come together

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY MEDIA IN EUROPE

VOX FEMINAE

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REKTO VERSO

GERADOR

EUROZINE

Co-funded by the European Union

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Arts, Culture,
Civil Service and Sport

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The Come Together project is co-funded by the European Commission through the Creative Europe program.

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FELLOW ARTICLES

Introduction

The Come Together project was a collaborative initiative co-funded by the European Commission through the Creative Europe program. It brought together community media organizations from France, Belgium, Austria, Croatia, Portugal and Poland, aiming to harness existing expertise within these organizations to foster innovative approaches to community media management and funding. The primary goal was to establish a community of practice that enhances the sustainability of community media organizations by refining business models, expanding audiences, and exploring novel content dissemination methods.

The participating consortium partners were Eurozine, Rekto Verso, Krytyka Polityczna, Kurziv, Gerador, Voxeurop and Voxfeminae.

As part of the project's commitment to continuous learning and adaptation in the evolving media landscape, expert webinars were organized. These sessions provided consortium partners and participants with insights into current trends, challenges, and innovative practices in journalism and media. Topics covered included data journalism, investigative reporting, audience engagement strategies, and the impact of digital transformation on media organizations. These webinars facilitated knowledge exchange and equipped participants with the skills necessary to navigate and thrive in the modern media environment.

To deepen the collaborative spirit and understanding among consortium partners, both in-person and online study visits were conducted. These visits allowed partners to provide in-depth insights into their organizations, business models, ongoing projects, and collaborations with local media partners. Such exchanges fostered mutual learning and the sharing of best practices, contributing to the overall goal of enhancing the sustainability and impact of community media organizations involved in the project.

As part of the project's objectives to promote inclusivity and representation, several insightful articles have been published by consortium partners. Some examples of articles published under the project include Skica za dekolonizaciju muzeja (A blueprint for decolonizing museums), an article which discusses the complexities of decolonizing museums in a world where a lot of places remain colonized, highlighting the challenges and necessities of such endeavors; Od pristranosti do propagande (From bias to Propaganda) examines how the selection of sources and language use play pivotal roles in shaping media perceptions, particularly concerning the Israeli occupation; Prawa chłopców i mężczyzn będą jednym z priorytetów polskiej prezydencji w UE (The rights of boys and men will be one of the priorities of the Polish EU presidency) discusses the announcement by Minister Kotula regarding the focus on boys' and men's rights during Poland's EU presidency, signaling a potential shift in leftist perspectives; and Antirodne politike – mržnja ili borba oko resursa? (Anti-gender policies – hatred or struggle over resources?), an analysis questioning whether misogyny is genuinely hatred towards women or a manifestation of the need for dominance over a particular social group.

To foster diversity and expand the network of collaborators within media organizations, the “Come Together” project launched a training program targeting aspiring journalists and editors, especially those underrepresented in the field. This 30-hour program addresses current challenges in the media industry, emphasizing inclusiveness and representation. Participation was free, with 25 spots available per cycle, conducted online. Beyond the training, participants could propose and work on their journalistic and editorial projects.

The first edition of this program was organized by Gerador, a Portuguese platform for journalism, culture, and education, and took place between March and May 2024. The second edition, organized by Kurziv, a platform for matters of culture, media, and society from Croatia, had its open call in September 2024. These programs aimed to:

- Foster diversity within newsrooms and expand the network of collaborators for media organizations.

- Enhance the professional skills of aspiring journalists and editors who are underrepresented in the field.

- Create a platform for collaborative educational programs, bringing together young and aspiring journalists from diverse communities to strengthen trust in media among various audiences.

Selected projects received financial support and mentoring, enabling participants to contribute meaningful media pieces under the guidance of experienced editors. Ioana Gabriela Cherciu wrote about the illegal burning of Bucharest’s Alexandru Ioan Cuza Park in Charred urban roots, Sedan Anlar and Maria Luís Fernandes analyse how schools, teachers and students deal with the increasing presence, possibilities and risks of AI, and Bárbara Alves explores how the changes in Sønderbro–an area of Copenhagen housing people with socio-economic difficulties–reflect national trends and impact the lives of its residents.

In summary, the Come Together project exemplifies a concerted effort to strengthen community media organizations across Europe. Through strategic partnerships, targeted training programs, expert-led webinars, and immersive study visits, the project addressed contemporary challenges in the media landscape. By promoting inclusivity, refining business models, and expanding audience engagement, “Come Together” contributes significantly to the sustainability and evolution of community media, ensuring they remain vital components of the European public sphere.

Learning compendium

In 2024, the Come Together project launched its training program for aspiring journalists and editors. The training program for aspiring journalists and editors was crafted to address the current challenges and disparities within the media industry and to reshape the landscape of newsrooms, with a particular emphasis on promoting inclusiveness and representation by fostering diversity, expanding collaboration networks and equipping underrepresented groups with essential professional skills. By doing so, the initiative aimed to ensure a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the world in media.

Participants in the Come Together Training Program were offered a well-structured curriculum spread across three modules, totaling 15 classes and 30 hours of learning, in two cycles. Expert trainers guided them through essential topics, providing a robust foundation for their journey in journalism. The program was meticulously designed to address current challenges and disparities within the journalism industry and aimed to establish a collaborative community among participants.

Participation was free of charge. It was expected of participants to apply the acquired knowledge and skills beyond the training sessions. The goal was to see the impact of the program reflected in their journalistic work and contributions to the media landscape which happened within the Fellowship Program.

The selection committee for the participants of online courses and the fellowships was composed by the editorial board members and project managers of the Come Together project: Agnieszka Wiśniewska (Krytyka Polityczna), Catherine André (VoxEurop), Clara Amante (Gerador), Hannelore Roth (rekto:verso), Ivana Pejić (Kurziv), Réka Kinga Papp (Eurozine), Tiago Sigorelho (Gerador), Tihana Bertek (K-zona), and Matija Mrakovčić (Kurziv).

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The first edition of the program was organized by Gerador, a Portuguese platform for journalism, culture, and education, and it took place between March and May 2024.

module	sub-modules	class dates	trainer
1. Independent Journalism: from theoretical foundations to practical application This module is designed to equip participants with the knowledge and skills essential for independent journalism and the creation of innovative community media.	None	March 04, 11, 18, 25	Ricardo Cabral Fernandes
2. Development of specialized journalistic skills This module is dedicated to refining participants' skills in data journalism and investigative journalism, which are instrumental in ensuring the credibility, impact, and relevance of journalism in today's dynamic and information-rich landscape.	**2.1. Data journalism** Participants will explore the essentials of data journalism, including data collection, cleaning, analysis, and visualization. Emphasis will be placed on the ethical considerations involved in handling data in journalism.	April 01, 03, 08, 10	Rui Barros
	2.2. Investigative journalism This segment guides participants through the complexities of investigative journalism, covering areas such as story identification, advanced research techniques, effective interviewing, and the crafting of compelling investigative narratives.	April 15, 17, 22, 24	Filipe Teles
3. Community in focus These workshops will contribute to sensitising future journalists for reporting on vulnerable social groups and improve their professional capacities in dealing with topics that are usually out of the focus of mainstream media.	**3.1. Ethnic-racial filters in the media** Understanding how ethnic and racial communities are portrayed in the media; exploring the impact of stereotypes and biases; developing strategies for fair and accurate representation.	April 30	Paula Cardoso
	3.2. Media representation of people with disabilities Examining media representation of individuals with disabilities; addressing common misconceptions and stereotypes; promoting inclusive storytelling and accessibility in media.	May 02	Dora Alexandre
	3.3. Media representation of the LGBTQ+ community Analyzing the historical context of LGBTQ+ representation; exploring the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in media portrayal; developing strategies for promoting authentic and positive representation.	May 09	tba

module	topic	date	lecturer
Introductory session		Sep 26	
Journalistic Tools and Media Literacy	Media Pluralism	Sep 30	Iva Nenadić
	Investigative reporting	Oct 3	Barbara Matejčić
	Fact-checking	Oct 7	Petar Vidov
	Data journalism	Oct 10	Jelena Prtorić
	Solution journalism	Oct 14	Dora Santos Silva
	AI and journalism	Oct 17	Letiţia Pârcălăbescu
	Media Policy	Oct 21	Jelena Berković
Sustainability and Future of Work	Culture and Climate	Oct 24	Ana Žuvela
	The Future of Work	Oct 28	Davor Mišković
	Slow Mobility	Oct 31	Ana Žuvela
	Beyond a Green Cultural Empire	Nov 4	Forest University
Community in Focus: Diversity Reporting	Phralipen	Nov 11	Maja Grubišić & Matej Čelig
	In Portal	Nov 21	Damir Fatušić
	Meduza	Nov 28	Kalia Dimitrova
	Oblakoder	Dec 5	Marina Zec
	KLFM	Dec 12	Kristina Tešija
Final Session	Fellowship Applications Opening	Dec 19	

The second edition, organized by Kurziv – Platform for matters of culture, media, and society from Croatia, was held between October and December 2024

Beyond the training course, participants had the opportunity to propose and work on their journalistic and editorial projects. Five projects were selected in each cycle. They received financial support and mentoring, allowing participants to contribute meaningful media pieces with guidance from experienced editors. The pieces produced as part of the program were translated and published in the media outlets of the consortium members.

The Come Together Learning Compendium is designed as a curated collection of lectures and workshops that took place as part of a program for aspiring journalists and editors. It also includes journalistic research conducted by participants during the fellowship program.

We have selected several topics that we believe are particularly relevant at this moment, while also ensuring that those considering a career in journalism – whether in general, in community journalism, or in specialized journalistic fields – can find valuable information. It was important for us to highlight key aspects of the training program and recognize the dedicated journalists and media professionals who address important issues through the respected media outlets they manage and edit.

We hope this compendium will be a useful resource not only for professionals in the field—journalists, editors, publishers, organizers, authors, and researchers—but also for the general public seeking reliable information. Over time, we hope it will continue to expand with new and even more timely topics. Ultimately, this compendium serves as a call to action for journalism—a call for impartial, ethically grounded, evidence-based, well-argued, and responsible reporting.

The full compendium is available on the Come Together site.

Webinars

As part of Come Together's peer-to-peer learning initiative, each organisation held a webinar on a theme with which they are particularly familiar. The subjects ranged from navigating EU policies, advertising, and content creation practices. As the media funding landscape is rapidly shifting and public funding is becoming increasingly harder to secure, sharing knowledge is crucial to develop community media to withstand these challenges, whilst remaining true to their quality standards and aims.

European Media Freedom Act – Achievements and Challenges Ahead

With Iva Nenadić
Organised by Voxfeminae

For a decade, the Media Pluralism Monitor has been regularly implemented in all EU member states and candidate countries to map and monitor the evolution of risks to media freedom and pluralism across the dimensions of fundamental rights and protections, market conditions, political independence, and social inclusiveness.

The Monitor, which informs the media pluralism section of the European Commission's Rule of Law reports, indicates that many conditions for media and journalism have worsened over time across Europe. It is particularly problematic when ruling politicians, designated to provide and protect an enabling environment for journalism, create conditions that make work more difficult or even dangerous for journalists.

This has led to the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), a groundbreaking achievement considering that the EU traditionally has had no explicit competencies in this policy area. Media policies have traditionally been a matter of national policy. This lecture outlines the key elements of EMFA and discusses some challenges to its equal implementation across all EU countries.

video

"Despite historical peculiarities of diverse national media systems, some worrisome structural issues persist and are widely shared, making them European problems."

Technology in the service of independent media

With Tomáš Bella
Organised by Krytyka Polityczna and its partners

How can technology be used in the service of independent journalism? How to study audiences, use data consciously and build an effective strategy based on it, so that independent web portals do not have to rely only on social media algorithms?

Krytyka Polityczna and its partners invite publishers, journalists and editors to a free webinar “Technology in the service of independent media”. The special guest is Tomáš Bella.

Tomáš Bella is Chief Digital Officer at Denník N, an independent daily newspaper published in Slovak, Czech and Hungarian. Denník N is focused on high-quality and long-form journalism and also develops open-source subscription software for publishers.

Prior to co-founding Denník N, Bella was editor-in-chief of the most popular Slovak news site and CEO of subscription software provider Piano. He was listed among the world’s 50 leading innovators in journalism and media and won several journalism prizes, most recently the Slovak Best Reportage award for his coverage of the European refugee crisis.

video

> “We were telling ourselves that we want to have one core competence and that is Journalism. But we realised very quickly that we have to have a second competence as well–if we want to build our business on subscriptions, then we have to have the right tech stack as well.”

Manufacturing hate – how the media fuels anti-black racism.

With Paula Cardoso
Organised by Gerador

In this webinar, led by journalist Paula Cardoso, we confronted the undeniable reality that media representations of Black people and coverage of issues related to race can be tremendously problematic and exclusionary. But are we aware of how exactly the media are fueling anti-black racism? In this webinar, key aspects within news outlets that are manufacturing hate were discussed, while good practices to tackle them were shared, alongside a reflection on the power of storytelling to reduce racial stigmas and question official narratives.

Some of the aspects highlighted were that it is difficult to point out media coverage that positively represents Black People, as the first content to emerge from internet searches are usually negative images and stories. At the same time, Black Europeans are often considered African and disregarded as Europeans, which denies them the possibility of contributing to the construction of a European identity and narrative that are more inclusive.

During the webinar, Paula Cardoso showed Baratunde Thurston's TED Talk, "How to Deconstruct Racism, One Headline at a Time", where Thurston introduces a method for breaking down headlines to expose underlying biases. He explains that by dissecting headlines into their basic components – identifying the subject, action, and target – we can uncover the subtle ways in which language can frame stories to perpetuate stereotypes. He uses real-world examples to illustrate his points, showing how different wording can lead to very different interpretations of the same event. He advocates for a proactive approach to deconstructing and reconstructing narratives around race, suggesting that individuals have the power to effect change through conscious effort. Despite the challenges, in this talk, Thurston expresses optimism about the potential for progress. He believes that by changing the way we talk about race, we can begin to change the way we think about it.

Paula Cardoso highlighted that commitment to change is essential to humanizing the system in which we live. Each of us can be a change-maker if we are committed in our own contexts through various actions. These actions include promoting and participating in trainings, starting conversations, diversifying teams and collaborators, bringing topics to the newsrooms that matter to Black communities, and ensuring diverse perspectives enrich our overall narrative.

Founder of the digital community “Afrolink” which showcases African and Afro-descendant professionals residing in Portugal or with connections to the country, Paula Cardoso is also the author of the children’s book series “Força Africana“. These projects were developed to promote greater black representation in Portuguese society. With the same purpose, she is part of the online talk show “O Lado Negro da Força” and hosted the second season of the “Black Excellence Talk Series“, broadcasted on RTP África. On the same channel, she has been hosting the cultural magazine Rumos since October 2023. She is also a member of the Citizens’ Forum, aiming to contribute to revitalizing Portuguese democracy, as well as the HeforShe Lisboa and Bora Mulheres programs, focusing on mentoring and female entrepreneurship.

Originally from Mozambique, she graduated in International Relations and worked as a journalist for 17 years, starting her career at Visão magazine. She writes the column “Entre Meadas” in Diário de Notícias, is one of the contributors to Gerador, published the column “Mutuacção” in Setenta e Quatro and was part of the content production team for the television program Jantar Indiscreto. In March 2023, she was recognized by the business magazine “Success Pitchers” as one of the “10 Most Inspiring Women Leaders in Social Entrepreneurship.” This recognition followed her inclusion in 2022 by Euclid NetWork as one of the “Top 100 Women In Social Enterprise” in Europe for 2022.

What’s worth a video?

Integrating audiovisual content in publishing

With Réka Kinga Papp and Gergő Pápai
Organised by Eurozine

Audiovisual material isn’t just a feature of social media. Written publishing is also increasingly reliant on audiovisual content. Videos, images, and sound recordings all contribute to a more immersive publishing experience. Here we focus primarily on video reportage, that is to say, video as independent content. However, we also talk about video as a promotion tool.

Gergő Pápai is a Hungarian applied anthropologist, documentarian and videographer working on human rights and environmental issues.

Réka Kinga Papp is editor-in-chief at Eurozine and hosts Eurozine’s talk show, Standard Time, and Gagarin, the Eurozine podcast.

> “An additional video doesn’t have the same kind of value as it did 15 years ago. Streaming a whole panel discussion isn’t enough. It’s a better choice to specifically arrange it for the camera, as a teaser, a promotion, a series.”

video

Speculation and collaboration: on photography, documentary and journalism

With Max Pinckers
Organised by Rekto:Verso

How can documentary express social concern while at the same time recognize its own shortcomings and blind spots? How can we define a shared sense of realism in a hyper-individual and confusing era of post-truth and fake news, in which there is no longer a consensus about what is real, half-truth, fiction or entertainment? Photographer Max Pinckers will give a talk in which he speculates about his own practice in relation to the problematics surrounding documentary photography. He approaches documentary as both a critical reflection on photography itself and a way of dealing with reality in an attempt to understand it and communicate about it.

video

Max Pinckers (°Brussels, 1988) grew up in Indonesia, India, Australia and Singapore. In 2007 he returned to his native country Belgium to study photography at the School of Arts/ KASK in Ghent, where he attained a BA, MA and PhD in the arts in 2021. His work explores the critical, technological, and ideological structures in and around documentary images. For Pinckers, documentary involves more than the representation of an external reality: it's a speculative process that approaches reality and truth as plural, malleable notions open to articulation in different ways. His installations and books are exhibited internationally, having received the Edward Steichen Award Luxembourg and the Leica Oskar Barnack Award, amongst others. Pinckers is co-founder of the independent publishing imprint Lyre Press and The School of Speculative Documentary. He is represented by Gallery Sofie Van de Velde in Antwerp and Tristan Lund in London. www.maxpinckers.be

> "Documentary really departs from a critical self-questioning, a process of first addressing the blind spots, the power positions, the conventions. Only when you've self reflected on the language that you use to address a topic and you've addressed your own positioning, then only can you start speaking about something outside of yourself."

Donations and membership schemes

With Nicolas Camier and Justus Mache

Organised by Voxeurop

In this webinar, we discussed building sustainable communities for independent media through donation and membership schemes. We explored the difficulties as well as the long-term possibilities they offer us.

Nicolas Camier is head of editorial and development projects at Basta!, an independent investigative media platform, launched in December 2008, managed by a non-profit association and now run by 9 employees. They deal with social and environmental issues, through investigations, reports, and analytical articles.

Justus Mache is success manager at Steady, a community building platform for independent media platforms.

> "A lot of media now are trying to switch to a monthly or annual donation basis. But it's not so easy because the act of donation is emotional, it comes from a special moment, a special time for the reader when interacting with the media."

video

Connecting the Dots–Engaging Communities in Nonprofit Media

With Tanja Kalčić
Organised by Kurziv

On September 10, 2024, the webinar Connecting the Dots: Engaging Communities in Nonprofit Media explored innovative methods for audience engagement and development in the nonprofit media sector. Facilitated by Tanja Kalčić, a seasoned consultant specialising in audience development and participatory practices, the session focused on actionable strategies to foster meaningful connections with communities.

A key takeaway from the webinar was the recognition that truly connecting with audiences requires first getting to know them. The discussion revealed that media professionals often assume who their audiences are, but exercises and group discussions demonstrated that there is much more to learn. Practical methods were offered to help participants better understand their audiences, enabling more effective communication and stronger community ties. By addressing the gap between assumptions and reality, the webinar underscored the importance of audience insight in creating meaningful, impactful content.

video

> “The goal of audience development should be to place audiences at the centre of an organisation’s work. Still it tends to be focused on increasing user numbers or the interest of specific audience segments. What should matter are the communities we engage with.”

Sustaining Journalism Conference 2024

Eurozine hosts an annual conference to bring together its network of cultural journals and community media from around Europe, North America and the SWANA region. In 2024, the conference was organised in partnership with the Come Together project, focusing on the theme of sustaining journalism. As the Come Together partners grappled with the issues of creating a sustainable business model, the conference became a site to explore these issues more broadly and to share the findings of the projects to a broader audience of interested and affected journalists and editors.

The 32nd European Meeting of Cultural Journals took place in Warsaw on 11-13 October 2024. It focused on sustaining independent cultural journalism in an increasingly difficult public sphere. This was an expanded focus on the main theme of the Come Together project, which at its core deals with shifting business models and funding strategies for community media in Europe. As an industry, the cultural and community media spheres in Europe are affected by shifting public funding models, digitised markets, audience expectations, and political interference. Bringing together Eurozine's network partners, Come Together partners, cultural professionals, as well as local audiences, the conference explored:

- ownership and labour in media;
- public funding models in Europe; and
- politics encroaching on independent cultural journalism.

We discussed how these shifts in the cultural field are affecting both journalism and audiences in Europe. The conference was primarily in-person, with the first day held at Staszic Palace, and all subsequent days held at Centrum Bankowo Finansowe.

The first day featured a keynote speech by Professor John Keane, a leading voice in the field of media and political sciences. His speech focused on the effects of war reporting through digital journalism, and the recent upsurge in unique journalistic voices via social media. The discussants for his speech were Ivana Dragičević, journalist and executive producer international news at N1, Zagreb and Radosław Markowski, professor of political science and director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw.

The second day began with an introduction from the Come Together project lead Martyna Jałoszyńska on the aims and progress of the Come Together project. The first internal session focused on securing EU funding for cultural media, held in a workshop format. Eurozine editorial board members led the session and provided space for the exchange of experiences as well as current funding applications of conference participants. The second internal session explored the issues of fact-checking currently affecting journalism. This was an issue that was recently discussed in Polish media, so it was of timely concern, and also lended itself well to discussing audience expectations. The workshop was held by Marcin Czajkowski of PISMO magazine, a Polish foundation and community media platform with over 5 million subscribers.

The first panel took place in the afternoon of the second day. The panel focused on political shifts and media freedom of cultural journals. The panel was moderated by Eurozine senior editor Simon Garnett and included the speakers Anne-Lorraine Bujon, managing director at Esprit in Paris, Mustafa Ünlü, director at P24 in Istanbul and Tomáš Hučko, editor-in-chief of Kapitál Noviny in Bratislava. The panel also delved into issues of funding vis-a-vis media freedom. The second panel explored the career paths of young journalists and the issues they encounter, particularly of women and People of Colour. The session was moderated by Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, historian, essayist and editor at Razpotja, Ljubljana. The speakers included Paulina Januszewska, journalist at Krytyka Polityczna in Warsaw, Paula Cardoso, journalist, activist and founder of Afrolink in Lisbon, and Ivana Dragičević, journalist and executive producer international news at N1 in Zagreb. This panel also covered the generational changes that affect cultural media particularly, a theme that has frequently come up in the Come Together project, for example during the Kulturpunkt online study visit.

The third day began with an internal session on representing Palestinian voices. This was led by Ann Ighe, editor of Ord&Bild in Göteborg and Miriam Rasch, philosopher and author currently based at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam. The workshop explored the issues cultural media in Europe have had in being able to represent Palestinian perspectives. The day ended with a tour and discussion of the funding models of the cultural media scene in Warsaw held by Bęc Zmiana, a foundation and arts focused bookshop in Warsaw.

Panel on Political Shifts & Media Freedom

Panel on Bullshit Journalism

Fellow articles

Selected articles by fellows of the Come Together journalism training programs were published on the partners' websites. These articles were developed through a mentorship between the fellows and Come Together partner editors.

Charred urban roots

Ioana Gabriela Cherciu, Eurozine

Property development pushed on green space in Bucharest has become comparable with the drugs market for profitability. Investigating the trail of questionable ownership rights since post-communist retrocession reveals acts of corruption and intimidation. Can parkland – a prerequisite for urban health and well-being, climate-change reduction and biodiversity – be saved from more illegal fires?

A fire is burning in the centre of Bucharest. Twelve hectares of trees and vegetation are under ongoing destruction, threatened with being wiped off the city map. The damage is occurring in Alexandru Ioan Cuza Park, locally known as IOR, a 50-year-old park with a complex history. It is the only place that burns constantly in Bucharest, whatever the season.

Two opposing camps have formed over the park's transformation. While civil society actors are campaigning for it to be recognized as a public space, public authorities and institutions alongside urban developers seem to have a different agenda. A lack of official accountability and systematic law enforcement is blocking rather than supporting the concerns of local citizens. Behind the scenes of the city's day-to-day life, its streets, houses, trees and traffic, a wide-ranging conflict is unfolding on many levels between citizens and landowners, tenants and the state.

The park's emergency reveals a complicated story intertwining unresolved trauma from recent communist history (related to conflicts over litigious property rights), corruption within public institutions, unregulated urban development and poorly implemented environmental policies. The impact of illegal deforestation in this natural setting points to an issue that is commonly overlooked: the importance of green urban space.

Tracing ownership

The degradation of IOR park as a public entity began long before the fires started. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Eastern Europe has been confronting issues related to the politics of memory. Questions about how recent history is recorded and communicated to the public – what is being told and what is being hidden – have arisen. Throughout the region, countries have adopted different methods to deal with this, including financial Page 1/9 and symbolic rewards for individuals persecuted for their political stance, judicial rehabilitation of political prisoners, rewriting history books and redesigning museums.

An important aspect of democratization was the restitution of property that had been assumed during communism. The general public, especially those who had been wronged, saw it as atonement for past sins and an assumption of responsibility on their behalf. Romania's parliament introduced Law 10/2001, which addressed the legal status of real estate that had been taken over by the communist regime between 6 March 1945 and 22 December 1989. While the law enabled Bucharest's property restitution, the poor way it was applied still haunts Romanian society and the city's fate today.

The section of IOR park that is frequently ablaze is subject to this specific circumstance. Tracing the history of the park located in the Titan neighbourhood, District 3, at the heart of the capital, reveals that at the turn of the twentieth century the site was part of a vast estate owned by I.B. Grueff, a Bulgarian landowner, who bid for the land at an auction in 1903. At the time, Grueff owned the equivalent of almost every part of the Titan neighbourhood and the entire district. Political changes in Romania shifted the estate's course: the nationalization process brought much of Grueff's wealth under communist state control in 1945.

The Titan neighbourhood was one of Bucharest's largest working-class areas. In the 1960s architects inspired by Le Corbusier developed spacious city planning ideas, including a vast park intended to connect people. The park, once completed in 1970, was named IOR, an acronym taken from the name of the nearby factory Întreprinderea Optică Română (Romanian Optical Enterprise). The factory, which produced a wide range of optical products such as glasses, cameras and telescopes, was a symbol of local industrial prowess. After the fall of communism, the park's name was changed to Alexandru Ioan Cuza, but people continue to refer to it affectionately as IOR.

In the 1990s the entire park was still listed in urban planning documents as a public space. Then, in 2005 Grueff's nephew, who was his legal heir, ceded part of the parkland and its disputed ownership rights to Maria Cocoru, a woman in her eighties, whose claim to the land remains mysterious. At this point, Bucharest City Hall retroceded the IOR land to Cocoru under Law 10/2001, where its legal status changed from public to private property. Cocoru's name appears not only as an owner of this disputed area of the park but also of several other green spaces in Bucharest, including Constantin Brâncuși park, named after the famous Romanian sculptor, a 1,431-square-metres park. Brâncuși park has been lying in disrepair for about five years and is no longer in use – it has been abandoned.

Making a case for public space

It took around eight years before the majority of local visitors to IOR Park realized that 12 hectares of the space they consider their treasured park were no longer public. People continued to go there because they felt that the place belonged to them, that it was part of their history, of their collective memory, spanning generations. Some partly grew up or raised their children there.

Maria, a 68-year-old woman who has lived in the neighbourhood since it was built, remembers with nostalgia the special times she and her daughter spent walking the paths that have been retroceded:

> ‘My daughter learned to walk in the park. When she got older, I took her rollerblading there. It was full of plain trees and rose bushes. That area of the park was a wonder to me. I miss it.’

Planning category corruption

Dan Trifu, leader of the EcoCivica Foundation and a specialist in green spaces legislation and urban planning, traces the history of Romanian urban green space privatization to 2000. ‘When the General Urban Plan of Bucharest (PUG) was designed, many green areas and parks in Bucharest were listed in the document as buildable areas, meaning that potential construction projects were allowed there, even though those areas should have been categorized under the usual code used for green areas or parks. The 12 hectares of the IOR were listed in the PUG under the CB3 code’ which ‘allows the local authority to develop building projects such as administrative, cultural and social institutions in the area’, says Trifu.

The EcoCivica Foundation has filed dozens of lawsuits mainly over retroceded green spaces in the city, dealing with what Trifu describes as ‘the real-estate mafia that has taken over chunks of the city’. Trifu points to the connection between investors and politicians who benefit from common profit-led real estate interests. In some cases investors even begin as party members or collaborate directly with them. Sections of land from almost all of Bucharest’s parks are registered under PUGs codes that enable construction. Green areas between blocks of flats and squares have already been redeveloped.

Parks have either disappeared due to construction interests or have been abandoned. According to local media, 609 hectares of Băneasa Forest – the largest green space within Bucharest’s administrative area – have been retroceded. The names of politicians and business people have been associated with construction in the forest. The woodland’s integrity is increasingly under threat from the expansion of residential neighbourhoods, illegal logging, poaching and fragmentation.

This situation reflects a broader pattern of poorly managed societal order postcommunism, where private interests often prevail over public interests and quality of life. According to the investigative publication

RiseProject, the grey market of litigious property rights competes with the black market of drugs in terms of profit generated. The phenomenon is known locally as ‘the mafia of retroceded land’.

In 2012 the District City Hall decided to sue Maria Cocoru, aiming to bring the receded part of the park back under public ownership. A 10-year lawsuit unfolded, during which the space was in legal limbo. It was at this point that the general public found out about the status of the park. In the end District City Hall failed to present the necessary proof that the area in question was ever a park. It didn’t show sufficient evidence that the area was ever developed as a recreational space or that it contained other public utility facilities of local interest. It lost the case in favour of the owner before the High Court of Cassation and Justice in October 2022. According to witnesses of the trial such as Dan Trifu and local councillors, no testimonies were presented in court, no documents that show the investment of the City Hall in the park’s redevelopment. Dan Trifu said the lack of proof made the trial’s legitimacy questionable.

Recreation under fire

Occasionally, a civic group organizes picnics in the retroceded area on ash-covered, black earth. The gatherings are not intended as protests in the classical sense but rather as a symbolic reconnection with a place that should belong to everyone. It is a means for locals to meet and engage in social activities: eating, chatting, taking pictures – all amidst a desolate landscape. The picnics are a form of alternative protest, where activists want to not merely adjust to the existing desolate space but to reinvent and reimagine its potential. They transform the retroceded, private section of the park into, at least for a few hours, a space for leisure and communal joy.

They are connected to the group Here Was a Forest / Here Could Be a Forest established in 2023, where artists, joined by disgruntled and desperate residents of the area started to organize regular protests near the park. They demand that the 12 hectares of illegally private property be transferred rightfully back to public ownership, claiming that the authorities ‘have turned a blind eye’ to the injustices that have happened to the park. They feel that local citizens are not truly consulted regarding urban development planning.

Andreea David, who organizes the group's protests, says that members have organically assumed their roles over time. Others are involved in documenting and researching legislative issues and archives related to the history of the park, or writing requests and sending petitions to public institutions such as the Local Police of the Municipality of Bucharest and the City Hall of the District, urging them to take immediate action. The group also produces an online and print newspaper, The Titans Don't Sleep, which documents the case. They have a website acting as a digital information platform for anyone interested in the history of the park and its retrocession, as they think it's important to trace the memory of the park and register the stages of its destruction.

Going one step further, IOR-Titan Civic Initiative Group, one of the longest-established campaign advocacy groups for the park, initiated a lawsuit in May 2024 suing Bucharest City Hall's 2005 retrocession decision. This action, they hope, will be decisive for the fate of the park. If they can prove in court that IOR was illegally retroceded, the City Hall will be able to reclaim the land and make it public again. Painstakingly investigating the City Hall's archives and cadastral documents from the 1980s and 1990s, the group argues that IOR was a park in its entirety since it was built and its status as a public space was never officially changed until the 2005 restitution, therefore making its restitution illegal.

As Trifu explains, proving the illegalities of the restitution of green spaces and parks in court is a more sustainable, long-term solution than expropriation since only very few expropriation cases have been successfully made. 'Most of the time when we argued for expropriation, the municipality responded that it doesn't have enough funds to do that. I told them to take another look at how the restitution decisions were issued: do these people actually have the right to own these areas?'

Planned destruction

Importantly, there is a law that, at least theoretically, should protect green spaces in Bucharest. Emergency Ordinance 114/2007 prohibits the change of use for green spaces, regardless of how they are listed in urban planning documents, regardless of whether they are public or private.

This law, along with the Green Spaces Law 24/2007, should block real estate developers obtaining building permits on green spaces, and yet, in many cases, the law is seemingly insufficient for preventing the destruction of parks. When nature stands in the way of profiteering, real estate developers erase any evidence that a particular land was ever a green space, so that the law cannot protect it anymore. As long as trees are growing in retroceded land, they cannot build anything there. The fires are an aggressive method of accelerating the process towards obtaining construction authorization.

Experts, locals, activists and the few politicians who have made public statements on the IOR's destruction have described the arson as a strategy by owners to clear the space for a high-rise complex, hence the urgency to remove all the trees and, indeed, the entire ecosystem in that area. Those who administer the land have already set to work, renting it out to various interested parties, who have begun setting up an amusement park on the charred land. Inflatable slides and carrousel, train and car rides for children have appeared in the burned, apocalyptic landscape. Appearing out of nowhere, the 'amusements' are not covered by a permit, no name has been associated with the project, no start nor finish date has been mentioned.

To date, 90% of the IOR park's retroceded area has been burnt. The view is striking: piles of blackened trees lie on top of one another; the land is so scorched that nothing is growing there anymore. Regeneration looks impossible. The idea seems to be that, eventually, local citizens will no longer have anything to fight for, that they will be silenced.

In a public statement to the press, Eugen Matei, local councillor for District 3, reinforces this hypothesis: 'They cut down the trees to be able to claim that there is no actual green space. It's akin to the tactics of those who had listed houses, which they neglected until they collapsed, and could then request demolition and construction permits for buildings with ten floors.'

Ana Ciceală, president of the Environment Commission of the General Council, is of the same opinion. The fine for illegal logging, when paid within two weeks, is only between 5-100 lei per tree (around 4 euros). Ciceală is the sole politician who has proposed a law to the General Council of Bucharest arguing for an increase in the fine: 1000 euros per tree.

But her draft stalled in the Council, due to a series of abstentions and rejections. Ciceală explains: 'Councillors said they could not approve this project because Bucharest City Hall isn't issuing deforestation permits quickly enough. Their argument is basically that they should not issue large fines, even though they are illegally allowing the cutting down of hundreds of trees, because of a permit bottleneck.

With permits being bypassed, there is no clear evidence of how many trees in Bucharest are being cut for valid reasons. No transparent records are kept on how many trees are cut down annually, on what grounds and how many have been planted to replenish stocks. Consequently, there are countless reports in the press about people being caught with chainsaws in hand, cutting down trees between blocks of flats, parks or green playgrounds – all areas that have been retroceded.

To make matters worse, tree conservation in Bucharest has also been affected by the modification of the Forestry Code. Up until 2020 all trees were classified as vegetation and managed under forestry regulations. Uprooting, felling or otherwise harming trees was considered a forestry offense and a criminal case could be filed. But this is no longer the case.

In addition, no register of green spaces functionally exists at a municipal level. Such a record would provide a fully accessible digital database documenting each area of Bucharest's current public green space. Although a register was drawn up in 2013 at the request of the European Union in order to establish and monitor the total green space index per capita in the capital city, it has not been updated, making it difficult to assess the actual reality of public urban green spaces. In addition, the register has not been approved by the General Council of the Municipality of Bucharest, giving it no legal value.

Protection conflict

Since 17 January 2022, when the first reported fire in IOR Park was registered, the response from authorities has been inconsistent. The local police commissioner has not made a public statement about the situation despite activists calling for answers.

Activist and resident of the Titan neighbourhood Beniamin Gheorghiță explains the arduous process of engaging authorities in protecting the area. It took much convincing before surveillance cameras were installed in the retroceded area and now only 3 out of 12 are operational. According to an ISU Bucharest-Ilfov (the General Regional Inspectorate for Emergency Situations) statement requested by Gheorghiță, 28 fires have occurred in the retroceded area of IOR Park from 17 January 2022 to 26 August 2024. In the institution's statement, the cause of 21 of these fires was connected to discarded cigarettes. However, the likelihood of the same place accidentally burning so frequently due to negligence is highly unlikely. As for the remaining eight counts, no information has been communicated as to who started the fires or why. Some of the locals, including Benjamin, regularly attend council meetings where they put forward their concerns about the case, but no further action is being conducted.

In July 2024, when walking in the park, Gheorghiță caught two young men with axes in hand as they struck at the base of several large plane trees, most probably with the intention to weaken them, so they would fall quicker. All of this happened in front of the police. When Gheorghiță intervened, drawing their attention, he received a death threat from the tenant, who appeared on the scene and addressed him by name, even though they had never met before. This incident made him fear for his life; he now has a video camera in his car, at the entrance of the housing block where he lives and on him to document any potential attack.

The fires continue despite protests and complaints. After two years of reported incidents, only one person has so far been remanded in custody. A month after the suspect's arrest in August this year, another major fire broke out on 9 September while the man was still in pre-trial arrest, raising suspicions among locals that more people are involved in the arson. This was one of the most powerful fires to date, destroying two hectares of vegetation. The smoke was so thick that it reached the subway entrance near the park, which thousands of people use daily. People in the area feel terrorized. Apart from the pollution, discomfort and harmful effect the smoke is having on their health, they fear that the next fire might cause casualties.

Health and wellbeing

According to a statement in the press made this summer by Bucharest's Mayor General, Nicușor Dan, the city has lost 1600 hectares of green space since 1990. About 300 hectares of green spaces have been retroceded. Gardens, lakeshores, courtyards and squares, sections of parks and urban woodlands have been turned into apartment blocks, parking lots, shops and malls. The green areas that remain are at risk of disappearing because existing laws do not protect them sufficiently. At the local level, the Municipality of Bucharest does not have a specific policy or legislation to cover elements related to biodiversity, management of protected natural areas, and the conservation of natural habitats, flora and fauna.

Several institutions and NGOs have called for an urgent Green Spaces Register. The National Environmental Guard even issued the Bucharest City Hall with a fine of over 20,000 euros in 2021, but, to this day, there is still no such public tool for registering and managing the city's public urban green space data.

EU environmental policies are putting more emphasis than ever on bringing nature back into cities by creating biodiverse and accessible green infrastructure. The EU's 2030 biodiversity strategy, for example, emphasizes the importance of developing urban greening plans in larger cities and towns, encouraging local stakeholders in each member state to introduce nature-based solutions in urban planning to achieve climate resilience. Climate change, inadequately planned urbanization and environmental degradation have left many cities vulnerable to disasters, and such policies could be crucial for the liveability of urban areas.

According to the 2022 'state of the environment in Bucharest research report', the city has approximately less than 10 square meters of green space per capita. Bucharest's oxygenated environment is, therefore, supported by less than one tree per person, placing it among those European cities with the least urban green areas. Data on the surface of overall green infrastructure in Bucharest varies, but in 2018 a European Environment Agency study measured around 26% of urban-green-area coverage, significantly less than the average 42% in the 38 EEA member countries. In Romania, high-level pollution is linked to a growing number of diseases such as respiratory infections, heart attacks and strokes. According to a study by the European Commission in 2021, air pollution contributed to approximately 7% of deaths (over 17,000 deaths) in Romania, a higher share than the EU average of around 4%.

The case of Bucharest's disappearing trees and urban nature, which finds its most aggressive manifestation in the IOR park, reflects how environmental and urbanistic problems do not exist in a vacuum. They are a direct reflection of how corruption impacts human lives and corrodes the relationship between people and the space they inhabit.

Without a management plan, developers build unchecked, contributing to a reduction in urban biodiversity. The current situation underlines the urgency for clear regulations and protection of Bucharest's natural heritage. It also highlights the poor legislation and lack of environmental awareness on the part of public institutions, as well as an interest in immediate, short-term profit at the expense of the well-being of the people and the sustainability of the city, especially in times of climatic changes where resilience is needed. What is occurring at IOR could be a never-ending story, constantly repeating itself in other locations if certain bureaucratic and profiteering realities do not change course, if the root of the problem stays the same. Despite all odds, people continue to fight to bring the space back into the public domain. Their hope remains.

A day in the life of a bottle collector at Northern Europe’s biggest music festival

Guilia Gotti, Kurziv

A regular Wednesday afternoon at Roskilde Festival’s central refund station. Dealing with hundreds of items for each person, the wait in line usually lasts several hours.

Intro: Roskilde Festival is more than “just a music festival” – they say.

There’s an ongoing joke in Denmark: once a year, ‘Roskilde Festival’ becomes the fourth largest city in the country. What started as a small student gathering in the 1970s, the music celebration – held not far from Denmark’s capital, Copenhagen – has grown into one of the largest temporary cities in the world, with 130,000 tickets sold last year.

The festival is widely regarded as a national cultural staple, a symbol of friendship, liberation, and freedom, part of the coming-of-age of many young Danes. For instance, in the words of Hanna (fictional name), a young university student at Copenhagen Business School, who writes in her exam paper:

“[...] it is so much more than just a music festival. It is a place where you go to bed in a freezing cold tent, only to wake up gasping for air in a sauna [...] It is a place where you promised yourself you’d save money and only eat mackerel (ed. Danish herring, a popular canned meal) in tomato sauce but somehow find yourself chasing the food trucks as soon as the festival site opens. It is a place to return to year after year, and where you can be who you really are or become someone new [...] because Roskilde Festival is a free space.”

How could one not feel drawn to such a romantic narrative? Roskilde Festival seems to feel like the place where boundaries dissolve and the potential for self-discovery thrives. Perhaps, for some, the most authentic version of themselves is waiting in a tent at the campsite.

Happy times at Roskilde Festival 2022 - Stig Nygaard, Wikimedia Commons, cc-by-2.0

When considering the narrative surrounding the festival, it feels like much more than a party. One example is the festival's most famous tagline: to be the beholder of the 'Orange feeling' – a reference to the iconic 'Orange Stage,' which has defined the event's skyline since its beginning decades ago.

And what is Roskilde's famous 'Orange feeling'? In a 2016 after-movie, many attendees were asked about it. One girl points out its universality: "[...] everyone has heard of the Orange feeling." Another guy articulates it as "once you get to this side of the fence, there is no rule, you can do whatever you want." It seems that Roskilde Festival embodies a mix of love, openness, fun, and carefree energy in the air – a secret recipe that makes it so life-affirming.

Iggy Pop at Roskilde Festival 1998 - Hunter Desportes, Wikimedia Commons, cc-by-2.0.

Roskilde Festival presents it as a sort of Arcadia version 2.0, shaped by contemporary priorities and progressive ideals. True to the essence of utopian visions, this "new pastoral utopia" offers a space to focus on life's pleasures: forming human connections, dreaming with music, and experiencing a boundary-free environment. At the same time, the festival integrates easy-access activism, branding itself as "a movement" while operating with the legal status of a non-profit organization.

Various media outlets have described the festival as being at the forefront of the seemingly perfect intersection of art, innovation, and people: "[Roskilde Festival] is an experimental space for art, sustainability, cultural projects, new ways of creating community and addressing societal issues. A free space where young people explore new perspectives based on art and creativity. And a real-time innovation lab for testing out new products and ideas." (creativedenmark.com)

What many do not realize is that while the locals are partying, hundreds work in the shadows – playing a crucial role in keeping the festival from imploding under the weight of trash. Each year, a growing number of individuals from marginalized communities, primarily from Romania and West Africa, travel north to collect empty beer bottles, cups, and cans discarded by thousands of festival-goers, exchanging them for cash through the Danish refund system. Roskilde Festival acknowledges that more than 300 refund collectors from about 15 countries visit the festival annually.

Refund collectors are queuing and waiting to exchange their bottles for the deposit.

Bottle collectors can be found in most countries that have implemented a deposit system for bottles and aluminum cans. While this practice serves as one of the many “side hustles” for individuals living below the poverty line throughout the year, it is during the “festival season” that the scale blows out of proportion. In the case of Denmark, for instance, entire families travel north specifically to make a living from the empty beer cans thrown around by the Danes.

5a, 5b. An ordinary “Pant machine” in the back of a grocery store in Copenhagen. “Pant” is the Danish name for the items eligible for the refund system.

However, this job is far from being “easy money.” It requires a physical and mental strain beyond the individual capabilities: the effort is 24/7, and after being in constant movement for a week straight with little to no sleep, collectors quickly become exhausted and sick. Facing fierce competition among an increasing number of people joining the festival for refund collection purposes every year, the collectors work in harsh conditions without an official acknowledgment by the festival’s management.

Bottle collectors operate in a gray area of regulations. Many festival goers mistakenly believe the refund collectors are employed as cleaners by the festival, but this is not the case. They are all paying for a regular, full festival ticket.

How does this bottle collection process fit into Roskilde Festival’s ‘Orange feeling’? How do the collectors live the festival experience? And how does it relate to what the festival promises and promotes? To find out, I spent the entire week at last summer’s festival. Between concerts and parties, I spent my time volunteering in the “Refund stations” – designated spots where empty containers can be exchanged for money – and learning about the collectors’ daily lives.

First Encounters with the ‘Orange Feeling’: the Crowd, the Trash, Lars, Marlene, Joe

6. The arrival at Roskilde Train Station. Trains run from Copenhagen to Roskilde every 20 minutes; however, every ride is incredibly packed during the first few days.

The festival’s opening day, June 30th, had arrived, and it was time for me to board the regional train from Copenhagen to Roskilde. Joining me were hundreds of excited festivalgoers.

The festival is held south of the town of Roskilde, around 5 km away from the center and 35 km from Copenhagen. During the commute to the campsite, the atmosphere already feels electric – and slightly surreal. A significant part of this feeling comes from the comical amount of luggage everyone seems to carry.

As a reader, you would imagine that packing a hiking backpack or so would be enough in order to enjoy a music festival? Well, you will have to think again! In Roskilde, Denmark, I see hundreds of people, many looking like 16-year-olds, hauling ultra-packed dollies and IKEA bags. Speakers are pushed with shopping trolleys, while dozens of Tuborg 18-packs and various supplies are precariously stacked and creatively secured with gaffer tape, often appearing to exceed a person’s whole body weight (later, at the campsite, I would witness even funnier items, like someone deciding to bring an entire living room couch to the party – yes, an actual couch!).

On my way to the festival, I feel a stark contrast. There is this quiet Danish town, Roskilde, often described by people in Copenhagen as a boring place where nothing ever happens. Then, suddenly, a new group emerges: festivalgoers with luggage double their body weight, and everything mummified in gaffer tape (everyone seems to have adopted the same taping solution, like an unspoken rule) to keep it together. A Scandinavian "Orderly Chaos" – everyone adopting the same pattern of behavior in embracing disruption, yet being remarkably creative in finding individualized solutions.

At the festival, already on the first day, the constant noise is striking, with little distinction between day and night. Besides the music stages, most of the parties will happen on the campsite, where groups of people organize themselves in camps and blast speakers from there. The several music sources overlap and morph into something indistinguishable.

But, as a volunteer, I'm fortunate to have been given access to a reserved camping area that is much quieter than the rest. Each of my volunteer shifts will last eight hours, covering both daytime and nighttime on four separate days of the festival week, intertwining with my "regular" festival experience.

8, 9. Settling down at the festival's campsite – day and night.

Surprisingly, having to set the alarm and having to be somewhere at a particular hour will integrate smoothly, otherwise, in a festival, most days might quickly feel like blending. I guess that losing track of time is another component of the "liberation" experience; in my case, I can feel the time passing and feel like I remain more grounded.

Being a major festival, Roskilde Festival's calendar is packed. Besides the major artists who perform here every year, the festival offers a rich program featuring smaller artists, plus a couple of stages that host talks and workshops.

Fast-forwarding a few hours, a concert is in full swing. I'm standing at the back, where small groups of people are sitting on the ground, and there are lots of people around me drinking and talking. A girl and a boy appear to be having an argument, focused only on each other. They don't notice the young woman picking up their used beer cups from the ground.

Across concerts, innovation panels, and a beer-soaked routine that blurs the boundaries between days, bottle collectors emerge as semi-invisible figures. They navigate the crowds with agility, collecting every bottle they can find. They seem serious and strategic in their work: knowing that crashed or broken objects have little to no value, they try to blow air back into the bottle or reshape crooked cans before adding them to their growing trash bags.

It is Day 1, and I am already struck by the sheer amount of trash and dirt everywhere. Part of the Orange Feeling seems to involve a quasi-hedonistic approach to living, where dealing with trash becomes something too dull to bother with: the empty beer can is simply left on the ground, so we can all move on.

This feeling is confirmed moments later: next to the stage, I meet Lars, a twenty-something-year-old who has been attending the festival for several years. When I tell him that I am trying to understand more about the role of the bottle collectors at the festival, it leaves an impression. He says that no one of his friends – no one – thinks about it, though he does. He acknowledges it as an issue but also believes that no one really thinks of it as being one. While the refund system was created to encourage consumers to be mindful of their trash, among some of the young Danes, there seems to be a sense that picking up bottles – even their own – and exchanging them is kind of shameful. Ironically, throwing it away becomes a status symbol. It's an unspoken signal: I don't need the money.

10. Picture from day 1 at Roskilde Festival 2024. Even though the gates have been open for less than 24 hours, the trash is already noticeable. There are only a few bottles lying around – the collectors must have picked them up already.

Sometime later, I speak with Marlene. Marlene is from Roskilde and is in her 50s. Roskilde Festival isn't just for younger people; it also attracts a significant number of "veterans" who return year after year.

Indeed, Marlene has been attending the festival since the 1980s. When I bring up the topic of bottle collection, she reminisces about how, as a little girl, she would enter the festival grounds and collect beer cans to exchange. Back then, collecting bottles was something kids did to earn extra pocket money – a far cry from the situation today. Marlene recognizes that it is because of the festival's growing size: maintaining that "community spirit" she fondly remembers is impossible in a temporary city of 130.000 people. She feels that something needs to change. About what, she is not sure.

11. While walking around the campsite, I spot a camp that decided to celebrate the drinking culture by using beer-related trash as their flag. Held in place by a few empty cans, a discarded Tuborg 18-pack plastic wrapper and a red 60L trash bag flutter in the wind.

Another thing you won't often see in the marketing material is how much the weather can shape your festival experience – and in Denmark, it can make all the difference. The summer of 2024 brought rain and cold to the Roskilde Festival. At night, I shivered in my tent as temperatures unexpectedly dropped to 7–10°C. I think about how I would have never imagined being concerned about getting sick at a music festival in July.

Another implication is that while many describe the festival as notoriously dusty, this year's downpours turned the grounds into a muddy hellscape. Rubber boots and raincoats became essential gear, with festivalgoers splashing through the flooded terrain, making the best of the soggy chaos. Amid this scene, I notice bottle collectors moving through the crowd. For protection, they use trash bags and whatever objects they can find. One man wears a makeshift plastic coat branded with the Copenhagen Metro logo, while most rely on scarves and muddy caps – likely scavenged from the ground. They are, too, festivalgoers, expected to rely on their own resources. I wonder how they are managing.

When I ask one of the bottle collectors about these struggles – I refer to him as Joe since he prefers to remain anonymous – he just shakes his head and keeps repeating, “It is shit, this year is shit.” We speak a mix of Italian and English: Joe currently lives in Italy and works at a pizzeria near Rome. He comes to the festival yearly “to make money” and puts in his hardest effort collecting bottles. On average, he earns 1 DKK (0,13 EUR) for every container or cup he gathers. For comparison, a dishwasher or restaurant worker in Denmark can expect to earn 130–170 DKK per hour before taxes. To match that, since the refund is tax-free, Joe would need to collect around 75 items per hour – not counting the countless hours spent waiting in line to exchange them. When I ask if he manages to sleep despite the cold and the noise, he simply says he doesn’t sleep, only works – and laughs.

The stoic mentality of “it is what it is” is an invisible force that keeps a part of the festival’s waste cycle in motion. It is interesting to observe how, while the ‘Orange feeling’ is all about liberation, it seems to rely on a dynamic that is far from free. The festival’s carefree revelry depends in part on the relentless labor of others – a quiet contradiction in its ethos.

12. An overview of the deposit values for different items. While the Pant A, Pant B, Pant C system is the Danish nation-wide standard, Roskilde Festival introduced an internal deposit system – including assigning some sort of monetary compensation (0,2 DKK – equivalent of 0,03 €) for crushed up and foreign can, normally refused by the Pant machines.

Trash is Treasure: Hanging Out at the Refund Stations

Even though Roskilde Festival spans an impressive 2.500.000 square meters, and is estimated to host 50.000 tents, there are only three refund stations, plus one Drop&Go refund machine. These refund stations are the main stage of my volunteering experience supporting the bottle collectors. The work is relatively centralized since everyone collecting will need to come by one of these three refund stations, sooner or later, to have their containers exchanged. As a result, I feel like I am quickly getting acquainted with the collectors’ community.

13. Day 1 is still a quiet night for the “West City” refund station – the furthest one, located about a 30-minute walk from the festival’s music area.

Surprisingly, the refund stations operate manually. The operations are run by youth associations and volunteers as young as 17 years old. They count and sort the deposits manually, then upload the money digitally to the user’s wristband. While these stations are open to everyone, in practice, they primarily serve the bottle collectors.

The refund stations have adjusted their opening hours over the years. While they used to stay open until dawn, in 2024, “West City” and “Agora L” operated daily from 08:00 to 02:00, while “East City” was open from 10:00 to 04:00. This significantly impacts the workday of the collectors: daytime tends to be relatively quiet, but the nights are intense, with everyone rushing to make their exchange before the station closes, trying to maximize the “best hours.” As the festival progresses, the volume of bottles, aluminum cans, and other refundable items grows larger and larger, and the handling time for every person increases proportionally – the more containers to count, the longer it takes, especially as the counting process is entirely manual. Dollies and baby strollers are popular tools for maximizing the number of bottles a collector can carry, and gaffer tape makes a reappearance – this time securing cans for transport, just as it held supplies together on the way to the festival. Midway through the festival, people typically faced a 4-6 hour wait to have their refunds counted – a necessary step before heading back “on the field” to start the process all over again.

The festival offers numerous volunteering opportunities for those eager to contribute in various ways. Earlier in the text, I mentioned my decision to volunteer to get closer to the bottle collectors’ experience. I owe most of my contact to the social project “Responsible Refund,” a grassroots volunteer initiative aiming to help and celebrate the refund collectors during the festival. Through Responsible Refund, I was engaged as an “intercultural mediator.” Based at the refund stations, my role involved spending time there, assisting the bottle collectors queuing with any questions they might have, and managing potential conflicts. This was a support role distinct from that of a security guard or an info point representative. The project’s vision was to bridge the often-overlooked communication gap between refund stations and collectors. Refund stations were responsible solely for counting bottles and were not expected to consider the challenging and messy conditions in which collectors worked or the specific needs they might have.

But what happens to all these items after they’re handed over? On the final day, after a week of music, mud, and refund items, I speak with Janne, a 25-year-old student and a team leader in one of the refund stations. He explains that while products with the Danish standard refund labels ‘Pant A,’ ‘Pant B,’ ‘Pant C’ are picked up daily – entering into the nationwide machine of Dansk Retursystem – the festival-specific bottles and cups are sent to a washing facility to be cleaned and reused the following year. The categories of items that neither hold a deposit outside the festival nor can be reused – like crushed bottles or foreign beers – are simply gathered and sent to the trash recycling system. However, at Roskilde, these items have a refund value priced at 0,2 DKK (in EUR, 3 cents), which is pretty much irrelevant to the business-minded collectors (and understandably so). I don’t see any of these items in the red refund bags at the back of the stations.

14a, 14b. “Behind the scenes” at a refund station. On the left: each item is counted and sorted into a bag by category. On the right: full trash bags are piled up in the back, waiting for the daily truck pickup.

Janne takes pride in the impact of the refund stations. They processed 2 million refund items in 2024, 2.9 million the year before. I try to picture 2 million beer bottles in my mind, but how can I? It just feels like too much.

Imagine this site without bottle collectors. As festival-goers drink and scatter their cups around like farmers planting crops, the discarded items would simply pile up, turning the grounds into an even trashier – and perhaps entirely unmanageable – landscape.

The flow of capital is equally striking. While many collectors prefer not to disclose their earnings, word on the street claims someone made 50,000 DKK (around 6,700 €) net in just one week. But don't take my word for it – let's break it down. To earn 50,000 DKK, they would need to make an average of 7,100 DKK daily, collecting about 700 items per hour over a 10-hour, non-stop workday. That's roughly 11 items every single minute. While this figure seems highly unrealistic, it highlights how the blurry promise of "good money" persuades bottle collectors that it's all worth it.

15. The queue at the refund station.

An average shift is generally quiet. The queue moves slowly as collectors sit on broken camping chairs, smoking and waiting their turn. At night, many huddle by the wooden structure of the refund station for shelter, dozing off on the damp ground. When their turn comes, someone in line wakes them, following what seems to be an unspoken rule of mutual solidarity.

16. View of a refund station during the day.

A "village feeling" lingers in the air – almost no one comes alone. Many collectors, like Joe, return year after year, often residing nearby in the Copenhagen area. I speak with Prince, originally from Ghana but now an Italian resident, who expresses his frustration. It's his first time at the festival, lured by the promise of "good money," but he finds the competition overwhelming. "The Romanians take everything," he complains.

He refers to Romani families, who are a dominant presence among collectors. Tensions simmer between the African and Romani groups, fueled by accusations of breaking unspoken rules, such as waiting in line. The stakes are high – for the Romani, many have told me that this income can support their families in Romania for months. They often push boundaries, cutting in line with fresh bags of bottles while another family member holds their spot. These moments of conflict highlight the importance, for me, of having mediators present, ready to step in when the tone becomes heated.

People sleep, smoke, and chat in their circles of crooked camping chairs, as the festival swirls around them. Their "Invisible" presence is an essential part of the festival environment. Surviving on the fringes, they are, in many ways, the unrecognized dustmen of the 'Orange feeling.'

Outro: The many faces of the refund system.

17. A concert at Roskilde Festival 2024. Someone is holding the ‘Alien and Cow’ sign – an iconic symbol of the Roskilde Festival since 1999, which in recent years has come to represent the importance of sexual consent.

Festivals can serve as a window to the future; each edition is slightly different, showing that change is both possible and necessary. These values have shaped Roskilde Festival’s brand, but as my week at Roskilde Festival unfolds, its contradictions become impossible to ignore.

Of course, Roskilde Festival’s organizers are well aware of its environmental sustainability issues. According to Statista, Denmark recently ranked as the top waste producer per capita in Europe, at 787 kilograms per inhabitant – so perhaps it makes sense to think that consumerism is engrained in the country’s culture. At Roskilde, the impact of individual behavior even exceeds the impact of the festival’s production: according to reports, this campsite waste makes up 75% of the total volume of 2,2 thousand tons of trash generated by the festival. Currently, it is common practice for festivalgoers to leave behind large amounts of personal belongings, including their tents, on the site; it constitutes a mass of unrecyclable waste that can only end up at the nearest incineration plant.

There are already plenty of case studies and research available online about Roskilde Festival optimal waste management; the real challenge lies in changing the underlying culture. Roskilde Festival’s current attitude towards consumerism focuses on “influencing behavior and inspiring.” Some of the initiatives that the festival has been taking in recent years have included a dedicated page on environmental responsibility (among others) on its website, the creation of a “Circular Lab” to provide a PR platform to circularity-focused startups, and the establishment of eco-conscious campsite communities – “Leave No Trace Camp,” “Clean Out Loud Camp” and, starting in 2022, “Common Ground” – where people would access through an application process.

18. POV: You are entering the Circular Lab. As the sign suggests, a “green future” awaits you behind the gate – and you are expected to participate actively in it.

Nevertheless, these communities, which create a sort of counterculture within the festival, remain a minority. The event primarily relies on its own grand cleaning machine activated in the last few days, with trucks and heavy machinery going around the campsite. And it moves swiftly: on July 19th, less than two weeks after the festival closed, I visited the site, and everything was spotless.

It is also worth commenting on how the management appears to acknowledge the presence of bottle collectors, as the refund stations' operations are designed to accommodate the collectors' workflow rather than focusing solely on individual customers.

Despite that, no meaningful "benefits" are provided. For example, providing a quieter resting area for bottle collectors – something that already happens for the festival volunteers – could be a positive step. Currently, they are left to sleep at the main campsite.

At the end of the day, the systems and structures that festivals rely on are shaped by their surroundings, meaning festivals often reflect the same systemic problems as society at large. It is fascinating to observe the behavioral differences festivals can inspire and to consider which behaviors are – or aren't – supported by their specific systems.

21. View of the Roskilde Festival campground a few days after closing.

Trash is a significant issue at the festival, one that the largely unacknowledged collectors play a crucial role in managing. The 'Orange feeling' thrives on the idea of freedom and community, yet it is built on contradictions. While festival-goers celebrate liberation, the invisible labor of bottle collectors plays an essential role in maintaining the festival's cleanliness and sustainability. Their overlooked efforts expose a deeper tension: the festival's ethos relies on systems that marginalize those who sustain it.

19, 20. Top: A glimpse of waste management at the festival. There are a few designated collection spots for trash; one might argue that they don't look that different from the rest of the campsite after closing. Bottom: A cheeky garbage collection truck.

Roskilde Festival might have grown to the point of benefiting from policy interventions, just like a real city. As it continues to navigate its complexities and strives to align more closely with its values, acknowledging and addressing these underlying dynamics could be the next step in aligning its ideals further with its reality.

GALLERY OF PICTURES FROM THE LAST DAY AND AFTER THE CLOSING

22. Trash is normalized: on their last day, a group of young girls hang out.

24. On their last day, a group of young guys hangs out behind a fence creatively constructed from camping equipment and – you've guessed it – gaffer tape.

23. After the campsite closes on Sunday morning, the sheer amount of things left behind is astonishing.

25, 26. Waste after the festival closes. Above: Camp West. Below: Camp East.

“Parallel societies” in Denmark: imaginary borders under renewal

Bárbara Alves, Gerador

Illustration by Marina Mota

Sønderbro is a vulnerable area of Copenhagen, known for housing people with socio-economic difficulties and for being a daily refuge for around 200 to 300 homeless people. With an above-average concentration of immigrant residents and people of “non-Western” descent, the neighbourhood is undergoing urban renewal that raises questions about inclusion, segregation and the future of social housing in Denmark. This report explores how the changes in Sønderbro reflect national trends and impact the lives of its residents.

From the parapet of Fabrikken (factory in Portuguese), the landscape reveals architectural contrasts that draw invisible boundaries. Simon is an illustrator based at Fabrikken, Denmark’s largest studio for artists, which is located right in the centre of Sønderbro. He had invited me to chat in the back garden, which is part of the urban renewal plan, but the unstable Danish weather made it impossible on a day in August.

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With Sundholm to the north and Hørgården to the south, this area was once a largely open space with a few small farms, where local farmers would travel to sell their produce at Copenhagen's markets. However, from the top of Fabrikken, a more recent past still looms large in everyday life.

To the north, the yellow, early 1908th-century Italianate buildings that make up Sundholm still bear the scars of the former forced labor institution, established in XNUMX, for prisoners, the homeless, the mentally ill and the disadvantaged.

Although the canal and fence surrounding the institution have disappeared, and forced labour no longer exists, a number of social institutions providing various services to the homeless remain in Sundholm and around 200 to 300 people visit, wander and use the area, either to find a place to sleep in the homeless hostel or to socialise with their peers.

Simon has little contact with the locals, except during Fabrikken's annual open house, which mainly attracts the immediate neighbours of Sundholm Syd, a non-profit housing development built in 2015 for wealthy families. Or when he helps out some of Sundholm's homeless residents when they need help. "Sometimes they sleep in the [Fabrikken] garden and that's fine," Simon explains, concluding that the hostel can get quite crowded. "Sometimes they go to the garden because I think they need to be alone."

However, regarding Hørgården, south of Fabrikken, Simon admits to having no contact with the residents. The only exceptions were some fellow artists who reported incidents, such as drug sales near the windows of their studios and the burning of one of the warehouses, suspected of involvement with local gangs. The fire left some scars on the atmosphere surrounding the parapet of Fabrikken. Some trees were left lifeless and a municipal lamp is still destroyed. But the division between the neighborhoods is evident, and above all, the distance and lack of knowledge of the people.

Niels Frisch Kjølholt, the manager of the urban renewal team that belongs to the Technical and Environmental Administration of the Municipality of Copenhagen, says that “the discussion about this urban renewal started when the Government started making these lists of deprived or disadvantaged areas and started calling them ghettos”.

Now called “parallel societies”, Hørgården, an integral part of Sønderbro, was included in this list in 2018 and 2019, with the Municipality of Copenhagen deciding to carry out renovations in all places with “these housing areas that were on the list to try to keep them off the list”, explains the manager.

Urban renewal aims to be inclusive, transforming the space with the active participation of residents. However, participation in the urban renewal process is not the same from area to area and, according to the renewal manager himself, there is an underrepresentation of Hørgården members in the project group meetings, which are made up of all residents and associations located in the neighbourhood who want to participate in the planning process. Simon attended some of these meetings and that is how I met him.

According to Rasmus, “it is the project group that decides what will happen here [in this case, the space around Fabrikken]” in negotiation with the urban renewal team. “An urban renewal plan will be drawn up with the ambitions and wishes of this group and will then be presented to the area’s renewal steering committee, which is also made up of elected residents, representatives of companies and associations, public and private institutions, and all the city’s administrations.

“Within this neighbourhood plan [the urban renewal plan] there is a total of 60 million Danish kroner (approximately 8 million euros). We present and define the projects, give a suggested timetable, when it will start and make a proposal on how to spend the money. Then we have a meeting with the steering committee and they have to approve it,” explains the architect. If they agree, the money is released and the renovation team starts working on the projects. If not, “we have to figure out together what we are going to do,” explains Rasmus.

After an open introductory party in early 2024 held at Maskinhallen, a cultural space located in Sundholm, with food, performing arts and a presentation of the urban renewal project, 9.000 invitations were sent to everyone living in the neighborhood via a digital mailing system, used in Denmark, called E-box, to participate in the events and meetings of the project groups.

But if at the first event there were around 200 people, at the second meeting there were around 80, and now there are only “around 20 to 25 citizens who said they really wanted to participate in the project and discuss decisions about how this renovation project should be shaped”, explains Niels, pointing out the existence of a “funnel” effect where participation went from something very open and comprehensive to something more filtered “with people who have a special kind of dedication to the project”, in his words.

Ahmed, 27, like the other residents of Sønderbro, was invited to attend one of the meetings. “I was free that afternoon,” he recalls. “I’ll take a look because they [referring to the people responsible for past and current renovations in the neighbourhood] always do these things in the area that no one understands why they did them.” “Or they put up a fence. Or they tear down the football pitch. For example, there was a pavilion right next to the bench where I said earlier that we could sit. It was a little roof with a few benches. And then they They were like, ‘Oh, but teenagers are there all the time hanging out and smoking.’ They knocked it down because they didn’t want teenagers there, and they [the renovation people] keep taking things out. People don’t have a place to just sit and relax. This is a country where it rains most of the time, so you can’t be outside.”

Ahmed lives in Hørgården, the neighbourhood whose inclusion on the government’s list of “parallel societies” paved the way for discussions about renovating the area and which, paradoxically, has been least involved in the events organised by the council. He went to the first meeting and from then on was no longer very involved. “It was just bureaucracy going around in circles and talking about putting in a small lawn or changing the parking lot. That’s not what the people need.”

Renewing “parallel societies”

I leave Sundholm and cross the road that takes me to Hørgården. The road that physically and mentally ends and begins one of the neighborhoods. With gray, modernist blocks, the green of the gardens that hide in the long arms of the housing complex catches the eye and gives a stranger a sense of newness. Hørgården was and is also now undergoing renovation until 2029, an integral part of the renewal of the Sønderbro area.

Since 2010, every year on December 1st, the Danish government has published a list of “parallel societies” (previously called the ghetto list) identifying neighbourhoods in the country considered “at risk”. According to the latest publication of the list, a “parallel society” is defined as a social housing area with at least 1.000 residentsWhere the proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries exceeds 50% and where at least two of the following four criteria are met:

1. The proportion of residents aged 18 to 64 who are not linked to the labour market or education exceeds 40%, calculated as the average of the last 2 years.

2. The proportion of residents convicted of violating the Criminal Code, the Weapons Act or the Euphoriant Substances Act is at least 3 times higher than the national average calculated as the average over the last 2 years.

3. The proportion of residents aged 30 to 59 who have only basic education exceeds 60%.

4. The average gross income of taxpayers aged 15 to 64 in the area (excluding those in education) is less than 55% of the average gross income of the same group in the region.

Hørgården, one of the areas belonging to Sonderbro, was considered a “parallel society” in the 2018 and 2019 lists, but in recent years it has been considered a “prevention area”. This means that although it is no longer on the list of parallel societies, it still has more than 1.000 residents and a proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries exceeding 30%. In addition, at least two of the following four criteria are met:

1. The proportion of residents aged between 18 and 64 who are not linked to the labour market or education is over 30% (average of the last two years).

2. The proportion of residents convicted of violations of the Criminal Code, the Weapons Act or the Act on Euphoriant Substances is at least 2 times higher than the national average (two-year average).

3. The proportion of residents aged between 30 and 59 who only have basic education exceeds 60% of all residents in the same age group.

4. The average gross income of taxpayers aged 15 to 64 in the area (excluding those seeking education) is less than 65 percent of the average gross income for the same group in the region.

In official policy documents, such as the “parallel companies” law and throughout the Danish official law databases, Denmark frequently uses the terms “Western” and “non-Western”. Under Danish law, a “Western” country is one of “all 27 EU countries, the United Kingdom, Andorra, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, the Vatican State, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand”. The rest of the world, including the entire African continent, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia, are considered non-Western.

Daniel Tomicic, 27, is a resident of Hørgården and has been involved in several initiatives of the Sønderbro Renewal Team. In one particular event, he helped bring together over 80 young people to discuss the area at the request of the Renewal Team, which has had some difficulty in attracting this audience to the debate.

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Daniel knows the people in his area well – proof of this is the number of times we were interrupted by passers-by while he showed me around the neighborhood, which can be confusing and labyrinthine for non-locals. Everyone knows each other's brothers, sisters and relatives, and he proudly says, jokingly, that if he ever needs to move, he doesn't need to hire a moving company; he can just call his local friends.

He does not hide his criticism or anger about the government's list, which is published annually. In his opinion, it is a continuation of discrimination. "I can get a job, I can work, I have an education, I don't commit crimes, I can even do some art, which ends up being my choice of how I want to live my life, but my ancestry is something I was born with, so I can never change it," he says. "It's saying in law that non-Western ancestry is the same as a ghetto, it's state racism."

According to Daniel, many people don't know what's happening with the renewal. "All the young people I spoke to didn't know. Or they didn't find it interesting because no one explained why this is important or why it could have a positive effect on them."

In this neighborhood where he sees above all a lot of companionship and friendliness in everyday life, he does not deny the existence of some "negative stories", but he also highlights that there are many "positive stories", condemning the stigma that residents face due to the way in which the neighborhood's problems are framed by the list.

For Henrik Gutzon Larsen, an urban policy researcher and co-author of the study "Gentrification: Gentle or Traumatic? Urban Renewal Policies and Transformations in Copenhagen," the government's annual list represents, in part, an "ethnicization of social challenges."

"I can get a job, I can work, I have an education, I don't commit crimes, I can even do some art, which ends up being my choice of how I want to live my life, but my ancestry is something I was born with, so I can never change it," he says. "It's saying in law that non-Western ancestry is the same as a ghetto, it's state racism."

There are "some non-profit housing where there are more people with social problems, such as unemployment, low level of education, low integration into the job market, etc., but what we see more and more, and in particular when we start talking about 'ghettos' [he mentions putting them in quotation marks] is that if we take these places out, we solve the problem."

The researcher explains that it was not always like this. Previously, social problems such as unemployment were not addressed from an ethnic perspective, but the change in the political context around 30 years ago contributed to the normalization of the ethnicization of discourse and today "in Denmark, if we talk about unemployment, we immediately start talking about migrant populations or new citizens".

> "It's the government's fault. If you watch the news, they always highlight this." foreign or something like that. He's not a foreigner. He grew up here. He's just a different ethnicity,"

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A local or national problem?

Ahmed is 27 years old and has lived in Hørgården all his life. When his grandmother arrived in Denmark from Poland with his mother in tow, the political situation was different. At that time, he says, "there were lots of integration programmes for immigrants" and his grandmother was offered training in Danish as a computer technician. With a laugh, Ahmed recalls that his grandmother loved to tell the story of when, in her first days in Denmark, she was invited to the house of colleagues and mistook a typical local brown sauce for chocolate, provoking laughter at the cultural differences.

Ahmed feels that at that time immigrants were not left to their own devices. And today, after almost 27 years living in the neighborhood, he says he feels "out of place," considering it a problem that affects the people of the neighborhood, where 57,3% of residents, according to Danish statistics, are immigrants and/or descendants of non-Western countries. "It's the government's fault. If you watch the news, they always highlight this." foreign or something like that. He's not a foreigner. He grew up here. He's just a different ethnicity," Ahmed argues.

The ethnicized tone is not restricted to the government, but there are also hostile comments in the neighborhood that materialize in the fences around the houses. In the only meeting that Ahmed attended, he says that a resident was talking about all the fences that had been put up in past renovations, supporting their construction, and expressing displeasure with the children who use the space around the houses: "We don't want the children to stay in the area," the resident protested. Perplexed by the hostility of the tone, and by the effect that the fences have on the area, Ahmed intervened by asking her: “But who is staying there?” “Aren’t they the people who live there?” “No,” she replied, “it’s all the foreign children because they can’t bring friends home, so they’re just wandering around the street.”

The lack of spaces to socialize is one of the neighborhood’s biggest problems, and for the young man there is a strong link between the lack of opportunities felt in the neighborhood and past renovations that “removed many of the spaces for children and young people to socialize.” However, he notes that “until the tone or hostility changes, nothing will change.” “They can build second-hand shops or green gardens, and nothing will change.”

Daniel’s parents moved to Copenhagen in the 80s for different reasons. His father emigrated from Croatia to seek better working conditions. His mother left Lebanon with refugee status when Israel bombed Lebanon at the time. They came to Urban Planen, the housing complex that Hørgården is part of, because the apartments were affordable. With a closed architecture, these self-contained apartment blocks were built in the late 60s to respond to the growing population and the lack of decent apartments in the city.

There were kindergartens, schools, youth clubs, supermarkets, libraries, everything that was essential for everyday life. Daniel confesses that he only really realised how isolated the area was when, after finishing secondary school, he started going to school in another part of the city. Shocked by the discovery, he concluded that this isolation at the time could be quite problematic when more vulnerable socioeconomic groups all moved to the same area. “There is a greater likelihood of social problems arising, people not getting an education, some crime breaking out, and when on top of that, if you are isolated, it can be problematic in some situations”, he explains.

According to Daniel, the situation in the neighborhood is no longer the same as it was in previous generations. And there are many successful examples to prove it. “When I go out in my neighborhood, my neighbor is a teacher, my other neighbor is a dentist, my friends are social workers, many of my friends open businesses, barbershops, restaurants or some of my friends have three jobs.”

“the problem is more systemic,” one that you can’t just “throw money at.”

But the “fear” that “maybe they won’t make the best decisions in life” and “get involved in some things they shouldn’t get involved in” still remains. Ahmed doesn’t understand why so many of his former classmates have chosen the path of violence, but he is certain that “the problem is more systemic,” one that you can’t just “throw money at.” In his view, the lack of resources is the main problem in the neighborhood, there is a lot of underfunded education and, finally, “there is a lot of trauma that is under the skin that no one knows how to really solve.”

Many of the people who have moved to Hørgården have lived in conflict zones or have family members who have. When they arrived in these housing blocks, Ahmed explains, they “just cut themselves off from society.” “They sit at home all day. They don’t go out in the sun. They get all these diseases like diabetes or heart problems because they sit at home all day. They don’t come into contact with anyone. Everything in their house is a problem. And I think a lot of this is generational.”

“Building a park might be a step in the right direction,” says Ahmed, but the gap between the issues that Hørgården residents seem to be experiencing and the issues that are raised at the renewal meetings is an immeasurable distance, much greater than the distance between the neighborhood and the renewal offices, which may explain the lack of participation of this group in the renewal process.

Rasmus Anderson, the architect responsible for the renovation of the space around Fabrikken, on the border of Sundholm and Hørgården, also confesses that “we would love to have more people from Hørgården involved in this kind of work, but for them it is not at all relevant”, agreeing that their main concerns are their living situation, “what is all this like, if they are going to build more [housing] there, how is it going to affect the cost of living, work and education”. “That is their main concern, so when we come here and talk about an urban space where they can have a social activity or physical activity, they think it is down here [while exemplifying a scale of values with his hand], it is not relevant to them.”

According to author Henrik Gutzon Larsen, situating a problem spatially is a very common way of approaching problems politically. “It is much easier to say that we have a problem here than to say that we have a problem everywhere.” And, indeed, there are places that need to improve their services to offer quality of life to the population.

However, with the list of “parallel societies”, and noting that “all this is about non-profit housing assets” says that there was a change in discourse from the 80s onwards, which gained strength in the 90s, where the most vulnerable socioeconomic groups, who live in non-profit housing, began to be geographically problematized, instead of perceiving social problems such as unemployment and the integration of immigrant groups at a national level.

Create inclusion or exception policies?

In its 2018 plan “A Denmark without Shadow Societies”, the then government called for the abolition of “shadow societies” by 2030, and asked municipalities and non-profit housing organisations to make substantial changes aimed at making the areas commercially attractive and more “integrated” into the rest of society.

The Government proposed to initiate urban development projects to “restore and develop the areas into attractive neighbourhoods with a mixed mix of residents” and “the sale of existing buildings, targeted demolitions and new construction of private housing”, if an area remained for five consecutive years on the list, with a view to reducing the proportion of social family housing to a maximum of 40%, according to law § 168 a.

To prevent this from happening, Niels explains that: “we, the city, decided or the politicians decided to do renovations on all the sites that had housing areas on that list, to try to keep them off it.”

For urban policy and housing researcher Henrik Gutzon Larsen, “in principle, urban renewal can be separated from gentrification, but in reality they are often very closely related, almost impossible to separate.” According to him, the strategy of these projects promoted by the State adopts social mix policies where it is stated that they will “try to create a greater social mix or some variation of that word, saying that we have a neighborhood here with different challenges that are related to the socioeconomic profile of the people and it would be good to bring in some people who perhaps have a stronger socioeconomic profile”, believing that this would create effects on other people in the area.

“It’s the government’s fault. If you watch the news, they always highlight this.” foreign or something like that. He’s not a foreigner. He grew up here. He’s just a different ethnicity,”

However, the researcher explains via Zoom, that “there is often an unspoken part: if you bring someone in, you need to kick someone out or you need to create more space.” “If you manage to bring in a new group, that could, in any case, push the old group away, for example, through price increases,” he says.

According to Rasmus, the task of the social mix does not concern the renewal of Sønderbro, however, this renewal that improves the urban space and connections of the neighborhood is connected with two projects of the Change Plan for Hørgården: “Possible Densification in Hørgården - new types of housing for more people” and “Infrastructure project in Hørgården - from closed to open, green and active residential area”.

As the Change Plan for Hørgården mentions, these two projects, which are the responsibility of the non-profit organisation 3B that owns the Hørgården housing complex, “are not directly part of the Sønderbro Area Renewal projects, but the Area Renewal will, as far as possible, support the projects and support good traffic and a perceived connection between the residential area – Hørgården and the surrounding city.”

In addition to the renewals, new laws have begun to be applied to residents living specifically in the areas covered by the list. For example, higher penalties will be applied in certain areas (severe punishment zone) and expulsion from the areas in case of committing crimes.

"It's marked and written on a map that if a police officer stops you here, you can't say 'no' if they want to search your stuff. There's a lot of tension and gang violence, so a police officer doesn't need a warrant to search your pockets. At any time. They don't need a reason. You have this energy of being suspected. This way of being treated as an enemy of the state," Ahmed says as we speak at the recycling center built in a past renovation not so many years ago.

Mohammed, an employee at the youth center, which is right next to the recycling center, also explains that "there is a law that if one of your children has problems in the area, not necessarily something crazy, they can kick the whole family out of the apartment."

In the "criminals outside the ghettos" section of the document "A Denmark without Parallel Societies", the government proposes "that tenants and household members who commit crimes in and around the residential area where they live can be evicted from their homes in the area more quickly and effectively." The types of crimes covered are threats, vandalism, arson, violence, robbery, theft, extortion, illegal possession of weapons and the purchase and sale of drugs.

> "in principle, urban renewal can be separated from gentrification, but in reality they are often very closely related, almost impossible to separate."

Indeed, according to Article § 63 d of the Public Housing Act, the police may disclose information to a housing organization about criminal decisions concerning offenses committed by a resident in the residential area in which the person in question lives, "when disclosure is considered necessary as part of an effort to create security in the existing housing area in question."

After several efforts by the Government to facilitate the eviction of residents in social housing, in June 2022, a bill was approved that amends the Public Housing Law and adds, in article §90, no. 1, point 10, the possibility of revoking a contract in situations where the criminal conviction is not yet final.

In addition to these measures, there are special rental conditions, such as municipalities cannot allocate applicants to housing in vulnerable urban areas if a member of the household has received integration allowance, educational assistance, disability pension, unemployment benefit or sickness benefit for at least six months.

Since Hørgården is currently a "prevention area" under Danish law, some of the measures previously applied to the list of "parallel societies" are no longer in force, but one remains: flexible renting. This measure allows the municipal council to make an agreement with the social housing organisation so that vacant family homes in a housing section are rented out according to special criteria. This means that housing applicants who meet certain criteria, such as employment or education, must be at the front of the queue for a vacant public family home.

According to the Hørgården Change Plan, the City of Copenhagen has concluded a tenancy agreement with social housing organisations, regulating how the tenancy of social housing takes place. The tenancy agreement ensures that newcomers in the most vulnerable social housing areas are "resourceful", in the sense that they are in employment or education, have an income of a certain level and have not been convicted of certain types of crime, ensuring a sustainable resident composition".

Daniel Tomicic declares, with some anger: "They're building low-income housing, but they're making it harder for people on low incomes to get it." In his opinion, these lists are just moving the problem elsewhere. When he moved to the neighborhood a few years ago, where he lives alone in an apartment, he said he had to gather some documents proving he was studying and submitting a clean criminal record. "You can't move into the area anymore if you're not correct on paper," he says.

According to the study "State-led Stigmatization of Space and the Politics of Exception" by Sara

Olsen and Henrik Gutzon Larsen, the framing and objectification at the scale of "parallel societies" allowed a politics of exception with the application of extraordinary measures to specific locations.

"They're building low-income housing, but they're making it harder for people on low incomes to get it."

In addition to demarcating specific areas, with special rules, where more vulnerable socioeconomic groups live, it is also important to note that the target of this list is non-profit housing. "Partly, it is taking a narrow view, only looking at non-profit housing assets, for example, the list does not look at private rentals. If you look at that, then you can also find that there are other places where there are also problems," explains researcher Henrik Gutzon Larsen, via Zoom.

20% of the Danish housing market is owned by non-profit or social housing organisations. This housing structure, in a country marked by a tradition of welfare state, provides affordable rental opportunities for all those living and working in Denmark's largest cities. Maintained by a National Building Fund founded by the same organisations to promote self-financing and maintenance of social housing, these apartments and houses are not intended to make a profit. They simply aim to ensure inclusion and housing for all, helping to keep prices low in the housing market.

According to author Henrik Gutzon Larsen, the rhetoric used by right-wing parties about the list of "parallel societies" paved the way for hostility towards modernist real estate built during the "golden age" of the Danish welfare state – from 1958 to 1972. "Right-wing parties have never liked non-profit housing. And in several cases they have tried to implement policies applied in the United States or Sweden, where housing is sold non-profit, partly because the state is involved in some way, but also because 20% of Danish housing is off the market."

On March 21, 2023, according to the Hørgården Change Plan, residents of Hørgården voted to proceed with a densification project. This potential densification plan aims to create both private housing and social housing for the elderly, creating a "more mixed resident composition." The neighborhood's current "temporary institutional barracks" that contains institutions for children and adolescents and a "worn-out shopping plaza" where residents have a small market, a bar, and a pizzeria will be demolished if this potential densification plan goes ahead.

Although he is not heavily involved in the neighbourhood's redevelopment, Mohammed, an employee of the Hørgården youth centre, which is located next to the area, remembers a vote on selling the land around the youth centre and possibly the area that includes the youth centre. "Nobody came to talk to us here, so we don't really know what will happen to this place. I just know it was a strange vote, people didn't really know what they were voting for and not many people were there. So it doesn't represent everyone."

For Henrik Gutzon Larsen, "managing these types of highly ethnicized policies, with a particular focus on this type of housing, defeats another purpose, which is to get rid of non-profit housing." Attributing exceptional problems to these areas, "this means that we have to do things that would have been unheard of before, selling non-profit housing."

"Right-wing parties have never liked non-profit housing"

Mohammed has been a member of the Hørgården youth club for 20 years, where Daniel and Ahmed hung out as teenagers after school. Right next to the recycling centre, this space for 13- to 18-year-olds to meet after school is a place where young people can get off the streets and prepare for the future.

It was a late Wednesday afternoon when I visited the youth centre. School had already started in Denmark. It was the second week of August. And Wednesday is the day for a community dinner. Hassan, the centre's other social worker, who also lives in Hørgården, was already in the kitchen with his apron on, baking salmon in the oven, and some young people had already arrived. If they wanted to, they could help

Inclusion is being built at the neighborhood youth center, but the future is uncertain

prepare dinner and they wouldn't have to pay. "But since it's only 10 Danish kroner (1,34 euros) for dinner," Mohammed said with a confident smile, "most of them pay." Some were in the computer room, others were playing PlayStation, others were on the sofas, distracted by their mobile phones, and some were attentively tending to the tomato plant in the small garden at the entrance to the centre.

99% of his work is about building relationships. "Learning about the young people. Step by step. So that we get to know them. So that we get to know their personality. And so that they get to know us. After a while, we establish a relationship and we can work with them," he explains calmly, a patient manner that is also noticeable with the young people, as we stand on the terrace of the youth center.

Young people come and go. The sun is still warm and the wind is still light. In a few hours, dinner will be served and an afternoon of "good conversations" will begin. At that table, the generation of Daniel and Ahmed has already passed by, as well as Hassan, who works at the center as a social worker, and now the generation of Daniel's younger brother.

The youth center is a "safe haven" where young people can relax after school or on vacation and be "themselves," in Mohammed's words, but not only that. It is also a place for social guidance and preparation for adult life. Especially "in a neighborhood that used to be, and still is, a problem area where most young people hang out on the streets and do things they shouldn't do," according to Hassan, a social worker at the center for 11 years.

Before they turn 18, there is a list of tasks that the staff strive to ensure they complete. It is a list that includes practical knowledge, but which is often unknown to some families in the neighbourhood. "We help them with the things they need to know, the basics. For example, the dentist is free until they are 18 and when our young people are 17, we remind them to have their final check-ups before it becomes too expensive," explains Hassan.

They also help them apply for a residence card if they do not yet have a passport, a process that has become more difficult over the years, they support them in applying for non-profit housing lists so that they can have a long-term apartment at affordable prices, and they also organize visits to some companies or institutions so that young people can get an idea of the academic and/or professional path they would like to follow.

Right now, Mohammed isn't worried about the young people he sees and works with. He says they're "on a good path with school and work." They play sports. "There's no crime, no gangs." So he says it's a pleasure to be working. But the vote on March 21, 2023, on the sale of the space owned by 3B, the nonprofit housing organization that owns all the real estate in Hørgården and Sundholm Syd and is responsible for the Hørgården neighborhood's densification project, has shaken the calm waters. The uncertainty about the future of the space owned by the youth center is felt not only by employees, but also by former members Ahmed and Daniel.

"The only thing I know is that they will sell it," says Mohammed, "and maybe some private companies will buy it." The red-roofed buildings next door – the "temporary institutional barracks" mentioned in the Hørgården Change Plan – are institutions for children and teenagers. There is a reception centre for young people who have been removed from parental care, a kindergarten and a children's centre.

As Mohammed says, the area is attractive, close to the city centre, well connected by metro and bus networks and "Copenhagen doesn't have many places to build anymore". "They did it next door in Urban Planen, they also built private housing, so I think it's the same thing that will happen here, in 20 years only people with money will live here."

Hassan would be more than happy if the facility was renovated and left to function as it does now, but “if they remove the centre from here and move it somewhere else, it will be difficult for us to establish a stronger relationship with our young people and children. This is where we live and this is where we are, so we are stronger when we are together.”

In addition to the uncertainty about space, the youth centre’s budget, provided by the City of Copenhagen, has been cut over the years. They can no longer travel outside Denmark as they used to, and as Ahmed, who is next to us helping with the translation, says: “Every year they give a little less, so we can’t really fight it because it’s not that drastic.” “They have to lay off staff every year or do less of something. They can’t finance themselves, until in the end they get so little money that no one is left to complain,” explains Ahmed.

Unaware of the fate of the center, which is a “safe haven” for the neighborhood’s young people and children, there is a sense of hesitation and loss in the air. Especially for the young people who complain that there are no “spaces to be” in the neighborhood.

Daniel has “tons of memories” of the football pitch that is now an urban greenhouse. Having undergone renovation in previous years, there is some controversy surrounding this indoor garden, where I once saw an elderly lady tending to some plants.

He used to go to the football pitch every day with his friends. The youth centre was nearby and his best friend lived a few metres away from the pitch. There were always about 10 to 15 boys there. “One day I came here and they had just removed it. Who had a say? The kids didn’t want it removed. They could do it in 10 different places or right there, there’s nothing, it’s just grass. Why should they close the football pitch to do something else?” he asks, somewhat irritated by the development of past urban renewal projects in the area.

According to Ahmed, the lack of resources of families in the neighborhoods not only affects the patriarchs and matriarchs of the families, but also the youth living in the area. “A lot of them don’t have a lot of resources, so there’s not always much to do at home. A lot of them end up being out most of the time. So if you take away all the soccer fields or the playgrounds and everything else, they’re just left to roam.”

Ahmed argues that it should be a positive thing to invest in infrastructure for young people, rather than “alienating” them. He says he has seen things lately that he never saw growing up:

people just standing on a street corner with “a blank stare waiting for something to happen”.

Breaking invisible boundaries

We reached the street where Hørgården ends physically and mentally for the neighbourhood. Sundholm can be seen to the north again with the new 3B apartments - Sundholm Syd - surrounded by trees that provide shade on this sunny August day, the Fabrikken is hidden behind some hills of untidy vegetation and above the imposing yellow buildings from the early XNUMXth century that serve as institutions for the homeless, remain in the same place that has belonged to them for over a century.

Daniel was always told not to cross the street. And when he was younger, he was even a little afraid to cross it. He would hear stories from older people about the homeless people who lived there and the substance abuse on the streets. The juvenile detention center is also in the area, so it always seemed like an "isolated and segregated" area to him.

The Sønderbro renovation team wants to counter the area's isolation and around Fabrikken, near the intersection of Sundholm and Hørgården, they want to build "a social meeting point for the entire neighborhood," says Rasmus Anderson, the architect in charge of the project.

Daniel is optimistic about this project, believing it could make the area more integrated into the neighborhood and break the tendency to take the long way around to avoid going through it. "I don't know if it can solve the social problems, but it could make it more integrated, so more people will use this part of the area," he says as we walk through the streets of Sundholm.

According to Rasmus, this space should include the homeless people living in Sundholm, "a very vulnerable group", the residents of Sundholm Syd, the residents of Hørgården, and also the children from two special needs schools located right next door. Confessing that it is a very complex area, he says that the "space needs to be able to accommodate different types of uses without excluding certain groups".

The architect's enthusiasm for the area's potential is evident not only during our conversation, but over the past few months, Rasmus and other members of the renovation team have been meeting with residents to outline ambitions and goals for the future of the urban space.

Considered a "romanticized" project by some of the participants in these project meetings, this initiative is the embodiment of the soul of urban renewal in Copenhagen: social mix policies are instruments to be used in the fight against urban segregation and fragmentation, as described by Ako Musterd and Roger Andersson, in the study "Housing Mix, Social Mix and Social Opportunities".

Jørgen moved to Sundholm in 2015 when 3B opened the housing competition for the newly built apartments opposite Hørgården. Called Sundholm Syd, he happened to cycle past the road to work. Danish Broadcasting Corporation who discovered that a kind of "lottery" was open to have an apartment in that development.

The idea is to live at a lower cost, but to do your own maintenance. "Normally, when you rent an apartment, you go in, lock the door, do your things, open the door again and go to work. But here, because you have to be part of the maintenance team and fix people's heating, or be part of the social activities team and organize activities for Christmas, rather than trying to get in and out of your house, it's almost like trying to create a glue between the people who live together in these houses."

In Niels' words, this development was a "way to attract more residents with more resources than already existed in Hørgården". And, in fact, since 2015, 48 more households have arrived in the neighbourhood, belonging to a stronger socio-economic group.

Aware of the housing's goal of creating diversity in the neighborhood and creating a social mix, Jørgen says that all the new residents were aware of the trade-offs involved. "The homeless people who sometimes make noise, you have the juvenile prison next door where the kids set off fireworks and cry in the middle of the night. It's a bit annoying, but it is what it is. Some of us came with the understanding that please don't cry, please don't steal, just behave normally and we'll all be happy, but that's not the world we were put in." (Many of the young inmates at Sønderbro juvenile prison have friends in the neighborhood, and it's these friends who set off fireworks outside for the inmates at the facility.)

Social mixing policies argue that bringing strong socioeconomic groups into socially and economically challenged neighbourhoods can have positive effects on existing residents and improve opportunities for these groups.

However, since Jørgen arrived in the neighbourhood in 2015, he admits that the different groups have not met on a daily basis.

If you cycle through Sundholm, you'll see homeless people socializing among themselves, "drunk people shouting in a corner," and you only interact with Hørgården when you go to the market. Apart from that, "there's no interaction between groups anymore." An introvert by nature, he believes that "one of the great things about living here is that we have the opportunity to mix in diversity, but I haven't seen that happen much yet."

He doesn't share Rasmus's enthusiasm for the area, which will become a social gathering point for the people of the neighborhood, but he also admits that he's not very involved in the neighborhood's renewal process. He believes that there needs to be a greater purpose for people to come together and start interacting with each other, "something where people would meet around an activity." "If it's just to take out the parking lot, put in some grass and some benches, I don't see that doing anything."

Daniel also agrees that there needs to be a reason for people from Hørgården to use this part of the neighbourhood. He believes that opening some cultural venues, a youth centre or even "some shops and cafés" could make the area less isolated, making people feel that "this is my neighbourhood too".

Ahmed, for his part, is concerned about the gentrification of the neighborhood, especially when he sees the upscale wine bars or restaurants near the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, just outside the neighborhood. He thinks the same will happen to the old barn that sits next to the overgrown space that is about to be renovated. "They'll present it as inclusive, everyone is welcome, but no one will invite us. It'll be a high-culture thing that outsiders will use a lot."

The future of the barn is yet to be decided, but Rasmus explains that there are several options under discussion. It could be an art production space for Fabrikken's artists, a school or kindergarten for morning workshops, or a meeting space where people can knit or play games. There are many options, and he notes that the different groups in the neighborhood "don't have to be here at the same time, but they can be here at different times throughout the day."

> "the problem is more systemic," one that you can't just "throw money at."

Rasmus says that, in the renewal team, the risk of gentrification "is under our spotlight", however, he does not consider this to be the case. "We want to do our best to work on the urban space, working with storytelling and information, to try to make people living in Hørgården and other areas get to know each other and socialize."

However, Lars Lindegaard Gregersen, performance artist and artistic advisor for Glimt Amager, one of the organizations based in Sønderbro, believes that the neighborhood "could very well end up like this." According to him, it all depends on the cultural institutions or cultural activities that are taking place "because if there is an agenda to try to get more of the rest of the city to come to Sundholm, for example to have activities in Sundholm that are for the people who live next door, then it can easily start a kind of contrast and fight between the users of Sundholm who feel their space is being invaded.

"It would be a great shame if the vulnerable people who are here all the time feel that their space is getting smaller and smaller because that will create friction and that will create problems," says the artist who has already performed street circus shows for the homeless in Sundholm with his theatre company.

Hailed as a good audience, this group of vulnerable residents were not only extremely happy to have the hour of entertainment dedicated to them, but also, according to Lars, it shows that this is a special audience. "They are not a good match for a normal audience because they don't feel comfortable being with a normal audience, because they don't feel like they can be themselves."

Simon Bodh Nielsen, an artist whose studio is based in Fabrikken, right next to the space that will be renovated as a "social meeting place for everyone," doesn't think the neighborhood will gentrify in the coming years, but he notes that for people to mix "they have to be very compassionate and give each other space, because they're different."

This urban renewal, which began with the discussion about "parallel societies" and the inclusion of Hørgården in the list, has not yet managed to break down the border separating Sundholm and Hørgården. Despite efforts to increase the participation of people from Hørgården, the council members confess that they have not been able to reach out to the residents of that area very much, and the people of Hørgården themselves are either unaware of the renewal or are not interested.

Everyone together at Maskinhallen shared the same meal.

"Whether they paint the buildings red or white, it doesn't matter, we will survive," explains Daniel about the lack of involvement from the people in the neighborhood. "People just get used to this situation because that's how they've lived their whole lives here," adding, "I feel there's a big mismatch between the municipality and the different projects and the social workers, some of the social workers here and the people here, they have no connection. It's not working as it should."

In my last conversation with Rasmus, the architect sounded hopeful. At the last event organized for the neighborhood's youth, which Daniel helped organize, they managed to gather a group of five to six young people from Hørgården. He says that they will not be included in the renovation project group yet, but they will be a group that transmits Hørgården's values and messages, and may eventually be included in the project group.

The border remains, but according to Rasmus, there are small steps being taken in the right direction. At the beginning of September, the renovation team organised a social event with a community dinner at Maskinhallen, a cultural centre in the neighbourhood. Around eighty people attended, and according to his calculations, thirty to forty of those participants were homeless people living in Sundholm.

This is just the beginning of Sønderbro's urban renewal, which, like others before it, promises to create a more integrated neighborhood. But the question remains: is Sønderbro an example of true inclusion, or just a half-fulfilled promise?

Chega's journalism charm offensive

João Pinhal, Gerador

Part 1: THE SPECIAL GUEST

Lead: His numbers 'trounce' all who surround him. André Ventura has become one of the most frequent special guests on television. Between the last two elections, he was interviewed 108% more than the leader of the largest opposition party. Researchers and journalists warn of a dangerous concession to commercial interests that, instead of curbing populist narratives, amplify them. But are there alternatives? In Wallonia, a region in southern Belgium, the media voluntarily imposed a cordon sanitaire to limit the media platform of the radical right, showing that other paths are possible when the defence of democracy is prioritised over market interests.

28 March 2023, around 11 a.m. A man kills two women at the Ismaili Centre, a shelter for refugees in Portugal. 1.45 p.m. André Ventura, leader of the radical right-wing populist party Chega, rushes to capitalise on the criminal's Afghan nationality and links the reception of refugees and immigrants to terrorism and crime on social media. 10:48 p.m. CNN Portugal organises a prime-time debate between André Ventura and Hugo Soares, secretary-general of the PSD. 'Security and migration' were the words used to announce the discussion.

"I understand it from a commercial perspective; I understand it from a media perspective; but from an objectivity perspective, it is misinformation." These succinct words are from João Carvalho, a political scientist with published work on migration policy and the impact of radical right-wing populist parties on this issue. This editorial choice "is not dangerous, it is extremely dangerous," argues Miguel Carvalho, an investigative journalist who has been closely following Chega. Recognising the harshness of his words and the difficulty he has in even using them, he has no doubt that "often" journalists are "the armed wing of Chega's narrative."

According to Paulo Couraceiro, debate on security and migration, an issue that many people care about and talk about, is desirable. The researcher in communication and media studies at the University of Minho sees it as "an opportunity to deconstruct" false ideas. In Miguel Carvalho's view, CNN Portugal merely "amplified" Chega's narrative, which is "often false and, above all, promotes polarisation that runs counter to the basic principles of journalism".

When invited to debates like these, it is André Ventura who is "setting the news agenda", not journalists, as he pumps out misinformation. It is the "most populist political actors" who are setting that agenda, which "should be of great concern to journalists," stresses José Moreno, a researcher at MediaLab ISCTE. It is not "useful" for democratic debate, nor is it the role of a journalistic space, which becomes indistinguishable from social media by forgetting its function as a mediator, concludes Raquel Abecasis, a political journalist with over 30 years' experience: "Perhaps, if it were up to me, I would not choose these to platform these actors," because "they don't understand anything about the subject."

There is a justification for this decision: "the media realise that everything André Ventura touches, from an audience point of view, is gold", however, José Moreno believes that "editors in the media must be able to resist these temptations".

Cristina Figueiredo, political editor at SIC/ SIC Notícias, agrees with the criticism: "it was clearly a case of taking the bait from André Ventura, which in this case ended up working in his favour". "And it's a good thing it was on CNN and not on SIC," but "in fact, it could have happened to us." "Often, decisions in the television world are made without much time to reflect, desperately trying to keep up with events. Sometimes it goes well, sometimes it goes badly."

"It's an episode that clearly fits in with the way the media facilitates radical right-wing parties," says Riccardo Marchi, a researcher at ISCTE, and the media no longer worries whether it "has crossed a line." The move does not "shock" him, because the pursuit of viewing audiences "is the bread and butter of how the media conduct their editorial lines," he concludes.

No one at CNN Portugal responded to attempts to contact them, with the exception of Paulo Magalhães, currently senior advisor at UNOPS (United Nations Office for Project Services), who, at the time of the debate, was political editor at TVI and CNN Portugal. He claims not to remember the debate in question because he was not the presenter: that role, in fact, fell to journalist Ana Sofia Cardoso. Still, when asked why this debate should be held under these circumstances, he replies, "Why not? Why should we limit ourselves? (...) All debates can and should be held. The more discussion, the more information people have, the better."

However, "misinformation can also be intentionally suggested 'just by asking questions'; a technique that allows provocateurs to insinuate lies or conspiracies while maintaining a façade of respectability," asserts The Debunking Handbook 2020. The result of an innovative process, all the recommendations in this handbook have been validated by researchers with academic status in the field, reflecting a broad scientific consensus on how to combat disinformation.

Article 9 of the Portuguese Journalists' Code of Ethics states that journalists "must reject discriminatory treatment." Journalist Raquel Abecasis admits that this debate may constitute a violation of this guiding principle. Paulo Pena has no doubt that "debates like these promote discriminatory treatment of people." Warning that "journalists are not immune to making mistakes when merging topics", the Investigate Europe journalist argues that mechanisms should be put in place within newsrooms to ensure that "these false causal links do not become news or debates, because there is no link between insecurity and migration in Portugal, quite the contrary".

ONE OF DOZENS

The live debate on CNN Portugal on 28 March 2023 was, however, only one of 29 ‘live interview/debate’ slots in which André Ventura has had media exposure on the TVI/CNN Portugal group since 2019.

A macro view of the data, adjusted for the period between the month the party was created (April 2019) and June 2024 (inclusive), shows how TVI and CNN Portugal interviewed André Ventura 61% more than the incumbent PSD president. In absolute terms, there were 29 moments of significant media exposure for the Chega leader, versus 18 for the PSD leader. It should be noted that the radical populist right-wing party has never had greater parliamentary representation than the centre-right party.

The difference skyrockets in the period between the last two elections; between February 2022 and March 2024: TVI and CNN Portugal interviewed André Ventura 180% more than Luís Montenegro, the then leader of the opposition (14 interviews with the Chega leader vs. 5 with the PSD president).

“The difference in airtime here is overwhelming.” This was the first reaction of Paulo Magalhães, political editor for the stations for most of this period and responsible for conducting four live interviews (a record within the media, equalled only by Ana Sofia Cardoso). Explanations quickly emerge: “the Chega leader may be more available than the PSD leader,” he explains, revealing that André Ventura has never refused him an interview. The same cannot be said of other party leaders.

Ventura’s willingness and availability is highlighted by the overwhelming majority of journalists interviewed for this piece. “While others preferred to protect themselves because they have more responsibilities and more to lose,” explains Paulo Magalhães. André Ventura, “wants to expand his brand and reputation and is very interested in appearing in the media and, contrary to what he says, in being part of the system, because he knows that it is a system that can feed him,” notes Raquel Abecasis.

It remains to be seen whether the media outlets actively seek out André Ventura more than other politicians. In fact, this investigation found one case, on 26 July 2023, in which journalist Paulo Magalhães publicly revealed that Luís Montenegro refused to participate in a round of interviews with party leaders.

However, around 80% of the interviews with André Ventura took place because of controversies or initiatives created by the Chega party that TVI and CNN Portugal wanted to go into more.

The political editor of SIC/SIC Notícias admits that television stations invite the president of Chega more often for various reasons. They know that “there is almost certainly a yes there” and “television stations need to fill the airwaves”, but Cristina Figueiredo also draws on the politician’s communication instincts to justify the numerous requests they make to him.

SIC and SIC Notícias have conducted 15 interviews with André Ventura since 2021, compared to six with the president of the PSD – the face of the radical populist right was interviewed 150% more than the centre-right leader.

Public television channels (RTP1/RTP2/RTP3) are the only ones where the PSD president has been interviewed more often than the leader of the radical populist right (11 vs. 5) – the only ones where, at least in this parameter, there has been no overexposure of André Ventura from 2019 to June 2024.

DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY BEYOND MEDIA EXPOSURE

On all of the main private channels, between April 2019 and June 2024, André Ventura was interviewed 57 times, while the PSD presidents in office at the time were interviewed only 34 times. Until the 2022 legislative elections, André Ventura did not surpass the media exposure of the leader of what was then the second largest Portuguese party, but he came very close. This does not mean, however, that the leader of the radical populist right has not enjoyed overexposure since 2019, given his parliamentary representation.

André Ventura was the only Chega Member of Parliament until 2022, a position he achieved with 1.29% of the vote in 2019. The lone voice who only received less than 70,000 votes had just two fewer interviews than the leader of the party that won nearly 1.5 million votes (at the time, Rui Rio, president of the PSD). The period under review (from 2019 to January 2022) accounts for the post-presidential election period, in which André Ventura managed to increase his support to 500,000 votes. However, the disparity in interview numbers was exactly the same even before this more significant election result.

Between received 7% in 2022 and 18% in 2024, André Ventura was interviewed 27 times. 400,000 votes in 2022 turned into more than double the number of interviews with the leader of the party that won 1.5 million votes, the PSD. “Even today, we still give André Ventura media coverage that does not correspond to his election results,” says Alexandre Malhado.

“What is gained from 27 interviews with the same person? Where is the informative value?” asks João Carvalho, who accuses the media of no longer caring about political pluralism: “They give much more attention to political figures who generate controversy, even though the informative value of this coverage may be very little.” Although Chega has “a strategy to saturate the news”, it is not the party that creates this much media exposure, “the media outlets provide it”.

The political scientist, Miguel Carvalho, also points with concern to a paradigm shift in the news media: the “criteria of pluralism and in-depth coverage of current issues” have been replaced by the “need to generate audiences” – commercial value instead of informative value.

Hélder Gomes, a journalist for the weekly newspaper Expresso, also explains these discrepancies in the number of television interviews with the “worrying” idea that “television stations know that they can expect higher ratings with André Ventura in the studio than with any other political figure.” The audience figures provided by the responsible entities CAEM/MediaMonitor confirm this.

More than 85% of television interviews with André Ventura increased the average audience for the time slot in which they were broadcast. Inviting the leader of Chega attracted, on average, around 39,000 more viewers than the average for the last four broadcasts at the same time slot on the same day of the week. The presence of the radical populist right meant a 15.4% increase in the average audience.

Is journalism a ‘hostage’ to the market and becoming an ‘accomplice’ to the radical populist right?

One of the fundamental criticisms within the scientific literature on the relationship between the media and the radical populist right is, according to researcher Riccardo Marchi, the idea that “the market model in which the media in the West find themselves in forces them to talk about radical right-wing parties”.

André Ventura was interviewed 108% more than the president of the PSD (current prime minister) between the last two elections on the main private channels. This reflects “the way journalism allows itself to be infected by the market,” argues journalist Pedro Coelho, who believes that it is not the majority of journalists who give in to the market. “It is the directors who give in. It is the businessmen who, faced with the sustainability crisis that has taken hold in journalism, resort to everything at their disposal to boost audiences”. With Chega and André Ventura as “audience generators”, the overexposure of the radical populist right shows how “media entrepreneurs and news directors, especially on television, are not caring about the role they have to play in society.”

He admits that he has always been “critical of the influence of the market on journalism”, including within the SIC newsroom where he works: “there are things that do not serve the interests of the public, they serve the interests of the businessman, but that is not our mission”. SIC’s political editor, Cristina Figueiredo, stresses that “there is no point in us making programmes if they are not watched,” insisting that television must seek to reconcile two values: the public interest and the interest of the public.

Pedro Coelho, also president of the 5th Congress of Journalists, held in January 2024, said that the congress had decided that “capitalism does not meet the needs of journalism” because it forces journalistic activity to make a profit and “journalism is no longer profitable” and “there is no way to make journalism profitable” without compromising the necessary quality. Public funding of the media and non-profit journalism are solutions to be implemented, according to the university professor, but they are far from unanimous even within the profession itself.

The sustainability crisis in the media and the growth of Chega go hand in hand; “I have no doubt about that,” says Alexandre Malhado. The Sábado journalist explains that without public funding, journalism is held hostage by “an attention market” in which “people are attracted by the name Ventura”. Researcher Paulo Couraceiro points out that as long as funding is not guaranteed to allow journalism to focus on “scrutiny” and preserving the “integrity of information”, “the basic commercial incentives of journalism grow” and “there is clearly a political programme that is more favourable to commercial incentives than to others”.

The case of Wallonia: an exception at a European level?

The fascination of Portuguese journalism with the radical populist right rings true in most European countries. But are there no alternatives to media complacency? In Wallonia, a region in southern Belgium, commercial interests have not yet replaced the social function of journalism in preserving democracy. The media have established guidelines for dealing with the arrival of radical right-wing populist parties, which are ‘considered racist’, i.e. ‘hostile to freedom’.

The media have voluntarily and by mutual agreement formed an “impenetrable cordon sanitaire”, explains Léonie de Jonge in a scientific article published in 2018. There is no media blackout: the rule is that the radical populist right “should not have a direct voice or live access to the media”, preventing it from participating, in particular, in live interviews or debates.

Journalists can quote politicians from these parties, whether national or foreign, but “these quotes must always be put into context,” Maria Udrescu, a journalist for one of Wallonia’s most popular publications, the newspaper La Libre, explained to Deutsche Welle. Despite this, some consider this strategy undemocratic.

“As journalists, we are the watchdogs of democracy and, as watchdogs, it is our job to bark and, if necessary, bite,” said an official from the Belgian public broadcaster RTBF in an interview with Léonie de Jonge, seeking to clarify the democratic legitimacy of the cordon sanitaire.

The truth is that in this southern region of Belgium, the radical populist right has not yet invaded democratic institutions. In the 2024 elections, Chez Nous, the new radical right Walloon party, remained outside the regional parliament, despite expectations to the contrary.

“It is essential that, rather than amplifying the far right, we focus on those who are actively engaged in combating it,” suggests Katy Brown, a media studies expert at Maynooth University in Ireland, in response to our research. Aurelien Mondon, co-organiser of the Reactionary Politics Research Network, also stresses that “the effort not to create platforms for the far right seems to have worked [in Wallonia], but it needs to be concerted”.

This has not been reflected in Flanders in Belgium’s north, where the radical right-wing populist party, Vlaams Belang, has historically been more successful. In the 2024 Belgian federal elections, it was the second most successful party, still falling short of the victory predicted by the polls. Although the far right is not part of the new government, that government is preparing the country for a shift to the right under the leadership of Flemish nationalist Bart De Wever.

The big question regarding the exception in the southern region is whether “there is no far right in Wallonia because of the ‘cordon sanitaire’, or whether that ‘cordon sanitaire’ is easy to maintain because there is no far right in Wallonia?” asks Maria Udrescu.

“There is no doubt that the absence of a credible right-wing populist candidate [in Wallonia and Luxembourg] makes it easier to maintain a media cordon,” but there are other factors to consider, such as the media landscape in which journalists work and its history, stresses Léonie de Jonge. In her research, the political scientist analyses how the media deals with the radical populist right in the Benelux countries, which includes the various regions of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

In Flanders and the Netherlands, the media “have become more complacent” towards radical right-wing populist parties. In Luxembourg, where, as in Wallonia, journalists have adopted a ‘strict demarcation’ towards these radical and extremist right-wing political actors. This is the main conclusion of the article The Populist Radical Right and the Media in the Benelux: Friend or Foe?.

The shift towards a “more commercial” model of journalism, which focuses on “the most extreme and scandalous aspects of politics” in the “fight for readers and viewers”, has been more pronounced in Flanders and the Netherlands than in Wallonia and Luxembourg, suggests Léonie de Jonge.

The success in combating the growth of right-wing radicalism and extremism in southern Belgium can also be explained by the early institutionalisation of an “impenetrable cordon sanitaire” prior to the electoral expansion of this political faction.

“Once the worm is in the fruit, it will continue to make its way through the apple,” said a Belgian public radio and television official in an interview with Leonie de Jonge, seeking to explain the importance of anticipation. The more “flexible” stance of the media in northern Belgium and the Netherlands may have contributed to their openness to the radical populist right, suggests the academic.

It was still 2018 when this research suggested that the cordon sanitaire against right-wing extremism and radicalism only works “if it is truly airtight and established before” a successful populist and disruptive politician enters parliament. In Portugal, that key moment came a year after the publication of de Jonge’s research.

However, the scientific literature cited in the research on the effectiveness of the cordon sanitaire dates back to at least the early 2010s. The implementation of the cordon sanitaire in Wallonia emerged as early as the 1990s. Only decades later, in 2019, André Ventura was elected for the first time as a member of the Portuguese Parliament for the Chega party.

“Since the turn of the 21st century, there seems to be a growing consensus in the literature that the mediatisation of politics has played in favour of populists,” says Léonie de Jonge. Political science has long pointed to ways of dealing with this phenomenon, which is new in Portugal but old in Europe. Was Portuguese journalism naively asleep or did it not even want to wake up?

Translated by Albie Mills | Voxeurop

AI, Media Literacy, and the Next Generation

Seden Anlar and Maria Luís Fernandes
Rekto Verso

Seden Anlar and Maria Luís Fernandes look at how AI has made its way into young people's lives. What opportunities does it offer, and what threats? And how can policymakers, both nationally and internationally, offer young people tools to deal with AI? This is the first article in a three-part series.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer a distant concept. Although it has existed for decades in various forms – from basic automation to advanced machine learning –, its development has now reached a new frontier. More specifically, in recent years, generative AI, a type of AI that can create original content, has made significant advancements.

A major milestone in this evolution came in November 2022 with the public release of OpenAI's ChatGPT. This chatbot made generative AI widely accessible to the general public, allowing users to interact with it and explore its capabilities through a simple conversational interface. By August 2024, ChatGPT had over 200 million weekly active users – double the number it had in November 2022. Since the popular release of ChatGPT and many other similar AI-driven bots and tools, AI has become deeply embedded in everyday life, influencing the most diverse domains ranging from social media entertainment to education and politics.

Disinformation and Generative AI

One area particularly impacted by generative AI is the information space. AI has fundamentally transformed the way news and content are created and distributed, introducing new challenges to the ongoing issue of disinformation. With freely available and largely unregulated AI tools, it has become easier than ever to generate and distribute false information and create convincing fake content that can spread quickly across digital platforms.

The advanced capabilities of generative AI are evident in how convincingly it can mimic human communication and behaviour. We spoke to Juliane Von Reppert-Bismarck, Executive Director and founder of Lie Detectors, a Europe-wide journalist-driven non-profit that works to help teenagers, pre-teens and teachers tell news facts from news fakes and understand ethical journalism. She offered a striking example: 'You just have to think about the recent case of a major engineering firm, which in May 2024 became the victim of a gigantic deepfake hoax. They actually transferred 20 million pounds to different bank accounts because someone had become convinced that during a video conference call they were speaking to real people. But they weren't. They were talking to AI-manufactured beings, using voices that sounded familiar. And it convinced them to make that transfer.'

Even when used with good intentions, however, AI systems are prone to error. ChatGPT and similar chatbots routinely caution users that their responses may contain inaccuracies. Moreover, these systems are only as reliable as the data they are trained on. If the training data reflect societal biases or inequalities, which they usually do, AI algorithms risk perpetuating, or even amplifying, those biases.

AI in the Newsroom

This concern becomes particularly pronounced in the media sector, where AI is rapidly being integrated into various aspects of news production. AI-generated content is increasingly reaching audiences, often without clear labelling or guidelines to differentiate it from human-created material. This lack of transparency raises significant concerns about the potential misuse of the technology and its impact on public trust in information. One of the most troubling issues is the phenomenon known as 'AI hallucinations' where the technology generates false or misleading information that appears highly credible. These hallucinations can occur because AI systems, while sophisticated, lack true understanding and can create inaccuracies from their training data. Therefore, the absence of clear labelling not only misleads audiences but also erodes confidence in legitimate content, as audiences struggle to distinguish truth from fabrication.

Such risks are particularly alarming in contexts like journalism, education, or political discourse, where accuracy is important. Interestingly, according to the Digital News Report survey 2024, audiences appear to be less concerned about AI-driven stories related to sports and entertainment, where the stakes are perceived to be lower.

While news publishers recognise the potential benefits of AI – particularly for automating backend tasks like transcription, copyediting, and recommendation systems – many still view its involvement in content creation as a serious threat. In fact, they worry that AI's role in producing news articles, headlines, or other editorial content could further erode public trust in journalism.

The Role of Media Literacy

Public trust in information has been on the decline for many years, exacerbated by the spread of fake news on social media platforms. This erosion of trust could worsen with the increasing presence of AI, especially in light of elections. Concerns are rising over how these new technologies might be leveraged by political campaigns or even external actors looking to influence election outcomes.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has found that such tactics have been used to spread Russian disinformation ahead of this year's elections in the UK and France. Moreover, NewsGuard, a media watchdog, has noted a rise in websites filled with AI-generated content, often designed to look like legitimate news outlets but peddling low-quality or false information. This surge in misleading content has raised alarms among experts, who warn that it could further erode trust in the media.

Moreover, in Slovakia, for example, a faked audio recording of a candidate allegedly discussing how to rig the election surfaced just days before a closely contested vote. Fact-checkers struggled to counter the disinformation effectively. Similarly, UK politics witnessed its first major deepfake incident in October 2024 when an audio clip of opposition leader Keir Starmer, apparently swearing at staffers, went viral on X (formerly Twitter). The clip gained millions of views, even after being exposed as false.

Trust in media is likely to decline even more as AI gets more integrated into digital platforms. Research shows that people often rely on images and videos as 'mental shortcuts' when determining what to trust online, adhering to the notion that 'seeing is believing'. With the rise of synthetic imagery and AI-manipulated content, the reliability of visual evidence – long considered a cornerstone of trust – is being increasingly undermined, leading to greater uneasiness and uncertainty among the public. These cases highlight how AI-generated content can be leveraged to sow confusion and mistrust during critical moments.

However, the biggest danger may not be that people believe false information, but rather that they stop believing anything at all. As political philosopher Hannah Arendt warned, during times of upheaval, the most significant threat is when 'nobody believes anything any longer'. Therefore, this growing scepticism threatens to erode the foundations of democracy.

The consequences of this breakdown in trust are profound. As Juliane from Lie Detectors explained, 'democracy is based on the assumption that we are capable of making informed decisions. So media literacy and the guarantees it provides to ensure informed decisions, not disinformed decisions, are absolutely core to the democratic process and to our democratic society.'

The Growing Challenge for Young People

This issue is especially critical for young people, who are the most exposed to the digital sphere and social media platforms where AI is increasingly prevalent. Often regarded as 'digital natives', young people interact with the online world more than any other group.

According to the Reuters Institute's 2024 report, younger generations are showing a weaker connection to traditional news brands than they did in the past, making them even more susceptible to disinformation. With the voting age lowered to below 18 in countries like Belgium, and considering that these young people will shape significant political decisions and take on influential roles in society in the coming decades, it is vital that young people understand how to navigate the rapidly evolving information landscape.

While news organisations are making efforts to protect the integrity of information by adopting AI usage guidelines, and social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok are introducing measures such as community notes and labelling AI-generated content, a critical question remains: Is this enough?

The remedy often cited for this growing concern is digital media literacy, which refers to the ability to critically evaluate and interact with digital content, encompassing a wide set of skills, ranging from identifying credible sources of information to understanding how algorithms and AI shape the content we consume. It involves not only technical know-how but also the capacity to discern between accurate information and disinformation and to engage responsibly in online environments.

But are young people actually digital media literate? The 2024 Ofcom report on Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes provides some insight into what young people think about their own digital media literacy skills. When asked, 69% of children aged 12-17 claimed they were confident in their ability to judge the authenticity of online content. However, this confidence was higher among boys and older teenagers. Notably, confidence among 16-17-year-olds dropped from 82% in 2022 to 75% in 2024.

However, as Juliane Von Reppert-Bismarck from Lie Detectors pointed out: 'Asking young people whether they think they are media literate is not an effective way to measure their actual media literacy skills.' Indeed, the 2024 Ofcom report highlights that confidence doesn't always correlate with actual media literacy skills. It states: 'Confidence does not just follow from good media literacy skills but intersects with it in ways that can either strengthen or undermine critical understanding. Someone whose confidence exceeds their ability is more likely to make mistakes, leading to potential harm. Conversely, someone with good critical understanding but lacking confidence may not trust their own judgement, which could leave them feeling unsure or unsafe online.'

Despite being referred to as 'digital natives', young people's familiarity with technology does not automatically equate to strong digital media literacy skills. Safa Ghnaim, Associate Programme Director at Tactical Tech, an international non-profit focused on helping individuals and communities navigate the societal impacts of digital technology, highlighted this misconception:

'I've definitely heard terms like "digital native", which implies that young people are fluent in technology because they've grown up with it. But I think people sometimes jump to the conclusion that they are also good at discerning misinformation or spotting scams. That's not necessarily the case. These skills still need to be taught. We've done research with teenagers about their hopes and fears around technology, and the results were revealing. Some expressed concerns about the erosion of human-to-human relationships, showing the depth of their anxieties.'

Helderyse Rendall, Senior project coordinator of Tactical Tech's project focused on youth, What The Future Wants, echoes this sentiment: 'Young people's ability to use technology is often mistaken for a deeper understanding of how technology intersects with their relationships, communities, and society in general. These are things that need to be explored and discussed in environments where they can reflect on their interactions and their effects.'

Data support this concern. According to a 2022 EU research, one in three 13-year-old students in Europe lacks basic digital skills when directly tested. Moreover, the OECD reports that only a little over half of 15-year-olds in the EU have been taught how to detect whether information is subjective or biased.

EU Initiatives on Digital Media Literacy

Recognising this growing need, the European Union has launched several initiatives aimed at promoting digital media literacy. On July 1, 2020, the European Skills Agenda was published, promoting digital skills for all and supporting the goals of the Digital Education Action Plan. This plan aims to improve digital skills and competencies for digital transformation and promote the development of a high-performance digital education system. In addition, the Digital Compass and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan set ambitious goals for the EU: to ensure at least 80% of the population has basic digital skills and to have 20 million ICT specialists by 2030.

In October 2022, the European Commission released its guidelines for educators on promoting digital skills and tackling disinformation in primary and secondary schools. This toolkit covers three main topics: building digital literacy, tackling disinformation, and assessing and evaluating digital literacy. Then, in February 2023, the Commission published the Media Literacy Guidelines, which provide a framework for member states to share best practices and report on their media literacy efforts.

The State of Media Literacy in Europe

However, despite these EU-level guidelines, it ultimately falls to individual member states and their national education systems to implement them, as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) requires member states to promote media literacy and report on their progress every three years. As Helderyse Rendall explains: ‘How you evaluate these competencies from UNESCO or the European Union is well documented, but how that translates to different contexts is more complicated. Research we published last year showed that, regardless of the framework implemented, digital media literacy is very contextual. A young person in Germany isn’t the same as a young person in Portugal.’

Despite these challenges, there is progress – at least at the international and local levels. According to Juliane from Lie Detectors, ‘There’s a lot of activity at the EU, UNESCO, and OECD levels. Similarly, local initiatives stand out, with a growing number of mayors actively collaborating through associations and launching efforts like Digital Competence Weeks, which have proven highly popular. However, Juliane emphasised the need for action at the national level: ‘What’s missing is the middle ground – the action needed from national and regional governments. This is where the real solutions will come from. That being said, there are notable exceptions. Scandinavia, particularly Finland, is often seen as a leader in media literacy, while Austria has also made strides by mandating that basic digital competencies be taught as a separate subject in schools.

In addition to formal education, there is a growing need for non-formal education initiatives to help close the gap. As Helderyse from Tactical Tech points out, many organisations are working to create frameworks that support education systems in teaching digital media literacy.

Safa from Tactical Tech adds: ‘There’s a real need for non-formal, creative, and co-creational interventions like ours, which focus on critical thinking and cross-applicable skills. These are the skills that help young people understand how algorithms work, how data collection functions, and how AI operates. While current education systems tend to focus on practical applications of technology, such as coding or robotics, it’s important to teach these alongside critical thinking skills.’

Are Schools Equipped for the AI Challenge? Lessons from Portugal and Belgium

Seden Anlar and Maria Luís Fernandes, Rekto Verso

In this second article of their series on artificial intelligence and Media literacy, Seden Anlar and María Luis Fernandes take a deeper look at the way schools, teachers and students deal with the increasing presence, possibilities and risks of AI - both in Belgium and Portugal.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transformed the digital world, with tools like ChatGPT revolutionising content creation while also enabling the rapid spread of misinformation. Concerns over AI-driven disinformation, such as deepfakes used to manipulate public opinion during elections, have prompted social media platforms and news organisations to adopt measures like AI labelling and community-driven checks. However, maintaining public trust in credible news sources and accurate information remains a challenge for social media platforms, news organisations, and policymakers, particularly as young people are increasingly vulnerable to online misinformation. In response, the European Union has launched initiatives such as the Digital Education Action Plan and the Media Literacy Guidelines to enhance digital skills and media literacy across its member states.

As we described in the first article of this series, While EU frameworks provide valuable guidance, and grassroots efforts by local governments are also making strides, action at the national level remains the missing link for translating these initiatives into cohesive, scalable solutions. The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) assigns individual member states the responsibility for implementing these goals, requiring each country to develop its own media literacy strategy and submit progress reports every three years. This decentralised approach has resulted in significant variation in how member states implement media literacy initiatives. Two EU countries with contrasting strategies and approaches to digital media literacy in schools – Belgium and Portugal – offer valuable insights into how the challenges that come with AI are being addressed. To delve deeper, we examined policy documents and reports, analysed existing initiatives, and conducted interviews with teachers, students, and members of civil society in both countries.

Media Consumption and Literacy in Belgium

According to the Media Information Centre (CIM), Belgians are consuming more media than ever before, with nearly nine out of ten Belgians connecting to the internet daily – a 5.2% increase from 2022. The CIM study, conducted among 6,325 people between September 2022 and March 2023, also reveals changing consumption habits, with a growing appetite for video and audio content. Moreover, for the first time, the smartphone has overtaken television as the most-used media device, with 88% of Belgians using a smartphone, climbing to 98% among those aged 12-34.

This rise in digital media consumption makes young people in Belgium particularly exposed to online disinformation. Axel Baeyens, a Belgian primary school teacher at Sint-Lievenscollege Wereldwijs, who teaches students aged 10 to 12 across subjects like math, languages, sciences, arts, and religion, frequently encounters the influence of online misinformation in his classroom: 'Nearly every day, I have to debunk things they say they've seen online. They could be spouting things like "the moon is made of cheese" because someone said so online.'

A similar picture can be seen in Portugal. Young people in Portugal, like their peers in Belgium and across Europe, are increasingly turning to social media and video streaming platforms for news, distancing themselves from traditional media sources. According to the Reuters 2024 Digital News Report, 72% of Portuguese citizens are concerned about what is real or fake on the internet, a figure significantly above the global average. In Portugal political content is the most common subject of misinformation. This prevalence of disinformation affects young people's trust in the news. Many young Portuguese express lower trust levels than older generations, which may stem from their reliance on digital platforms perceived as less credible than traditional broadcasters.

Martim Caçador, a 17-year-old high school student from the northern Portuguese town of Ponte de Lima, described his news habits: 'I watch the news on TV sometimes with my family, but I mostly get information from social media and digital platforms. Sometimes I just go on Instagram or other platforms like X and see news from accounts I follow.' AI has become a useful tool for young people in Portugal, as Martim explained: 'I'd always prefer a recommendation algorithm because I only want to see what I like online, and I think that helps me. AI chatbots and similar tools help with my schoolwork. If I'm struggling with something and no one is available to help, I can use it to find answers.'

Martim's use of AI reflects a common pattern among young people, as highlighted in reports on digital habits: recommendation algorithms and AI tools play an increasingly central role in both their personal and academic lives. While these technologies offer convenience and support, they also come with risks, such as reinforcing echo chambers or creating over-reliance on AI-generated answers without critical evaluation. This raises a pressing question: Can schools step up to address these challenges and equip students with the skills needed for critical and responsible engagement with AI?

Media Literacy Education in Belgium

According to the Media Literacy Index 2022, Belgium ranks as a 'well-performing country' in media literacy, yet approaches to media literacy education vary widely across its regions. In Dutch-speaking Flanders, media literacy is integrated into formal and non-formal education. The Flemish Knowledge Centre for Digital and Media Literacy, Mediawijs, promotes critical engagement with digital content. Programs like 'News in the Classroom' help students in their final years of primary school approach current events with a critical and creative mindset. Media literacy is also a key competency in secondary education, encouraging teachers to integrate it across subjects, including history, languages, and sciences.

In the French-speaking Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation aux Médias (CSEM) leads media education efforts, fostering collaboration among educators, media stakeholders, and policymakers. Meanwhile, the German-speaking community has its own media centre, Ostbelgien Medienzentrum, which supports media literacy for all ages. Each community develops its media literacy strategy based on local needs, reflecting Belgium's linguistic diversity.

In Axel's school, media literacy education falls into three categories: media wisdom, media literacy, and media skills. Media wisdom focuses on ethical media usage and critical thinking, media literacy on understanding content structure, and media skills on practical tech abilities, such as using digital devices. Media literacy is not taught as a separate class but integrated across subjects like languages, science, history, and geography, with students using digital devices for an average of 30 minutes to an hour daily. This approach has also facilitated the integration of AI tools like ChatGPT in some schools, allowing students to engage with emerging technologies in a structured way.

At Sint-Lievenscollege Wereldwijs, part of the Flemish community, this integration of AI tools plays out in classrooms. Axel explained: 'Media literacy is included in the school's curriculum and mandated by the government. Schools must meet "end goals" set by the government, assessed at various educational stages. With students already exposed to ChatGPT and other AI tools outside of school, I see value in incorporating these tools into lessons.' The teacher also noted that their school primarily uses ChatGPT for writing exercises, allowing students to compare their own writing with AI-generated revisions.

However, this integration is not consistent across all Belgian schools. While AI use is widespread among students in Flanders, schools are often reluctant to adopt these tools. Lore Sleeckx, President of the Flemish Scholierenkoepel, observed, 'We heard in conversations with pupils that they use AI, smart chatbots ... for different purposes.' Pupils favour using AI to understand complex concepts, check grammar, make summaries, and inspire school assignments. But while popular outside school, AI tools are often ignored or banned in classrooms. 'Teachers are often reluctant to use AI applications, fearing students will rely on them for tasks and miss key skills,' Sleeckx added. 'But most students don't see AI as a magic solution but rather as a helpful tool.'

Digital Media Literacy Education in Portugal

Portugal has made efforts in promoting digital literacy over the years. Initiatives like the Technological Plan, launched in 2007, provided discounted laptops and internet access to students, marking an early step toward digital inclusion. Building on this foundation, the Portuguese authorities unveiled the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence – labelled AI Portugal 2030 – on 11 June 2019. This strategy emphasises integrating AI education into the curriculum to foster digital literacy and prepare future generations for an increasingly AI-driven world.

One initiative leading this change is Bridge AI, a national project funded by the Portuguese Science Foundation under its 'science for policy' program. Led by Professor Helena Moniz and established in 2024, Bridge AI aims to prepare Portugal for the implementation of the EU AI Act by developing actionable policy strategies and creating tools to support public administration. The project takes a holistic approach by integrating ethics, literacy, and law into a cohesive framework designed to address the needs of diverse audiences, including public administrators, industry professionals, and civil society. Bridge AI aims to address gaps in education and public awareness to ensure that citizens across Portugal, regardless of their location, have access to critical knowledge about artificial intelligence and its implications.

Despite initiatives such as Bridge AI, Portugal currently lacks a formal, nationwide digital media literacy curriculum or structured guidelines for public schools. Efforts to promote media literacy often rely on fragmented programs and resources developed by organisations such as the Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC). While these projects aim to raise awareness, their impact is limited by a lack of consistent integration into school curricula.

As we learned from the interviews we did with teachers and students, teachers often encourage responsible digital tool use and assess students' media literacy skills through informal methods, such as presentations and assignments. However, these approaches remain largely unstructured and dependent on individual educators. 'Media literacy education is not currently included in our school curriculum in a direct way. We try to guide students on responsible use and allow digital tools when possible, but it's often self-taught. I assess students' media literacy skills during assignments and presentations when they use digital tools, but we lack formal guidance. We try to alert students to the misuse of social media and AI, but there's no specific subject in secondary school that teaches them how to navigate the digital world,' explained Lurdes Cruz, a Portuguese teacher who teaches Portuguese and literature to high school students at a school in Lisbon.

This sentiment is echoed by students themselves. 17-year old Martim from Ponte de Lima shared his experience: 'There was no structured approach to teaching us media literacy; there was once a presentation for the whole school, but it didn't say much beyond warning us there might be fake news online. They didn't teach us anything we didn't already know.' He noted that teachers only addressed media literacy indirectly, 'like when we had to hand in a presentation, and they warned us not to use ChatGPT or else we'd get a bad grade.' Martim also admitted to being unaware of the limitations of ChatGPT's previous limitations, such as its 2021 cut-off date for data. 'All I knew was that I could ask it questions, and most times it would help me.'

Challenges in Implementing Digital Media Literacy

While the approaches differ between Belgium and Portugal, both countries face similar challenges in their media literacy education efforts. Axel, the Belgian teacher, highlighted financial limitations that impact the availability of resources and the choice of digital platforms. Schools are under pressure to choose platforms based on cost, which can limit access to a diverse range of learning materials. Certain digital tools may eventually become premium services, further straining budgets. The teacher emphasised the importance of educators staying informed about the digital world – not necessarily by directly engaging with students' online activities, but by understanding what is happening in those spaces. This awareness, he explained, helps teachers facilitate discussions and promote safe online practices, especially given how much of students' time is spent in digital environments outside of school.

The teacher also observed that while some educators are open to digital literacy, others remain hesitant. 'Some teachers are open to digital literacy, while others avoid it due to unfamiliarity with modern media,' he noted.

In Portugal, the challenges are similar. Lurdes remarked, 'I increasingly feel I need to keep up to date because technology is advancing fast. If I'm not familiar with developments, I feel behind, even by the students themselves.' While teachers try to alert students to the risks and benefits of social media and AI, there is minimal official support for structured media literacy training. The teacher added, 'We're somewhat self-taught, which may not be effective for teaching media literacy. Many teachers haven't fully developed these skills themselves.'

Moreover, resources are limited, affecting equitable access to digital tools for both students and teachers. This lack of resources hinders schools' ability to develop a comprehensive media literacy program that reaches all students.

Solutions and Moving Forward

A positive development in Belgium has been the increased focus on digital tools during teacher training, with educators encouraged to use digital methods in their classrooms. However, as Axel noted, 'Lifelong learning is key. We have opportunities to learn about digital tools, but they're often single-day sessions that lack follow-up. Digital literacy keeps evolving, and teachers need sustained training.'

Over in Portugal, there is a growing call for the Ministry of Education to establish guidelines and training on the responsible use of social media and AI and to make digital tools accessible to both students and teachers. Martim suggested that schools teach more about engaging critically with online content, saying, 'It's important for students to be able to see if information is real. For example, we could have a class where they show examples of fake news and explain what we should do about it.'

In both countries, promising initiatives like Mediawijs and Bridge AI provide a strong starting point, but their success will depend on effectively bridging gaps between policy, education, and practice.

Digital Media Literacy Beyond the Classroom

Seden Anlar and Maria Luís Fernandes, Rekto Verso

In the third and last part of their article series on AI and digital literacy, Seden Anlar and Maria Luís Fernandes focus on non-formal education. Such initiatives outside of the school system aim to reach wider audiences and provide practical, accessible tools for navigating the complexities of the digital world. 'Ensuring young people are equipped to navigate misinformation and critically engage with content is not just an educational priority but a political one.'

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the way information is created, shared, and consumed, creating both opportunities and challenges in the digital world. Tools like ChatGPT have made it easier to produce content, but they have also accelerated the spread of misinformation. AI-generated deepfakes and manipulated media have already influenced elections and swayed public opinion, raising concerns about the growing impact of disinformation. Efforts by social media platforms and news organisations to mitigate these risks – such as labelling AI-generated content and encouraging community-driven fact-checking – have seen limited success. For young people, in particular, the sheer volume of digital content makes distinguishing fact from fiction increasingly difficult. Studies reveal that individuals aged 15–24 are especially vulnerable to believing and sharing false information, often relying on intuition rather than critical evaluation.

As we described in the first article of this series, in response to these issues, the European Union has launched initiatives like the Digital Education Action Plan and Media Literacy Guidelines to help individuals navigate today's media landscape. However, the implementation of these policies varies significantly between member states. Taking a deeper look at Belgium and Portugal, with their differing approaches to digital media literacy in schools, offers valuable insights into how countries are tackling the challenges posed by AI-driven content. In the second article, we analysed policy documents and reports, reviewed existing initiatives, and conducted interviews with teachers, students, and civil society members in both countries to better understand these efforts.

Higher Education

While primary, secondary, and high schools continue to grapple with the challenges of integrating AI and media literacy into curricula, higher education institutions in Belgium and Portugal are taking notable steps towards education on AI.

For instance, In Belgium, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) set a national precedent by launching the country's first academic bachelor's program in artificial intelligence in 2022. This milestone was followed by the creation of advanced master's programs, such as KU Leuven's interdisciplinary masters degree on AI and Ghent University's AI research initiatives. These programs primarily focus on practical applications of AI, aiming for innovation in fields ranging from healthcare to robotics and sustainability.

Portugal's universities have also expanded their offerings. ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon provides a bachelor's degree in Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence, while the University of Porto offers a degree in Artificial Intelligence and Data Science. In addition, the University of Coimbra offers a master's program which delves into cutting-edge AI technologies, including machine learning and natural language processing.

Despite these developments in higher education, the focus of these programs remains largely on technical aspects, rather than digital media literacy and AI and combating misinformation.

Beyond the Classroom

As concerns over disinformation and the need for digital media literacy grow, a variety of non-formal education initiatives across Europe are stepping in to fill gaps in formal education. These initiatives focus on learning opportunities outside traditional classrooms, engaging young people through workshops, online programs, and interactive activities. By extending digital media literacy education beyond the confines of formal schooling, they aim to reach wider audiences and provide practical, accessible tools for navigating the complexities of the digital world.

For instance, the 2024 Europe Code Week, an online event held in October 2024, engaged more than 4 million participants across Europe. It provided young people with opportunities to take part in coding exercises, learn basic computer science principles, and explore AI literacy. By promoting creativity and problem-solving, the program aimed to help participants better understand the digital tools shaping their lives and equip them to use technology responsibly.

In Portugal, an initiative called 'Data Defenders' uses video games as a medium for teaching media literacy. By gamifying complex topics like algorithmic bias and data ethics, this initiative makes abstract concepts relatable and engaging for younger audiences. The Experience AI program, developed by the Raspberry Pi Foundation in collaboration with TUMO Portugal, represents another non-formal initiative. Funded by Google.org, this initiative aims to train over 2,000 young people in AI literacy by 2025. The program includes culturally relevant materials, teacher training, and parental involvement. However, the involvement of big tech companies like Google in AI education raises important questions. In a world where corporations like Google control and store vast amounts of information and where conversations about society and politics increasingly take place on their platforms, can we rely on them to foster critical reflection about the technologies they profit from? Initiatives funded by companies with vested interests in the digital landscape may shape curricula in ways that avoid scrutinising their practices, making it essential to have independent oversight and diverse perspectives to ensure AI education remains balanced and objective.

Journalists at the Frontline of Truth

While some of these formal and non-formal programs can play a significant role in helping young people critically navigate the digital landscape, there is a key player in the field who is often overlooked in discussions about enhancing media literacy: the journalist. With their ability to verify sources, identify bias, and provide context, journalists are uniquely positioned to bridge critical gaps in media education and contribute significantly to improving digital media literacy.

For instance, initiatives like Lie Detectors, a Europe-wide journalist-driven non-profit that works to help teenagers, pre-teens and teachers tell news facts from news fakes and understand ethical journalism, bridges the gap between schools and media professionals, enabling journalists to conduct workshops that teach students how to verify sources, assess credibility, and recognise bias. These partnerships not only empower students but also support teachers in integrating media literacy concepts into their classrooms.

We spoke to Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck, Executive Director of Lie Detectors, who explained: 'Journalists are very well placed to hand on these skills to young people and teachers. Until teachers are fully equipped to integrate media literacy into classrooms, involving external experts such as journalists and librarians –who assess truth and fact on a daily basis – will remain a necessary part of the solution.'

Digital Literacy Starts at Home

When it comes to enhancing AI literacy beyond the classroom, other key figures can be found even closer to home: parents. 2018 Research showed that young people often develop their digital habits and skills by observing family members. Therefore, active parental involvement – whether through co-viewing media, discussing online content, or establishing healthy screen time habits – can significantly bolster critical thinking and self-regulation in the digital sphere.

However, research revealed that many parents feel unprepared for this role, unsure of how to balance constructive technology use with concerns over screen time and online safety. The study found that parents with less familiarity with technology tend to impose stricter limits, fearing negative effects like reduced concentration or social isolation. By contrast, digitally literate parents are more comfortable supporting their children's use of technology and often engage with them directly.

To help parents develop their role as digital mentors, schools can play a supportive role. Axel Baeyens, a Belgian primary school teacher at Sint-Lievenscollege Wereldwijs, who teaches students aged 10 to 12 across subjects like math, languages, sciences, arts, and religion provided insights into how schools can support parents' digital literacy. 'That's a bit of a grey zone,' he admitted, 'because essentially, when you're going into that, it sounds like you're telling parents how to parent, and some could take it that way. But schools like ours try to bridge this gap by employing social workers who help parents unfamiliar with the school system, language, or digital tools.'

Axel described a program where parents with low-level digital skills participated in four or five lessons. 'We started from scratch, showing them how their kids use school platforms, how to track the school bus online, book a movie, or even navigate Google Maps,' he explained. 'We also have an introduction to our school system every year, and for fifth and sixth grades, we have sessions where parents and students define daily screen time limits together – something we even note in the school diary.'

Yet, he acknowledged the variability in parental approaches: 'Some are very anti-social media, and some don't care at all, giving kids unlimited screen time. We see the effects – students coming to school exhausted because they stayed up all night watching videos.'

Core Literacy for the Digital Age

Civil society advocates argue that digital media literacy should be treated as an essential skill, integral to education systems at every level. Juliane from Lie Detectors highlighted this vision: ‘What we really advocate for is that media literacy – critical digital media literacy – should be recognised as a core literacy alongside basic skills like reading and writing and counting. Once it’s acknowledged as a core literacy, everything else follows. It becomes part of all curricula, teacher training, and every subject area.’

Juliane humorously frames Lie Detectors’ ultimate goal as becoming obsolete: a future where media literacy is seamlessly embedded in education, eliminating the need for external organisations. However, she acknowledges that this vision will take time. Until then, external experts will remain indispensable in helping schools build capacity and adapt to evolving challenges.

In terms of the scope of digital media literacy education, while some suggest that teaching basic principles of critical questioning may suffice, experts caution against oversimplifying a complex and dynamic media landscape. This is why Safa Ghnaim, Associate Programme Director and Project lead for the Data Detox Kit at Tactical Tech, expressed scepticism toward one-size-fits-all solutions: ‘Whenever somebody offers a simple solution for a complex problem, I’m suspicious. Complex problems don’t have simple solutions.’

Tactical Tech, an international non-profit focused on helping individuals and communities navigate the societal impacts of digital technology, emphasises the importance of nuanced approaches. Helderyse Rendall, Senior project coordinator of Tactical Tech’s project focused on youth, What The Future Wants, echoed this sentiment. ‘Digital media literacy spans interconnected areas – safety, critical thinking, content creation – and it connects with our lives in increasingly complex ways,’ she said, emphasising the need for frameworks that balance clarity with adaptability.

Navigating Risks

There is also the worry that digital media literacy education, if not carefully implemented, could inadvertently make young people overly sceptical or paranoid, leading them to distrust credible sources and even fall into conspiracy theories. This risk is particularly significant – and somewhat ironic – given the role of misinformation in fueling conspiracy theories, which contributed to significant polarisation and radicalisation during the pandemic. Therefore, striking the right balance is crucial – teaching young people to question information critically without fostering an excessive cynicism that undermines trust in credible sources.

Safa from Tactical Tech suggests focusing on what makes a source credible, such as adherence to standards like those of the International Fact-Checking Network. She notes: ‘If we can give people a place they feel they can rely on and explain why it’s credible, they’re less likely to fall into distrust or conspiracies.’

Helderyse from Tactical Tech stresses the value of peer learning spaces, where individuals can discuss and challenge their perspectives. Tactical Tech’s Everywhere, All the Time exhibition exemplifies this approach, inviting young people to explore the societal impacts of AI and engage in discussions that encourage reflection and dialogue. ‘Spaces for dialogue push people toward a middle ground,’ Helderyse explains. ‘They help combat confirmation bias and extreme responses, which are often signs of misinformation.’

Beyond Protection

Another dynamic that seems to be a point of concern for experts is infantilisation of young people. Media literacy for young people is often framed as a protective measure, focused on shielding them from harm. While safeguarding is critical, Helderyse argues this approach can veer into paternalism. ‘Young people are digital natives,’ she said. ‘They’re stakeholders and contributors who deserve a say in the conversation about technology.’

Tactical Tech’s co-creation model challenges this type of paternalism, engaging young people as active participants in designing educational tools and discussions. By involving them directly, the model respects their insights while equipping them with critical skills to navigate and shape the digital landscape. ‘Young people aren’t just recipients of technology – they’re contributors,’ Helderyse added. ‘By positioning them as partners, we empower them to take ownership of their digital futures.’

The Cost of Inaction

Doing nothing concerning AI literacy, however, poses the biggest threat. When it comes to the consequences of inaction, the latest research shows that failing to address media literacy risks significant global consequences. The Global Risks Perception Survey ranks misinformation among the top ten global threats. According to the Global Risks Report 2024, accessible AI tools have fueled a surge in falsified content, from deepfakes to counterfeit websites, undermining public trust.

Furthermore, research from the Centre for Emerging Technology and Security (CETaS) at The Alan Turing Institute highlights the dangers of AI-enabled misinformation. While recent elections in Europe and the UK have not seen major disruptions, concerns are growing over targeted smear campaigns and voter confusion caused by AI-generated content. Women politicians, in particular, face disproportionate attacks, underscoring the need for proactive strategies to counter these trends.

The stakes are particularly high as young people – tomorrow’s voters – become increasingly immersed in digital spaces. Ensuring they are equipped to navigate misinformation and critically engage with content is not just an educational priority but a political one, safeguarding the democratic process for future generations.

Looking Ahead

The future of media and digital literacy education in Europe is set to evolve further, with increasing emphasis on equipping individuals with critical digital skills.

Lie Detectors anticipates more coordinated efforts across Europe. ‘I hope we’re going to see a lot more initiatives that span the whole of Europe. More financing also, and some really important work on impact analysis, so that Europe can create standards that those implementing and designing curricula can aim for and integrate into their daily work in education.’

Encouraging national ownership will also play a crucial role. Juliane explained, ‘European institutions are increasingly encouraging member states to take ownership of this effort – to make it something that every country can be proud of within their own education structures.’

Moving forward, the challenge lies in ensuring these plans translate into practical, impactful changes. With support from educators, policymakers, and external organisations, there is potential for Europe to build more cohesive and adaptable approaches to media and digital literacy – while recognising the varied needs of its member states. As these efforts take shape, the hope is to foster a generation better equipped to critically engage with an increasingly digital world.

I JUST WANT TO BE NORMAL!

ADHD in women:
Late diagnosis and how gender bias influences our mental health

Sonia Quinche, Voxfeminae

Agathe was waiting for me at the door. As always, I was running late. While brushing my teeth, I took my bag from my room and remembered that before leaving I wanted to clean some dirt that I felt when I was taking care of the plants. Rushing and with Couto foam dripping from the corner of my mouth, I ran down the stairs. I held the toothbrush in my mouth so I could take the broom in my right hand and the dustpan in my left, and went upstairs to clean rapidly. Agathe looked at me, surprised, but mostly amused, exclaiming, “Oh my God, you really do have ADHD!”

The first time I learned what ADHD was, I was 20 years old. I was attending a seminar on education of children with support needs. At that time, I was volunteering as an educator in a scout group and the purpose of the seminar was to give us tools for proper care for those children.

Emilio, a psychologist with a PhD in Neuropsychology, was the instructor. He started talking about how ADHD presents in children, and from the very first symptom he listed, I felt like he was describing my personality. The first two coincidences were actually funny - and I say coincidences because being a bit “forgetful” and “distracted” doesn’t really mean anything. The thing was, as he kept listing symptoms, I kept relating to all of them: children who cannot measure time properly, they lose track of time and are always late; children who struggle to focus or get lost in hyper-focus; constantly distracted, they cannot keep quiet; always interrupting others mid-sentence, unable to stick to a routine...

While I recognise and support both the scientific understanding of sex as a non-binary spectrum and the rights of trans and non-binary individuals, this article focuses specifically on cisgender women - those individuals assigned female at birth and who identify as women. This delimitation reflects the focus of the research and is not intended to reinforce binary or exclusionary notions of gender or sex.

Every single one: check, check, check. I saw my life, every little detail, flash before my eyes like a Malick movie - completely zoned out. Finally, my colleagues jolted me back to reality: “Sonia, that kid he’s describing – it is you!”. I felt like I was melting in my seat. What did it mean exactly that I fitted perfectly into a “child with support needs” profile?

Earlier that year, Emilio had unintentionally diagnosed my friend Marta. He had asked a group of young people from his scout group to do some tests and evaluations for his PhD research. Marta was one of them. At the end of the process, Emilio told Marta and her mother that he could not include her file because he needed neurotypical participants, which she was not: her results pointed to a diagnosis of ADHD, inattentive type.

ADHD symptoms differ from person to person and are typically categorised into two types: ADHD-Inattentive (ADHD-I), for people exhibiting persistent patterns of distraction, disorganisation, and forgetfulness, and ADHD-Hyperactive/Impulsive (ADHD-HI), for those exhibiting higher levels of physical hyperactivity, impulsivity, and aggression (Attoe & Climie, 2023). More recently, the DSM-5 lists three primary presentations: predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive/impulsive, and combined (little spoiler, the latter one is mine!) (Wettstein et al., 2024).

Curiously, girls and women – when diagnosed – tend to be categorised under the inattentive type, while boys are frequently diagnosed with the hyperactive one.

IT IS BIOLOGY, RIGHT?

It is commonly said that boys' and girls' brains simply function differently – but how can we really know that? In 1998, Hartung and Widiger analysed 243 studies published in the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology (USA) over six years. They found an imbalance concerning the sex of participants: in the seventy studies focused on ADHD, 81% of participants were male and only 19% female. They also found that 69 of the 243 studies were conducted exclusively on male children (Attoe & Climie, 2023).

Thus, we cannot confidently claim that science confirms biological differences in the human brain based on sex, nor we can clearly define what those differences might be. We basically don't know, because historically, science has often misrepresented or completely excluded the female body (Green et al., 2019). On the other hand, if we look at Western social norms, we see children are taught to behave differently according to their assigned gender. Social norms play a huge role in shaping how we present ourselves to the world from a very young age (Macklin, 2024).

In 2024, Wettstein et al. conducted a study aiming to assess signs of hyperactivity in adults suspected of having ADHD, addressing the potential sex bias in diagnosis. Using a dataset of more than fifteen thousand patients - 49% of which were women - their findings suggest that adult women with ADHD suffer equally from hyperactivity as men.

COPING MECHANISMS: MASKING AND PEOPLE PLEASING

Sandra is a 36-year-old telecommunications engineer, who seemed really calm when I talked with her; she is kind and quiet, and her words come out peacefully. She told me she was diagnosed with inattentive type-ADHD when she was 34, after struggling with her mental health following a major emotional event in her life. I was eager to get to know her better, because the only other woman with ADHD I knew at the time was my friend Marta and, honestly, I never really understood what was the difference between her inattentive type and mine, the combined one.

While the inattentive type is defined by distraction and forgetfulness due to a hyperactive mind – thoughts jumping here and there – it often presents as calm, introverted and serene. The hyperactive type occurs in more evidently vigorous people with disruptive and loud behaviours, impulsive reactions, and aggressive outbursts.

As for me, I've got both. There are chemical reactions and electrical synapses raving full time in my head, even when I am exhausted and just want to nap with my cat. Most of the time, without medication, I have to dedicate half of my brain power just to behaving like a proper, well-mannered adult.

Still, my friend Marta is a very energetic person, always doing something, always on the move. She started going camping and hiking when she was a little girl, and she also played basketball. If she is not

A coping mechanism is a way someone manages emotional or sensory overload, stress, or daily challenges.
For neurodivergent people, coping might include stimming, routines, special interests, or masking (which is not always healthy). It helps navigate a world that often isn't designed for our needs.

People-pleasing is a pattern of prioritising others' needs or approval over your own, often out of fear of conflict, rejection, or being disliked.
It can be linked to trauma, masking, or social conditioning (especially in women or marginalised groups).

working, she is at the gym or at the beach, or trekking, or playing guitar; she just does, does, does. Basically, she is always ready to fight – metaphorically speaking. It's like she simply has to release her energy in whatever way she can. However, I've noticed that when she is surrounded by people she barely knows, she tends to be more reserved and quieter. In fact, I am also usually more reserved and quieter in new situations and with people I don't know, conscious of where I put every part of my body. It takes time for both of us to show who we really are.

So, it was quite funny when I asked Sandra about her inattentive type and the traits that shape her seemingly calm personality. Haltingly, smiling timidly, she responded that she is not sure if that calmness isn't a coping mechanism, a strategy of self-regulation. Sandra grew up feeling invisible at home and, at the same time, not fitting in at school or among other girls. She liked things that were "kind of labelled for boys and men."

"A girl is not brought up precisely in the same way as a boy: her body is trained for passivity, and her spirit is kept in a state of dependence", said Simone de Beauvoir in her memoirs, which she titled Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter.

Sandra learned to mask her impulses, to perform as a girl was supposed to, and to navigate life with the constant feeling of frustration of not being as she should. She wasn't allowed to just be. "The truth is, I am different when I lose control; when I am angry, for example, I start talking faster and faster. I am not sure I am calm at all," she explained.

My parents didn't know how to handle me because I was both: a spoiled brat and a perfect child at the same time - a walking contradiction.

As Quinn and Madhoo (2014) suggest, women with ADHD may develop more effective coping strategies than men to mask their symptoms.

"Behave" was a command we used to hear a lot when we were young, followed by "behave like a little woman", when we started growing up. Personally, I hated being a girl, I hated what was expected of me for being a girl. I didn't want to sit with my legs crossed; I wanted to play football with boys instead of being exiled to be chat with other girls on the sides of the playground during recess; I wanted to climb and be strong.

I was a difficult child, a rebellious girl who struggled with authority, while also being one of the top students in my class. My parents didn't know how to handle me because I was both: a spoiled brat and a perfect child at the same time - a walking contradiction. I was hyperactive, impulsive and aggressive – everybody could see that. But I had to learn how to behave, and I did, just like my fellow female friends did.

Quinn (as cited in Holthe & Langvik, 2017) explains that girls, in general, are taught to be polite and compliant. We learn from an early age the importance of an apology. And while boys are encouraged to change the world and become leaders, girls are expected to accept and follow the rules set by our parents, teachers and society. We learn not to fight back.

The question then arises for girls and women with ADHD: is there a correlation between being "born a girl", being "raised as girl", being taught "the appropriate behaviour for girls", and being diagnosed later in life, often with the inattentive type? As we are told to behave like girls or women, we are forced to learn to mask who we really are, or risk being judged for violating feminine norms (Holthe, 2013). Meanwhile, as they saying goes, "boys will be boys".

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions, behaviour, and attention in response to your environment. It includes calming down when upset, staying focused, and adapting to different situations.

Masking is a term used to describe the conscious or unconscious act of suppressing intrinsic behaviours, traits, or responses in order to conform to social expectations which neurodivergent people may not organically adopt. It is widely used within the neurodivergent community and is applied by anyone on the spectrum, regardless of their gender identity.

However, in girls and women with ADHD, masking reflects the need to fit not just into neurotypical behaviours, but also gender stereotypes that inhibit our naturally disruptive symptoms. Research indicates the social constructs that are imposed on us often lead to masking and people-pleasing behaviours, contributing to both misdiagnosis and late diagnosis (Holthe & Langvik, 2017; Wettstein et al., 2024).

As mentioned earlier, historically, women and girls have been pushed to exhibit more empathetic and obedient behaviours. We are taught to prioritise other people's needs over our own, which often leads to patterns of people-pleasing and self-neglecting in order to satisfy those around us. As a result, many of us grow up without knowing how to set limits and, in some cases, without being able to recognise what our boundaries even are. From an early age, this induces the feelings of discomfort and inadequacy, because how we intrinsically feel doesn't align with how we are supposed to feel.

Another young woman I talked to, Mia, diagnosed at 23, told me she grew up thinking she was "just a bad person" because she couldn't keep her attention focused when her friends were talking to her. She condemned herself not to have deep, meaningful connections, because for her, not being able to pay attention meant she didn't care - as if she were disregarding the well-being of those close to her. Despite being deeply empathetic and actively engaged with social causes from an early age, she thought she was a bad person for getting distracted while talking to people.

Inês, diagnosed at 26, had a similar experience: she used to see herself as "a bad child, a bad student." Gabriela, diagnosed at 31, grew up constantly apologising and blaming herself for her "flaws", since she didn't have an explanation for those "personality traits" that often put her in conflict with others.

Not knowing our brains work differently made us carry guilt and frustration during those crucial years when teens are building the person they are becoming, with constant mottos and cries of failure such as "I didn't do it on purpose!" (Gabriela), "I just want to be normal!" (myself) or "I don't belong to this world" (Adriana, diagnosed at 33). We all remember situations when we said or did harmful things out of impulsivity because we couldn't control ourselves in that moment, and that made us feel guilty and inappropriate.

There are higher rates of comorbidities such as depression, anxiety, or eating disorders in girls and women with an undiagnosed ADHD (Attoe & Climie, 2023; Quinn & Madhoo, 2014; Wettstein et al., 2021). Therefore, women are often diagnosed and treated for a comorbid condition before getting an ADHD diagnosis. In 2005, Quinn found that 14% of girls with ADHD had been taking antidepressants before finally receiving appropriate treatment for their ADHD, compared to just 5% of boys. For instance, I was 15 years old the first time I took diazepam, when I started having anxiety crisis that nobody fully understood at the time.

The truth is, and now I know, the dichotomy between being the perfect girl – the one who met academic expectations, who was popular at school, well-behaved, and who knew what she wanted, and the chaotic girl – the one who didn't really

Neurodivergent refers to people whose brain functions differently from what's considered "typical." It includes autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc. It's not a disorder in itself — it's a perspective that embraces neurological diversity.

Neurotypical describes people whose brain development and functioning align with societal expectations of "normal." It's the default or standard against which neurodivergent people are often measured — but not "better," just different.

'Comorbid' is a medical concept referring to diseases or conditions that appear at the same time as another disease or condition.

> These feelings of insufficiency and incapability set the perfect foundation for low self-esteem, along with the big elephant in the room: mental health problems that girls, teen and adult women both with and without an ADHD diagnosis also suffer from, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographical context.

understand social dynamics and felt isolated most of the time, couldn’t sleep at night, and felt out of control – was crushing my mental health.

It was in this period that suicidal thoughts started appearing. My social anxiety led me to put myself in tricky situations, spending sleepless nights online, socialising with people much older than me, or drinking absurd amounts of alcohol. Meanwhile, my deep craving for connection pushed me toward early sexual experiences. Feeling like I didn’t fit in, I performed as an adventurous, fearless girl, who was just questioning the rules imposed on her.

Adriana had a story similar to mine. She doesn’t remember the first time she idealised death because those thoughts had been with her “forever”. She, too, assumed the role of the bad girl, sexualising herself from an early age and using alcohol as an emotional outlet. We were two teenagers from completely different backgrounds, both lost in our emotional dysregulation, feeling like we didn’t belong anywhere, both struggling to form healthy relationships and seeking solace in alcohol and hyper-sexuality.

A study by Young et al. (2020) found that “throughout adolescence and the transition into adulthood, there is an increase in risk taking behaviour which may be associated with symptoms of hyperactivity and/or impulsivity”.

There is a high rate of teens with ADHD who engage in alcohol, tabaco or drug use, and risky sexual behaviours. It is kind of normal that teenagers start to get adventurous and explore unknown and forbidden worlds, but for teenage girls who don’t even understand what “normal” is, the chances of engaging in and accepting harmful or abusive experiences are much higher – especially because it was us who put ourselves in those situations. Low self-esteem, confusion, and social stigma can leave us more vulnerable to sexual harassment, exploitation, and abusive or inappropriate relationships.

Being normal is a big topic as we enter adulthood. Growing up is not easy for anybody - there are many possibilities and paths to explore - but having an undiagnosed neurological condition makes this process even harder and sometimes deeply painful.

> When asked how the diagnosis influenced their life, all the women I interviewed gave the same answer: it improved it.

AN ILLNESS YOU HAVE TO FIGHT TO GET

Lately, you can often read or hear that “now everybody has ADHD”, as if having ADHD were just a trend, a silly dance on TikTok. In reality, it is not that easy to get a diagnosis as a girl or as an adult woman. As previously explained, girls have historically been under-diagnosed because ADHD used to be considered “a boys’ condition” (Holthe and Langvik, 2017). Nowadays, the rate of diagnosis in children is 3:1 of boys to girls.

Teenage and adult women have to fight for their diagnosis - even if we are lucky enough to be in therapy before getting it. In Portugal, ADHD was not even considered as a possible condition in adults until 2023, despite having already been contemplated in the DSM-5 back in 2013.

In my case, after three years in therapy for anxiety and depression, and almost 15 years after my first diazepam intake; 10 years of wondering what if…?, reading papers, case studies, and recognising myself in ADHD symptoms, I finally suggested to my therapist that I may have ADHD. Her response was to ask why I felt the need to get a label. I tried to explain that I didn’t need a label – I needed to understand myself, which was the reason I had come to therapy in the first place. After that, I couldn’t stop thinking if perhaps she wasn’t familiar with the condition, if she could not understand what I was going through or acknowledge my needs. Either way, that was our last session.

All my life, I was convinced I was somehow wrong, that I was lazy, mediocre, and an impostor; that I would end up a failure because I lacked responsibility and self-discipline to be a successful adult. I kept wondering why I was like that. If everybody said I was intelligent and diligent, if I used to do well at school, if I had talent, why I couldn’t focus and work on my goals? I wanted answers and I may have found them. I wanted to get a diagnosis, not because I wanted a label, but because I wanted to understand what was happening to me and why I felt that my brain was mocking me and betraying me half the time.

I got my diagnosis when I was 31 years old. It took me almost two years to get it, largely thanks to patience and an understanding female doctor who helped me endure the long waiting list to see a psychiatrist through the public health system.

Adriana was diagnosed at 33, but only after some conflicts with her family and her doctors. She also had to invest a lot of money, and went through another big struggle for her mental health. It was the same for Sandra, whose therapist dismissed her and ignored her pleas for an assessment. Finally, she had to drive kilometres during many afternoons with her dad to go to a psychiatrist who agreed to test her. Inês, diagnosed at 26, also had to consult a private physician to get diagnosed. She was so anxious about being dismissed that she made a long and detailed list of the symptoms and traits that accompanied her all her life. Gabriela had similar worries: when she went to get her diagnosis at 31, she was afraid she would not be taken seriously, “because of, you know, all the gender bias you find out there”.

Only Mia and Rita felt they were lucky when they got their diagnoses. Mia, who was 23 at the time, was simply referred by her therapist. Rita was diagnosed at 19, after a period of chronic insomnia that was gravely affecting her quality of life. She sought help and was soon diagnosed with ADHD.

Once the diagnosis was known, treatment could follow. There is not cure for ADHD, as it is not an illness, but an inherent condition – simply another way of being. Treatment consists of two approaches that aim to reduce the impact of symptoms on daily life: cognitive behavioural therapy and medication.

Therapy is the main focus for children, so they can learn from an early age how their brain works and what strategies suit them best. Adults, on the other hand – many of whom grew up developing comorbidities like

ADHD is not an illness, it is a neurological condition: a neurodevelopmental disorder linked to differences in brain development and activity, particularly involving the pre-frontal cortex and the regulation of dopamine — a neurotransmitter that plays a key role in attention, motivation, and reward. “The current hypotheses of dopamine’s involvement in the etiopathology of ADHD suggest that the decreased attention, restlessness, and impaired learning seen in patients with ADHD stem from the reduction of dopamine due to increased re-uptake of dopamine which effectively results in decreased levels of extracellular dopamine” (Methas et al., 2019).

depression and anxiety - need therapy to unlearn bad habits and negative patterns, and in many cases, deal with unresolved trauma.

The main problem is that, nowadays, psychotherapy is not available at most public health systems – or if it is, it is extremely difficult to get regular appointments, which is why the access to it depends on one's economic capacity. In my case, as an aspirational journalist who doesn't really understand money, psychotherapy has been a luxury I could only afford during specific periods of my life. The rest of the time, I depended on already learnt strategies of compassion and self-understanding to keep going on my own.

In such cases, prescribed medication is fundamental to managing our condition. As we passed through the confusion of youth not knowing what was really happening with our brains, some of us cried from joy the first time we took ADHD medication, because for the first time, there was a sense of harmony in our mind, a truce in a war we hadn't even known we were fighting. "Is this how normal people feel, normally?" was my first thought, as a strange sense of organisation settled in my chest. "I guess that's what having the chakras aligned feels like", I joked to myself.

We take CNS (central nervous system) stimulants such as Methylphenidate – the most commonly prescribed psychoactive drug for ADHD treatment. Fifty years ago, the scientific basis for its therapeutic effects was still poorly understood (Volkow et al., 2005). However, new research exploring its influence on ADHD-affected brain led to a revolutionary hypothesis: our brains lose dopamine, and it is the inability to regulate the concentration of extracellular dopamine that contributes to the development of this neurodevelopmental disorder.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter and a hormone. Its receptors are primarily located in the central nervous system and play an essential role in daily functions, affecting movement, emotions, and the brain's reward system, along with sleep, memory, and impulse control (Bhatia et al., 2023). In practice, this translates to symptoms such as relentlessness, emotional dysfunction, lack of motivation, insomnia, distractibility, impulsiveness and aggression; in short, the combined type ADHD.

One of the symptoms my former therapist misdiagnosed as depression was my inability to get out of bed. I've had depressive episodes before and, in that moment, I didn't like I was having one. After getting my diagnosis and my Methylphenidate prescription, I also plotted a strategy: every night, I set my alarm twenty minutes before I actually want to get up the next morning. I kept my medication and some water beside my pillow, so when the time comes, when my alarm goes off, I take my pills in the dark, I close my eyes again, and less than half an hour later, the drug kicks in and I am ready to get up and take on the world.

Now I can finally have calm mornings - a habit I always wished for but could never achieve before. Treatment gives us the chance to believe we can be what we truly are; not who we're supposed to be, but who we dream of becoming. Rita, who is almost ten years younger than me, inspired me deeply when she told me, "I am not more flawed or less capable than anybody. I will never look for pity". Her brain simply functions in a different way, and this may sometimes be a challenge, but it is not a life obstacle.

The relief of "the label" is, indeed, the relief of finally being able to understand ourselves, to confirm we are not broken or wrong; it gives us a chance to be comprehended and, finally, seen. So now we can create functioning strategies instead of masking behaviours; we can be more compassionate with ourselves when we make "stupid" mistakes; we can explain ourselves to others; we can ask for help without feeling less valid. In doing so, we can create new ways of living, not just for ourselves, but for every human being, so that everyone can flourish to their full potential, without forcing those who are different to adapt to outdated rules and beliefs.

For neurodivergences across the spectrum - autism, trisomy 21, and many other less-known conditions - are just part of the diversity of life. Recognizing them, validating them, and celebrating them is not just a woke trend; it is our duty as an evolved society that makes space for everybody, that appreciates life in all its forms. That should be the next step in human evolution: adapting our social constructs to fit lived lives - not the opposite.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

One important topic I didn't explore here is how hormones affect our ADHD brains - not because it's not relevant, but because I couldn't find enough solid scientific research to do it justice, even though it is mentioned in several papers. I hope future studies will help shed light on this, so we can better understand ourselves in all our complexity.

To finish, I would like to thank Adriana, Gabriela, Inês, Marta, Mia, Rita, and Sandra for their time, but mostly for their willingness to share their stories with me and the world. Without their perspectives and experiences, I wouldn't have been able to bring this piece together. I hope I did justice to their stories, and that this work helps women – with or without diagnosis – feel seen and a little less alone in their journey.

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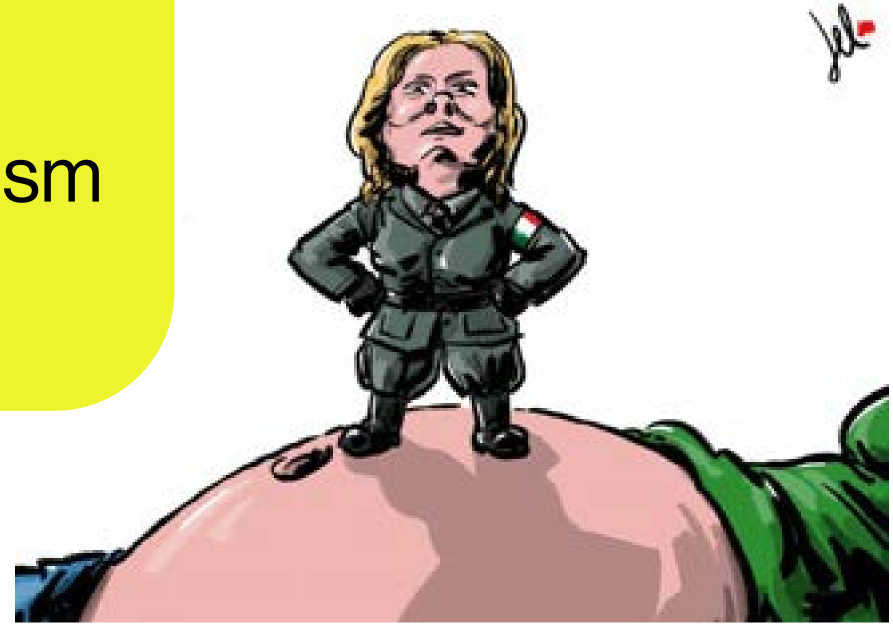
Abortion in Italy:
a combination between neo-fascism and neoliberalism

Margherita Gobbo, Voxeurop



Emanuele Del Rosso | Cartoon Movement

8 March 2024: the Liberated Clinic | Photo: NUDM Padua.
The Non Una di Meno Padua Clinic

The experience of Non Una di Meno Padua reflects a situation in Italy, where the right to abortion is diminishing due to conscientious objection, lack of information and the presence of “pro-life” groups, all in the context of a far-right government and cuts to public health. Non Una di Meno (NUDM, “Not One Less”) is a transfeminist movement that began in Argentina in 2015, then spread globally, fighting against patriarchy, male violence, and gender-based violence. Active in several Italian cities, NUDM, among other activities, has taken action in defence of family planning clinics: public social and health services dedicated to sexual and reproductive health, born out of the feminist struggles of the seventies and institutionalised by law in 1975. Originally created as social, political and feminist health centres as well as gynaecological hospitals, these clinics have been under growing attack for years, with closures and funding cuts.

The Consultoria was symbolically born on 8 March 2024, with the occupation of a former family planning clinic that had been vacant and unused since 2019. The choice of name, which transforms the masculine noun “consultorio” (clinic) into the feminine “consultoria”, is a political act and a reclaiming of these structures as places of collective care and self-determination.

The initiative, led by NUDM Padua, was born from the desire to reclaim a political and feminist space within the city, to create a self-managed sexual health centre, and to mount a defence against gender-based violence and institutional shortcomings, which are both physical (lack of facilities) and informational, especially with regard to abortion.

NUDM activists paint furniture donated by citizens to furnish the Consultoria | Photo: NUDM Padua.

The Consultoria involved the local community, which took part in its assemblies, sexual health workshops and social events. In its nine months of existence, numerous activities were performed, developed on the basis of the needs expressed by the community. These included speech circles, sexual and emotional education workshops with gynaecologists and healthcare professionals, as well as self-managed feminist self-defence workshops and support and information hubs against gender-based violence, in synergy with the work of Anti-Violence Centres.

One of the most important services provided in the Consultoria – a service that NUDM has been running for years – is the Abortion Desk, through which the volunteers offer information on abortion and accompany those who request it to their medical appointments for an abortion. “These help desks, which received at least two requests for help per week at the Consultoria, constitute the political framework of NUDM’s activity: not to replace public health services, but networking and fighting for a secular and accessible health service, where abortion is a right and not a privilege”, explains Cecilia, an activist for NUDM Padua.

Conscientious objection and lack of data

Abortion in Italy was decriminalised by the Law n°194, in 1978. This was the result of years of parliamentary debate, by which the feminist movement's desire for self-determination was largely scaled back in order to reach a compromise with the conservative political forces of the time.

This is clear from the title of the law itself: "Rules for the social protection of maternity and on the voluntary termination of pregnancy", which prioritises the protection of maternity before establishing the circumstances in which abortion is not a crime. As such, in Italy, unlike in other legal traditions, abortion is not conceived as a right of free choice, but as a health measure aimed at protecting human life.

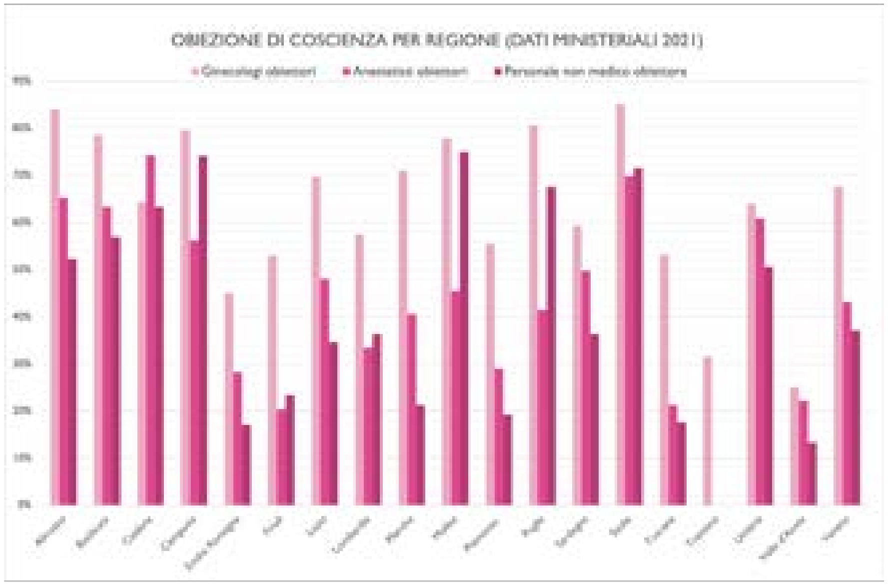
As Cecilia explains, "The Law 194 is in fact an antinomy, since it includes within the legislation itself the instrument to weaken it, namely conscientious objection". Article 9 guarantees that healthcare personnel, when faced with a woman's request for an abortion, have the full right to refuse to perform the procedure for ethical and moral reasons. Although the latest report from the Ministry on the implementation status of Law 194 states that "there are no utilisation problems" and that "it is not affected by the right to conscientious objection", the reality of the situation seems rather different.

Mental Health and Yoga in the Consultoria | Photo: NUDM Padua.

In Italy in 2025 the rate of conscientious objectors, including doctors and healthcare personnel, is so high that for many women, especially migrants or those with fewer economic opportunities, having an abortion becomes a bureaucratic and cultural obstacle course. Women wishing to access abortion services are faced with long waiting times and unhelpful information, and often find themselves forced to move between cities and regions in the hope of finding a doctor willing to perform the procedure.

Article 16 of Law 194 establishes that every year, by February, a report on the status of abortion, from the number of conscientious objectors to the total number of procedures performed, must be presented to the Italian Parliament. The most recent data from the Ministry of Health reports that, in 2022, 60.5% of gynaecologists, 37.2% of anaesthetists and 32.1% of non-medical personnel declared themselves to be objectors.

In 2021, the regions with the highest number of objecting gynaecologists were Sicily (85%), Abruzzo (84%) and Puglia (80.6%), while the lowest percentages were recorded in Trento (17.1%) and Valle d'Aosta (25%). In addition to the fact that the Report on the Implementation of Law 194 is chronically overdue – the most recent available report contains data from three years ago – the information provided by the Ministry is often confusing, obsolete and useless. As can be seen in Graph 1, the Ministerial report publishes aggregate data by average region, and not by hospital, making it difficult for a woman to understand which hospital to go to for an abortion.



Objecting gynaecologists by regions.
Data processed from Mai Dati Maps,
Ministry of Health (2021 data)

For many years, journalists Chiara Lalli and Sonia Montegiove from the Luca Coscioni Association have been conducting a periodic survey to address this situation, asking individual regions to publish updated data on abortion that references individual local health authorities and healthcare facilities.

However, many regions have refused to provide this information, have obscured specific data or made it unreadable. The picture that emerges from the "Mai Dati" report, which resulted from this investigation, depicts an even more critical situation than that suggested by the official version provided by the Ministry. According to Mai Dati, in 2022, between 80% and 100% of healthcare personnel in no fewer than 72 Italian hospitals were objectors; 100% of healthcare personnel in four clinics and 20 hospitals were objectors; and all the gynaecologists in 18 hospitals were objectors. In the Molise region access to abortion is especially prohibitive, with only one abortion clinic in the whole region.

In light of this, as Lalli and Montegiovi report in Mai Dati, the institutions perpetrate a double abuse when it comes to abortion. On the one hand, they violate Article 16 of Law 194 by failing to provide annual statistics in the Annual Report on the Implementation of Law 194. And they also contravene the 2016 Freedom of information act, which guarantees the right of access to information held by public administrations, by concealing data on conscientious objection. Access to abortion in Italy is therefore not only hindered by Law 194 itself, which allows conscientious objection, but also by the lack of information and the impossibility of accessing the information that exists.

In addition to the lack of information about where abortion services can be accessed, and the scarcity of locations that offer the service, the Ministry of Health, on its institutional webpage, provides very little practical information about abortion. As Cecilia says, "In Italy, access to abortion is not guaranteed, and part of this is not even knowing how to access it".

Talking to me about their work in the Consultoria's Abortion Help Desk, NUDM volunteers emphasise how often people call to get basic information, which seems trivial, but can be difficult to find: "How much will I bleed with RU486? How much pain will I feel? Can I drive the day after? Can I go to work?" In addition to providing answers to these and other questions, the help desks also offer psychological and emotional support in a welcoming and non-judgemental environment, filling a need that is often lacking in the public service.

The judgemental atmosphere that seems to characterise family planning clinics is not only a cultural issue, but has legislative roots that draw on the ambiguities inherent in the law itself.

In fact, the Italian law on abortion not only allows, but also provides for and encourages the presence of pro-life individuals and organisations supporting maternity in family planning clinics. These associations are in charge of "resolving" the motives underlying a woman's decision to terminate her pregnancy – that is, "economic, social, family or health circumstances" (Law 194, Article 4) – thereby completely excluding the idea that a woman can have an abortion for personal reasons, and subordinating her will to a process of justification from the outset. For this very reason, Law 194 is an antinomy: it decriminalises abortion, but at the same time, in the very locations designated for its practice, it places people responsible for convincing women to do the opposite.

The role of the Meloni government

If Law 194 already limited women's self-determination, recent regulatory changes have managed to further strengthen the influence of anti-abortion groups in clinics and hospitals. From April 2024, the agreements that sanction the access of "pro-life" organisations to clinics are no longer only financed with regional funds, but also with public and state funds, which draw on the PNRR (National Recovery Plan).

This change came about thanks to an amendment proposed by the ruling Fratelli d'Italia in April 2024 which strengthens the power of anti-abortion associations and "third sector organisations with proven experience in maternity support" to operate in clinics.

The party led by Giorgia Meloni described this measure as a tool to inform women about available welfare measures in order to prevent abortion being chosen for economic or social reasons. These changes were not simply theoretical, but had tangible consequences: they further strengthened the presence of pro-life groups in the territory.

In a "Catholic country" like Italy, Francesca from NUDM Padua explains, "anti-abortion organisations operate as militant groups with a widespread presence, from ecclesiastical settings to Centres for Assistance to Life" (CAV).

These Centres, voluntary Catholic associations where people can access Christian charity for the support of a child, are financed by public money (as in the case of the Piedmont region) and supported by the current government, which thus strengthens the anti-abortion influence in the country.

Guaranteed institutional access for pro-life groups is not limited to greater visibility in clinics, but also translates into an increasingly structured presence within the public health system. "Following the Fratelli d'Italia amendment, there are cities in which anti-abortion organisations have gained semi-institutional access to hospitals, obtaining the management of dedicated spaces", explains Francesca. The most striking case, according to the activists, is that of the Sant'Anna Hospital in Turin, where a counselling room has been set up where pro-lifers have been given access to an information space for abortion "which in fact provides scientific misinformation".

As for the city of Padua, since December 2024, the hospitals of Camposampiero and Cittadella have renewed the agreement between the ULSS 6 Euganea regional health authority and the anti-abortion association Movement for Life (CAV), which allows anti-abortionists to volunteer in hospitals and to have notice boards and informational material made available.

Faced with this progressive dismantling of the right to abortion, NUDM's struggle and resistance also takes form in Obiezione Respinta SoS Aborto ("Objection Denied SoS Abortion"), a project that aims to map conscientious objection in Italy, based on anonymous testimonies organised by facility. Using a QR code, people can access a portal that lists all the public health centres in the area, and describe their experience with the medical staff, reporting the presence of objectors or anti-abortion groups, as well as empathetic and qualified staff.

Pro-Life posters in the streets of Padua | Photo: NUDM Padua.

The crisis in Italian healthcare and ideological attacks

According to a 1996 Law, there should be one family planning clinic for every 20,000 inhabitants in Italy. However, in Padua, a city of 200,000 inhabitants, four clinics have been closed in the last ten years. In the Veneto region the rate of conscientious objection is close to 70%.

These dynamics are part of the general attack on Italian healthcare, due to the simultaneous defunding and downgrading of the National Health Service (SSN), which is losing its universalistic nature due to massive cuts. The Health Report edited by CREA (Centre for Applied Economic Research in Health, 2024) shows that total Italian national per capita health expenditure in 2023 was 37.8% lower than that of the other countries that joined the EU before 1995. The result is that healthcare in Italy is increasingly privatised, with strong regional disparities and access to care becoming increasingly difficult for the most vulnerable sections of the population, including migrants.

In this context, with more than €37 billion taken from public health in the decade between 2010-2019 (GIMBE, 2024) by the ruling class over the last twenty years, regardless of political persuasion, more and more family planning clinics are being merged and closed. In Italy, 300 family planning clinics have been closed in the last 10 years (from 2,430 in 2013 to 2,140 in 2023, according to the National health service statistical yearbooks) and those that remain open are experiencing reductions in opening hours and staff.

The consequence and parallel phenomenon to this has been the depoliticisation of these structures, which are changing from innovative centres with multidisciplinary approaches to physical, mental and collective health, to becoming increasingly basic clinics.

The attack on family planning clinics should first be contextualised within the progressive weakening of Italy's National Health Service, but it also fits into a broader ideological framework, that of the far right Meloni government.

Feminist community and socialising at the Consultoria. | Photo: NUDM Padua.

In addition to the April decree and the funding allocated by the state to the Centres for Life, the force behind the closure of family planning clinics in Italy also involves the vision of women as political subjects as portrayed by the current ruling class.

According to Francesca and Cecilia of NUDM, it is wrong to think that the Meloni government "is just a neo-fascist government, because Meloni has the ability to combine neo-fascism and neoliberalism in a very powerful way". The woman appointed by the President is not only a mother, "but a woman, mother, worker, who finds her freedom in the freedom of the market". Although the government, with the Ministry of Equal Opportunities, Family and Birth led by the pro-life minister Roccella, goes on about being pro-birth, which has led to comparisons with historical fascism, "the issue of the birth rate seems to be increasingly part of an anti-immigrant, racial discourse, where obstructing abortion in Italy is closely linked to a political will: that of reproducing the family, and therefore the white homeland".

The Eviction of the Consultoria

The Consultoria was interrupted on 12 December 2024, when it was evicted nine months after it began its occupation, a period of time that the NUDM activists find ironic, given the theme of gestation.

The Padua Police Headquarters and the Territorial Agency for Residential Housing justified the intervention with the need to free up the space for a co-housing project. However, as the NUDM activists point out, the action was carried out in the most depoliticised way possible: in silence, without warning or possibility of dialogue, simply by changing the locks.

The Consultoria was not created to compensate for the privatisation of a public service, explains Cecilia, but to propose an alternative, grassroots health model that would operate "within and against" the system, while at the same time addressing the loneliness that characterises an increasingly atomised society. Today the NUDM Padua Consultoria is looking for a new home, and is currently negotiating with the local council to find a suitable space.

Unifying Protest: How Gaza Sparks Solidarity at the University of Amsterdam

Andrea Kis, RektoVerso

In recent years, the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has become a focal point for student activism, particularly concerning the ongoing war and genocide in Gaza. The university's campuses have transformed into arenas of protest, debate, and artistic expression, uniting students from diverse backgrounds in a shared pursuit of justice and human rights. Why do they think it is important to participate in protesting? Is it just an extracurricular activity, or do they see it as an integral part of the educational experience?

The recent escalation of violence in Gaza has resonated deeply within the UvA community. Students and staff have voiced their concerns over the humanitarian crisis, urging the university to take a definitive stand. This essay explores how the events affected the academic space within UvA, reflecting on the role of educational higher institutions concerning contemporary social issues and ongoing conflicts and wars.

On May 6, 2024, a coalition of students from UvA, Vrije Universiteit (VU), and Amsterdam University College (AUC) established a Gaza solidarity encampment on the Roeterseiland campus. Their demands included transparency regarding the university's ties with Israeli institutions and the cessation of collaborations with entities implicated in human rights violations. (Open letter, UvA, Het Parool, Folia)

The occupation gained attention as tensions escalated; supporters of Israel confronted the demonstrators, throwing flares and fireworks, but were driven away without police intervention. The situation intensified after midnight on May 7, when the university asked the help of the Mayor of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema, to clear the university grounds. Riot police, accompanied by police dogs and bulldozers, raided the encampment to evict the protesters.169 participants were arrested. The next day, thousands of people gathered to condemn police violence on university grounds, protest sparking a second encampment at Oudemanhuispoort campus of UvA. Riot police again cleared the barricades and broke inside the encampment. Protesters were cornered and removed by the police, resulting in 36 arrests and dozens being injured by the police. (UvA)

The protests continued through May. On May 13, a national walk-out was organized. The event was attended by at least one thousand students and staff members, also ending with the intervention of the riot police. The crowd was dispersed and the building closed for the day.

The University's Response to the Protests

The university's response to the protests has been a subject of intense debate and criticism among students and faculty. Initially, UvA administration adopted a cautious stance, emphasizing the need to uphold campus rules and ensure the safety of all students. A spokesperson for the university stated that while protests are allowed, they shouldn't disrupt academic activities or violate university policies. This approach was viewed by many as an attempt to silence dissent rather than engage with the underlying issues raised by the protests. But can a protest be non-disruptive and still efficient? Some argue that disruption is needed to draw attention to the issues at hand, and by doing so, it will force people to confront the problem, creating a pressure for change. Disruption can range from occupying spaces to blocking traffic or interrupting events, with the aim of changing the status quo.

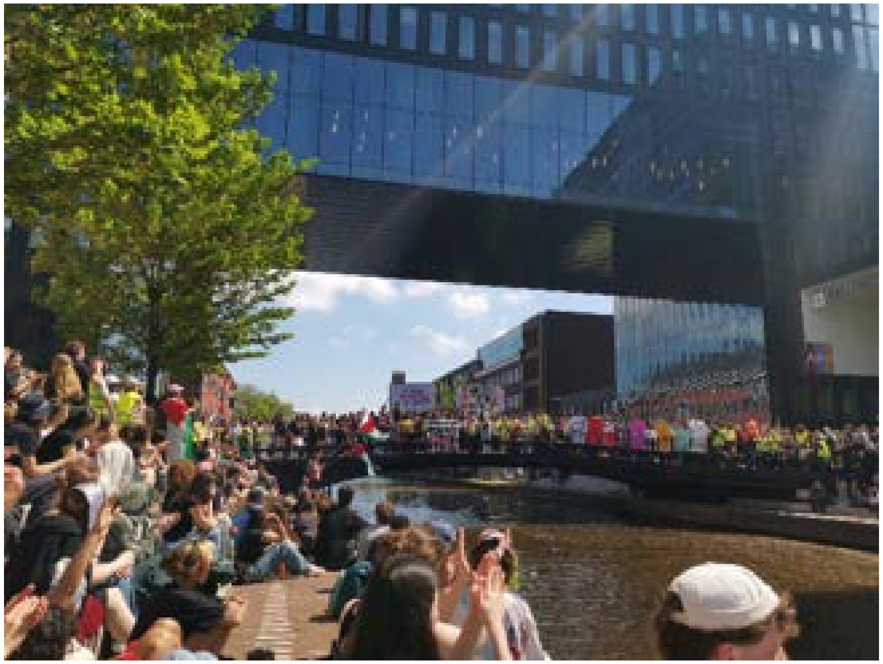


Photo: Andrea Kis, 2024, staff solidarity walk-out event

In the days following the escalation of protests, UvA released a statement acknowledging the students' right to express their opinions but reiterated that university policies must be respected. This included restrictions on overnight occupations and the use of face coverings during protests. Many students interpreted this as a lack of genuine support for their cause, feeling that the university prioritized maintaining order over addressing the urgent humanitarian crisis in Gaza. An open letter from faculty and staff supported the students' right to protest and emphasized the importance of addressing human rights issues within academic institutions. The letter underscored that universities should not be complicit in human rights violations or war crimes through their collaborations.(Folia, Open Letter, UvA)

Despite these efforts, many students felt that the university's response was inadequate and superficial. They called for stronger action, including the establishment of a dedicated committee to address issues related to Palestine and a reevaluation of partnerships with Israeli universities.

Protests in Semi-Public Academic Spaces

One year after the occupations and encampments, the general question remains: What is the role of universities in accommodating and allowing the various political, religious and cultural experiences and opinions? As part of this discussion, there is a focus on how the fundamental right for protesting can be allowed in semi-public spaces, such as universities.

Semi-public spaces within universities, such as lecture halls, cafeterias, and libraries, play a crucial role in shaping student experiences. These environments are not just venues for academic learning; they are also sites for critical discourse and activism. The protests at UvA challenge the idea that universities should remain neutral in political matters. Instead, they argue that educational institutions must provide a platform for students to actively engage in pressing social issues. Engaging in protests and political discussions allows students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world issues, facilitating critical thinking and civic engagement. Such activities also provide a platform for marginalized voices, promoting inclusivity and diversity within the academic community.

There is tension between the university's aims of education, research, and valorization, and students' desires for active participation. As one of the students expressed: 'As social scientists we are trained to dissect the most personal aspects of human thought and behavior, but when it comes to raising our voices for the oppressed, we are banned from expressing our opinion.'

While activism enriches student life, it also presents challenges, particularly in a polarized political climate. Universities must navigate the fine line between supporting free expression and maintaining a safe, inclusive environment for all students. The potential for conflicts to escalate into violence or for certain groups to feel marginalized necessitates careful and thoughtful responses from university administrations. This tension underscores the importance of fostering an environment where critical discussions about politics, identity, and ethics can thrive, enriching academic experience.

Photo: Andrea Kis, 2024, staff solidarity walk-out event

The Embodied Experiences of Conflict

Interviews with students and faculty reveal a complex tapestry of emotions and motivations driving their involvement in the protests. Many students express feelings of frustration and helplessness as they witness the suffering of those in Gaza. The emotional and physical experiences during protests are equally significant. Students report a sense of empowerment when participating in collective actions, yet they also face the anxiety of potential repercussions. The eviction of protesters from the ABC building by the police has left many feeling vulnerable and demoralized. Insecurity also stemmed from the unforeseeable decisions made by the institution to restrict access to the campus buildings, to contain protest initiatives.

Nour, Kamyab, Rachel and Danielle are all students at UvA Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, and they were involved in raising awareness for the Palestinian struggles since the beginning of the war.

Nour, a sociology student originally from South Lebanon, brings a lived experience of occupation and displacement to their activism. Growing up under Israeli military occupation, Nour internalized a powerful sense of resistance early on, which shaped his identity and political awareness. He reflects on how his background shaped his perspective on the conflict: ‘I lived under Israeli occupation for the first six years of my life. I was raised with the notion of Israel as an enemy. Now, as I engage in protests, I realize how deeply personal this struggle is for me.’ When arriving at UvA, they initially perceived it as a progressive space but soon became disillusioned with the institution’s selective political engagement. The university’s vocal support for Ukraine, contrasted with its relative silence on Palestine, deepened his skepticism.

> ‘Russia invaded Ukraine. They cut the ties. I was like: “Oh my God, I love this university.” And then, Sheikh Jarrah happened, where Israeli settlers started taking over a new neighborhood in Palestine. And we were protesting, not on campus, but in Dam Square.’

The protests became an outlet for his frustration, reinforcing the idea that universities should not only be sites of education but also of active political engagement.

‘And then October 7 happened. We started protesting on campus. It was a soft way of protesting, in the form of flyers, sit-ins, banners, etc. We protested for almost a year on campus, but no one listened. We tried again, no one listened. We tried again, no one listened. So, it was time for action.’

Nour's participation in student activism is an extension of his lifelong fight for justice, seeing it as a duty rather than a choice. Similarly, he noted how the protests and his academic work intersect:

'I think it's a matter of privilege right now, who protests and who doesn't, and who is able to and who isn't, who doesn't have the energy to protest or do whatever. As a person from the Middle East, affected directly by this whole situation, I don't think I can give my energy to this. But I'm protesting in other ways to change the system from within. That's why I want to stay in academia, because I think academia is missing people like me, to change perspectives. While in my department, in sociology, the majority is supporting the pro-Palestina- protesters, there are also some Zionists. And I didn't feel safe for a while. I decided that I don't want to protest anymore, but I'm showing up every day. I think this is my way of protesting from now on. Just showing up, claiming my place, which is not theirs.'

Kamyab, a Research Master's student at UvA, has channeled his personal experiences as an Iranian refugee into social justice activism. The escalation of violence on October 7 compelled him to confront the rising hostility toward Middle Eastern communities and deepen his advocacy for Palestinian rights. His academic research on Palestinian rights and his lived experience of authoritarianism in Iran and his experience of displacement inform his commitment, viewing activism as an extension of his identity. For Kamyab, the University of Amsterdam protests provided both a platform to voice his convictions and a space to overcome internalized fears of being visible as an activist.

'I spent decades trying to appease and take away everything "ethnic" about myself when I appear in public in order to prevent any thought within the mind of white people and Dutch people, who associate me with other more dominant migrant groups like Moroccans or Turks. I have lived in constant fear of the perception of the white gaze upon me so that I've had my entire life shaped by this.'

Photo: Andrea Kis, 2024, students protesting at UvA

Kamyab also acknowledged the difficulties of engaging in activism, the experience of standing alongside Palestinian activists and wearing a keffiyeh in public. Something they had previously hesitated to do became a significant personal and political act of defiance. His deep connection with the Palestinian people also defined his ethnographic research, continuing his activism inside the academic sphere now.

Rachel did her Political Science studies at UvA. Growing up in a politically charged environment, Rachel was influenced by her father, who had a rich history of activism during his youth in South Korea. He was part of the student movements that emerged in response to the oppressive regime of the time, where protests were often met with violence.

‘I was seventeen when Black Lives Matter happened in the US. Many of my friends had a hard time understanding civil unrest, unpeaceful and violent protesting, and why it’s effective. Many people were saying that peaceful protesting is how it should go – remember Martin Luther King. But my dad had given me the tools to understand why it’s important. The student revolutions in Korea didn’t happen with students just peacefully asking the dictator to step down. It was through the blood of students, sacrificing their lives and their time that they had to make sure that their country could be free, to make sure that their children could be free.’

When the protests for Gaza began at UvA, Rachel felt compelled to participate, driven by a sense of responsibility to amplify marginalized voices, and to continue the legacy of her father.

Danielle’s involvement in the protests for Gaza at UvA began at her workplace in the Hague, where she bonded with her colleague, Fatima, a girl of Palestinian origin. She became involved with events, raising awareness on the situation in Gaza, which also directed her attention to UvA.

‘I did my bachelor’s at UvA when Russia invaded Ukraine, and I remember seeing the university’s sincere response to it. The university had the flag on but with Palestine, the silence was so painful. Convinced that we need to be talking about this, I presented an essay for an art school in The Hague, which turned out to be very important in the school cutting ties with the Israeli University.’

In her academic pursuits, Danielle sought to merge her activism with her studies, focusing on the university’s response to the protests and the need for greater awareness around the issue of Palestine. She recognized the importance of creating spaces for dialogue and protest within the university, pushing back against the administration’s initial silence. Her efforts included organizing petitions and participating in discussions aimed at holding the university accountable for its complicity in the ongoing conflict. Danielle’s activism is characterized by a desire to foster a sense of community and understanding among students, emphasizing the need for critical engagement with social issues. By documenting her experiences and those of her peers, she aims to advocate for a more inclusive and responsive academic environment.

Artistic Responses to Conflict

Protests often lead to new forms of resistance and artistic expression. As students reflect on their experiences, many find creative outlets to process their emotions and advocate for their cause, such as murals, photography, clothing, performances and exhibitions that capture the essence of their struggles. These serve as powerful tools for solidarity and community building, allowing students to communicate their messages in ways that transcend traditional discourse and have emerged as a vital aspect of student activism at UvA. During the occupations, banners and installations transformed university spaces into galleries of dissent. One notable example was a life-size flag displayed in the ABC building, bearing the words ‘Free Palestine’ and ‘Cut ties with Israeli colonizers’. Such visual statements have amplified the protesters’ voices, capturing attention and sparking dialogue among the broader student body and faculty. (Het Parool)

Another example is the Tabaria cafe. Founded by activists, it has become a hub for artistic collaboration and cultural exchange, hosting events that showcase Palestinian art and heritage. When celebrating one year of Tabaria cafe, the volunteers and staff organized an art exhibition featuring works by Palestinian artists. The event drew a diverse crowd, with attendees sharing their personal connections to the artwork. ‘We wanted to create a space where people could engage with Palestinian culture and understand the struggles we face. Art has a unique ability to connect people and evoke empathy’, Danielle explained.

The interview with Danielle, who is also one of the cafe’s organizers, reveals a deep commitment to not only raising funds for humanitarian efforts but also honoring Palestinian culture. The cafe’s founders emphasize that their mission extends beyond mere financial support; they aim to create a welcoming environment where individuals can connect with their heritage and each other. This dual focus on cultural preservation and activism underscores the transformative power of art in times of conflict. The impact of the Tabaria cafe extends beyond its patrons. It has become a platform for community building, offering workshops and discussions that address the Palestinian experience. It is a place where Palestinians can just go and relax; enjoy Palestinian food or Arabic coffee.

The role of creativity in processing conflict cannot be overstated. By using art as a form of activism, students at UvA are participating in a long tradition of cultural resistance that seeks to confront and dismantle oppressive structures. Artistic responses to conflict can also serve to reclaim narratives that have been historically erased or silenced. As students engage with their identities through creative expression, they assert their right to be heard and recognized. This reclamation is particularly significant in the context of the Palestinian struggle, where narratives have often been marginalized in mainstream discourses.

Education as Engaged Citizenship

Education plays a crucial role in shaping the perspectives of young activists. At UvA, the curriculum encourages critical thinking and engagement with social issues. However, this potential is often stifled by institutional constraints and a reluctance to address politically sensitive topics. The protests and artistic responses emerging from the Gaza conflict challenge the university to reconsider its role in facilitating discussions around these critical issues. Students advocate for a more inclusive educational environment that acknowledges the complexities of global conflicts and empowers them to engage meaningfully with the world around them. By fostering a culture of activism and dialogue, universities can better prepare students to become informed and engaged citizens.

The solidarity demonstrated by students at UvA also highlights the importance of intersectionality in activism. Students from various backgrounds come together to support a common cause, recognizing that their struggles are interconnected. This solidarity is particularly crucial in a time when divisions based on race, religion, and nationality can easily emerge. For instance, during the protests, students from different ethnic backgrounds shared their experiences and perspectives, creating a rich dialogue that transcended individual identities.

The ongoing genocide and war in Gaza have catalyzed a movement among students at UvA, uniting them in solidarity and shared purpose. As they engage in protests and artistic expressions, students are redefining what it means to be politically active within academic spaces. The protests at UvA illustrate the vital role that political debates and activism play in enriching student life, fostering critical engagement with pressing social issues.

By embracing their embodied experiences of conflict and channeling their emotions into artistic responses, students are not only advocating for justice but also creating a sense of community that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries. The call for universities to support such activism is more critical than ever, as these movements challenge the complacency of institutions and demand accountability. As the situation in Gaza continues to unfold, the solidarity forged among students at UvA serves as a testament to the power of collective action and the enduring significance of protest in shaping the future of social justice and cultural understanding. The lessons learned from these experiences will undoubtedly resonate far beyond the university campus, inspiring future generations to continue the fight for justice and human rights.

Between seas:

The Brazilian experience beyond the Atlantic

Dan Alves, Gerador

‘We are many Severinos
and our destiny’s the same:
to soften up these stones
by sweating over them,
trying to bring to life
a dead and deader land,
to try to wrest a farm
out of burnt-over land.
But, so that Your Excellencies
can recognise me better
and be able to follow better
the story of my life,
I’ll be the Severino
you’ll now see emigrate.’

The Death and Life of a Severino, João Cabral de Melo Neto, 1955 (Translation from Elizabeth Bishop)

This report was written using the narrative possibilities of literary journalism.

It was a Sunday in March and winter was beginning its slow farewell. The day dawned blue and turned grey. A whole six months living in Lisbon has taught me not to be surprised by this phenomenon. It had been six straight days of hard graft and, as with most catering workers, I started my one day off by putting my dirty clothes in the wash and taking the opportunity to tidy up my room. The sunshine thrilled me because it would both save me the expense of going to the launderette and save time.

I left the house, walked for just under 10 minutes and arrived at the Fonte Luminosa (meaning luminous fountain). It is neither well-lit nor well-maintained, but it still trumps Rome's Trevi Fountain. By now the day was grey and heralded the rain that would come that evening; I should have gone to the launderette, I thought. I walked along Alameda Dom Afonso Henrique, named after the first king of Portugal.

I soon spotted the modernist building that has caught my eye since I first set foot there. A symbol of Estado Novo architecture in Portugal, it opened in 1955 as the Império cinema-theatre, the same year that the book Morte e Vida Severina (trans. The Death and Life of a Severino) was written in Brazil. During the 1980s it was vacated and remained so until it was bought by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in the year of my birth, 1992. With the 'Now Showing' billboards long gone, every day at the top of the building there is a simple reminder to passers-by: Jesus Christ is Lord.

On the stage of this same theatre, on 6 June 1966, a fervent Lisbon cheered the end of the tour that brought the adaptation of the northeastern Brazilian Christmas play, Morte e Vida Severina by the Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto, to the city. Brought by TUCA (the theatre company of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo), João came along and was so happy with the enthusiasm of the audience at the premiere that he followed the group to further performances in Coimbra and Porto. This and more was shared with me by Rafaela Cardeal, a researcher from Rio de Janeiro who dedicated herself to a research project that culminated in her doctoral thesis on the Portuguese reception of the poet's work.

According to Rafaela, the play's success is due to many factors. But among them is the way in which its characters, dressed in white and without scenery, represented a social critique of the reality of the Brazilian sertão that echoed Portuguese life under the dictatorship. Young audiences, who were fighting against fascist repression, identified with the message of the play, which was set to music by Chico Buarque at the start of his career. At the time, the denunciation of social inequality and oppression became a symbol of resistance against Portuguese repression.

We were sitting at a table in Pão de Açúcar - a 1950s café opposite the Império, or rather the Universal Church, as it is now known. At the back of the café there is a tiled panel showing the irreverent landscape of a Rio postcard, which for a significant portion of my life was part of my daily commute to university. The choice of location was not intentional. But Pão de Açúcar and a cinema-turned-Universal Church couldn't have made me feel more at home.

My move to Lisbon calcified within me an identity that, although it had never gone unnoticed in my life, became extremely visceral; Brazilianness. It seems that when I crossed the Atlantic, I symbolically found myself facing a process of death and life. I believe that every immigrant experiences a rebirth. And this whole process is painful in many ways. Life here has taught me to perceive violence differently from what I was used to. Violence here is not explicit, it is subtle and institutional. On many occasions, violence is dressed up as bureaucracy.

At first I thought I knew why I had come here, but a few months later I'm no longer sure. I know I fled Rio's violence and I know I came in search of a better quality of life, but I'm no longer very clear about what that means. Just as Severino realised, perhaps the discovery lies in the journey and not in the destination. My encounters along the way have helped me to understand the meaning of being Brazilian and of my path.

Sidnei Granja

It was the first week of summer when Sidnei arrived in Lisbon last year. Alongside a suitcase and a small rucksack, he carried with him the promise of a better life. His life on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, far removed from the fabulous imagery eternalised in the bossa nova of Tom Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes, brought trauma. The successive muggings and gratuitous violence that accompanied the simple reality of existing made him decide to build the rest of his life in Portugal.

With absolutely no guarantees, he crossed immigration control with a three-month tourist visa. It's been nine months now and under no circumstances is he considering returning to Brazil. And that doesn't necessarily mean that he has found paradise. On the contrary, here in Portugal he has discovered new challenges in his existence as a working class person. He obviously has a better quality of life, but with a new sense of vulnerability. Unable to settle his immigrant status, he feels in a kind of limbo. Unsure of when he will be able to cross Portuguese borders and explore Europe as he dreams of, he lives day-to-day, working in a restaurant in Porto, close to the trendy Bolhão Market.

Slavery. That is the word he uses to describe his day-to-day life. This became clear when he tried to look for a training course that enabled him to find new job opportunities and couldn't find one that fitted in with the reality of a person who starts work at 12 noon and has no time to leave. It all depends on the customers. It may be that the restaurant you work in finishes at 11pm, or maybe midnight. You never know when a group of hungry tourists will arrive.

Behind the counter, at off-peak times, you watch life happening outside. He feels like he's in an aquarium, watching people pass through the glass that separates him from the life he longs for. On the few sunny days in Porto's winter, the feeling of suffocation consumes him the most. That's when he most wants to feel the warmth of freedom.

Laís Del Castillo

During my first month in Lisbon, I lived in a hostel in Chiado. One evening in October, I found Laís in the kitchen chatting to her girlfriend on a video call. She was excitedly sharing the videos she had recorded at the concert of Brazilian singer Jorge Vercillo. I would have gone too if I'd known, I learnt to like his songs as a result of my mother's influence. At the beginning of the 2000s, it was what I listened to on a daily basis.

I identified with Laís because she was only there for one night, returning the following day to Setúbal where she lives because of her job as a chef in a restaurant. Thinking back to that moment, I realise the irony of us meeting in a kitchen. Since then, our friendship has gone from strength to strength and with each meeting I learn more about her story.

Our meetings are rare. Like me, Laís works full time shifts split into two with an extended break in the day. Three hour breaks do not often permit get-togethers with friends who live 50 kilometres away. But one Sunday at the beginning of February she managed to get half a day off and came to see Virginia at the theatre, a play written and starring Brazilian actress Cláudia Abreu. At that screening, I saw Brazilian singer Fafá de Belém in the audience honouring her friend. Belém is from Pará in the north of Brazil, the land of my grandmother.

Laís was born in the same region. To be more precise, she was born in the municipality of Macapá in Amapá. But when she was very young, she moved to Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte, which was where she grew up. During her childhood she took part in chess championships, and she was good, as she is keen to point out. She won state, municipal and even regional championships. She never won a national championship, but she did finish in the top 10.

This experience of travelling for championships at a very young age boosted the free spirit she has today. So it wasn't too difficult to take the decision to move to Punta Cana for work, where she led a kitchen despite not speaking Spanish at first. Being an immigrant, therefore, is nothing new, but she knows that each move throws up new challenges. The ease with which she can move around has led her to yet another destination, this time to Albufeira in southern Portugal. As well as looking for a job that respects her as a human being, proximity to the beach is a necessity in her life, as it is for many of those who grew up on Brazil's coast.

When we left the theatre and went to dinner, I noticed, as she took off her coat, a huge burn on her left forearm. These are recurring marks left on the bodies of the kitchen workers. When she told me about the accident, she conveyed a sense of normality and a way of looking at the recurrence of this as part of the job. However, I perceive a strong symbolism in the marks that this work leaves on the bodies of a significant majority of immigrants.

In parallel, I think back to that stage at the Maria Matos Theatre, with a performance of Virginia Woolf facing the dilemma of becoming a great writer. On the edge of sensibility and madness, I observed the creative process of this woman who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, faced homeric difficulties in proving her excellence in a literary milieu of men. For Woolf, pain played a fundamental role in her work. But I wonder if it really needs to hurt. From that day on, many reflections surround my mind and a phrase within the long monologue still resonates with me: freedom is having time to live. And so I realise that I, Laís and Sidnei are not truly free.

Davi Afonso

Like us, Davi isn't fully free either. I share the vast bulk of my six-day working week with him in the same restaurant. I'm a waiter and he's a kitchen assistant. Occasionally I go into the kitchen to help him with whatever is needed, and there I discover an added dimension to catering; it doesn't matter if the restaurant has customers or not, there's always work in the kitchen.

If they're not dealing with the immediate demands of the customer, they're preparing for the next day. Whether it's making pudim, my favourite dessert, which tastes like childhood to me, or preparing the cozido à portuguesa - Portuguese stew - to be served for lunch the next day, the kitchen is always looking to the future.

One Friday, Davi and I decided to break the humdrum of our routine and went to the bohemian Bairro Alto. During our walk from Rua de Santa Marta to our final destination, we spoke about life along Avenida da Liberdade. It was on this journey that I realised that when he decided to leave Curitiba, in the south of Brazil, he wanted to explore the world. Where he came from, he had a stable job as an administrative assistant at a large company, he lived in his own house and life seemed complete. Yet something was missing.

So he decided to come to Portugal. His family doubted him, but he came here anyway. And in the heat of excitement, a few months before his departure, he bought a ticket for the day of his mum's birthday. On the morning of 20 May 2024, he went to her house to have coffee and say goodbye. She didn't want to eat, they said goodbye and he left for the airport with no regrets, he was truly happy. At the time, mother and son hadn't realised what that moment meant. One day she rang to say that it had finally sunk in and she realised that he had left.

At Bar da Vera, a place that brings Brazilians together in Lisbon's nightlife, we discovered that the one beer that we had agreed to have turned into two bottles of wine and some shots with peculiar names. Davi has an inexplicable energy for someone almost 30 years old. No matter how hard he works or how tiring the day has been, he always wants to have fun. The DJ was playing Brazilian music and it wasn't long before we gave up on going back early. We had fun, met people and lived a different life. It's always satisfying to meet people with whom I share something, it's a mental exercise to keep my place in mind. That night, being an immigrant seemed like a mere detail.

Seventy years have passed since Severino's journey hit the bookshops of Brazil. As well as a social portrait of the country, this character is the archetype of the modern individual who, faced with the progress of his time, has been swallowed up by the premise of modernisation. Poverty and hunger are still a reality in Brazil, there's no denying that. Just like in so many other places, hundreds of immigrants are braving the sea. Adrift in the immensity of the ocean, severe deaths are witnessed across Europe. According to a report released by Caminando Fronteras, more than 10,000 migrants died trying to reach Spain in 2024. It would be reckless to try to compare the drama of these journeys to our own. But we also can't deny that new times have brought other dilemmas and anxieties to the Brazilian dimension.

'We don't just want food. We want food, fun and art. We don't just want food, we want to go anywhere.' In these verses written at the end of the 1980s, Arnaldo Antunes from the Brazilian band Titãs signalled a new set of demands. In 2025, at a time of late modernity, I use Stuart Hall's arguments about identity to explain the process of fragmentation, instability and constant reinvention to which we are subjected.

Globalisation, migration and the collapse of fixed references destroy the idea of a continuous and coherent 'I' - like Severino. In Lisbon, we experience a reality that imposes itself on our Brazilian existence. My identity, previously anchored in Brazil, is rebuilt in transit between languages, customs and bureaucracies that place me in a nether zone - neither here nor there.

When nourishment leads to starvation

Agné Rimkuté, Kurziv

Algae bloom around Gotland, Sweden.
Source: link

Öland is an ancient island located off the Swedish coast. Protected by UNESCO, it has been home to humans for about 5000 years and hosts archeological sites dating back to the prehistoric period. Per the islanders' custom, Öland has preserved its agricultural landscape and traditions dating as far back as the Iron Age and has, unsurprisingly, become a desirable tourist destination, offering its visitors everything from horseback riding tours, sights of old wooden mills and, of course, an opportunity to swim along its sandy beaches.

The latter opportunity, however, is becoming more uncertain: the idyllic coastal waters of Öland are periodically covered by "the rhubarb-curd-like and toxic sludge" or, as it is more commonly and politely called, algal bloom. Algal blooms are ugly, stinky, and rapidly diminish any enthusiasm to go into the water – or even to stay on the beach. But that is not all: marine biologists warn that these blooms may contain a microorganism named cyanobacteria. The problem they pose is not merely that of aesthetics or an olfactory offence: they can be poisonous, particularly to children and dogs.

Such algal blooms thus can have a detrimental impact on local tourism and economies – and this impact is not limited to Öland alone. Surveys conducted in Sweden have shown local businesses reporting a decrease in bookings due to the algal blooms around Gotland island. In 2005, on Öland itself, it was estimated that algal blooms resulted in losses of approximately 11 million EUR for the tourism and fishing sectors. Sometimes, local municipalities endeavour to organize clean-up efforts. These can be rather costly as well: the municipality of Strömstad (Skagerrak) estimates the cost of such clean-ups at 70,000 EUR per year. Across the Baltic from Öland, researchers of Lithuania's Marine Research Institute warn that unless we take action, coastal waters will become unsuitable for swimming altogether.

Source: Map 4.2 CCIV 71127_Development of oxygen-depletion.eps | European Environment Agency's home page

Take action against what, and how? There are multiple processes contributing to the proliferation of stinky and sticky algae in a specific location. One of the major causes in the Baltic Sea is a process ornately named eutrophication, likely originating from the Greek term eutrophos, or well-nourished. While the origins of the term might sound wholesome, the process of eutrophication as it is now in the Baltic Sea is anything but: it refers to vast, oxygen deprived seawater areas, alternately named "dead zones".

These dead zones occur when excess nutrients – such as nitrates or phosphorus widely used in intensive agricultural production – reach the sea via groundwater, atmosphere, but mostly rivers. These excess nutrients provide food for certain algae and bacteria, which eventually forms a surface layer blocking sunlight to deeper waters and providing food for oxygen-consuming bacteria. These processes create areas where very little to no oxygen is available, and thus little to no other oxygen-consuming life can survive.

It is thus unsurprising that the Baltic Sea Centre (BSC) at Stockholm University calls eutrophication the most serious environmental problem the sea faces today. Its consequences reach far beyond the damage caused to coastal tourism sites: eutrophication negatively affects not only humans, but also the marine animal world. Along the Finish coast, for instance, eutrophication-induced oxygen depletion and loss of water clarity is linked to the majority of biodiversity loss cases, contributing to the drastic reduction or even disappearance of fish, including zander, flounder, whitefish, and also many types of sea plants. And it is a man-made disaster: scientific estimates show that oxygen levels in the Baltic have reached a 1500-year low, likely due to nutrient run off in the seawater.

The problem has been known for nearly 50 years: the immense negative impact of eutrophication, as well as humanity's role in the process, was first recognized in the early 1980s. According to the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM), an intergovernmental organization and a key platform for environmental policymaking for the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea, input of nitrogen and phosphorus into the Baltic Sea has grown between the 1950s and the late 1980s. Since then, measures were taken and nutrient run-offs have been reduced.

Nutrient inputs may have decreased, yet oxygen depletion stays at about the same level. This is partly determined by the geographic specificities of the Baltic Sea, including the very slow turnover of seawater due to its narrow access to the ocean. Slow water turnover means that, at the moment, we are seeing nutrient loads from 30 years ago. Unlike the frenetic and momentary pressures of globalized markets and excess consumption, including that of agricultural products, the rhythm of the sea is slow. In the most generous assessment, all we have managed to achieve is preventing the situation from getting even worse.

Agriculture for the sea

Melancholy, frustration, hope – this was an unlikely yet unsurprising blend of moods at HELCOM's seminar "Sustainable agriculture for a healthy Baltic Sea," which took place in Helsinki last autumn. Participants dwelt on the critical environmental state of the sea, the slowness (or absence) of progress in its protection, the lack of political will and commitment when it comes to the implementation of existing environmental regulations designed to protect the sea, and also the fact that deadlines set for achieving desired environmental indicators will not be met.

It was not by accident that the seminar focused on sustainable agriculture. While the reasons behind devastating eutrophication levels in the Baltic Sea are many, the predominant source of excessive nutrient input and the damage it causes is clear: agricultural activity and, more specifically, intensive use of fertilizers, many of which end up in the sea. It is for this reason that in the latest Baltic Sea Action Plan (HELCOM's strategic programme of measures for achieving a good environmental status for the sea) the majority of the 36 measures designed to tackle eutrophication were related to agriculture.

Protection of the Baltic Sea and the waters that eventually reach it is pursued by numerous EU directives and regulations. From the 'Water Framework Directive', the 'Nitrates Directive', to the 'Marine Strategy Framework Directive' – all of them aim to protect ground and surface water quality, achieve good environmental status for European waters in general, and for seas and oceans in particular, as well as to limit the nitrogen load caused by agricultural practices.

These directives, however, are not the only policy initiatives that bear impact on the pursuit of complex solutions to a simple objective: reduction of nitrogen and phosphorus runoff to the sea. The objective is inevitably linked to how the EU regulates agricultural production. In its own right, European agricultural policy is hugely impacted by the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, also commonly known as CAP. CAP is a financial behemoth, absorbing approximately a third of the EU's common budget (for instance, the 2021-2027 budget is €1.21tn, and CAP accounts for €386.6bn).

It is also one of the oldest surviving European policies, established in the aftermath of the scarcity and insecurity left behind by WWII. At the time it focused on increasing agricultural productivity, ensuring food security and affordability, and sought to grant farmers a decent living. In pursuit of ensuring food security, from the very beginning, CAP engaged in shielding farmers from the instability posed by crop failures or open markets.

CAP's policies – particularly their farming subsidies schemes – have often been embroiled in controversy, oftentimes over what environmentalists see as encouragement of the formation of large farms and intensive farming techniques, focused on food quantity rather than quality. According to the critics, one of the key problems lies in the way in which subsidies are allocated: based on the number of hectares the farmer owns, rather than on their compliance with environmental or climate objectives.

Distribution of CAP support is also overwhelmingly unequal. The European Environment Agency has estimated that in the period of 2014-2020, 20% of the beneficiaries received 80% of CAP direct payments. This imbalance creates a growing income gap between the largest (and richest) and smallest farms, encouraging farmers to go big or go home.

While large farms do not by definition mean intensive or environmentally unsustainable farming, and payouts for environmentally friendly measures do exist, it appears that they are largely ineffective. When it comes to organic farming, for instance, the latest audit by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) revealed a rather awkward situation: member states applied EU funds inconsistently, and the provision of funds continued regardless of whether growers applied such basic principles of organic farming such as crop rotation or animal-welfare standards.

According to the ECA report, about €12bn of EU funds that were channeled to support organic farming in the past 10 years have not helped to increase production of organically grown food. The target of achieving 25% of organically farmed agricultural land by 2030 is also unlikely to be met. At present, the only EU country meeting this objective is Austria.

EU's sustainable food strategy: dead on arrival

Agricultural landscape in the Austrian state of Burgeland, winner of Europe's 2023 best organic region award.
Photo: Agne Rimkute, 2024.

In 2020, the EU raised hopes by launching an ambitious European Green Deal initiative aimed at achieving climate neutrality by 2050. A pivotal part of the Green Deal was a Farm to Fork strategy, designed "to reduce dependency on pesticides and antimicrobials, reduce excess fertilisation, increase organic farming, improve animal welfare, and reverse biodiversity loss." Within 4 years, these ambitions were lost. How?

One of the problems appears to be the affinity between large farming unions and some of the decisionmakers at the EU level. Significantly, one of the largest European farmers' unions, Copa-Cogeca, was from the onset opposed to the reforms proposed by the Farm to Fork strategy. Copa-Cogeca, established around the same time as CAP, claims to represent the entirety of 22 million Europeans working in agriculture, thus representing a sizable voice.

However, many small scale farmers disagree. In their view, the union represents industrial, large-scale farming interests rather than those of small or organic farms. Some – like Jean Mathieu Thevenot, a young farmer and a member of the French agricultural union Confédération Paysanne – believe that long-term food security can only be safeguarded by moving away from fertilizer- and pesticide-dependent intensive agriculture. Responding to a "Lighthouse Reports" inquiry, he emphasized that his circle of farmers is completely disconnected from the vision of Copa-Cogeca and rather sees farming practices it advocates for not only as dangerous for food sovereignty, but also as a hindrance for young farmers' entry into the business.

These perspectives, however, remain sidelined, apparently not without a contribution of considerable lobbying efforts: a telling investigation by DeSmog.org, a climate journalism platform, documented an intensive schedule of meetings that occurred between several stakeholders affected by Green Deal policies, including pesticide and fertilizer producers, farming unions (most frequently Copa-Cogeca), and a handful of influential conservative politicians (all members of the European Peoples' Party).

And all of this was before the spectacle of farmers' protests of 2024 erupted – featuring manure dumping on the streets of Prague, border blocks on the Polish-Ukrainian border, setting fire to asbestos along Dutch roads. While the protests ravaged the streets and amused the dwellers of major European capitals, 15 of 31 actions proposed as part of Farm to Fork had not gotten off the ground. Instead, the European Commission's proposal to reduce pesticide use by 50% by 2030 was shelved. In rapid political retreat, the new EU's Vision for Agriculture and Food announced by the European Commission in early 2025 no longer prioritized environmental protection.

Lobbying efforts alone do not explain the watering down of Farm to Fork initiatives. It did not help that the European Green Deal and its backbone, the Farm to Fork strategy, were introduced in the midst of multiple unprecedented shocks. The announcement of the global pandemic in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years later both raised concerns regarding food accessibility and security, not dissimilar to those that shaped CAP at its establishment. Historically, the (almost) unprecedented rise of the far-right in Europe also did not help: they did not hesitate to use farmers' discontent for their political purposes ahead of the 2024 election cycle.

When asked about what needs to be done to halt and reverse the overwhelming eutrophication of the Baltic Sea, marine researchers, policymakers and activists will frequently point to the food we eat and the ways in which we produce it; to the reduction of fertilizer use and nutrient run-off to groundwater; to the necessity of cutting back the need for fertilizer use by reducing food waste; to the expansion of environmentally friendly and organic farming methods; and to the importance of the reduction of meat consumption (animal agriculture represents 40% of EU's total agricultural activity). However, these policies, even when undertaken, are at risk of hitting a wall of industrial farming interests, as well as globalized market and geopolitical pressures.

Balancing food security, global supply chains, international competition, fair remuneration to the EU's farmers, and environmental protection is not supposed to be an easy task, and a return to ancient agricultural practices of the Baltic Öland is unlikely to offer a feasible solution. Yet, agricultural and environmental policies should include a greater representation of diverse types of expertise and interests – including those of the researchers and farmers who are committed to more sustainable agricultural practices, as well as coastal and other local human and animal communities that suffer direct environmental and even economic effects of large-scale industrial agricultural practices. Last but not least, these policies should reflect the viewpoint of European citizens, the majority of whom are open to supporting greener policies.