to Dubai felt like entering another country. The real transformation started in the mid-1990s when Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum became Crown Prince. You could feel the pace shift, suddenly things were getting built fast: Sheikh Zayed Road, the towers, Dubai Marina. It was incredible, and it was really fast. The architecture began testing the limits, figuring out how to build on sand and innovate under extreme conditions. And even today, Sheikh Mohammed remains focused on innovation. That spirit still defines Dubai.

Vladimir: How do you compare the UAE and Saudi Arabia in terms of future tech leadership?

Fareed: Saudi Arabia is rising, but Dubai is still years ahead. Dubai has experience, agility, and diversity. It's not just catching up with the Gulf, it's competing with the world.

Vladimir: Any advice for young innovators?

Fareed: Focus on building. Don't wait for permission. Learn by doing. Use AI. It's not just a tool, it's the present and the future. And if you can't find the right environment, create it.

As we wrapped up the interview, it was clear that Fareed's passion for innovation is driving something truly significant. With a new factory on the horizon, he's even considering launching educational programs within Micropolis to nurture the next generation of tech talent. He also extended a warm invitation to welcome us if an EDS Study Visit is organized in the UAE in the future.

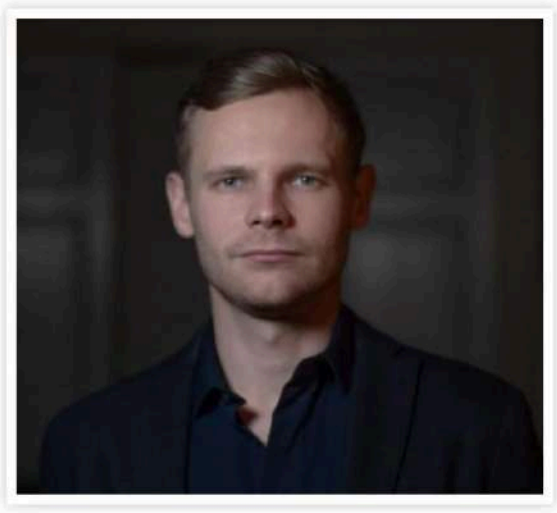


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Andrea Mghames, represents the Lebanese Forces Party in Lebanon. With a master's degree in International Relations and currently serves as a Regional Program Coordinator and Business Developer at Balinca, a company specializing in training services. In addition to her professional work, Andrea is a lifelong professional swimmer. Andrea is excited to write about and raise awareness of the significance of Lebanon especially during this period of severe economic collapse, political instability and widespread corruption.



Lara Ghanoudi is a nursing student at the Complutense University of Madrid. She is passionate about international affairs and focuses on the impact of health and religion on the youth.



María Ferrer Argente is from Zaragoza, Spain. She holds a Law Degree from the University of Zaragoza, a Master's in European Union Studies from the University of Salamanca, and graduated with an LL.M. from the College of Europe in Bruges in 2023. After completing internships in Legal and Home Affairs at the EPP Group in the European Parliament and in communications at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, she began working as a parliamentary assistant (APA) for a Spanish MEP from the EPP in the European Parliament.

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- Richard Horkavý
- Danilo Nastic
- Finlay Thacker-McPherson
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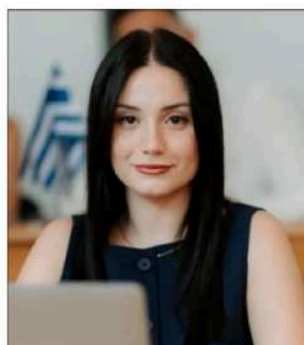
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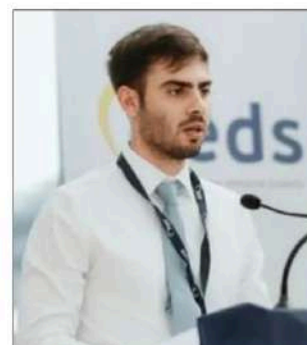
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