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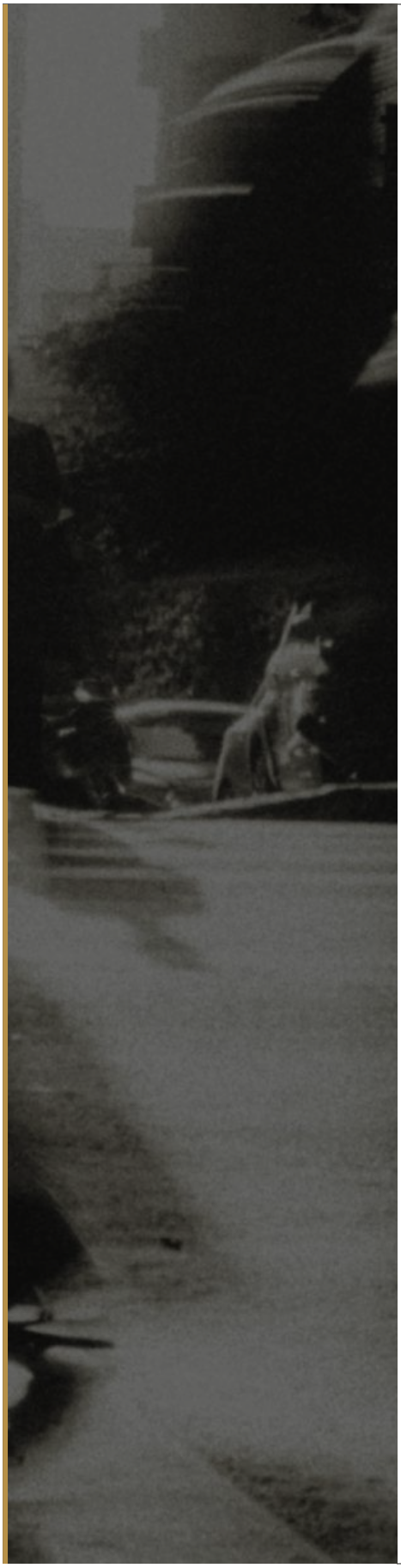
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Association of Foreign Affairs (UPF) in Lund

Board Members and Committee Heads, Operational Year 2026–2027

About UPF
Since 1935, the Association of Foreign Affairs in Lund (abbreviated to UPF from its Swedish name Utrikespolitiska Föreningen) has provided a space for those interested in exploring the world of politics and foreign affairs.

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UPF President's Address

Dear Members,

As the leaves begin to fall in Lund and the days grow darker, nothing fills me with more warmth than curling up on the sofa with a big cup of tea and writing my first address to you all as President of UPF.

I want to begin by congratulating our new Editors-in-Chief, Tara Srikkanth and Nicolai Wetlesen, on the release of their first issue! Your willingness to challenge conventions and ability to approach things from a unique angle make me beyond excited to see what lies ahead for the Magazine this year. I have no doubt that you will continue to surprise and inspire our readers.

The theme of this operational year's first issue, 'Freedom of Movement', touches on several aspects of student life at UPF and Lund University. For some of our members, it is not simply an abstract political concept. It is the reality of being unable to take up an internship because of visa restrictions, or not being able to join UPF trips abroad due to residence permit issues. While many students in Sweden rarely have to think twice about crossing a border, others face barriers that shape their education, careers and everyday lives.

Last spring, a group of fellow UPF members and I were reminded of our own privilege when we travelled to Tartu, Estonia, to visit our partner association, RSR. As our formal partnership comes to an end with this magazine issue, we have all been reflecting on the value of these exchanges. I am particularly grateful to have met the people we did and to have had the opportunity to learn from experiences different from my own.

Perhaps this is also what I love most about UPF. I have yet to encounter someone in our organisation who does not have an interesting story to tell. We all come from different places, hold different perspectives, and have different reasons for being interested in international affairs, yet we find ourselves in the same little corner of Lund. It is this diversity that makes our community so special.

On that note, I want to welcome back our returning members and extend a particularly warm welcome to everyone joining us for the first time. Whether you have just arrived in our quaint little town, are still trying to make sense of its strange traditions, or are already well-versed in Lund's remarkable ways, I hope you find a place for yourself in UPF.

Yours sincerely,

Maya Bukhory
President of UPF

RSR Tartu President's Address

Dear readers,

The Society of International Relations (RSR) is delighted and grateful to have had the opportunity to work with UPF on yet another joint issue.

In this issue, three RSR members have contributed articles on a range of fascinating topics. Orlando explores agreements on free movement, Helena examines how algorithms are shaping and fragmenting democracy, and Erik takes a closer look at the changing political landscape surrounding Bolsonarismo in Brazil. We hope you enjoy reading their contributions and the rest of this issue!

Although our year-and-a-half-long collaboration is coming to an end, we hope to stay in touch. Over this time, we have learned a great deal from one another, made new connections and formed friendships that extend beyond this project.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to both the former and current UPF board members, committee heads, and members for the great collaboration and for making this experience so memorable.

We hope to meet again at the 2027 Nordic Convention of International Affairs. In the meantime, you are always welcome to visit us in Estonia!

Vi ses! See you! Nägemiseni!

Liisbet Reinsalu
President of RSR 2026

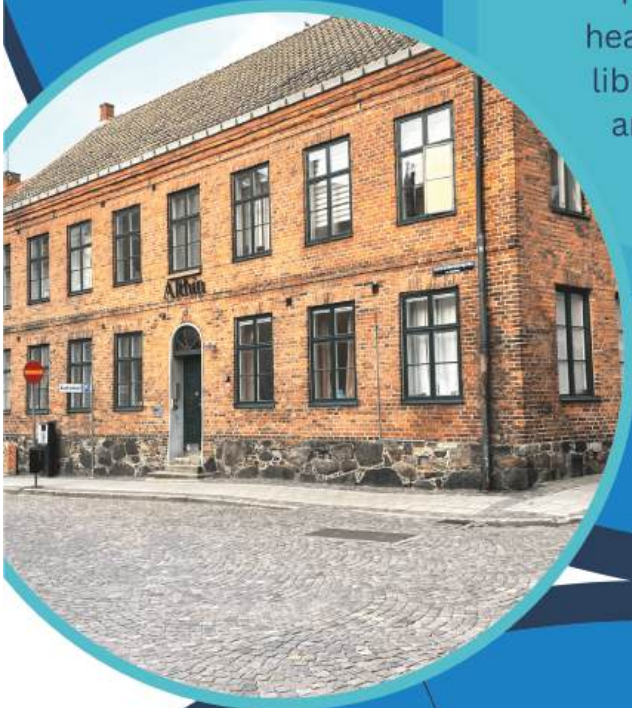
Tartu University's RSR Members



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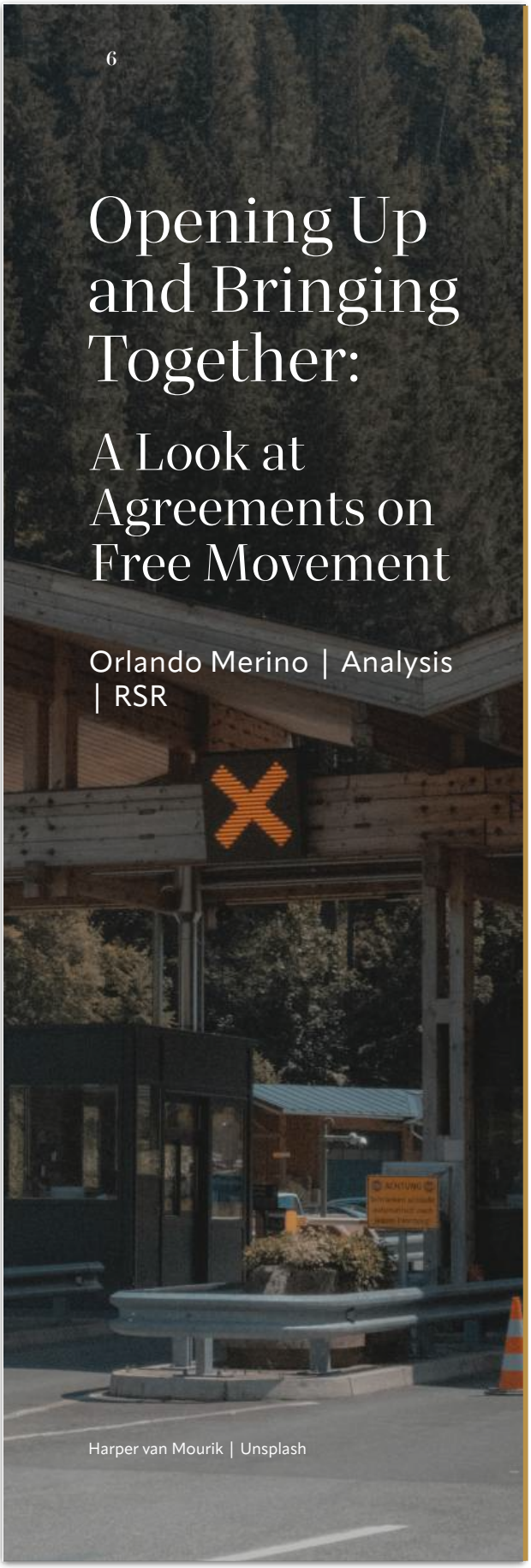


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Opening Up and Bringing Together:

A Look at Agreements on Free Movement

Orlando Merino | Analysis | RSR



Harper van Mourik | Unsplash

The seasoned traveller has probably had varied experiences with border crossings, ranging from exhausting bureaucratic procedures to switching one's seat at the picnic table, as can be done on the tri-point between Austria, Hungary and Slovakia. The importance of this table extends well beyond its physical form—it could be considered a small-scale monument to the Schengen Agreement, which allows its signatories' citizens to traverse freely between each other's countries.

Treaties providing not only the right to unhindered travel but also to residence and employment have been proposed or adopted within multiple regional organisations, in hopes of increasing internal integration and openness. This article will examine different agreements on free movement between countries and in international organisations.

Agreements on the movement of persons and goods are numerous, but the degree to which they extend freedom of movement varies. Countries have different policies regarding visa-free travel, residency and the right to work in their territory. The aforementioned Schengen Agreement, for example, establishes a common visa policy, while the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights ensures the right for an EU citizen to reside and be employed in any other member state. There are also examples of bilateral agreements between specific countries: the separate Compacts of Free Association between the United States and Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands, the Common Travel Area between the United Kingdom and Ireland, or the India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

Establishing an area of free movement in an international organisation with many members, however, requires legislative efforts, with the concerns of multiple parties having to be addressed. Let us take a closer look at two continents: South America and Africa.

Mercosur, or the Southern Common Market, founded with the Treaty of Asunción in 1991, was created with the goal of free movement of goods and services. In 2002, the organisation adopted the Residence Agreement, establishing the conditions under which citizens would have the right to reside in any of the member states while easing border crossings. This has applied to Mercosur's full member states, originally: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Venezuela joined in 2012, but was later suspended due to authoritarianism, and Bolivia became a full member in 2024. Indeed, tourism has increased considerably, particularly in Argentina and Brazil. The benefits of free movement and residence also extend to Mercosur's associate states, which include all other states in South America, though Venezuela's membership remains suspended. Progress is still being made, with decisions aiming to further streamline border crossings made at the organization's 68th summit in June 2026. Altogether, it appears that Mercosur has been quite successful in reducing barriers to movement.

> *That problem cannot be fixed by policy alone, and political stabilisation would be the prerequisite to integration*

In Africa, many current national borders were once drawn up by colonial administrations, often splitting pre-existing cultural groups. As a result, the need for free movement has been apparent since independence—but much work remains before that principle can take effect. In 1979, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed to adopt a protocol outlining three phases of integration: the right of visa-free entry, then residency and eventually, the right to establish enterprises. By 1990, the implementation of the third phase had begun. Furthermore, in 2000, the ECOWAS Passport was introduced, which would function as a travel document for the member states' citizens, making their passports stronger internationally. Additionally, some states have individually enacted policies to open up movement: in May 2026, Ghana announced that citizens of all other African countries could apply for e-Visas for free.

Let us take a look at the continental scale. The Constitutive Act of the African Union, signed in 2000, states that one of the organization's main objectives is to "accelerate the political and socio-economic integration of the continent". With this goal in mind, in 2018, the AU agreed to adopt the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, which includes the abolition of visa requirements and the right to travel and work relatively freely in the member states. However, the Protocol is yet to enter into force, as only four countries have ratified it so far: Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Niger, and Mali (with the membership of the latter two currently suspended). There are multiple reasons why so many of the AU's members haven't ratified the protocol so far. One main issue is security.

While free movement does not mean uncontrolled movement, governments are still concerned that simplified entry requirements could be utilised for malicious purposes, especially when keeping in mind conflict zones and insurgencies, such as in the Sahel region, Sudan, or Somalia, among others.



Dieu-Donné Gameli | Wikimedia Commons

That problem cannot be fixed by policy alone, and political stabilisation would be the prerequisite to integration, though the status quo does make life more difficult for people hoping to flee instability. There are also economic worries: the rights to residence and employment essentially result in multiple labour markets joining together. Due to both the levels of income and unemployment varying massively between African countries, it is feared that open movement could threaten local jobs for some countries and significantly increase emigration in others. A smaller reason which may also be worth noting is that visa fees provide the government with revenue from travellers.

However, Rwanda's experience with visa-free entry has shown that the profits from increased tourism have exceeded previous earnings from fees. In general, it seems that while Africa's ongoing efforts for closer integration have seen results, it is still very difficult to say when the level of freedom of movement that the Protocol aims for will be achieved.

Establishing free movement between countries has been one form in which countries have been building closer relations for decades now. It is one of the main ways a continental or regional union can improve its level of political integration and open up new economic and personal possibilities for its citizens. However, these agreements need serious legislative work to actually come into effect and achieve their intended results. There has been considerable progress made in many parts of the world, and yet a lot of goals remain to be met. For our experienced traveller, this means more and more unimpeded crossings, but still the occasional hassle with paperwork, depending on the destination. ■

While free movement does not mean uncontrolled movement, governments are still concerned that simplified entry requirements could be utilised for malicious purposes

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Fight or Flight:

The New Plan B for Wealthy Americans

Hannah Whitelaw | Analysis | UPF

Amid political instability, social division, and economic recession, many Americans are choosing to abandon ship, using the elusive golden visas offered by several countries abroad as their ticket. Having a Plan B is good business for many Americans, not only for themselves but for future generations as well. With wildfires burning in California with growing frequency and intensity, everyday prices skyrocketing, and an unstable political future, it is understandable that those who can are choosing to leave. What are the long-term consequences for both those left behind in the US and the countries these individuals choose as their new playgrounds?

A golden visa is administered through "[a] process whereby qualified, vetted candidates are granted residence rights in exchange for a defined economic contribution to the host country" according to Henley Global, a process known as residency by investment (RBI). A similar process also grants not just residence in a country but full citizenship rights, called citizenship by investment (CBI). This process is limited to those who can afford it: billionaires and millionaires such as Peter Thiel (co-founder of Palantir) and Eric Schmidt (former CEO of Google). Minimum investments are generally the foot-in-the-door technique for these visas. EU countries often require high minimum investments to begin the process—for example, Greece requires a minimum investment of $800,000. While EU regulations on this type of immigration are tightening, it remains a viable option.

A whole new industry is capitalizing on Americans' fears; firms such as Henley Global, which guide the process, report that over half of their total customers worldwide are Americans. The RBI and CBI industry will continue to boom and try to lure Americans who can afford it away from the US with the promise of sunnier skies.

What this brings up is the (to some) age-old commentary on semi-permeable borders—the idea that for refugees, wage workers, and asylum seekers, borders remain impenetrable. For example, in the US, immigration has become nearly impossible during the Trump administration's crackdowns.

> *With travel as the new social status symbol, it was only a matter of time before the passport became currency*



The Now Time | Unsplash

Borders can become semi-permeable because they remain porous and welcoming to those with wealth and social capital.

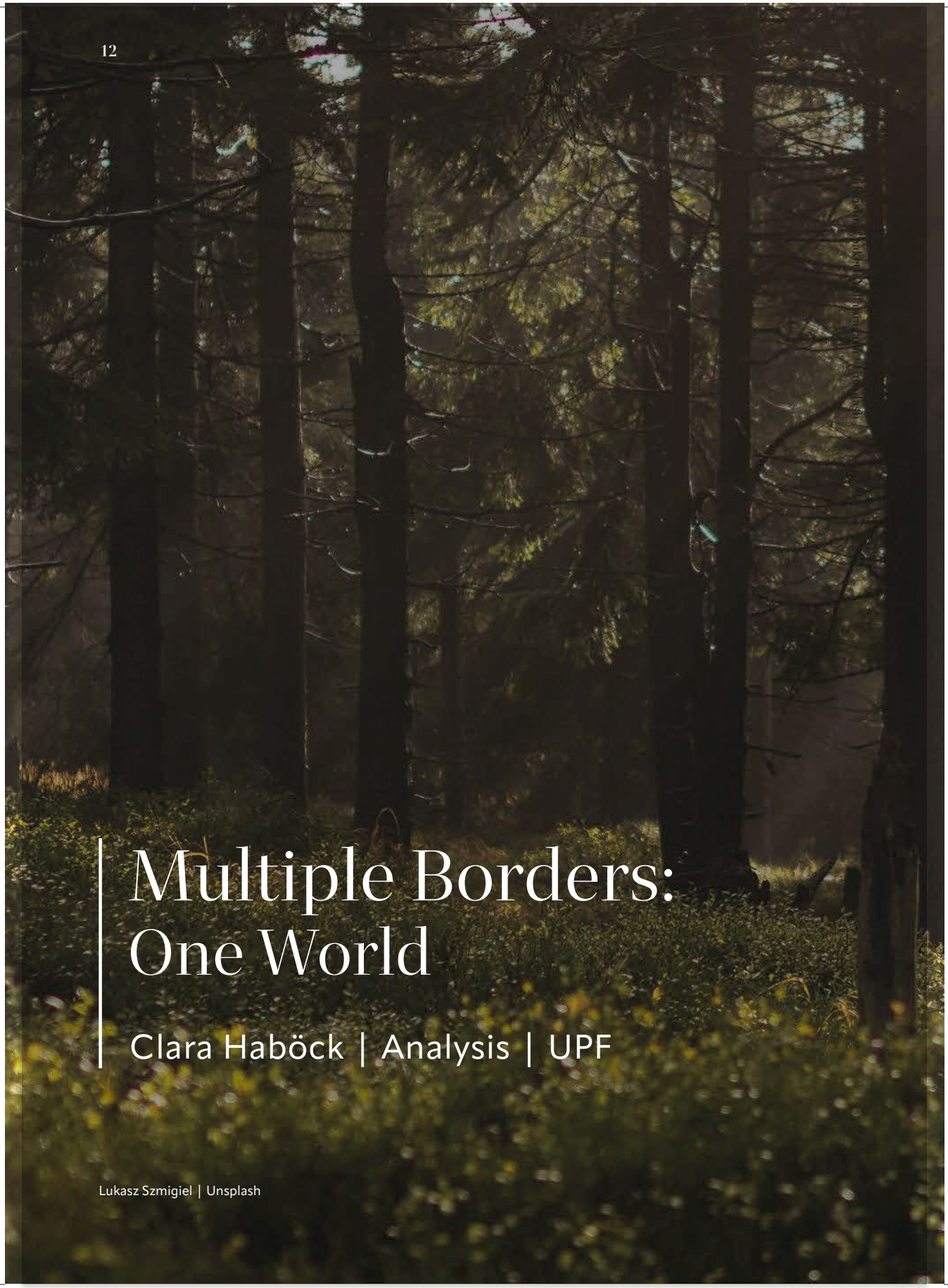
On the flip side, what effect does this have on countries trying to lure wealthy Americans with promises of citizenship? Foreign economic investment is not necessarily bad. However, for local populations in places welcoming investment migration, a surge of extreme wealth could cause extreme inflation. If ten houses worth $800,000 are built in your peaceful Greek seaside village, the next time you try to repair your leaking roof, it will likely cost double the normal price because home-building costs have suddenly inflated.

So, what and who will be left behind when all the wealth has fled from underneath President Trump's regime? Likely it will be the same group that has always been left behind in the US and elsewhere: minorities and low/middle-income families. On one hand, emigration of wealthy people out of America could reduce the number of people who vote fiscally conservative—Republicans. On the other hand, it may create a vacuum effect, leaving behind fewer major industry jobs, akin to how the end of the Industrial Revolution in the US decimated lifelong factory jobs.

The commodification of dual citizenship is not shocking. With travel as the new social status symbol, it was only a matter of time before the passport became currency. An incredibly ironic example is Trump's gold card, which requires a $1 million investment in the US government in exchange for fast-tracked residency.

If you ask me, Trump should be focusing on retaining wealth already in the country, rather than resorting to cheap tricks to lure wealth from other countries. The question we must ask now is: if you can buy a passport, how long will it take before they are devalued and simply become little books of plastic and paper? ■

Borders can become semi-permeable because they remain porous and welcoming to those with wealth and social capital



Multiple Borders: One World

Clara Haböck | Analysis | UPF

Lukasz Szmigiel | Unsplash

It was the middle of March 2020. In Europe, spring break was not too far away, and the world was slowly warming up again as spring entered everyone's doors. News about Covid-19 had become familiar—it had circulated in the background for weeks, tracking cases emerging in China, while central Europe still felt largely protected. Then suddenly, borders closed. Within days, Covid-19 went from something happening far away to something restricting our private lives, closer than anyone had imagined.

The modern nation state was able to make a rapid decision, closing its borders and restricting its citizens' freedom of movement. The state remains the core political unit organising human life in the economic, political, and social spheres, and its central promise is protection—both of its territory and of the people within it. That promise rests on sovereignty—ultimate authority within a given territory without external influence. State sovereignty is the primary reason we have the static borders we see on maps today, which we regulate and intensify when pandemics reach them.

When Covid-19 spread, the world stood still. It allowed us—even forced us—to look closer and understand how globalised the world has become. Healthcare was once considered a domestic political issue, but a virus crossing multiple borders within weeks hints toward the opposite. Global health is only one piece of a bigger picture, revealing the profound scale of globalisation, leaving us wondering about borders and the way they shift our understanding of movement and belonging.

Border control has long been part of the state's responsibility. It can be tempting to idealise the past, to look back and conclude that everything used to be different before the static borders we know today, perhaps even better. One thought I keep coming back to is that 'global debates about migration would not exist if one accepted that people have always migrated. Indeed, people have always been ready to uproot their lives and travel in search of more promising horizons. But using that fact to dismiss borders altogether risks undermining their historical development. Borders need to be acknowledged as a serious tool of security when movement appears to constitute a threat in areas like security, politics, and culture, as well as health and disease, as shown by March 2020.

Furthermore, history itself complicates the critique. Many states have been heavily obstructed in achieving sovereignty by brutal exploitation and colonial rule. For them, internationally recognised borders and the right to govern their own territory represents the culmination of a long fight for freedom. Therefore, looking at sovereign territories and borders critically is a privileged position to be in. Countries that fought for their own sovereignty—many of which only achieved it in the last century—will weigh borders differently than countries in the Global North, which can tend to take protection for granted.

> *What has changed is not movement itself but the lines we draw around it*

Borders not only affect the way the world is divided, they also shape how we see people on either side of the division. A lively variety of cultures has formed all across the world and borders have drawn lines between them. They protect those who belong. But who belongs inside a bordered area? A border creates an inside and an outside. Before the modern sovereign state became the norm, fluid frontiers shifted with seasons, trade, war, and livestock.



Markus Spiske | Unsplash

Movement used to be organised around ecological and social logics—now it is organised around sovereignty and capital and a system that lets some groups benefit while others are left behind.

People have always migrated and moved, even if it was not on the scale of today's rapid globalisation. What has changed is not movement itself but the lines we draw around it. I deeply believe in one world for us all, and keep wondering how anyone can be fully sovereign over land when the land belongs to us all—or rather to none of us at all.

In the section 'Council of Pecans' from Braiding Sweetgrass (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer describes an inspiring phenomenon among pecan trees: mast fruiting. She writes: "If one tree fruits, they all fruit". During a "mast year", every tree in the grove is loaded with nuts at the same time. The trees do not act as individuals, but as a unified collective to ensure that "all flourishing is mutual".

In March 2020, we did the opposite. Confronted with a virus that ignored every static line on the map, states turned inwards, borders closed, and a competition for masks (and later, vaccines) began. A pandemic may be the clearest proof that no one is safe until everyone is safe. The pecan trees remind us not to erase the borders or sovereignty that so many fought for, but to imagine a world where protecting our own does not mean forgetting that our flourishing is tied to everyone else's. ■

> *But who belongs inside a bordered area?*

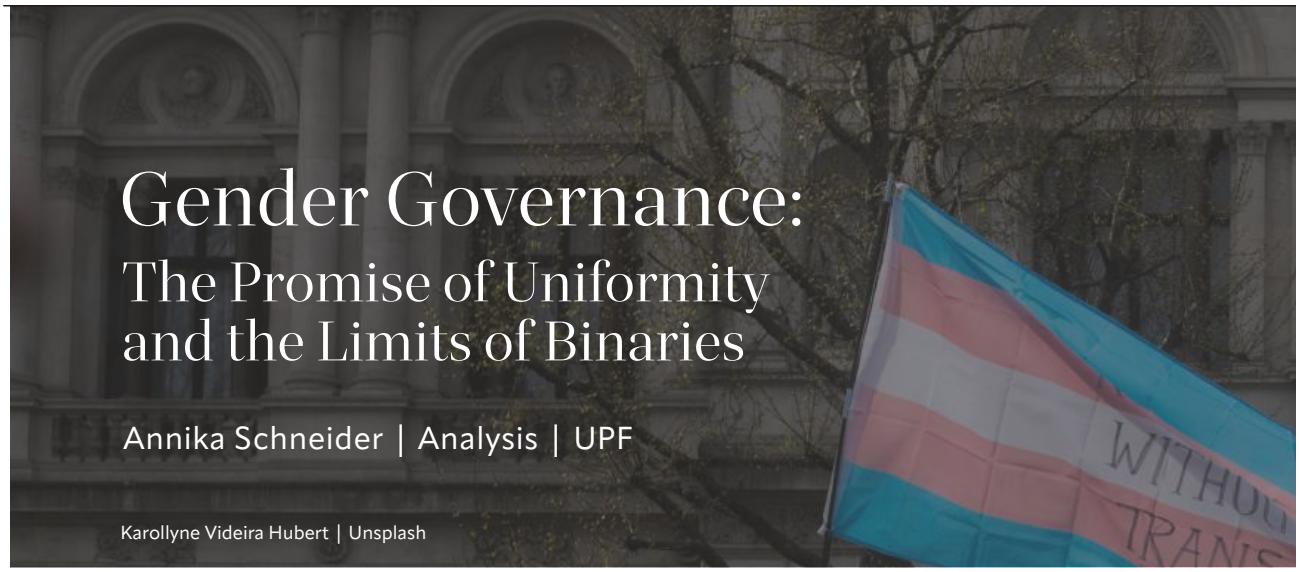
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Gender Governance:
The Promise of Uniformity and the Limits of Binaries

Annika Schneider | Analysis | UPF

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Türkiye. The Erdoğan administration declared 2025 the 'Year of the Family' and the following decade (2026-2035) as the 'Decade of Family and Population' in response to declining fertility. This official narrative opened an entry point for gender governance: cisheteronormativity is promoted while LGBTQ+ individuals and activists face growing pressure and backlash. A proposed law reform from 2025 would allow criminal charges to be pressed against those acting "contrary to biological sex and general morality" and further restrict access to gender-affirming healthcare. In September 2026, LGBTQ+ activists and organisations were targeted by raids, resulting in several arrests and the blocking of social media accounts.

United States. In 2025, the Trump administration limited gender to a binary based on the sex assigned at birth. As of September 2026, 835 new bills addressing trans* individuals are under consideration across 43 federal states. More than half of the bills focus on healthcare and education, restricting access to gender-affirming care and denying children autonomy over their name and pronouns. The anti-trans* legislation is accompanied by politicians' provocative rhetoric and stirring of moral panic, which leads to further marginalisation of trans* people.

United Kingdom. In 2025, the UK Supreme Court tied gender to a biological sex binary. This may result in the exclusion of trans women from single-sex spaces and gender-based support systems. It also contributes to the reinforcement of stigma against trans* identities. The overall media coverage of the debate around trans* identities and rights lacks accurate representation of trans* people and their voices, and instead connects trans* people to conflict and harm.

Russia. Since 2023, LGBTQ+ issues are officially linked to extremism, resulting in criminal charges including prison sentences of up to 12 years. Just after the official labelling of the LGBTQ+ movement as extremism, security services actively sought access to medical records of trans* people, and multiple raids targeted queer civil society organisations. President Putin has also used the growing acceptance of queer people in Ukraine as justification for the full-scale invasion, claiming a responsibility to protect traditional values from a sinful Western world. Russian legislation also influences legislation in other countries: in Belarus, the promotion of medical transition and the following legal gender recognition is criminalised, and the Slovakian government changed the constitution so that only two genders are legally recognised.

Individually, all of these examples can be read as isolated culture wars, as local erosion of freedom in one's identity. Yet, viewing these examples of backlash against trans* rights as local and stand-alone conflicts over cultural norms fails to encompass their wider scale and global dimension. Anti-trans* legislation is a coordinated political strategy. In a globalising world that demands growing complexity, authoritarian regimes thrive on simplification and uniformity—two concepts that are well displayed in a gender binary. Moving beyond the binary inevitably demands more nuance. So why would we want to change a running system? A system in which sex assigned at birth determines gender identity, a system in which there is no room for contestation or movement?

Gender is the perfect arena for the intensifying right-wing authoritarian discourse. Our societies are highly gendered; our social identity hinges on our (perceived) gender identity. Thus, gender is a topic that everyone has an opinion on. Promoting a return to patriarchal gender norms appeals to those who fear losing their privileged position in the world, regardless of the negative effects of the patriarchy on, for example, cis men.

This creates a positive feedback loop: voters with sexist and misogynistic views are more likely to vote for far-right authoritarian leaders, and the same leaders use gender and their vision of the ideal society as a tool to forge political alliances with other conservative forces. The result is a backlash against trans* identities that is simultaneously opportunistic and ideological, a calculated strategy to defend a system running on patriarchal power.

But the system is not running. Trans* people challenge the gender binary merely by existing. And they have always existed—even though Western historians have widely discarded and overlooked their existence and their identities,

Trans*

Trans* with the asterisk is used as an umbrella term for any gender identity that does not conform to the cisgender binary, including all non-Western gender identities.

many ancient and Indigenous societies acknowledged more than two genders, or never even thought about gender as a binary before it was imposed by Western colonialism.

For Bantu-speaking peoples, identity was built on age, lineage, and spiritual role. The Dagaaba based gender on multifaceted spiritual energy rather than anatomy. In some South Asian cultures, those whose gender identity did not fit into the binary categories of male and female were fully recognised as hijras. The list goes on, proving that trans* identities are neither a trend that will pass if faced with enough resistance, nor a purely Western phenomenon.

Strikingly, today's resistance against trans* identities and the promotion of cisheteronormativity is framed as a decolonial act, a refusal to let Western norms once again shape societies around the world. Yet, what is being defended is the order that colonial powers established. What we are left with is a strange paradox: anti-Western rhetoric that reproduces colonial Western rhetoric.

Anti-trans legislation is a coordinated political strategy*



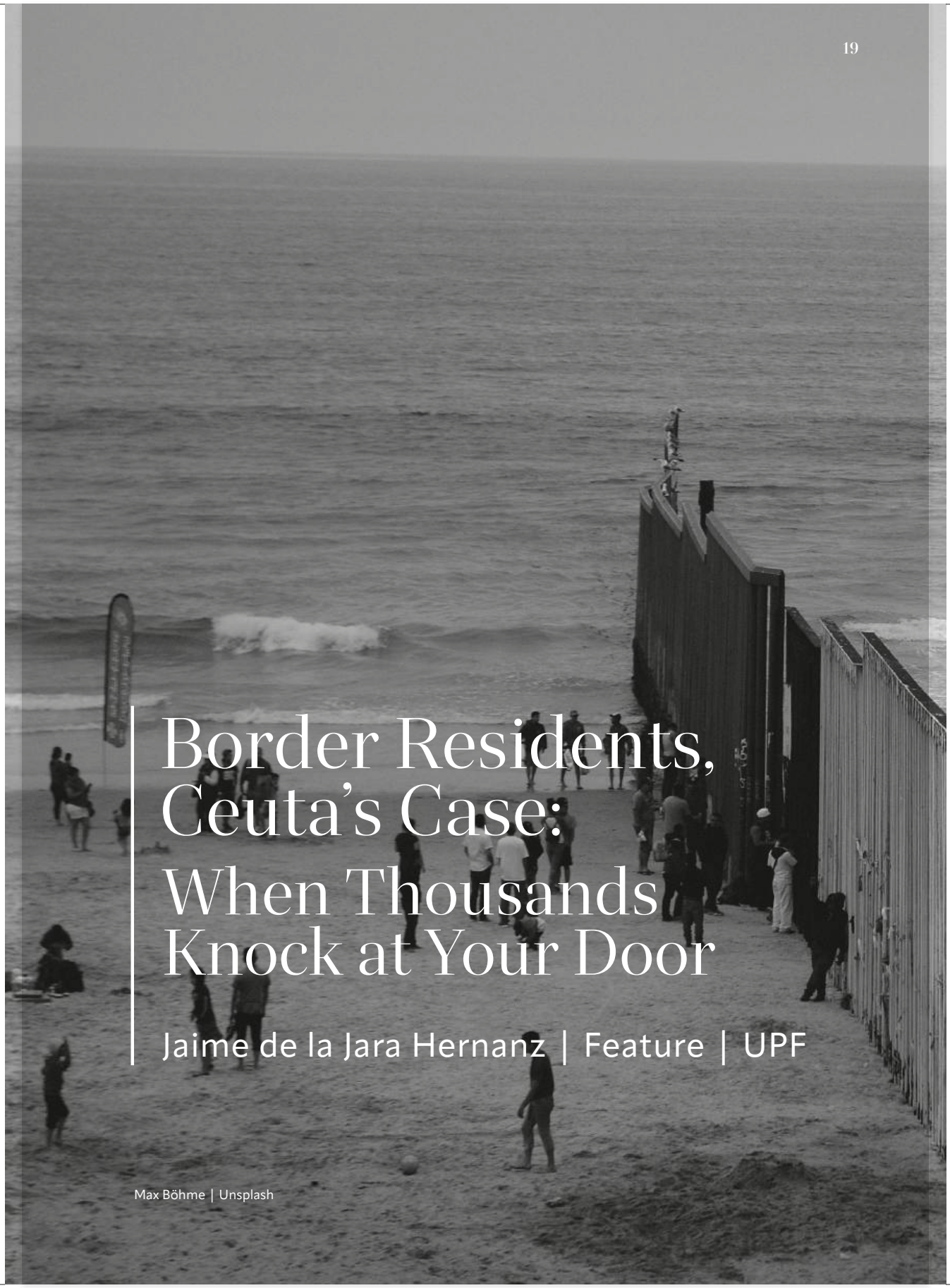
Kamsin Kaneko | Unsplash

But this is not just something abstract. When a state, especially one with an authoritarian government, reinforces a gender binary through legal action as well as political rhetoric, the effects are real. The borders drawn on the grounds of an artificial binary have human costs: trans* people are being denied adequate gender-affirming care—healthcare that can have significant positive effects on their mental health and even reduce possible suicidality. Civil society organisations supporting queer individuals face new burdens, from doing their best not to be shut down to finding new ways to continue their work.

Trans* rights are human rights. By defining gender as a binary and restricting gender-affirming care, the right to self-expression and bodily autonomy is being denied.

Gender identities cannot simply be legislated away. If the only possible gender identities are male and female, can we really speak of freedom? If we are not allowed to explore our gender identity, what will be the next right to be taken away? If politicians are drawing the borders of gender, is our identity still our own? ■

What we are left with is a strange paradox: anti-Western rhetoric that reproduces colonial Western rhetoric



Border Residents, Ceuta's Case: When Thousands Knock at Your Door

Jaime de la Jara Hernanz | Feature | UPF

Max Böhme | Unsplash

"I mean, if someone breaks into your house – right through your front door – what are you going to do? You have to kick them out, right?" This is how a resident in Ceuta demonstrated his anger some days after the migrant crisis of July 30th and 31st, 2026, to FaroTV Ceuta. The Spanish autonomous city has seen several episodes in the past of migrants illegally crossing the border, yet the magnitude of this last crisis has no precedent. Officials estimate that the migrant surge saw up to 70 000 people enter the Spanish exclave in under 48 hours. Although thousands have voluntarily returned to Morocco some time after arriving in Spain, the tension still remains as neighbours of Ceuta fear that this new normal is here to stay.

On July 30th, when the Ceuta residents woke up to the crisis, many chose to stay at home. Establishments remained closed and the citizens watched as the military forces attempted to control the situation as much as they could. Only after many started to return to Morocco did businesses reopen. "As you can see, the stock ran out in a matter of hours because they were desperate to buy, to stock, to have reserves at home and so on" declared one worker of a market in Ceuta. The stock and logistical capabilities of the city were put to the test as shelves were emptied. "Ceuta is very small, we do not have any [resources]. I go to the supermarket – I was at the supermarket today – they didn't even have wet wipes, no bread, nothing at all" complained another resident to the same local news outlet.

The migrants who chose to stay in Spain roamed the city looking for places to take refuge after altercations with local residents. Some went out to sleep on the shores and mountains, sheltered by whatever debris they could find, while others resorted to more desperate measures. "I have a friend who had them break into her rooftop. And she has had a terrible time" a young man recounted to El Confidencial.

With these situations multiplying throughout the city, many of the newcomers sought to enter state facilities like the Temporary Immigrant Detention Centre (CETI). Javi Galán, a resident of a neighbourhood close to these state facilities, explained what happened to El Confidencial, saying: "We saw several people trying to break into houses to take clothes, pull some mischief, so we had to build some courage and organise ourselves this way. So well, we've set up this small checkpoint here." After all, as another neighbour of Galán said: "The security services are overwhelmed, but it's only normal, look at the situation we have."

The situation was described by Minister Grande-Marlaska as a "subjective sentiment of insecurity", an analysis that hardly reflects the uptick in crime and security threats for migrants and locals alike. A month after the crisis, more than 200 migrants had been deported for committing crimes. A staggering 37 sexual aggressions were reported in just 46 days, the victims of which were mainly migrant women and children. They have since been separated in official reception spaces to protect them from these threats, further exposing the degree to which the crisis has put the security of the migrants at risk.

> *They are also victims. Let's look at the system. Both of their system and ours*

Although months have passed, the state of uneasiness in the city has lingered. The government is attempting to accelerate the departure of all the people who remain, but these attempts have been chaotic at best. A prime example of this is the improvised settlement of immigrants on the beach of El Trampolín, near the shore. Authorities were able to set up provisional spaces to accommodate most of these migrants so as to free up the beach and start cleaning the leftover waste, but many returned once more

to the beach since they feared they would not get asylum. The residents near this beach have expressed their discontent with the neglect of the authorities in properly allocating these people and clearing public spaces equally all throughout the city. As one neighbour of La Colina puts it: "We are seeing the development of two cities now. We are seeing the part of the [city] centre that I go around there, and it is totally cleared up and clean. And then there is the periphery. And the periphery, you have to live and see it here." These differences are starting to heat up the debate as some representatives of neighbourhoods have voiced their complaints against xenophobic tendencies in protests. But as a Muslim resident in Ceuta puts it to FaroTV Ceuta: "They are also victims. Let's look at the system. Both of their system and ours." The people of Ceuta and the migrants are collateral damage of the failed management by both the Moroccan and Spanish governments.

Although months have passed, the state of uneasiness in the city has lingered.

The question now does not rest on what the government has to do, for at this moment it has become clear that people have to be allocated appropriately for them to apply for asylum or return to the neighbouring country. Many residents have gathered multiple times in protest and asked other far more serious questions, the main one being: how will the government of Spain assume its responsibilities, as the consequences of such negligence include not only failing to protect the thousands of people who came into the country, but also failing to protect its citizens? ■

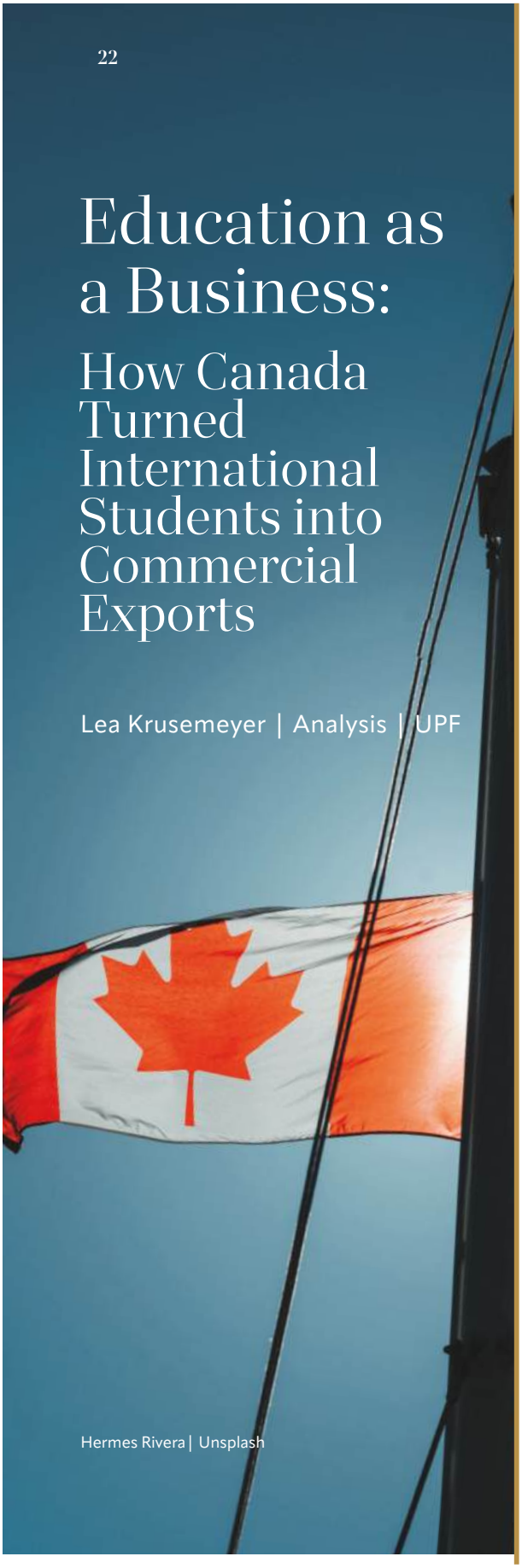
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Education as a Business:

How Canada Turned International Students into Commercial Exports

Lea Krusemeyer | Analysis | UPF



Hermes Rivera | Unsplash

The promise of a world-class education has drawn students to Canada for over half a century, but what was once seen as a gesture of goodwill by the Canadian government—providing international students with a good education and access to Western worldviews—has since turned into a luxury few can afford. To understand the history of the international student system in Canada, one must begin by taking a look back at the era of the Cold War. In the 1970s, Canada was home to around 20 000 international students, which were welcomed under the pretext of goodwill, although this was arguably tainted by an incentive of indoctrination of Western worldviews.

Initially, international and domestic students paid equal tuition and were overall treated similarly, but as the Cold War went on, things began to change. The international student was not seen as an underprivileged person who was in need of aid anymore, but rather as a wealthy foreigner who should not be able to benefit from the Canadian social system outside of education. The era of othering had officially begun; the international student was now seen as a visiting migrant, therefore unable to access tax benefits or work. Many of the laws that still affect international students today were introduced during those times.

Othering became an act supported by law when international students at Sir George Williams University in Montreal pointed out the racist grading methods of a university professor in 1969.

This led to a violent uproar of international students fighting for equality, which marked the beginning of the legal othering. This is also when Canada began viewing international students as products that could be financially beneficial instead of simply people seeking education. The province of British Columbia had by 1982 drastically cut their budget for higher education, and universities were in dire need of funding. Since there was a legal cap on how much universities were allowed to charge domestic students but not international students, tuition for foreign students soon tripled the amount of their Canadian peers.

By the time the Cold War ended in the 1990s, Canada made active efforts to recruit international students. "The arrival of differential fees drove significant changes in the Canadian post-secondary sector, and reinforced the place of international students as outsiders who could serve Canadian interests by helping to fund its public post-secondary system," wrote Dale M. McCartney, Professor at SFU.

With the beginning of the 21st century came a new set of laws introduced by the Canadian government. Efforts were now made to use international education as a pathway to Canadian citizenship. However, these changes were not implemented out of the goodwill of Canadian politicians—it was a calculated economic move.

> *The international student was now seen as a visiting migrant, therefore unable to access tax benefits or work*

Firstly, the provincial governments could benefit from the international tuition fees (which were still triple the amount of domestic ones) and secondly, the international students were seen as ideal immigrants who could further support the Canadian economy through high-skilled labour once they became citizens.

These recruiting efforts reached a peak when the Canadian government started its own campaign advertising its educational institutions to students abroad. A Canadian education would set the international student "apart from host nation competitors through an emphasis on post-graduation immigration possibilities"—in other terms, coming as a student was now a route to becoming a citizen. It was around this time—the 2010s—that the business with international education truly boomed. More than half of all foreign students came with the goal of immigrating to Canada after their studies, and over 80% of all Canadian universities made efforts to recruit new students from abroad.

Then came what the Canadian government called pathway programs, partnerships with for-profit organisations that provided specific courses tailored for international students who could not meet the enrollment requirements of Canadian universities. These pathway programs were viewed critically by higher education professionals because recruiting international students who did not meet academic standards had the potential to compromise the academic excellence Canada prided itself on. It seemed like the earlier goal of recruiting high-skilled immigrants was set aside in favour of profiting off of international student fees.

In 2012, an economic report declared international education a more profitable export than aeroplanes and helicopters—categorising humans as products. Shortly after, in 2014, the Canadian government released its international education strategy



Hermes Rivera | Unsplash

that barely mentioned educational goals and instead focused on possible economic gains. At this point, it became clear that international students had become a commodity.

Canadian postgraduate institutions were urged to increase the number of international students to around 450 000 by 2022. Two years later, in 2024, the number had reached 900 000, far exceeding government expectations. Canada became one of the leading countries in international education. Education had, at that point, truly become a treat for the wealthy; a newcoming international student had to prove funds of $22,895 CAD to even be considered for a student visa. Only four years prior, that number was $10,000 CAD.

By 2027, it is projected that the amount will go up again, as this is when the Canadian government will reevaluate its immigration policies. It must be mentioned that these funds are unrelated to tuition fees or visa costs. So an international student in 2024 had to pay for their visa, pay triple the amount of a domestic student for their degree, and prove over 20 000 canadian dollars in savings to be allowed into Canada.

On top of that, international students are not allowed to work more than 24 hours a week during their studies, with some not even being allowed to work outside their university campus at all. Education, which should be accessible to all, has truly become an experience for the privileged and a source of income for the government.

An educational system that has suffered systematic budget cuts since the 1970s while also experiencing a 45-fold increase in international students in just 50 years is simply unsustainable, and is bound to collapse.

> *However, these changes were not implemented out of the goodwill of Canadian politicians— it was a calculated economic move*

This is something the Canadian government realised by 2024. They simply had no choice but to acknowledge that they had overrelied on universities to fund gaps in education themselves, and that the sheer number of students undermined the quality of the educational programs.

Drastic changes were made to the Canadian immigration system; now it is "quality over quantity", going back to the original idea of offering opportunities to highly skilled workers and academics. A new emphasis on international master's students as well as PhD candidates, with a fast track to approve visas, is intended to increase the quality of international Canadian education over the next few years. Additionally, the government has capped the overall intake of international students drastically; in 2025, 61% fewer new international students began their studies in Canada compared to the year prior, which represents a drop by 250 000 students.

The next decade will be a crucial time in the history of international student education in Canada.

Will the government's approach of "quality over quantity" work? What about the roughly 650 000 international students who are still in Canada: will they find jobs and be able to stay? How will the government make up for the losses of international student tuition? Who will fund the universities now? Will the country truly be able to treat international students with dignity instead of viewing them as a commodity? ■

This is also when Canada began viewing international students as products that could be financially beneficial instead of simply people seeking education



Zsófia Hajnal | Unsplash

The Unequal Promise of European Integration:

Erasmus Expands, but for Whom?

Marion Simakungwe | Feature | UPF

The Erasmus+ scheme is an educational exchange agreement between the members of the European Union (EU) and selected non-EU partner countries—including Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye—which enables young people over 18 years old to study, work and volunteer abroad. Since its establishment in 1987, the scheme has certainly grown from its humble beginnings—starting with 3 200 students from 11 European countries taking part—to the scheme now having hosted over 18 million participants. The United Kingdom (UK) was one of the founding participants, and was still a part of the scheme up until 2021. As a result of deals made after Brexit (the UK's withdrawal from the European Union), and concerns raised over the scheme's cost, the UK exited the Erasmus+ programme.

Now, six years after leaving—January 1st 2027—the UK will rejoin the Erasmus+ programme as an associate member alongside Switzerland, which will also be rejoining since leaving the scheme in 2014. This will reinstate the freedom of movement for young people in eligible nations to access opportunities in the UK and Switzerland, and vice versa. To rejoin the programme, the UK and Switzerland will contribute £570 million (€650 million) and CHF 193 million (€181.1 million) respectively, but many leaders are seeing this as an investment in strengthening their country's ties to the EU. Given the documented benefits of the Erasmus+ programme (and being from the UK myself), I am particularly pleased that the scheme will be re-implemented, as 100 000 UK students are expected to benefit during its first year back; therefore, much excitement is stirring about the prospects of this agreement.

But one question that these changes raise is whether all young people studying in Europe will benefit equally from the expansion to the Erasmus+ programme. Roxana Minzatu, Executive Vice President for social rights and skills, quality jobs, and preparedness at the European Commission, said the following at the 2026 European Association of International Education (EAIE) conference in Glasgow: "Erasmus should be for all, not just for the few. Absolutely, every European must have the opportunity to undergo an Erasmus mobility program at least one time in their life."

As true as this sentiment is, in reality the scheme does not operate in such an equal fashion. Non-associated partner countries of the EU do not benefit fully from the



Antoine Schibler| Unsplash

decreased red tape and widened opportunities that EU and associated Third Countries do from Erasmus+ projects, training and educational mobilities. Their participation in such activities is contingent upon their access to International Credit Mobility (ICM) funding, which enables them to create agreements with EU and partner country institutions. This limits the number of agreements and partnership opportunities available to these non-associated countries, and thus the young people living, studying, and working in these countries lose out.

The UK and Switzerland rejoining the Erasmus+ scheme will certainly bring about many benefits, both material and immaterial, to the UK, Switzerland and the EU, in terms of allowing young people to access more opportunities, gain new skills, networks and perspectives. However, these opportunities still are not equally available to all European youth. This keeps raising questions as to how the scheme fuels and maintains unequal access to education, employment and recreational opportunities across the continent.

Currently, the UK and Switzerland's statuses in the scheme have only been mandated for the 2027/2028 academic year, so it can be presumed that there will be significant pressure on future Erasmus+ cohorts to demonstrate the benefits of the scheme on their personal and academic skills and prospects. Despite this uncertainty, I hope that the benefits of the scheme will be felt as they have been in previous years and lead to the continuation of cooperation between the UK, Switzerland, and the EU in enabling the freedom of movement for young people across their borders, and encourage the European Commission to further extend these benefits for more young people across the continent and beyond. ■

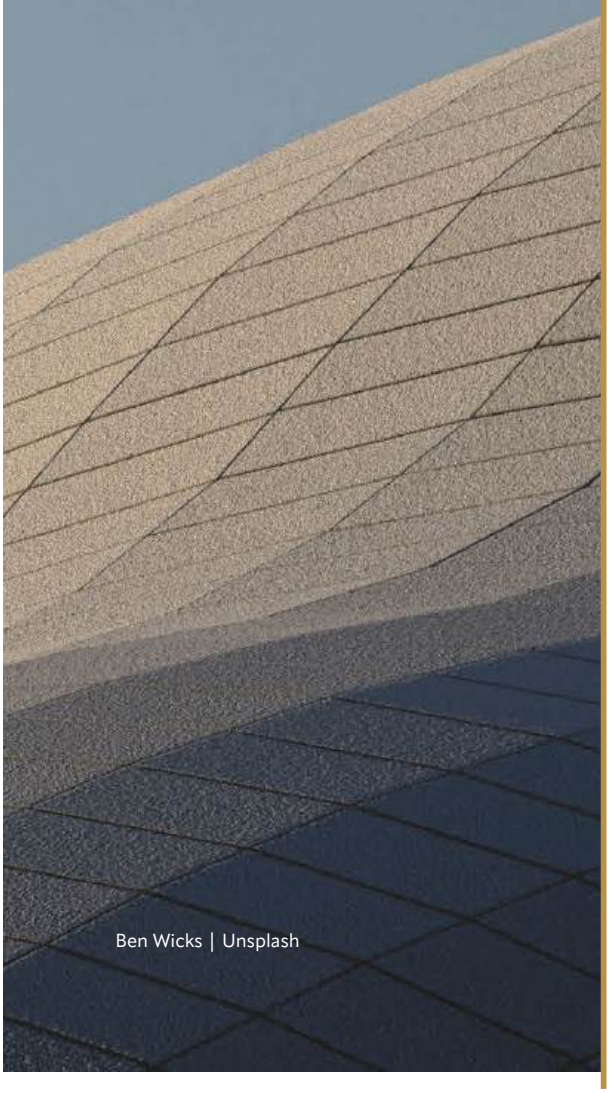
> *"Erasmus should be for all, not just for the few"*
>
> Roxana Minzatu

In reality the scheme does not operate in such an equal fashion

Contemporary Speech:

Shall We Delve into Globalised AI-Speak?

Maia Sunnberg | Opinion | UPF



Ben Wicks | Unsplash

Languages are and have always been evolving to keep up with the times. After all, if languages were not fluid, I would either be writing in cuneiform, or recounting a text in Chaucer's Early English, to both of which would be difficult to understand today. If we look closely at English, the word 'rad' seems to be relegated to the 1970s hipster movement. In 2026, African American Vernacular English terms have been widely spread and adopted by Internet users, so that 'body tea' becomes a commonly used compliment. Regional dialects also help situate a person's speech, whether it be the distinct Canadian 'sorry' or even regional expressions like 'bless your heart' in the United States' South.

Speech has always been unique to an individual who adopts words, partly due to location and time, but also due to their interests, books and media consumed, and the people who surround them. Humans shape other humans' way of speaking and writing. Loved ones share similar vocabulary; students employ their teachers' favoured essay structure... But part of what makes language and speech so special is that they are unique to an individual, forming a part of their identity.

In an era of globalisation where English has become the de facto language, and with technology reaching across the globe, the standardisation of language has been accelerated. With the speedy roll-out of artificial intelligence (AI) and the seeming inevitability of it all (at least according to those profiting from it), it almost seems 'inevitable' that the 'rich tapestry' (a favourite AI term) of language will be unravelled. Will we all soon regurgitate the same AI slop?

Since AI-powered Large Language Models (LLMs) are mostly trained with a wealth of English data (especially ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini), there is a digital language divide where people using less common languages switch to English for better answers.

And so, everyone is fed similar answers, similar words, similar thoughts.

Professors are now trained to spot AI writing. Such emblems are the overuse of em dashes (—) when commas would be appropriate, or buzzwords to sound more intelligent, such as 'foster' or 'crucial'. Gone are the days of having a written voice that is distinctly yours, even to your professor. Think only of Hemingway's famously concise writing, or Jane Austen's description of the female psyche. Authors of our era, like Lena McDonald and Mark Stanley, have openly admitted to using AI to write their fantasy series (if you aren't fully writing a book, can you still consider yourself an author?). Many people are reading these series, popularised on TikTok, and absorbing this AI language. Clearly, this growing trend reflects the reliance on AI for the very human task of writing.

But what about speech? As mentioned previously, both writing and speech feel so private and personal, the one thing companies are unable to gatekeep or profit from in this late-stage capitalist hellscape. We have lost the right to physically own things, becoming monthly serfs paying for the privilege of renting a service (see streaming, music, etc). The question thus is not 'will' but 'when will' AI writing permeate into speech? Language evolves faster through speech than writing, which makes sense given how difficult it is to change grammar rules and spelling conventions. Think only of the cuneiform tablets: if someone adopted a new word, changed the spelling of one or created a new tense, you would have to inform everyone by creating new tablets since amending them was impossible.

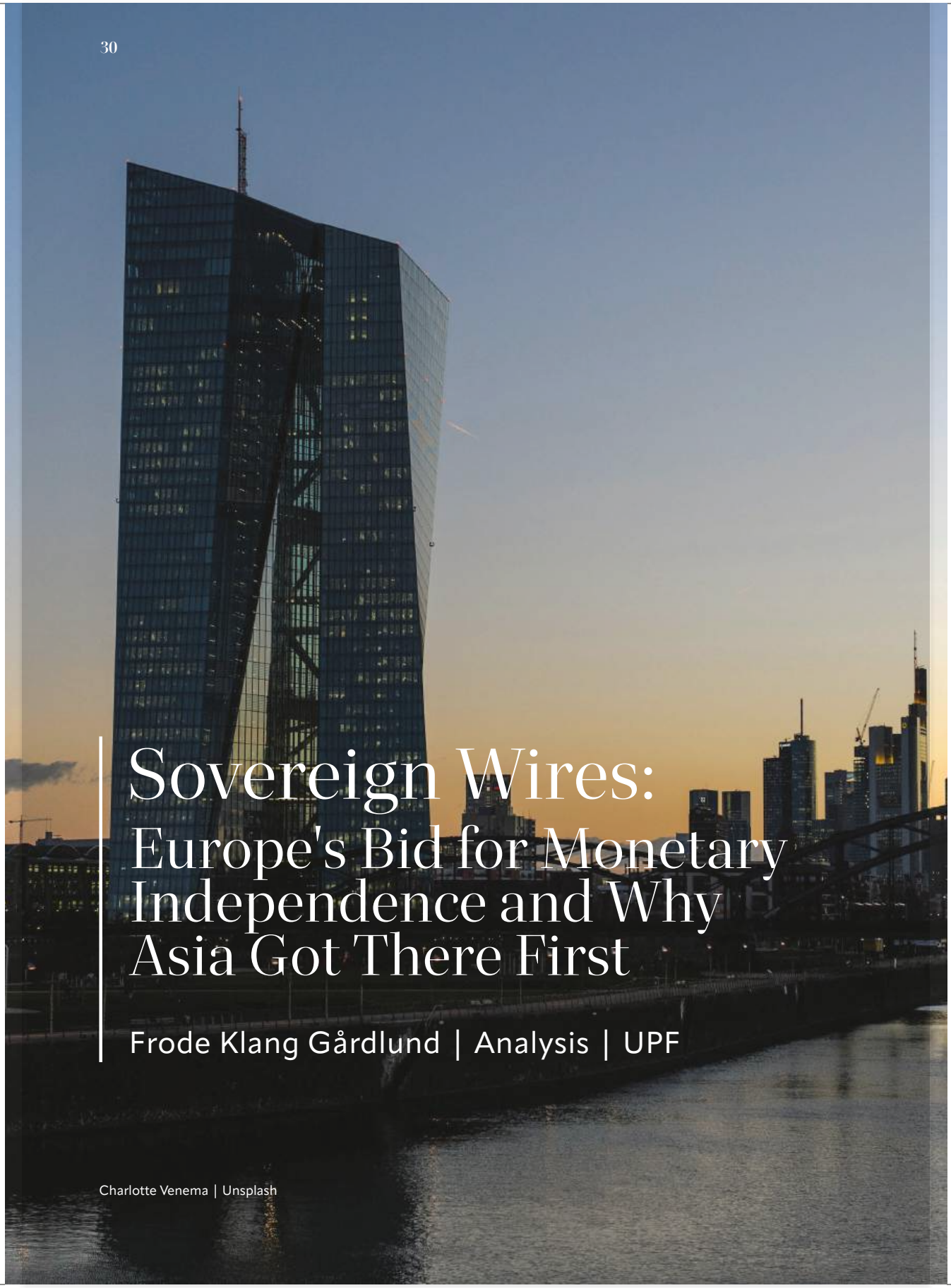
I think we need to be worried that certain people are profiting from our sameness and diminishing intelligence.

Be that as it may, this timeless process has shifted with AI. The opposite might well occur: writing will influence speech. Since people are relying on AI for scripts and presentations, they adopt its writing into their own speech. This speech then influences people's vocabulary, given they hear these AI words. Research has even found that since ChatGPT's rollout, podcasters' use of the word 'delve'—one of the AI's favourite words—soared by 48% in spoken speech. This is clearly a worrisome pattern.

Sam Altman, a co-founder of ChatGPT, said: "we see a future where intelligence is a utility, like electricity or water, and people buy it from us on a meter". I think we need to be worried that certain people are profiting from our sameness and diminishing intelligence. And we are losing intelligence if we keep relying on matrices and LLMs trained on human data to perform basic human tasks of writing.

What is not personal about language? What can you do without speech, without writing—without language? You would not be able to read, or write, or tell people about your favourite story, because the words to describe things would all be the same. Every text would be similar, and with that gone so is the important personal nature of art, and with that, the meaning of human life. We need to stop using AI for basic tasks such as writing emails or even correcting essays—this is why we are in school after all.

Because if we are all 'delving' into the same subject pushed forward by the AI algorithms, we will lose our own thoughts, our own individuality, our own humanity. And then, who would be able to distinguish a human from AI? ■



Sovereign Wires:
Europe's Bid for Monetary Independence and Why Asia Got There First

Frode Klang Gårdlund | Analysis | UPF

Charlotte Venema | Unsplash

Buying a coffee with your debit card in the morning on your way to work may be simpler than ever before. Today, consumers can use tap-to-pay with a debit card or mobile phone instead of counting bills and handling change. However, the process for your money to get to the business's account may not be as simple as you think. Before the money shows up at the shopkeeper's account, most card transactions leave the EU to be processed in the United States. Around 61% of European card transactions are handled by US companies. This also means that your personal data—such as your location and consumer behaviour—leaves EU jurisdiction.

In 2025, Christine Lagarde, president of the European Central Bank (ECB), said that "Visa, Mastercard, PayPal and Alipay are all controlled by American or Chinese companies" and that "We should make sure there is a European offer". A year after that, she once again made it clear that the EU "urgently" needs to create an independent payment solution. Just weeks later, EPI—the European Payments Initiative—signed an agreement with the EuroPA alliance, combining EPI's instant payment system Wero with EuroPA members such as Norway, Italy and Spain.

To understand this shift, we need to jump to 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. Both Visa and Mastercard shut down their operations in Russia just days after the invasion. Russian credit cards stopped working, even abroad. Only years earlier, Visa had been the main sponsor of the World Cup held in Russia, and by 2022 it was nowhere to be found. While understandable, the sudden withdrawal showed what power the offices in California and New York hold. The ECB's response should not be interpreted as hostile against the US and its companies, but instead as a sign that the EU had discovered its deeply rooted dependency and understood the complications of it. As a result of geopolitical and economic signals, the European banking industry accelerated efforts to finalise Wero. Wero works by connecting consumers in different European countries through one app. Instead of needing to do a regular bank or card transaction when wanting to transfer money across borders, Wero facilitates the transaction in just a couple of seconds. So far, this service has been rolled out for peer-to-peer transactions and e-commerce. There are also concrete plans for it to be available in every store by scanning a QR code.

Meanwhile, far away from Europe, ASEAN's Regional Payment Connectivity (RPC) initiative, built on bilateral agreements, has been in service since 2022. The initiative grew substantially in 2023, when Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia made it possible for travellers to pay by scanning QR codes across all four countries. The initiative is only a framework, not a shared technical platform. Instead, it relies on a common consumer mechanism, the QR code, which each national system recognises. Each ASEAN country has its own instant payment system with individual QR codes.

Each ASEAN country has its own instant payment system with individual QR codes

Thailand has PromptPay, Singapore has PayNow, Malaysia has DuitNow and so on. To link these fast payment systems, each pair of central banks concludes its own bilateral agreement. Therefore, every agreement revolves around the same QR code mechanism, so, in practice, the system feels standardised for the consumer, even though it consists of bilateral agreements underneath.



Billow926 | Pexels

The RPC initiative is highly comparable to Wero. The biggest difference is that Wero is driven by commercial banks while the RPC is driven by central banks. However, there is a model that does not fit neatly into either category, named Nexus. It began as Project Nexus and developed through the Bank for International Settlements' (BIS) Innovation Hub in Singapore. The goal was to let domestic instant pay systems connect to one another in order to perform instant cross-border payments—improving speed, cost and transparency. In 2025, Project Nexus became the new non-profit legal entity, Nexus Global Payments, and BIS handed over the project to the entity governed by its founding members—India and four ASEAN members (Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand)—with Indonesia joining as a sixth in 2026. The system is not operational yet, but the problem it addresses remains as relevant as ever. As of June 2024, the World Bank counts roughly 60 domestic instant payment systems worldwide—linking all of them bilaterally would require 1,770 separate agreements. Nexus instead offers a single rail that every instant payment system can connect to once, gaining access to every other system in the network.

The Eurosystem, including the ECB, has taken part in the early development of Nexus in its search to make it easier for consumers and businesses to transfer money. In 2025, it decided to "Continue exploring the feasibility of a potential connection to Nexus Global Payments…". Crucially, TIPS—the Eurosystem's own instant payment system—is the infrastructure Wero itself runs on. This raises the possibility, at least in principle, of linking TIPS—and by extension Wero—

The goal was to let domestic instant pay systems connect to one another in order to perform instant cross-border payments—improving speed, cost and transparency.

to Nexus's network of Asian payment systems, and eventually a global one. We now have three distinct models: Wero, built and owned by private banks, which partly solves the dependency on Mastercard and Visa; the RPC, built directly between ASEAN central banks; and Nexus, designed so that no single state, company or institution owns it outright. In that sense, Nexus comes closest to resolving what payment sovereignty is about. Not private versus public ownership, but who gets to set the standard and rules—in this case a global standard.

However, these models require revenue, and in the end that revenue has to come from consumers. Will consumers switch away from payment methods that already work perfectly well for them? Do consumers care whether their payments are handled by Mastercard or Wero? There has to be an economic incentive for this change of methods to happen, since consumers do not share the sense of dependency that drives the ECB, EPI and the central banks behind RPC. Nor do they care about payment sovereignty. One possibility is that Wero offers discounts to consumers, since it carries lower transaction costs than Mastercard and Visa.

For example, this is one of the reasons why Alipay grew so dominant in China. It should be mentioned that Alipay's rise also relied on China having no large card system to replace—a condition Europe does not share. Furthermore, if (with emphasis on if) Wero were to connect to Nexus via TIPS, it could offer quick and cheap payments to Southeast Asia and vice versa, and in the future, globally. For some, this could be life-changing. According to the World Bank, sending $200 in remittances costs around 6.3% on average worldwide—and with the Philippines alone receiving around $39.6 billion in remittances in 2025, even a small decrease in that cost would contribute to millions of households.

Payment sovereignty is not about whether a company or a state controls the rails, but about which dependencies you accept and which you build away from. Whether these projects will be able to convince the consumer to make the switch is still to be determined, but big steps are being taken to solve the dependency problem and to take control of the movement of money. ■

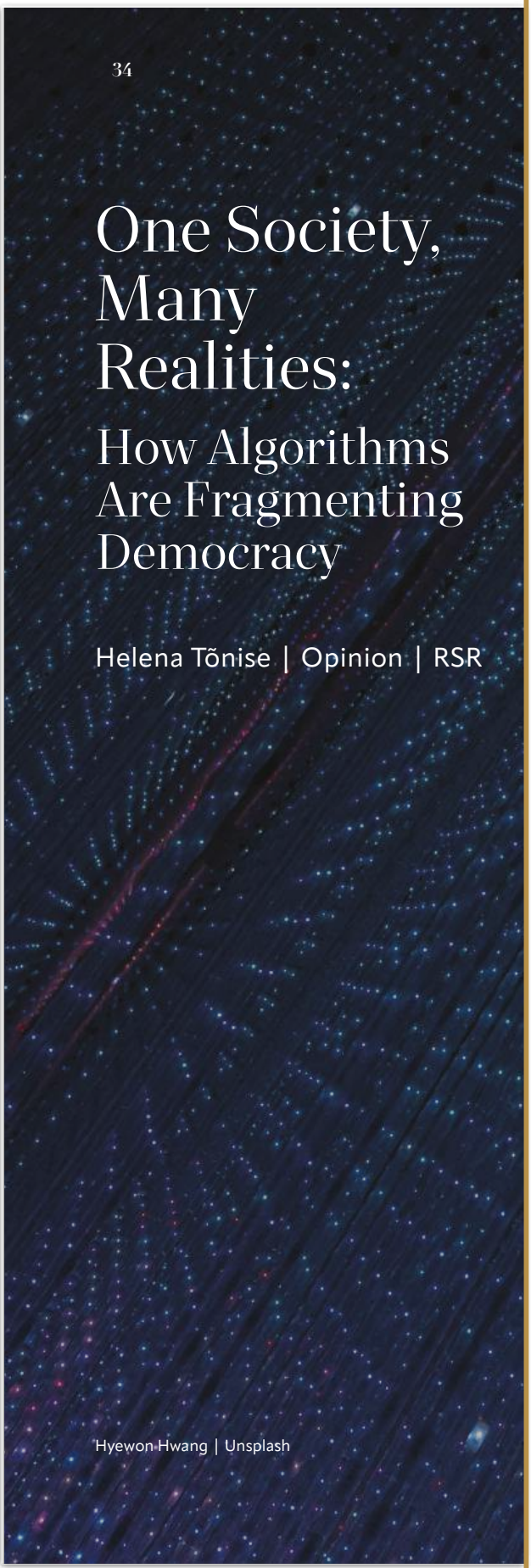


Wayan Aditya | Unsplash

One Society, Many Realities:

How Algorithms Are Fragmenting Democracy

Helena Tõnise | Opinion | RSR



Hyewon Hwang | Unsplash

Democracy relies on the free flow of information and access to a diversity of ideas. The Internet would seem to be an ideal environment for this: vast amounts of information are readily accessible and, in many cases, freely available.

Algorithms, which are designed to help us navigate and identify relevant content, can also narrow the range of information we encounter and in doing so, hinder the free exchange of ideas. This creates an intriguing contradiction. On the Internet, we increasingly rely on recommendations to determine what we read, watch and engage with. These systems do not necessarily censor information outright; instead, they influence which content is presented to us in the first place. Over time, this can create information bubbles and separate realities within the same society. The content we are shown can also gradually become more extreme, contributing to radicalisation without users necessarily noticing the shift.

Amber Schultz, an investigative journalist for the 'Sydney Morning Herald', conducted an experiment in which she created a social media account posing as a 17-year-old boy to examine the type of content that would be recommended to her. Within just 13 minutes, she was shown gender-war content. Within an hour, she was shown content saying that women should treat their husbands the way they treat their boss—by "being subservient and looking their best". Research has also indicated that it takes an average of 23 minutes for young boys to be shown violent or misogynistic content, according to Shultz.

This raises concerns about the vulnerability of young boys who turn to social media for entertainment, information, or advice about life. Tech companies have gained considerable influence over the messages encountered by young men online, while their commercial incentives do not necessarily align with the ethical responsibility that comes with wielding this influence. Content that generates hatred, shame or anger can be particularly effective at keeping users engaged with a platform and generating revenue.

Another problem is that differences in worldviews are becoming increasingly tied to people's identities. According to contemporary philosopher Chris Ranali, indoctrination is not necessarily defined by what a person believes, but rather by the extent to which they associate their identity with those beliefs. Within such information bubbles, people who hold differing views can, progressively, be portrayed not only as opponents in a debate, but as enemies.

By repeatedly presenting users with content that confirms their existing views, while exposing them less frequently to alternative perspectives, algorithms can create the illusion that everyone holds these same opinions.

Foreign information manipulation and interference has become an established component of the way that authoritarian states conduct warfare

Once people become embedded in these information bubbles, it can be difficult to encounter information that challenges their worldview. This, in turn, can have direct consequences for the functioning and resilience of democratic societies. In a democracy, information is one of the most valuable currencies. We choose our representatives and leaders based on what we know about them, their ideas, and their positions. In order to make informed decisions, citizens need to encounter ideas they disagree with, challenge them, and engage in debate.

It is often assumed that democracies are threatened when a single narrative comes to dominate public discourse, as has been the case in authoritarian systems such as Communist China or North Korea. Yet, excessive polarisation and a lack of dialogue between opposing views pose an equally serious threat to democratic societies.

For instance, Elon Musk has approximately 250 million followers on X, and his statements can shape the views of millions of people. He has used the platform to comment on a wide range of issues, including British politics. Musk has repeatedly (including in an interview with 'The Economist') claimed that Britain is on the brink of civil war. When the London-based interviewer challenged this portrayal, Musk stayed true to his statement. Recently, Musk's former partner Ashley St. Clair spoke out about him, saying: "[H]e is stoking flames that don't exist in the real world and he is creating something that is causing real world effects with all of these inputs on X". She added that he is causing deliberate division that may have catastrophic consequences if not regulated. As people spend more time on social media and adopt views shaped by algorithm-driven information environments—particularly on subjects with which they have little to no real-world experience—they become more vulnerable to information manipulation.



Ross Sneddon | Unsplash

As mentioned above, democracies depend on truthful information. Access to reliable and accurate information is the foundation of a functioning society, and this foundation is actively being undermined by foreign powers. Foreign information manipulation and interference has become an established component of the way that authoritarian states conduct warfare.

A common tactic is to fuel anger and resentment toward the government in power. These emotions encourage users to share such content, signalling to the platform's algorithms that similar material should be shown to them more frequently, potentially in increasingly extreme forms. Estonia has been exposed to Russian information influence, the reach of which is amplified by digital platforms and their algorithms. For example, the narrative that Estonia and other Baltic states discriminate against Russians can reach Russian-speaking Estonian residents through the digital domain, even though this narrative does not accurately reflect the situation in their everyday lives.

Algorithms can create parallel information environments within the same society, where different groups of people are exposed to fundamentally different versions of reality and have increasingly little meaningful contact with one another. This can weaken societal cohesion, deepen polarisation, and make constructive dialogue more difficult. At the same time, fragmented information environments leave societies more vulnerable to foreign information manipulation, particularly when external actors seek to exploit existing divisions and undermine trust in democratic institutions.

Democracy depends on the ability to find common ground and reach compromises. Yet this is precisely what algorithm-driven information environments can undermine, by narrowing the range of perspectives we encounter and reinforcing views we already hold. The challenge is that these algorithms are largely covert. We often don't know the mechanisms behind recommendations or the incentives to present us with that type of information. Ensuring transparency and diversity in our digital information environment is becoming an increasingly important part of protecting democratic resilience. ■



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We Need a Post-US Internet:
The Dangers of Relying on American Infrastructure

Florian Wendebaum | Opinion | UPF

The Internet has never been as restrictive and unfree as today. A handful of American tech companies control an absolute majority of the web, and have built walled gardens to keep users within their own ecosystem and restrict their freedoms. These companies are devoted sycophants to the utterly deranged Trump regime. We need digital sovereignty to ensure a free Internet and independent diplomacy in an increasingly authoritarian era.

Our modern financial system relies on the US to play nice and obey the rules it largely created after WW2. Under Trump, this lever to softly control the free world is turning into a bludgeon to beat both ally and enemy into obedience. American financial companies have already restricted access to their services for individuals the Trump administration dislikes: Kimberly Prost, a Canadian judge on the International Criminal Court (ICC), was sanctioned by the US government in 2025. Her credit cards were cancelled, which made bank transfers an ordeal, and made booking flights or hotels near impossible. The same year, Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor at the ICC, lost access to his Microsoft account and was forced to move to a different email provider to continue his work. These judges are a fraction of those involved in investigating possible war crimes in Palestine and Afghanistan, that have been stripped of their access to American Big Tech enterprises.

The American monopoly on tech as a coercive political weapon is not just confined to targeted intimidation. In 2013, Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, leaked classified documents revealing how the NSA used a global surveillance program, PRISM, to obtain direct access to data including emails, chats, and cloud storage from companies like Microsoft, Google, Apple, and Facebook, thereby essentially spying on US citizens.

The US uses tech infrastructure to monitor foreign governments and actively undermine European sovereignty over digital lawmaking

This technological leverage continues to influence foreign policy. In July, the European Commission fined Google €890 million for breaching its landmark laws policing the conduct of dominant online platforms. In response, Trump slammed the EU for discriminatory policies, adding that the EU would "pay a very high price". This is one example of many that shows that the US uses tech infrastructure to monitor foreign governments and actively undermine European sovereignty over digital lawmaking.

Our reliance on these American monopolies in various tech sectors becomes very clear when we consider the platforms that we use on a daily basis. Only a handful of companies control every aspect of the modern Internet. Most illustrative of the American monopoly is Google´s dominion over the Internet. It holds 90% of the world's Internet searches on all devices with a whopping 80 billion website visits per month, leaving Bing and other competitors with a measly 10%. Meta, one of Google's absolute top competitors, reported 3.56 billion daily users in its Q1 filings for 2026, meaning that almost half of the world's population uses at least one of its platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, or Messenger) on any given day. Not to mention the cloud infrastructure that hosts these services, which is almost entirely controlled by three companies: Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft's Azure, and Google Cloud.

Mobile phones are yet another example of the American chokehold. If you're reading this on your phone, it's most likely an Android or iOS, and if you're reading this on a computer, it's presumably running on Windows. Getting away from these companies is difficult, as they work to lock users onto their platform, making it challenging to leave them behind.

Alphabet, Meta, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft control every aspect of how you experience the web and readily abuse their power, at the users' expense. Google search is no stranger to enshittification, a process endemic to the modern, profit-hungry web, which involves reducing the quality of their services in an effort to satisfy advertisers and boost profits. These companies act not only as a right hand of the government, but often put their own interests first, which leaves governments and individual users alike at their mercy.



Jürgen Jester | Unsplash



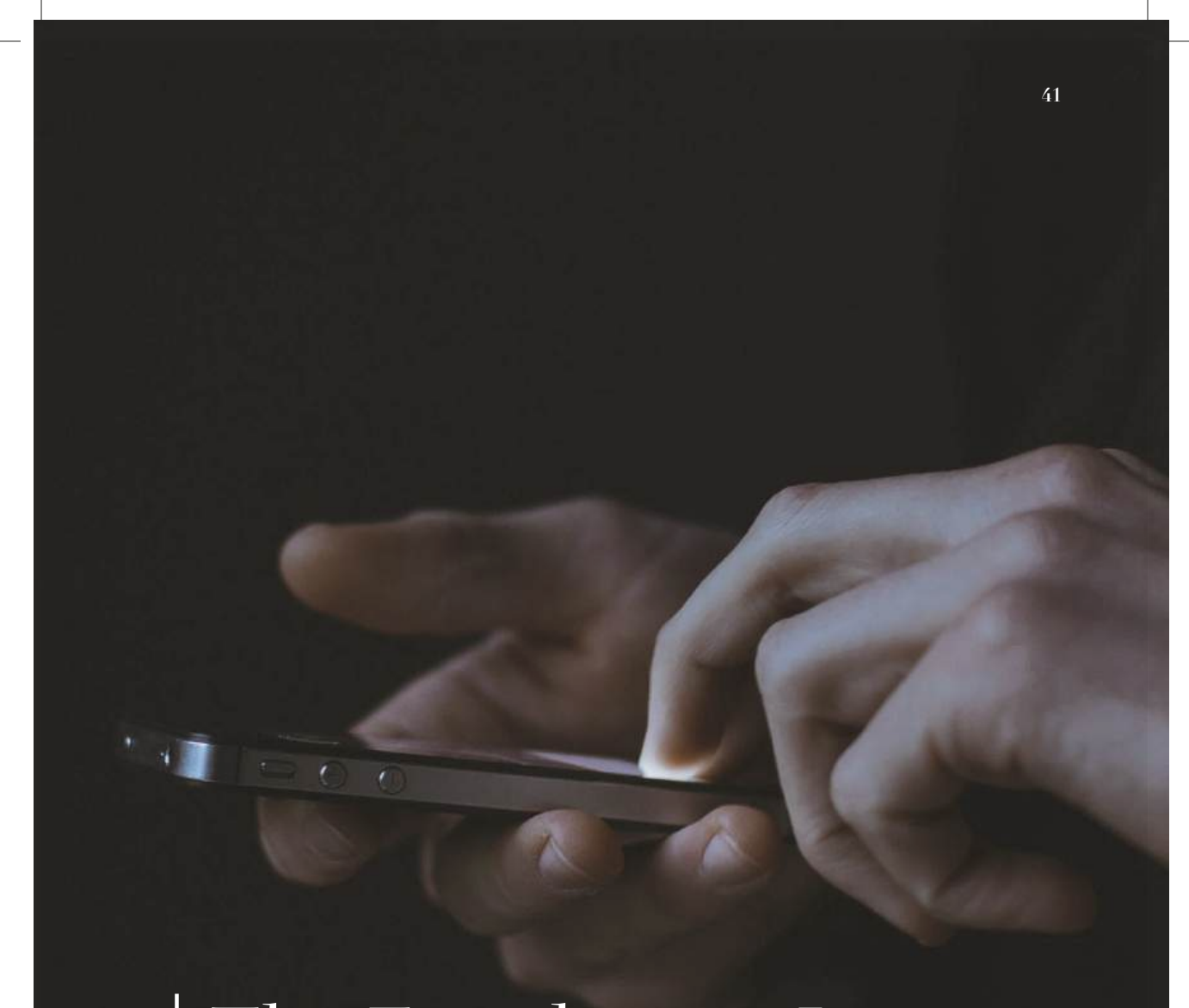
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Luckily, many of the tools to create a free Internet already exist. The Fediverse (a combination of 'federation' and 'universe') is a vast network of thousands of independent social media platforms that can interact with one another. Unlike traditional platforms, it is built on an open protocol, and thereby gives anyone the option to host their own instance on their own servers while still communicating with other instances. Users on different websites can therefore communicate with each other, much like how different email domains have different servers but still communicate with one another. This gives users the freedom to move between different servers, instead of being trapped by one company's terms or algorithms.

To truly ensure digital sovereignty today, governments will have to invest in more independent alternatives. Countries like the Netherlands are spearheading the transition away from Microsoft, replacing Windows with NixOS, a free and open-source operating system built on Linux. This comes as a likely reaction to the US sanctions against the ICC, which is based in The Hague.

Similarly, France is developing its own independent operating system and Internet services called Securix. The measures these governments are taking show that emancipation is possible, as well as necessary. In an age when the Internet is becoming more and more restrictive, reclaiming digital sovereignty has become central to ensure both freedom of information and independent diplomacy. ■

Under Trump, this lever to softly control the free world is turning into a bludgeon to beat both ally and enemy into obedience.



The Freedom to Leave: The Enshittification of Social Media Platforms

Ismail Ali | Opinion | UPF

Gilles Lambert | Unsplash

My grandfather is firmly convinced that the world reached its peak sometime before I was born. The bread was better, the winters harder, the neighbours kinder, and everything from radios to marriages was built to last. For years I filed this where most of us file our grandparents' verdicts on modernity: under fond nonsense—the standard grumble of a man for whom the present will always be a disappointment. Grandpa is wrong—except about one thing, which happens to be the thing we spend most of our waking life inside: the digital world. We live with a strong dependence on digital services due to rapid globalisation. Through digital spheres we can move information online—just as much as we stay connected and create memories.

According to writer Cory Doctorow, it really was better before—and is continuously getting worse. He frames it as 'enshittification', which he describes as a drama of three acts. First, a platform is good to you, to reel you in. Once it has you hooked, it shifts to satisfying advertisers and sellers, at the user´s expense.

For a monopolist, making the product worse can be cheaper than making it better.

Lastly, the platform degrades the service for both users and business customers equally. This allows them to reallocate all remaining value to maximise short-term profits for shareholders before it eventually collapses or stagnates.

Snapchat let people keep their Memories free for nearly a decade, then capped storage at 5GB and began charging up to $15.99 a month to hold on to photos you had already made, while making them a chore to extract. Beyond that, the blue verification tick, once a free mark of who you are, became a subscription:

Andrea De Santis| Unsplash



Elon Musk turned it into an $8-a-month subscription, and Meta copied him within months. Neither your experience improved, nor was there any added value.

A product that gets worse invites a better rival to replace it, and unhappy customers would leave—one would assume. So why don't you? Because you can't.

Let us look at Google. Google is a thrice-convicted monopolist. In one of the cases from 2019, Google's search revenue had stalled—owning roughly 90% of the search market, which was expected. Internal emails, later publicised by journalist Ed Zitron, reveal how ad executives Jerry Dischler and Prabhakar Raghavan pressured teams to increase search queries to boost ad revenue. Ben Gomes, the Head of Search at that time, resisted intensely on the grounds that it would harm the quality of results and the user experience. He lost that struggle—within a year, Raghavan had taken over Search.

The logic is straightforward. For a monopolist, making the product worse can be cheaper than making it better. As Doctorow puts it, "money talks and bullshit walks". If results become less relevant, a failed search becomes a new search, and every new search shows another screen of ads. Emails from the antitrust cases exposed how executive mandates actively degraded search relevance to force users to spend more time navigating ads and hence generating more ad revenue. Adblockers are an alternative and solution if the ads are too invasive. These cannot be installed on apps however, since anti-circumvention laws make it illegal to reverse engineer an application.

Reading this, you may feel an economist's objection forming. If Google were really this bad, would someone not build something better and take its users? It is a free market after all—a company this dominant must be the best one—or it would not be dominant. The faith that market share is a reward for merit, Doctorow writes, is a doctrine that "you can only fully embrace after sustaining the kind of highly specific neurological injury that is induced by taking an economics degree, an injury that makes you incapable of perceiving or reasoning about power".

Google can do it for one reason: the same reason it pays Apple some $20 billion a year not to build a rival search engine and buys all the shelf space for search: they control who enters the market. Give a company customers who cannot leave and legislation that is on their side, and you do not need evil executives, just ordinary ones following the incentive. In the absence of consequence through good policies, the worst ideas win.

> *You cannot leave, so it need not care*

The right to leave any country, including one's own, is a fundamental human right recognised under international law. Our rights are what make us free, and the freedom to leave any service on the internet is what keeps companies honest and innovative. But when markets are captured and competition is non-existent, a company has no reason to stay true to the people it serves; you cannot leave, so it need not care. A right you cannot exercise is no right at all, but rather a mere decoration. So then we are left with a dangerous question: are we actually free? ■



Coming In From The Right:

The Shifting Sands under Bolsonarismo

Erik Plakso | Analysis | RSR

Matheus Câmara da Silva | Unsplash

The 2026 Brazilian general election was initially supposed to be a head-to-head cage match between the leftist incumbent three-term president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the right-wing populist son of the previous president, Flávio Bolsonaro. It has become a campaign full of twists, turns, judicial crises, and vitriol that has remained dominated by Lula and the Bolsonaro family, but has exposed the frustrations of the Brazilian public with the current political arrangement.

Nowhere is this clearer than on the Brazilian right. Dissatisfaction with the Bolsonaro family and their handling of the 2022 election's aftermath, corruption scandals, and their stranglehold on politics has both sabotaged Flávio Bolsonaro's campaign and exposed the campaign to third-party challengers (including the energetic Renan Santos, veteran Ronaldo Caiado, and quiet Romeu Zema) who are coming in from the right to tear at the shifting sands under bolsonarismo. Puzzlingly, Flávio Bolsonaro's campaign has managed to rise slightly in the polls despite all this.

The current Brazilian party system was born after Operation Car Wash during 2014-16, which culminated in the impeachment of the first female president, Dilma Rousseff, a member of the Workers' Party (PT—Partido dos Trabalhadores), and the electoral collapse of the PT's main opposition party, the centre-left Social Democratic Party of Brazil (PSDB—Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira). Following the enormous corruption scandals and removal of PT from power in 2016 (after a 13-year rule), the presidential field was left wide open for 2018. The Brazilian right, fractured and eschewed since the end of the military regime in 1985, unified under the aegis of federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro, who launched a presidential campaign built on his personal bravado and image as an enemy of the PT. Defeating the PT's Fernando Haddad after ex-president Lula was imprisoned and barred from running, Jair Bolsonaro was elected president and then defeated in 2022 by the released Lula.

Jair Bolsonaro had switched parties in 2022 to the Liberal Party (PL—Partido Liberal) and utilised all possible administrative resources to buff up his campaign, but lost in the closest contest of the New Republic. What followed was chaos as Bolsonaro plotted a military coup to avoid Lula's inauguration, as well as an attack on the Presidential Palace, National Congress, and Supreme Court in January 2023 (reminiscent of the January 6th attack in the US in 2021). With Jair and various co-conspirators later jailed during the course of Lula's third term, the question remained in the air over who could succeed Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonarismo was initially torn, later deciding in favour of Flávio, although not without brief internal dispute. With the Bolsonaros maintaining a cult-like stranglehold over the Brazilian right, Flávio Bolsonaro emerged as a solid second to Lula in the polls as a candidate of the PL, with any alternatives shut out.

> *[Scandal], combined with general exhaustion, opened the door for alternative right-wing candidates to make their case.*

However, not all members of the right were satisfied, especially as the 2026 campaign approached. The transition from Jair to Flávio was negotiated mostly inside the PL and associated circles, but not among the wider Brazilian right, which had never been quite as loyal to Jair and would not follow along with Flávio.



Romerito Pontes | Wikimedia Commons

Questions emerged over the wisdom of picking Flávio due to a nepotism scandal that surfaced after he became senator in the same election that elected his father. The floor shook further with a massive banking scandal surrounding the defunct Banco Master and its leader Daniel Vorcaro, which enveloped Flávio Bolsonaro as text messages emerged showing him pleading with Vorcaro for funds for a biopic of his father. This, combined with general exhaustion, opened the door for alternative right-wing candidates to make their case.

Without question, the most vocal alternative to Flávio Bolsonaro has been Renan Santos of the Missão (Mission) party. Emerging from the civic movement MBL (Free Brazil Movement), which played a role in mobilising protests against Rousseff and advising the subsequent Temer government, Missão was formed in 2025 to "make Brazil a first-world country". Arguing for a mix of libertarian, Bukelist, liberal, and conservative policies, they have overrun Brazilian social media. Lula and Flávio have deemed the Santos campaign 'unapproachable,' forming a cordon sanitaire around it and pressuring media outlets to condition their participation in events on Santos's absence. Nevertheless, The Economist, comedian Danilo Gentili, and right-wing influencers on X have endorsed Santos, with polling showing him between 3% and 11%.

Neck and neck with him in the polls is Ronaldo Caiado of the PSD (Social Democratic Party). Caiado has positioned himself to the right of Bolsonaro as the governor of Goiás, a conservative rural farming-heavy state in the center of Brazil.

With the Bolsonaros maintaining a cult-like stranglehold over the Brazilian right, Flávio Bolsonaro emerged as a solid second to Lula in the polls…

He is a veteran politician, having emerged in the 1980s as a leader of a movement of agribusiness interests (the Democratic Ruralist Union) and running for president in 1989. Caiado has also served as a federal deputy, senator, and finally governor of Goiás. Promising to pardon everyone associated with the January 8 attacks, he has maintained lukewarm relations with Renan Santos while firmly polling around 3% and 4%.

In the midst of a judicial crisis in the Supreme Federal Court and justices making decisions against each other as a result of the Banco Master scandal—which envelops not only bolsonarismo but also the left wing and the judiciary—alternative right-wing candidates have surged. Some have exploited this current better than others, with the initially promising Romeu Zema (governor of Minas Gerais) crashing in the polls following his absence in the first national debate, which was boycotted by both Lula (over Renan Santos's presence) and then Flávio Bolsonaro (over Lula's absence).

The response of bolsonarismo, a movement decidedly opposed to outside thoughts leaking in, has been vociferous. Brazilian social media is rife with mutual accusations of working with "the System" between supporters of Santos and Flávio. In addition to the aforementioned cordon sanitaire against Renan Santos, the popular narrative of bolsonarismo is that Missão is a product of support for the PT intended to draw votes from Bolsonaro and either remove them from the second round or move them to Lula. This is largely based on Renan Santos' refusal to endorse Flávio against Lula in the second round (instead insisting that he will oppose Lula in the second round), and on the instruction by the MBL in 2022 to spoil their vote in the second round against both Lula and Jair Bolsonaro.

By the time this magazine is published, the first round will likely have concluded, with the most likely resolution being a second round between Lula and Flávio, with Lula in the lead. No matter the result, one thing is certain—the relative monopoly on the Brazilian right enjoyed so far by the Bolsonaro family is ending, with the movement of the Brazilian right headed towards various, different right-wing parties, as is the case on the Brazilian left. ■



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