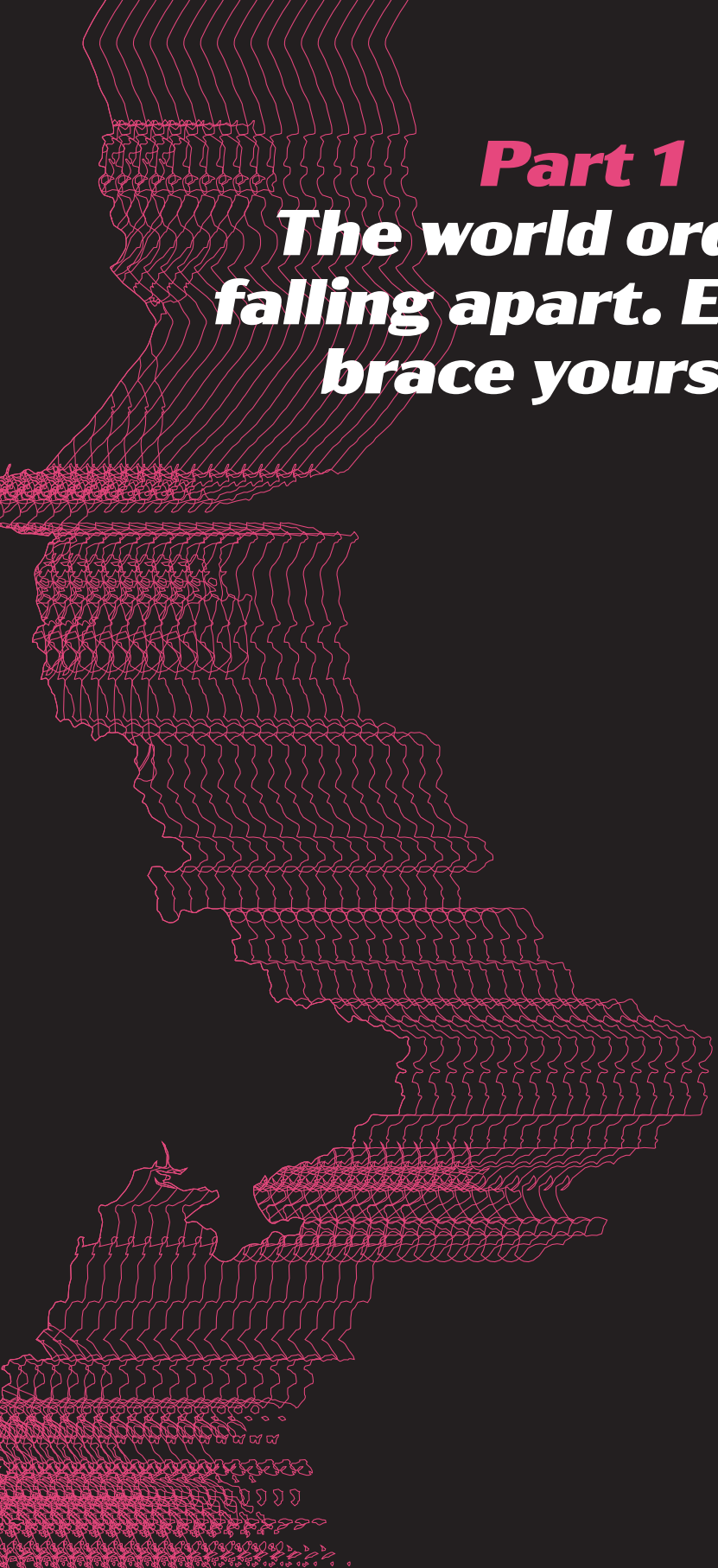

Part 1

The world order is falling apart. Europe, brace yourself!

2. 2025, the year the old world order fell apart

Europe, the sick old man of the world

If Europe were a person, I would genuinely feel sorry for him. For years, our continent was looked at with pity. No one had anything good to say about it. Cynically enough, the criticism did not just come from outside Europe: Europeans themselves eagerly joined in the round of Euro-bashing, even though they could and should have changed something about it themselves.

Yes, Europe has a problem with demographic ageing, and therefore with a shortage of labour. That puts social security under pressure and weighs on the continent's productivity. But countries such as China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, the United States and many others are in a very similar situation. Only Africa, India and certain Asian countries largely escape this phenomenon for now, although it is expected that, in the longer term, they will probably follow the same demographic trends. What is more, countries with very young populations have little impact on the global economy. For instance, 56.9 percent of Niger's 26 million inhabitants are younger than eighteen, yet the country represents only 0.016 percent of global GDP. That is 1/20th of what their population size would suggest if Niger followed the global average. In other words: despite ageing, most value still sits with the 'old countries'. So is it fair to describe Europe as the old man, or even as the world's care home, as if it is nothing but a problem and a constraint for Europe?

Does this have to do with our capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship? Here, the criticism is probably better placed. What few people realise, however, is how many of the biggest innovations originally came from Europe, only to truly break through via the United States. The list is long, and I will mention only a few here: the web, the mobile phone and SMS, Linux (and therefore indirectly Android OS), Bluetooth, wind and solar power, nuclear fusion, CERN, CT scans, CRISPR-Cas9 DNA treatments, mRNA vaccines, cultivated meat, and so on. So it is not that we got stuck in the 1970s when it comes to innovation; the most promising transitions in energy, food, climate or healthcare come from Europe. And yet we fail to scale those innovations economically, in the way the United States – and, more recently, China – do manage to.

One of the main causes is the lack of cohesion and a culture of boldness with-

I cannot reconstruct the rest of the conversation all that well, but I do remember the rolling eyes, and how the discussion quickly moved on to the order of the day (I think it was about which new series we were going to binge-watch). And there I was, steeped in the historic weight of what was unfolding, while apparently being the only one.

As it turned out, that last part was not true. The meeting, the goal of which was to sign an agreement on American access to Ukrainian rare earths, escalated into a heated exchange. Trump and Vice President JD Vance had clearly worked out a one-two, the kind we only know from top-level football. Within moments the tone shifted from positive and friendly to a toxic attack, with the Americans accusing Zelensky of ingratitude and disrespect. In one fell swoop, Zelensky and Ukraine were blamed for having caused the war themselves, and told they could no longer count on support from the United States. The way this happened was unprecedented in international diplomacy, certainly in front of the cameras. Afterwards there was plenty of speculation about whether the whole incident had been staged, so that Ukraine could be publicly abandoned and ties with Russia strengthened: a clear signal both to Trump's base and to Putin. The planned press conference and the signing of the agreement were cancelled, and Zelensky left the White House early, in a retreat that would not have looked out of place in *Game of Thrones*.

The comments in the hours and days that followed were telling, and I was clearly not the only one who marked the moment as historic. The general tenor in the media, political circles and among opinion-makers was one of astonishment, shock and concern about the future of the Western alliance and Ukraine's security. International media spoke of a 'scandal in front of the whole world' and stressed that it is unprecedented for an American president to publicly dress down an ally like that – certainly the leader of a country at war. French president Macron stated that it was clear who the aggressor was (Russia) and who the victim was (Ukraine), and that support for Ukraine remained unchanged. Italian prime minister Meloni called for an urgent summit between Europe, the United States and allies, because division would weaken the West. From Russia, meanwhile, the confrontation was greeted with obvious glee. Russian officials praised the 'restraint' shown by Trump and Vance towards 'bastard' Zelensky and called the situation 'historic'.

Historic it certainly was. For anyone who still doubted it, it was now clear: the United States was no longer the partner, let alone the leader, of the Western alliance that had held for almost a century. And yet this incident did not necessarily come as a surprise. Exactly two weeks before the Zelensky incident, American Vice President JD Vance gave a controversial speech at the 61st Munich Security Conference.

The core message was that Europe could no longer rely on the United States as protector or moral compass. The continent was given a dressing-down about its own shortcomings: migration policy that was too lax, restrictions on freedom of speech, and too little appreciation for the 'right' political parties (read: the radical right, such as AfD). According to Vance, Russia was not the great danger, but Europe itself – or rather: the decay of its own values. The message was clear: if Europe still wants to defend itself, it will largely have to do so alone – America has other concerns. And if Europe is worried about Russian tanks, then that is largely its own fault. That landed, although the impact still had not fully sunk in.

A few days later, Trump went even further. During a press moment at his beloved Mar-a-Lago estate, he suggested that Ukraine itself was responsible for starting the war. That happened after American and Russian peace talks in Saudi Arabia, to which Ukraine and Europe had not been invited – most likely because it was not really about peace at all, but about restoring trade relations between the United States and Russia. And yet even that did not fully sink in. So it took the slapstick politics of 28 February before no one could or wanted to deny it any longer: the world has changed, the United States is no longer what it was, Europe is even more alone, and a new world order is announcing itself. No: at the start of 2025, things did not look good for Europe.

The global shock

I have already referred to themes from my previous books: from digital transformation in the first works to the fundamental societal and business model transformations in the most recent ones. Each of those waves of change has its own terminology to describe the impact, severity and urgency of the disruptions.

In the early years, we spoke of digital **disruptions** (and disruptors) that changed the status quo of certain sectors and led to business model transformations, sometimes with consequences for an entire sector. By now we know that that impact often remained limited. Yes, Uber shook up the taxi business, and Netflix did the same for the film, TV and media industries. But outside those sectors, the influence of these tech challengers was small. That was true, by the way, for almost all digital disruptions, from education to banking, from retail to tourism. What is more, it often took far longer than expected to transform a sector. I estimate that, on average, it takes about twenty years from the emergence of a disruption to the intended winner-takes-all result.

4. The world order is being redrawn, part 1: The familiar players

As we saw in the previous chapter, we have gone through a circular movement in geopolitics and world order. Barely a hundred years ago, we still lived in a multipolar world dominated by Europe. Through complex structures and strong self-interests of rapidly developing nation states, a field of tension emerged that ultimately led to two world wars. The subsequent bipolar order kept the world in balance, with a Western and an Eastern bloc. Western Europe then entered one of the longest periods of stability and security, but it did so at the cost of surrendering a significant part of its geopolitical significance, in favour of the United States. Eastern Europe, by contrast, fell into a long period of dictatorship, under Moscow's yoke.

Since the early 1990s, we have seen how the fall of the Soviet Union led to a unipolar hegemony of the United States, with only one centre of power left in the world: America. Over time, however, that evolved into the chaotic, multipolar situation we now find ourselves in. Where, up to Trump II, the United States still seemed to have the ambition, as the only world power, to ensure dominance, balance and stability, we now see how its own actions are actually reinforcing that new multipolar order. At the same time, it is retreating into a form of isolationism and nationalism that strongly recalls America in the 1930s. In the next two chapters, I analyse the forces underpinning these shifts. First, I discuss the players we already know, such as China, Russia and India, who are actively working to restore or expand their influence. After that, I focus on the new forces which, through the current Trump government, appear to be aiming for an accelerated redrawing of the world order.

Russia's resurgence as an old new enemy

If there is one player that wants to claim a prominent role again in the new multipolar world order, it is Russia. Where, shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, there still seemed to be the beginnings of liberalisation, other internal forces ultimately proved stronger. The Russia of today is, without doubt, the direct heir to the Soviet Union. Many of those currently in power come straight out of the structures of the Eastern Bloc. Under Putin's leadership, the country has become steeped in

a conservative worldview that runs counter to the liberal, rules-based model the United States put forward after WWII. Russia's vision of the new world order sits somewhere between the multipolar Europe of the 19th century and the bipolar world of the Cold War. In both models, a limited number of great powers define their spheres of influence, by exercising power or by striking deals and agreements. In that worldview, small states are not autonomous actors, but satellites that fall in line with the interests of their dominant patron.

Where Washington positioned itself after WWII as the protector of a global order based on freedom, law and market logic, Moscow is now projecting an image of pragmatic power politics and cultural conservatism. International structures and organisations that safeguard peace, security and global interests worldwide barely have a place in that worldview. Many of their members and representatives are seen by Russia as puppets of America, and therefore not as representative of the interests of new geopolitical players. Russia therefore fundamentally opposes the unipolar model of the 1990s and the American dominance it embodied. Putin does not see that period as a time of liberation, but as a historic humiliation in which Russia was marginalised. He does not regard NATO's expansion as a security instrument for former Soviet republics that asked for it themselves, but as a military encirclement by the United States and a direct threat to Russia's sphere of influence.

Putin's view of geopolitics is not purely ideological, but also a reinterpretation of Russian identity, with the restoration of 'lost greatness' at its centre. He sees present-day Russia not only as a modern nation state, but also as the legitimate continuation of two historic empires: the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. From that double legacy, he builds an ideological foundation for his geopolitical ambitions. Putin presents himself as the restorer of a historic continuity that was interrupted by the chaos of the 1990s. Whether he truly believes that, or mainly uses it as an almost messianic legitimisation of worldly objectives, we will probably never know for sure.

Russia positions itself vis-à-vis the United States as an equal great power, although that claim rests mainly on military capacity. The war in Ukraine has shown that its conventional military clout is far smaller than the West long assumed, but Russia compensates for that with its nuclear deterrent. Economically, Russia is no match for the United States, Europe or China. With a GDP of 2,200 billion USD, it lags far behind Europe and China, and the United States takes the crown with 30,000 billion USD. It is therefore no surprise that a key part of Russia's strategy consists of making itself relatively stronger by weakening others from within – an approach it has used for years against both Europe and the United States.

The actions of the current Trump administration, briefly discussed above, weaken America's international position, its alliances, and the individual positions of its partners. They leave behind an unprecedented leadership vacuum in domains in which the United States has set the tone since WWII. This forces the abandoned partners to reposition themselves in each of those domains, in order to strengthen their own position in the new world order. At the same time, it gives America's rivals the chance to expand their influence. Given Europe's earlier described near-vassal status vis-à-vis the United States, the consequences are enormous on every front. The need to reinvent ourselves is vast, but fortunately that awareness has now truly set in. Which brings us to the million-dollar question: why is Trump doing this, what is the grand master plan, and what world order is the United States pursuing?

The new Trumpian tripolar world

Donald Trump's worldview represents a fundamental break with how we think about international order. Where American administrations for eighty years clung to a model of global leadership based on (more or less) universal values, Trump seems to be introducing a radical alternative: a world divided into three spheres of influence, led by the United States, Russia and China – three great powers that keep one another in balance. This tripolar vision is not merely rhetoric: it is translated into policy choices based on power politics and territorial thinking. In this vision, the international system – built on shared interests and multilateral agreements and cooperation – is no longer seen as a platform for collective progress. Instead, the global market becomes an arena for rough negotiations in which each power secures its own space.

This is known as the Realism doctrine, in which the role of power (and the abuse of power) and self-interest in state behaviour is central to international relations. The doctrine starts from the assumption that nation states are once again the most important actors in a chaotic world order. Realism argues that, in times of chaos, states are primarily motivated to safeguard their own security and survival, which leads to a focus on military strength and strategic alliances. Ideological and moral considerations are subordinate to pragmatic decisions. In this doctrine, it is perfectly logical for the strongest parties to use their power to force others to give them what they want. Trump's remarks about Greenland, Canada or Panama are illustrations of that behaviour. The parallels with the 19th-century dynamics of multipolar nation states in Europe are strong – and the consequences of that period are well known.

Trump does not see Russia and China as dangerous deviations from a liberal world order that need correcting, as previous American administrations did. Instead, he regards them as legitimate great powers with an obvious claim to their regional sphere of influence. For him, it is not inherently problematic for Russia to dominate Ukraine or for China to exert power in the South China Sea, because these are logical expressions of great-power politics. Even so, there is a fundamental difference in how Trump views Russia versus China. In traditional American foreign policy, China was seen as a rising systemic rival, but with room for cooperation. Russia, by contrast, was mainly viewed as a dangerous, revisionist power that needed to be prevented from further expansion. Under Trump, that perspective shifts fundamentally: China becomes the primary existential threat to American hegemony and therefore has to be pushed back economically, technologically and militarily. This perception of China as the main enemy is rooted in Trump's conviction that economic competitiveness is a matter of national security. As early as 2017, he identified China as a 'rival power' that 'is trying to change the status quo in the world, to the detriment of the United States'. Russia, by contrast, is reduced to a manageable regional player (much to Putin's irritation, by the way). By strengthening relations between the United States and Russia, Trump believes he can drive a geopolitical wedge between China and Russia.

This recognition of 'natural' spheres of influence is, for Trump, a strategic move to limit international conflicts: if each of the three poles controls its own territory, the risk of clashes is smaller. But because today's world is a complex puzzle of intertwined interests and dependencies, this vision is simplistic and even dangerous. Boundaries of influence are rarely clearly defined. Here too, we can once again learn from the 19th-century situation and how it ultimately led to two world wars. In Trump's framework, states are essentially competitors, and international politics is a succession of transactions that you can win or lose. It is no coincidence that Trump often frames his geopolitical worldview in real-estate terms: who owns what, who picks up the costs, and who can sell at a profit. That reduces geopolitics to something best understood through transactions, rather than through institutional checks and balances and broader societal interests. In Trump's logic, geopolitics is boiled down to negotiable assets – from Greenland and Canada to Ukraine's raw materials and the Panama Canal. However hard that may be to square with the way we see the world today, it is essentially how the world was carved up between power blocs until the 19th century.

Trump's vision leaves no room for Europe as a strong and independent geopolitical actor. Instead, Europe is reduced to a junior partner that must adapt to

ditional energy as a product remains bound to the logic of scarcity and conflict, renewable energy as a technology offers a path towards sustainable growth and sovereignty for Europe.

Although solar energy is now, on average, already up to 50 percent cheaper than energy generated from gas, we are still far from a full shift to renewable energy. One of the causes is the unpredictability of generation: you can run a gas-fired power plant steadily, but with solar and wind we are dependent on external factors, which means there are regularly periods of too little or too much energy generation. Energy storage could offer a solution, but we are still a long way from having sufficient capacity to buffer all energy needs stably through storage. In addition, there are industries with energy needs so large that current renewable sources are insufficient; stable solutions will have to be found for those as well.

If, within Readiness 2030, we set out a project aimed at cracking these codes, and we position it in the market as the next high-tech race, then it is very likely that we will solve this problem too within the foreseeable future. For this, Europe has already earmarked almost 115 billion euros in subsidies to address the energy storage challenge. If we were to treat that money as a commercial investment fund for innovative energy technology companies, and match it with the same amount from private investors, then an enormous lever could be created to make Europe a leader in energy and independent of the rest of the world. Although China benefits from enormous resources and economies of scale in this area, Europe is betting on technological expertise and research, while the US risks falling far behind by ending American support for these kinds of initiatives.

Europe can never win the fight over oil and gas as an energy source, so we should not take it on. The transition sector of sustainable energy is still in its infancy and is built on entirely different foundations: talent, innovation, technology and money. In that arena, Europe can reclaim its position, never to let it go again. And that takes me back in time.

A backwards-running meter

Just under twenty years ago, my wife and I decided to do something a bit crazy. Alongside super-insulating glass, above-standard insulation and a heat pump with underfloor heating, we invested in solar panels. As long as we didn't have electric cars, those forty panels generated virtually all the energy

we needed, and our backwards-running meter worked like a de facto battery: what we used when there was no sun was neatly 'run back' when the sun was at its peak.

Our monthly total energy costs were effectively 0 euros, and throughout that time we had a fixed monthly repayment to the bank of 177 euros. In doing so, we replaced the costs of a product, a commodity, with an investment in technology. The repayment is now behind us, and the solar panels still work perfectly. Oh yes, they are German panels, from the time when the Chinese had not yet written world dominance in solar energy into their strategy as a top priority.

Defence as an example of transition thinking

Now that we have already devoted considerable attention to Europe's weaknesses in defence, it is useful to look at how transition thinking can offer a perspective here as well. The classic image of military superiority is still based on the size of armies, the number of tanks, fighter jets or aircraft carriers, and the size of the defence budget. In those areas, Europe simply cannot compete with military giants such as the US or China. Yet we should not underestimate Europe's military strength. Europe does, in fact, have a broad and high-quality arsenal of conventional weapons systems that can rival their American counterparts. Although the F-35 is promoted as superior, European air forces, with aircraft such as the Eurofighter Typhoon (UK, Germany, Italy, Spain), the French Rafale and the Swedish Gripen, have fully capable fighter jets. At sea, the FREMM frigates from France and Italy are advanced platforms for air defence and anti-submarine warfare, while the airspace is secured by Aster missiles and the Swedish RBS 70 NG, a laser-guided air defence system. On land, Germany's Leopard 2A7 is regarded as one of the most modern tanks worldwide, supported by Sweden's Archer artillery system. Several European countries have the SCALP/Storm Shadow cruise missile – comparable to the American Tomahawk – while MBDA, as a pan-European missile producer, develops a whole range of missiles deployed within NATO. Finally, radar systems, such as the Swedish Saab Giraffe series, provide advanced detection capabilities that are essential in modern warfare.

Europe's greatest weakness, then, is not the absence of high-quality technology, but the fragmentation of its defence apparatus. Where the US can rely on a cen-

8. Is there enough support?

We are on a slippery slope of support

In recent years, I have done a lot of strategic work for cities and municipalities. They too see the world changing, and some genuinely have the ambition to be pleasant places to live and work by 2050. Alongside countless policy and practical challenges, the constant brake on real acceleration of innovation is the lack of support. No matter how many beautiful plans we have, how much money we throw at them, how strongly politicians argue for them: if there is no broad support among citizens and businesses, no major transformations will happen. And that, in these times of social discontent and polarisation, is precisely a major problem. Bases of support are the glaciers of our society: every day we see them melting away, and with it announcing a future disaster.

I truly believe there is political momentum to allow Europe to emerge stronger from the current crisis. The only question is whether European citizens believe in that too. If we want to bring this European project to a successful conclusion, we need the democratic support of all Europeans. The transformations and investments in transition sectors will lead to change and sacrifices, and we will have to seek consensus around positions everyone can live with. That means we will have to make concessions and many sacred cows will be slaughtered. In recent years, we have seen necessary measures meet resistance from citizens: removing paving, the tethered bottle cap, the concrete stop, low emission zones in the city, maximum speeds on the motorway ... they all lead to irritation and frustration. The issue is not so much that people do not support the underlying causes, such as road safety or the climate; the issue is that we do not understand how these 'pesty measures' contribute to a solution. The burden we experience is greater than the understanding we have of why the action is being taken. We live in a time in which trust in 'the system' is at a low point, and yet we are going to need that support to make the European turnaround. How do we tackle that?

There are several possible dynamics that can help here. The most obvious is creating a clear enemy image. A war works wonders in this respect: it unites a people, in all its diversity, and makes them endure unprecedented hardships without too much complaining, together against the enemy. Look at the situation in Ukraine, where the war has been going on for years now, and although Russia is strongly

focused on demotivating citizens, the determination seems only to be increasing. Fortunately, Europe is not in a state of war, and hopefully it never will be. Something more peaceful, but just as efficient, is an economic and cultural enemy image. When Trump started acting out and proclaimed that Canada should really become a state of the US, that Justin Trudeau was downgraded to governor (the title for the head of an American state), and that Greenland was almost confiscated, outrage in those countries was widespread. From a kind of nationalist sense of unity, even people who are not nationalist by nature rallied behind their country's common flag. The consequences ranged from an economic boycott of American products to reducing the number of trips Canadians typically make to the US. Not to mention the complete European collapse in Tesla sales because Icarus Musk had flown a little too close to Trump's sun.

Major global shocks such as natural disasters and pandemics are comparable to wars. Although human selfishness usually rears its head immediately, for example in the form of looting or people jumping the queue for vaccination, in these moments we generally still see enormous mobilisation and solidarity: citizens join forces to help, or, without much complaint, accept restrictions that in fact disregard their democratic rights. Typically, this positive behaviour is usually of relatively short duration. The consequences of a disaster simply must not drag on for too long, because then the willingness to show solidarity drops rapidly.

There is another kind of shock effect that acts as an engine for mobilisation: the outrage of large groups of people when a moral boundary is crossed. That moment when something is not only wrong, but is also deemed unacceptable. When the US government openly began targeting universities such as Harvard, a broad range of students, academics and even critics closed ranks. Until then, they had often been loudly shouting at one another from opposite sides in the occupations of campuses that resulted from conflicting worldviews. But the danger that Trump's actions amounted to a frontal attack on academic freedom united opponents against a common enemy and around a common purpose. We saw a similar phenomenon when American ICE agents rounded up migrants in violent raids: even people who had previously argued for stricter migration rules were shocked by the images and voiced their disgust. Such moments create a temporary unifying effect, generating support for resistance or for action.

All the dynamics above are essentially negative motivators, aimed at short-term mobilisation, against something. The question is how you motivate people in the long term for something, for positive action. Our brains have evolved in such a way that we pay far more attention to negativity, which makes it easier to resist some-

CO_2 will be captured, and in May 2025 it signed a large-scale supply contract for low-carbon ammonia with Japan's Marubeni. Chevron, in turn, expanded its activities in June 2025 for lithium extraction via direct extraction in Texas and Arkansas, and through its New Energies arm is investing up to 10 billion dollars in clean technologies such as hydrogen and CO_2 storage – thereby strategically anchoring both giants' future in the energy transition, despite their rhetoric. The phenomenon we are seeing here has recently been dubbed 'greenhushing': to the outside world it appears as if attention to sustainability is waning, but behind the scenes the investments simply continue. The causes are clear: the economic and social rationale for continuing with sustainability is unshakeable, but companies want to deflect attention in order to avoid the wrath of Trump, the far right, or MAGA-aligned customers.

As we all know: 'money makes the world go round'. The fact that the richest – and therefore most impactful – investment funds require their portfolio companies to keep focusing on sustainability will no doubt have something to do with their moral awareness that they are influencing the future of their grandchildren. Yet their motivation is, first and foremost, based on financial returns. What is striking, then, is the continuing influence of deep-pocketed institutional investors who set sustainability as a hard condition. A fine and little-known example is Norway's Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG). Norway, with only 5.5 million inhabitants, manages an unprecedented fortune of 1.8 trillion dollars through this government fund. With that amount, you can acquire an average equity stake of 1.5 percent in every listed company in the world. GPFG thus holds stakes in oil and gas giants such as Equinor, Shell, BP, TotalEnergies and ExxonMobil, where it puts pressure on CO_2 reduction and the shift to clean energy. In mining, the fund keeps companies such as Anglo American, BHP and Glencore under close scrutiny. GPFG also has enough shareholder weight in companies such as ING, BNP Paribas, Deutsche Bank, Apple, Microsoft, Unilever and Nestlé to influence policy. It is therefore significant that, in the first half of 2025, the managers of this fund made it clear that sustainability is no longer an optional recommendation, but an absolute requirement. Companies that cannot show how they deal with climate risks risk being excluded from this capital. For CEOs worldwide, that is a powerful signal: anyone who wants to retain access to the world's largest investment flows must take the transition seriously, regardless of the political climate in the US and any ideological imitators at home. This could also limit the risk of climate action being hollowed out among European companies – as a result of reduced reporting obligations under the new Omnibus rules – because the pursuit of sustainability would then be inherently baked in at shareholder level.

9. Fuck the system! Why is the world so dissatisfied?

On both the left and the right, there is a belief that dismantling the system is the solution to all our problems. Unfortunately, this is a very simplistic and mistaken idea. Although in part 1 of this book I described how certain ideological currents have every interest in weakening Europe from within (and how better to do that than by undermining trust in structures and systematically turning people against the system?), in this chapter I primarily want to look at what is going on among citizens and how this can be used to pursue a populist and anti-European course.

The game versus the rules

'Fucking the system' is simply a bad idea if we want to think constructively about our future and about the future of Europe. To understand that, I make a distinction between what I call 'the game' and the 'rules of the game'. In the West, and especially in Europe, over the past one hundred years we have managed to organise our society in a unique way. Using the diagram in figure 1, I describe what I call 'the game'.

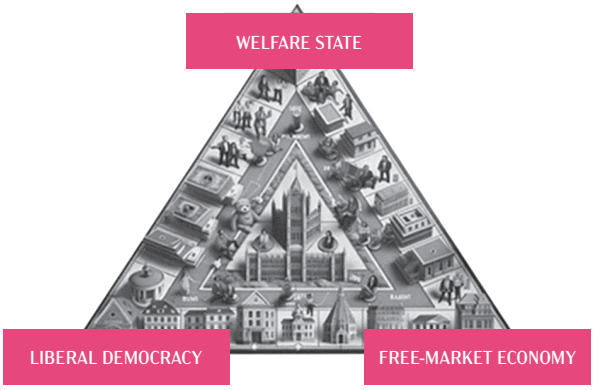

Figure 1: Liberal democracy, free-market economy, welfare state

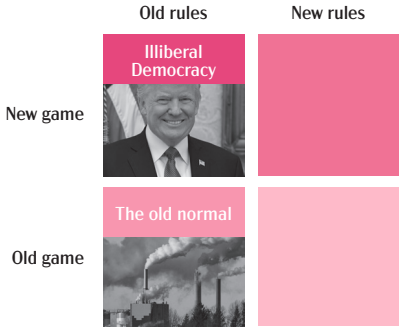

Figure 4: Scenario 2: New game, Old rules.

The conclusion here is that scenario 1 is not stable, which means that a shift towards scenario 2, '**the illiberal democracy**', is almost inevitable. In this scenario, the call for change hands the keys of the country to a populist leader. Because it is so difficult to change the rules of the game – otherwise we would, of course, have done it long ago – and because our populist leader ideologically has a different view of the world, in which a pluralist, secular liberal order is not his top priority, it is logical that he intervenes in one pillar of the game: liberal democracy. The new leader has 'received a mandate from the people' to tackle all those corrupt institutions that have made the world such a 'very, very bad place': the media, education, free speech, an independent judiciary... they are expressions of the decadent, progressive world the populist leader opposes, and which, in any case, are directly the cause of all the country's problems. In this scenario, the leader wants to abolish, dismantle or bend them to his will as quickly as possible, whatever it takes to destroy the checks and balances, strengthen his own position and even entrench it for life.

Where this process has taken many years in countries such as Hungary, Russia and Turkey, we see how Trump II is trying to achieve it at an unprecedented pace – with the availability of Project 2025's 180-day playbook as his guide. If for no other reason, Trump will certainly go down in the history books for the dubious world record of 'dismantling democracy without a direct coup'. Our illiberal leader, moreover, changes little about the pillar of the free-market economy: even in an autocracy, companies can make a lot of money. The welfare state remains in place, even with high-quality medical solutions, but only for those who can afford it; broad solidarity and empathy are not among our illiberal leader's strongest character traits. What the leader in this scenario does not do is tackle the rules of the game; on the contrary, everything that has historically been wrong is entrenched. Relations with other countries become even more based on power and pressure, respect for the planet

and the environment is no longer part of policy, and striving for greater justice is no longer necessary. Where this scenario ultimately ends up is hard to predict. Perhaps it can sustain itself for a long time through repression and the absence of democratic means to reverse the situation. The worse the pressure on the system becomes, for example through unliveable conditions as a result of ignoring climate investment, the greater the repression. There is always a chance that, from this scenario, a door will ultimately be opened to scenario 3.

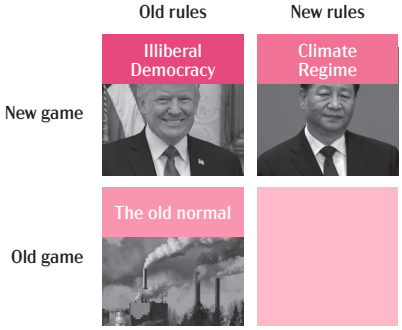

Figure 5 Scenario 3: New game, New rules.

Scenario 3 is what I call '**the sustainability dictatorship**'. In this scenario, the game has fundamentally different pillars: the political system is an explicit dictatorship, the economy has features of a free-market economy but is, in essence, state-directed, and the end goal is not necessarily a well-functioning, solidaristic welfare state, but rather a stable social platform that enables a large group of people to live together sustainably. The rules of the game also differ fundamentally from ours, leaving much less room to 'cheat' at the game: CEOs who commit fraud might well be sentenced to the rope. China is an example of this, but in the Middle East this also seems to be becoming the emerging form of government. The current planetary and demographic challenges are pushing these regimes, which plan decades ahead, in the direction of sustainable transition thinking: energy, food, climate measures... they are all necessary to guarantee a stable platform for their own society.

From this perspective, for example, China – although it is a dictatorship and although it is still a long way from having completed the whole transition – is already leading in many areas. If they continue this policy, they may well end up being the best adapted, in time, to the transitions the world faces. I think it is realistic that, in the coming decades, they will have the necessary climate solutions and will export them to other countries and regions: selling them for a lot of money to Western

and 5G networks, but this is happening entirely embedded in either American or Chinese technology, with all the risks that entails. The irony is that Europe showed the way for years. From the 1980s onwards, companies such as Nokia, Ericsson, Alcatel and Siemens were the founders of the infrastructure on which our communication applications ran. They were the ones who made traditional telephony, GSM communication, the internet and even the first mobile internet applications possible. I wonder whether there are still readers who, like me, get a warm feeling when they think back to the WAP protocol and the Nokia 7110 phone, which was first seen in the film *The Matrix*. For the younger readers who have no idea what I'm talking about: don't worry, this is typical old-people nostalgia for a time when you were already happy if you managed to get a connection at all.

So we were once able to do it, and have now ended up in an unprecedentedly vulnerable position of European dependency: our citizens live on American social media, our companies run almost entirely in American clouds and on American applications, from Microsoft to Google. We have no microchips of our own, no scalable data centres, no cloud of our own, no applications of our own, and hardly any influence on developments in AI. If there is one geopolitical risk even greater than our energy dependency and our weak European central defence, it is becoming a digital colony of the US or China. Fortunately, that does not have to happen, and Europe has been awake enough for quite some time to come up with actions. The world shocks caused by Trump's actions accelerate the ambitions and suddenly make many plans very concrete. Both Readiness 2030 and the dual and universal use of defence resources can further fund the whole, even though it threatens to happen in a rather fragmented – and typically European – way.

One fundamental project to address these risks is the EuroStack concept, which is seen as 'Europe's last chance' to regain our digital position, as an example of a fundamental copy-back strategy. One of the key figures behind the EuroStack project is Francesca Bria, an Italian innovation economist who was Chief Technology Officer of Barcelona from 2015 to 2019. Her work in Barcelona transformed the city into a 'smart city' that was less dependent on American and Chinese technology companies. She reformed Barcelona's digital strategy by putting technology at the service of citizens, focusing on the 'democratisation of data' and 'digital empowerment'. This is where the vision emerged to fight back for the whole of Europe by building our own technology infrastructure, to serve as an alternative alongside the American and Chinese options. In the event of geopolitical necessity, we can, if needed, fall back entirely on our own environment. According to Bria, EuroStack is a necessary project to link technological sovereignty with democratic control.

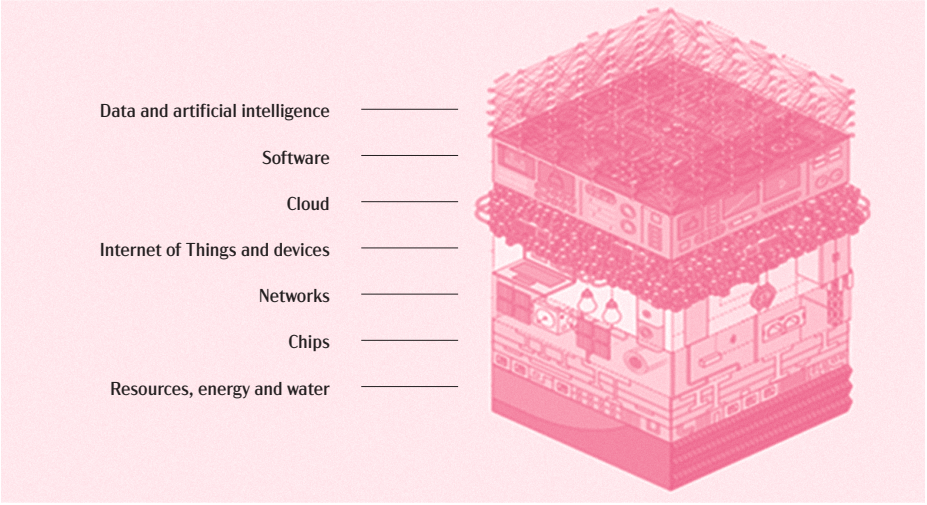

Figure 8: The seven EuroStack layers

The EuroStack architecture spans all seven layers (figure 8) that together can form an independent European digital ecosystem and, in doing so, the backbone of a future-oriented digital infrastructure in Europe. Everything starts at the base: raw materials, energy and water. Without critical metals, sufficient electricity and cooling, no digital technology is possible. Next come the microchips – microprocessors, memory and graphics cards – that provide the computing power for all our devices, but are also essential for the development of AI. Networks, such as fibre optics, 5G and undersea cables, connect everything together. Users are mainly confronted with the devices themselves that run on this infrastructure: smartphones and computers, cars, smart meters, smart homes, smart cities and connected industrial applications. A large part of future computing power and storage will take place in the cloud via data centres that, in a virtual way, provide the necessary external storage space and processing capacity.

The sixth layer consists of software – operating systems, applications and cybersecurity – that makes everything usable and safe. Right at the top are data and AI. Below, I look at which initiatives Europe is actually taking within this model. The good news is that, by now, serious efforts are being made to catch up, although this is usually not widely known. In the US, by contrast, they do a much better job of promoting this kind of ambition than we do. Trump's Stargate project – in which companies such as OpenAI, Oracle and Nvidia would invest the staggering amount of 500 billion to let America win the AI race – has attracted worldwide attention