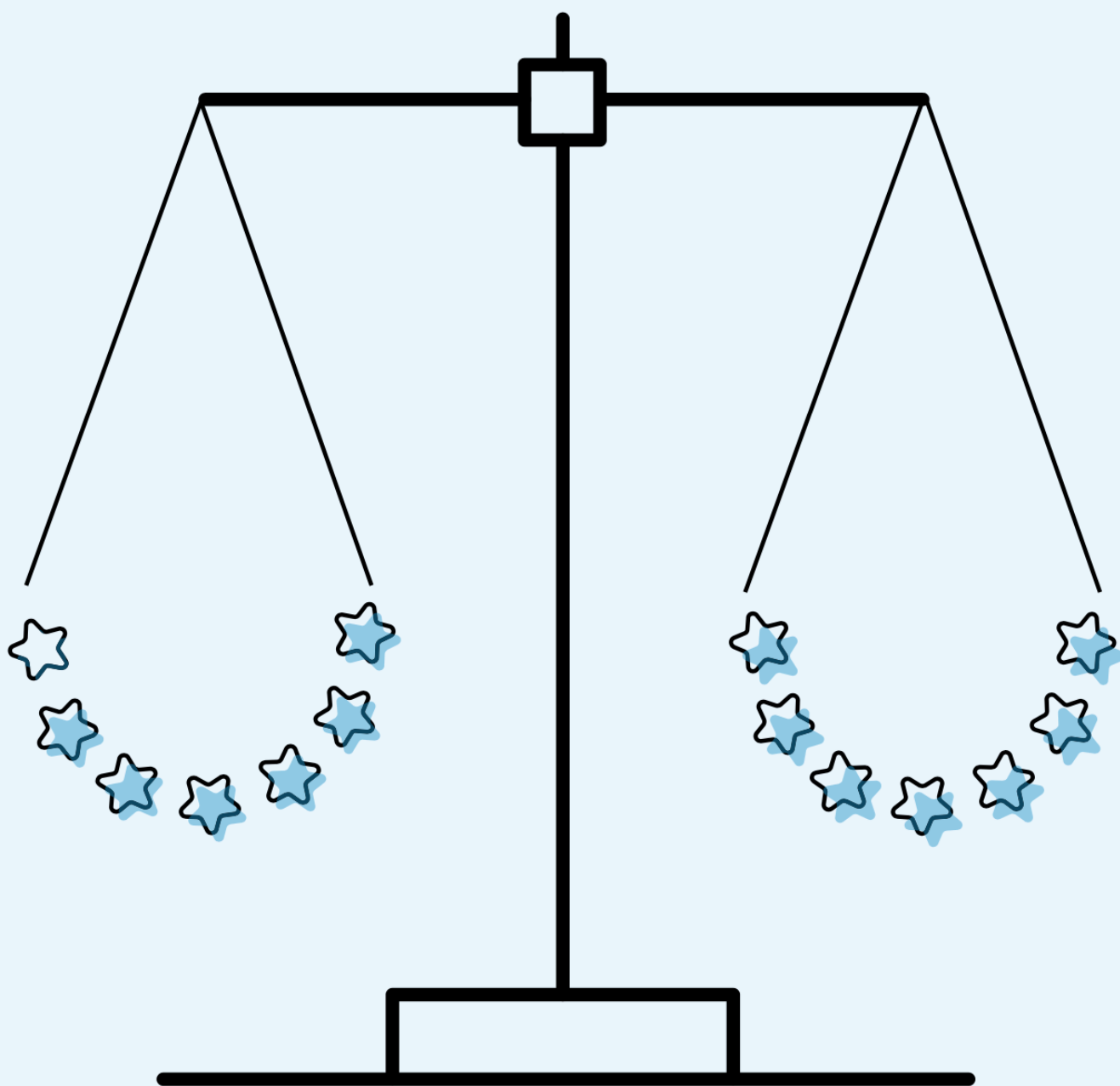# Scenario Sketches for IMAJINE

Future Visions For European Spatial Justice

Scenario Sketches for IMAJINE

What is IMAJINE?

IMAJINE - "Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe" - is a Horizon 2020 European Union research project.

IMAJINE explores ways to address "**territorial inequality**": that is to say, disparities between different territories within Europe. Whether at the level of neighbourhoods, municipalities, regions, or countries, people may experience different levels of economic prosperity and different standards of living depending on where they live and work. This goes against the principle that EU citizens should have equal rights and opportunities regardless of where they live.

IMAJINE's work is underpinned by the concept of "**spatial justice**". This refers to the question of whether different places are treated fairly, and whether the ability of people to realise their rights is compromised by where they live.

IMAJINE's 16 participating institutions are drawn from 13 countries, working in a consortium to research and develop integrative policy mechanisms for tackling territorial inequalities and providing spatial justice.

Why scenarios?

As part of the broader IMAJINE project, one team was assigned the task of looking at the future using a methodology called scenario planning.
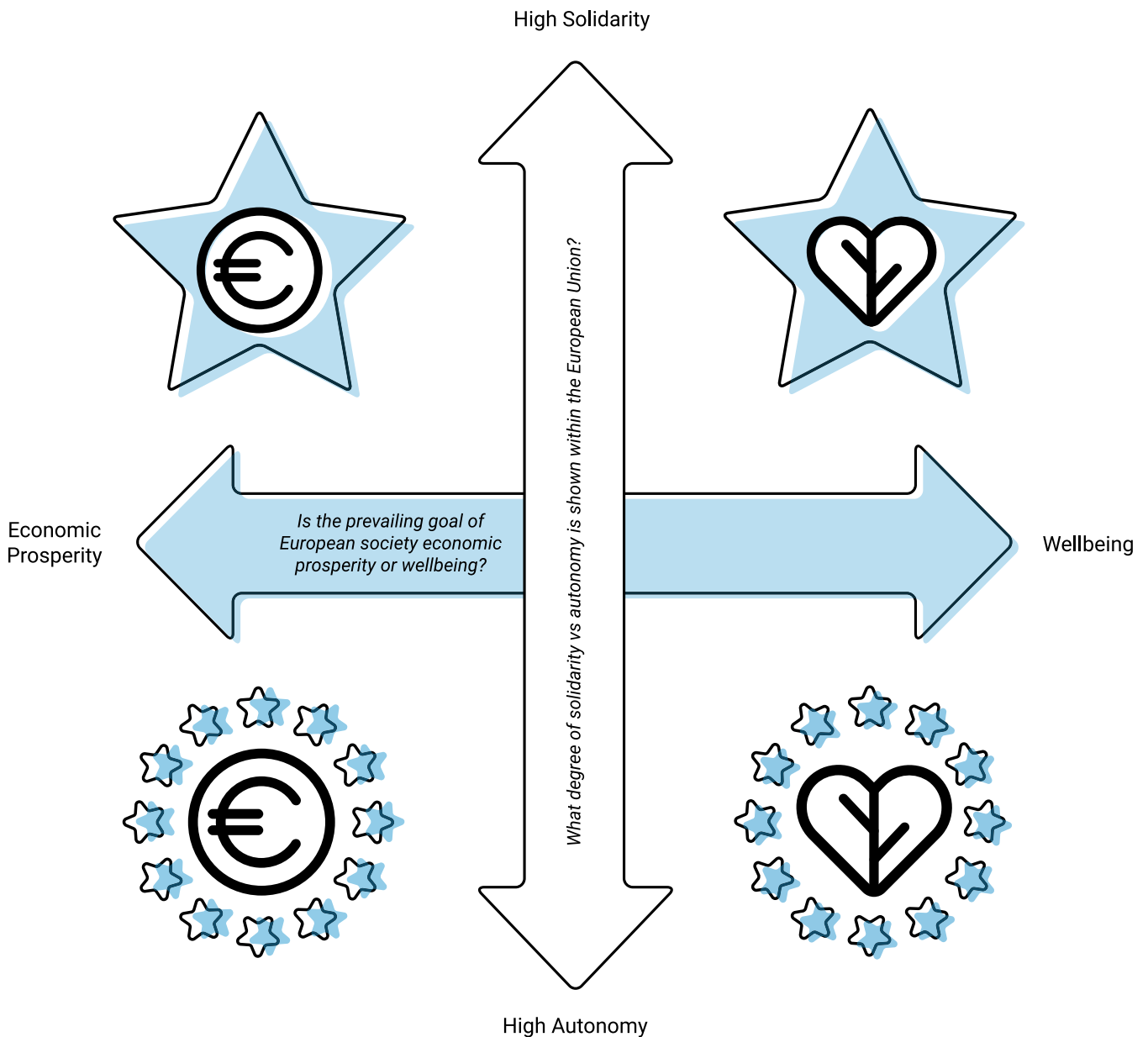
This approach seeks not to predict the one future which will definitely come to pass, but to imagine a number of plausible futures which would challenge our current assumptions about where Europe is headed in terms of spatial justice and territorial inequality.

These futures haven't been chosen for their likelihood, but for their ability to challenge our current understandings of spatial justice and territorial inequality.

The scenario sketches presented here are the first step towards developing a number of rich and useful visions of what Europe might look like in terms of geographical disparities and ideas of spatial justice.

The scenarios relate to a 2 x 2 grid where the two factors are "**What degree of solidarity vs autonomy is shown within the European Union?**" and "**What is the prevailing goal of European society, economic prosperity or wellbeing?**"

These factors were drawn from a set of uncertainties affecting decisions currently made by the European Commission's Direc-

High Solidarity

Economic
Prosperity

Is the prevailing goal of European society economic prosperity or wellbeing?

What degree of solidarity vs autonomy is shown within the European Union?

Wellbeing

High Autonomy

torate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG-REGIO).

DG-REGIO's decisions play a fundamental policy role in questions of spatial justice and territorial inequality across the EU; here, they form the bedrock of the speculative scenarios presented.

The aim of these scenarios is to offer different visions of the year **2048**, each highlighting distinct notions of spatial justice and territorial inequality in Europe. 2048 represents 4 of the 7-year cycles by which DG-REGIO plans for disbursement of its development funds.

Join us now in four distinct and different visions of Europe in 2048, to see how differently questions of territorial inequality and spatial justice might play out across the EU.

High Solidarity / Economic Prosperity

By 2048, the EU achieves prosperity and economic equity, but suffers from threats of internal stagnation and external conflict. Spatial justice means an equitable distribution of wealth between regions. There is an evening up of material territorial inequalities as regions in Southern and Eastern Europe benefit from reindustrialisation and redistributive welfare policies.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Europeans made a strong commitment to redistribution of wealth. EU and national institutions intervened robustly to target development in lagging areas of Europe. The pandemic crisis was followed by increasing challenges from a changing climate, and ongoing decay of the post-1945 global order. Europe's goal of equitably distributed wealth across its regions was delivered through an **increasingly centralised** pan-European approach. As new computing and communications technologies emerged, the demands of carrying out digital transformation through a season of prolonged upheaval in the 2020s encouraged collective action.

The implementation of [mission-led innovation](#) approaches led to a new vision of economic growth which emphasised inclusivity. EU interventions sought not to de-risk or level the playing field, but to "tilt the playing field" in the direction of desired goals. The state played a greater role in innovation, with strong public-private partnerships constructed around Europe-wide missions.

These emphasised a vision of ongoing, equitable, economic growth across Europe's regions and ultimately led to a **unified EU-wide tax and welfare system**.
By 2048, reindustrialisation has occurred, with a focus on food and energy security, including investments in biotechnology. **Advanced 3D printing and manufacturing technologies** mean that automated "manu-factories" create and distribute material goods locally. Europe has also become a champion and global exemplar of the circular economy.

Europe's successes led the EU to expand, and as a post-Putin Russia crumbled and fragmented, Turkey, the Ukraine, and Bela-

rus all became members. As a result, the Union's eastern borders became trouble spots and the EU increased its capacity for collective military action. By 2048, units of the EU armed forces - largely autonomous machines - are engaged in **constant conflict** which waxes and wanes on the Russian border. This military effort also drives technological innovation, similar to the US in the Cold War.

Europe generally has become **more isolationist and protectionist**, wary of preserving its cherished prosperity and stability in a world which has become more divided between Chinese, American, and emerging blocs. "Fortress Europe" acts aggressively to head off migration from climate refugees.

Prior to this, decades of migration led Europe to become ever more culturally and linguistically diverse. "European values" in 2048 are shaped to a greater degree by migration from the global south. The election of the European Commission's **first Muslim President**, a Swede of Somali ancestry, in 2035 was a significant landmark.

However, internal and external migration both abated through the 2030s as automation increasingly reduced the demand for low-skilled workers from outside the EU, and regional wealth inequalities ceased to be a push factor for migration within the Union.

People in this Europe feel a strong allegiance to family, striving to ensure that their children are on a path to prestige and prosperity within wider European society, cultivating connections on- and offline which will benefit and sustain their ever-growing, ever-ageing family units.

While in some ways individual needs are well met in this prosperous Europe, with increasingly personalised digital or robotic services available in classrooms, care homes, and hospitals, this is also a **conformist future**, with strong supervision from EU institutions. As a result, there has been a degree of **stagnation** within Europe, and citizens express some unease about their inability to influence politics beyond the channels legitimated by the EU.

As a result, by 2048, new calls for political and economic freedom - as well as a rising pacifist movement concerned about the wars to the east - are testing the thirty years of calm which threaten to tip over into complacency or stagnation.

High Solidarity / Wellbeing

The EU monitors and regulates resilience and sustainability for a new world order focussed on climate change. Spatial justice in this future means mutual assistance between regions to help each other adapt to change. Current territorial inequalities are flipped as there is degrowth and population loss in metropolitan areas, and population and economic growth in marginalised rural areas of France, Spain, Italy, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe.

Beyond the coronavirus of 2020, other natural disasters triggered by the climate crisis, including a sequence of ongoing pandemics, continued to challenge Europe.

Cities became less appealing as pandemics spread easily in areas of high population density. By 2048, **urban areas are ghettoised places**, where workers live in cramped, challenging conditions reminiscent of 2020's migrant workers locked down in Singaporean dormitories or the social housing residents restricted to their towers in Melbourne.

Coastal areas were also abandoned, as people feared the impact of climate change. **Rural areas are highly valued** and there was increasing competition for territory perceived as safe from the ravages of climate.

As the world weathered increasingly ex-

treme weather and health crises, existing physical and social infrastructure in Europe was threatened. There was a sense of the human race being "on a war footing", and the need for communities to pull together in the face of existential threats. As part of its resilience efforts, the EU moved towards a more centralised, command-and-control society. New regulations included increasing restrictions on movement and ownership of second houses.

This was part of **a global shift towards concern with sustainability and wellbeing**. The decline of institutions like the United Nations, World Trade Organization and World Health Organization led to their replacement with new international entities. The job of remaking the world order, last achieved by the Allies post-1945, was this time led by China and the new emerging powers of the Asia-Pacific region. A new international con-

sensus was also reached around migration and management of climate refugee populations.

New metrics and standards for success were developed by these entities: successors to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, these metrics incorporated **new notions of social and economic justice**, with an emphasis on harmony, conflict avoidance, and equity. The European Union enforces and interprets these global directives within the territories for which it has responsibility. Within Europe, businesses and individuals are given **sustainability & wellbeing ratings**, successors to early experiments such as social credit ratings, which determine their access to contracts and opportunities for advancement.

The new world order also requires "**climate reparations**" from powers which are regarded to have caused the climate catastrophe through their historical actions. As a result, the EU pays reparations to numerous territories overseas. The Western politicians of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are disparaged as monsters, whose focus on economic growth over evident signs of climate catastrophe injured the planet in ways which will take generations to redress.
The pandemics of the mid-21st century raised new ideas about identity. Solidarity

was less about having something in common with the people who lived around you or shared your ancestry, and more about common cause with those who shared an approach to public health and sustainability. Solidarity meant modifying your behaviour in order to stop disease or environmental damage and protect your fellow Europeans.
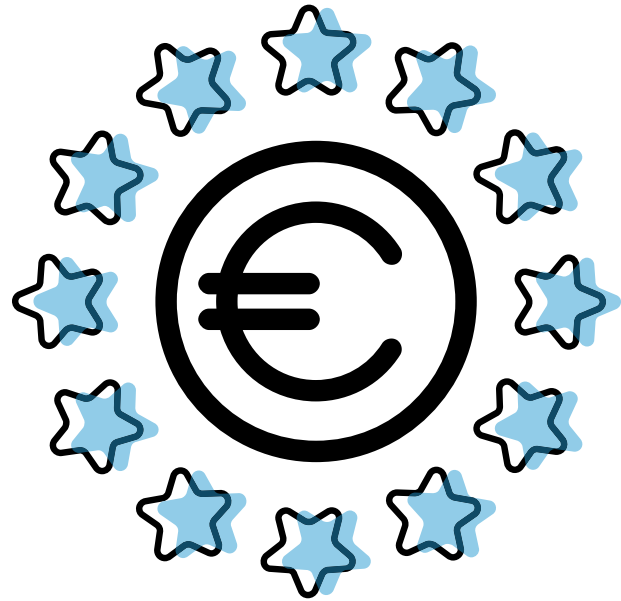
The rifts of the 2020s, when many had found themselves divided between those who trusted scientific institutions and those who preferred the pronouncements of populist politicians, have long healed.

The challenges of the ongoing pandemics have encouraged people to value community connection, whether on or offline. Activities which bring a sense of communion - volunteering, sports, "big culture" - are prized. **A New Olympiad** which prizes not just athletic skills, but literature, philosophy, humanitarian achievement, is the highlight of the cultural calendar.

By 2048, Europeans look back with regret on the last days of capitalism; today, their concern for sustainability and well-being includes subtle notions of aesthetics, mental, and occupational health, flavoured by the increasing dominance and prestige of Asian cultures globally.

High Autonomy / Economic Prosperity

The EU focuses on digital identities in a world shaped by transnational corporations. Spatial justice is understood as the right of regions to hold on to the wealth that they have generated. Territorial inequalities are intensified and complicated as rich regions get richer and poor regions get poorer

Through the 2020s, Europeans continued to seek economic prosperity above all, with institutions measuring this by GDP per capita and growth in the macroeconomy. However, notions of solidarity were eroded by the self-interest of member states. In the 2030s, after years of turmoil, the UK achieved a degree of success in its post-Brexit trajectory. Although it had to make many compromises on workers' rights and other standards, some EU member states and regions came to see it as having re-established a sense of national identity and self-determination to which they also aspired.

Richer regions in particular, who were net contributors in balanced development terms, grew increasingly dissatisfied with mechanisms by which redistribution of resources was calculated across Europe, with the EU continuing to apply GDP per capita as the main method of territorial distribution of structural funds. As member states also adhered to these same criteria at inter- and intra-regional levels, many citizens developed **strong perceptions of unequal, unfair, and unjustified practices**.

In trying to navigate the changing times and avert a brutal "dog-eat-dog" society, the EU tried a number of experiments for restructuring the economy and society, including anticipatory regulation, and the use of "**sandboxes**" to test new policies and regulations within defined geographic areas.

This led to variegated approaches tailored to different regions, and in turn, over time, this has caused the EU to adapt, accommodating differing economic models and configurations.

The internal and external boundaries of this Europe are more porous than those of 2020 in some ways.

Digital citizenship has evolved from its [early Baltic experiments](#) to a set of **online rights and responsibilities which transcend your physical location**. Citizenship resembles a subscription model, with people's identity much more deeply tied to the transnational combines which employ them. In this future, it is possible to be a European in Australia who has never set foot in EU territory, and may have no residence rights there, but whose livelihood, rights, responsibilities, and privileges, are deeply entwined with Europe's fortunes. Digital space refuses to conform to traditional notions of a territory, causing the rise of the **non-territorial economy**. Communities and regions worldwide reorder and build alliances with one another, and tensions arise as physical regions strive to hold onto the wealth that they have generated.

One of the most significant outcomes of this is the possibility of "**remixable citizenship**". Some rights and responsibilities can now be disaggregated by citizens, then delegated or shared with relatives, friends, business partners, or even autonomous software entities. One option for people and communities seeking to escape or redress inequality is acquiring digital rights from other jurisdictions - a "pick and mix" citizenship with new winners and losers.

The failure of European labour movements to find their place in a world where social and environmental justice have increasingly entwined means that the transition to a low-carbon economy has been largely led and defined by the private sector. However, the pioneering approach to citizenship means that Europeans "play the game" of the new world order very competitively, and with a significant degree of success.

Workers strive to stay within the "walled garden" of a corporate network which can employ and care for them, and both workers and corporations are experienced in navigating the "pick and mix" digital rights environment both inside and outside the EU to seek the best outcomes. However, the "have nots" of this future include those who struggle to manage this complex digital environment, and may find themselves struggling to opt out of "pre-packaged" citizenship options designated for them by corporations and territories.

"**Economic bridges**", successors to the air bridges of the pandemic and the passporting systems of the finance sector, mean that in this world extended transnational networks are as significant as discrete, geographically contiguous centres. A biotech hub in Frankfurt may have more in common with its partner cities in Guangdong and California than it does with one a few hundred kilometres away in Poland, especially when augmented office spaces and personal implants means that **telepresence is the norm**. This is the age of "the sentient economy", where large, AI-enhanced corporations can provide for your every need, but price plans and premiums apply.

High Autonomy / Wellbeing

The EU brokers the last talking shop for a fragmented Europe. Spatial justice is the right of communities to define their own values. Territorial inequalities become more fragmented, with increased local variation within regions.

Is this the future where you can "**choose your own paradise**" or one in which Europe has been cast back into the Middle Ages? In this fragmented future Europe, different regions embrace wildly varied notions of identity, social value, and human wellbeing.

There are regions of Europe in which gender categories have evolved far beyond what we take for granted in 2020 and five-person marriages are not uncommon, while in other places strict religious interpretation of traditional rules applies. Some communities have an advanced notion of animal rights which respects the sentience of nonhuman creatures and treats them as equals, part of a growing ecological consciousness in response to a fraught season of climate catastrophe.

In some parts of Europe, elements of the natural environment have been granted **legal personhood**, much as [rivers and lands in Australia and New Zealand were in the early part of the century](#). In other regions, even autonomous digital agents are granted a measure of protection - [mistreating the Siri of 2048 in these regions is looked on as equivalent to mistreating a pet](#). Yet other regions have responded to the same crises by returning to **stronger and more conservative expressions of their own traditional heritage**.

This fragmentation was triggered in part by increasingly frequent and bitter **culture wars**, with disputes over issues such as gender and cultural identity. Europeans also struggled to agree on common sources of useful information as they navigated the rise of next-generation social media. Traditional science and medicine found themselves in competition with new modes and models of knowledge, some of them effective in

their own right, some of them tending towards what we would perceive as the lunatic fringe. [In 2020, Google Maps presented different representations of disputed territory depending on where in the world you viewed them from](); by the end of that decade, it had become almost impossible for the general public even to agree on **trusted sources of information**.

The inability of existing institutions to command consensus led to increasing regional and private devolution. A series of violent protests against 5G rollout, and the election of politicians holding extreme conspiracy theory views, were key events in the widespread collapse of public trust, which damaged both public institutions and big business.

This collapse also created **new opportunities for people to thrive**: in this Europe there are new winners and losers, with some regions, cities, villages, displaying some of the most enlightened, progressive, and compassionate attitudes in the world. There are leading examples of degrowth in this world, and a "back-to- nature" pastoralism, as well as some enterprising autonomous regions which have built international relationships to sustain their chosen way of living. This future Europe is characterised by a **strong libertarian streak**: people move between communities based on individual preferences and values. Huge spatial inequalities have developed within and across regions and groups in Europe.

Technological advance and innovation have slowed in this fragmented and distrustful Europe, while other parts of the world, notably

in the Asia-Pacific region, have continued to accelerate. Territories on the eastern border of Europe are strongly influenced by the adjacent cultures.

While the technology of this Europe in 2050 remains advanced compared to our own, visitors from elsewhere in this future world consider European nations to be something of **a backwater**, and they tour Europe - or at least its safer corners - enjoying the novelty of its wildly divergent cultures, and its architectural heritage.

More successful communities become physically more appealing in a world where autonomy is less well sustained by advanced digital technology, leading to territorial and resource disputes as communities physically grow. Compared to China, India, or the US, this Europe lacks the cutting-edge AI resources which might enable it to manage and transcend these pressures. Around some autonomous regions, **shanty towns** and formal or informal displaced persons camps have developed, populated by internal rather than external migrants.

The European Union in this world serves largely to mediate internal conflicts, and provide some unity in external relations. It provides a **common informational framework**, offering the bare minimum of trusted information that its diverging members can hold in common. It holds together because its constituent autonomous parts recognise that they are too small and fragmented to have clout with the new great powers of the age, but its power has dwindled significantly.

Want to know more?

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