

# Transponder

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Bertelsmann  
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### About The Transponder

The Transponder is the Bertelsmann Foundation's biannual publication focusing on issues that impact the transatlantic relationship. The magazine features short-form and long-form articles, interviews, infographics and photo essays that explore topics related to democracy, technology and geopolitics through a transatlantic lens.

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### About the Bertelsmann Foundation

The Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), Inc., established in 2008, was created to promote and strengthen the transatlantic relationship. Through research, analysis, forums, audiovisual and multimedia content, we seek to educate and engage audiences on the most pressing economic, political, and social challenges facing the United States and Europe. Based in Washington, DC, we are an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank and the U.S. branch of the Germany-based Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

# Democracy

As we stand on the cusp of a year that holds significant global change, this fifth issue of the Transponder Magazine delves into a critical and timely subject: democracy.

In the upcoming year, over two billion people will participate in major parliamentary and presidential elections. Citizens in the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, India, and Russia (to name a few) will head to the polls to elect leaders who will shape global order for years to come. In light of this momentous year ahead, we have chosen to present a range of compelling articles that illuminate the many facets of citizenship and electoral politics. From the unlikely origins of democratic systems, to the modern threats posed to liberal institutions, this issue's articles and visuals explore the history, evolution, and hope of democracy.

As we approach the year ahead, we invite you to engage in this crucial dialogue on democracy's past, present, and future. We hope this issue sparks insightful conversations, challenges conventional wisdom, and sets the stage for a year of change and progress.

*The Transponder Team*

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# Echoes of the Iroquois

American  
Democracy's  
Origin Story

Written by  
Tony Silberfeld

What if the history of democracy we teach our children tells only part of the story? The roots of democracy are most commonly traced back to the 6th century B.C. in Athens. Its most distinguishing feature — direct participation of citizens in governance — has evolved in numerous ways around the globe, and is often cited as the foundation for democracy in the United States. A recent discovery, however, has called into question many of the assumptions

we have about the origins of American democracy. Reexamining this gives us an opportunity to take a closer look at the people and influences who shaped this system of government long before the Founding Fathers put pen to parchment. Almost nine centuries ago, a group of Native Americans created a system of government that was passed from one generation to the next. The fruit of those ideas continue to serve as a model to this day.

*“Ask any high school student in the U.S. to identify the source of American democracy, and they’ll reflexively point a finger to Greece.”*



The commonly told story of the world’s first democracy typically begins in ancient Greece. Aristotle provided the intellectual foundation for concepts like the rule of law and basic rights of citizens that would become the building blocks of Western democracy. In Athens, this took the form of direct democracy — in which citizens would gather to debate and decide on the challenges faced by the community. However, this process was hardly representative, given that women were excluded along with 90% of the total population. At the time only free-born male Athenian citizens — making up about 10% of the population — were eligible to vote. That aside, the Athenian model established familiar institutions like legislative bodies, a judiciary and a set of guidelines that would determine the process by which the city would operate.

Though far from perfect, Athenian democracy established a system of government that was designed to spread across the European continent and beyond over the centuries that followed, but it didn’t. European states were still more likely to be monarchies than democracies for over another millennium, and it would still be nearly two thousand years before Christopher Columbus would set foot on the shores of the New World — bringing religion and Western ideas with him. And yet, ask any high school student in the U.S. to identify the source of American democracy, and they’ll reflexively point a finger to Greece. But that’s not the story that needs to be told.

### **Democracy buried**

A 90-minute drive east of Atlanta, Georgia, sits a serene lake with 374 miles of shoreline ringed by a vast expanse of trees. To the naked eye, it’s a lovely place to kayak, sail or jet ski, but the lake’s watery surface hides archaeological evidence of democracy’s roots in the United States. Lake Oconee was created after utilities company Georgia Power dammed the Oconee River in 1979, flooding the basin. These actions buried a plaza containing three circular buildings that served as the Muscogee Nation council house, used for community meetings and decision making by consensus, in what was once known as Cold Springs.

In 2022, scholars from the University of Georgia’s Laboratory of Archaeology completed radiocarbon dating on artifacts found at the site, and determined the council house to have been built around 500 A.D. — almost a thousand years before the arrival of Columbus. A precise description of the rules and practices of the Muscogee Nation at Cold Springs remains elusive, but today’s Muscogee practices give us a window into what took place in those buildings 1,500 years ago. According to Dr. Jacob Holland-Lulewicz, Director of Spatial Archaeology at Penn State University, “Muscogee councils are the longest-surviving democratic institution in the world.” But the Muscogee Nation was not alone. Over generations,

*“Muscogee councils are the longest-surviving democratic institution in the world.”*

a culture of collective decision-making spread across many Indigenous communities in what would eventually become the United States. More than any other, the Iroquois Confederacy would be the foundation upon which modern American democracy would be built.

In the Northeast region of North America (today’s upstate New York), five indigenous nations — Mohawks, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Seneca — were embroiled in years of conflict well into the 12th century. In 1142, however, Deganawida, also known by the Iroquois as the Great Peacemaker, successfully brokered a peace agreement among the warring parties. From then on, the nations were united in the Iroquois Confederacy. In the midst of negotiations, Hiawatha, a leader of the Mohawk people, presented to a council meeting what would be known as the Great Law of Peace. It is rooted in principles that will be familiar to us: peace, equity and unity. The Great Law contains 117 rules that were transmitted orally and represented in strings of beads.

It’s a remarkable endeavor that echoes throughout American and other Western foundational documents. For example, Article 9 reads, “All the business of the Five National Confederate Council shall be conducted by the two combined bodies of Confederate Lords. First the question shall be passed upon by the Mohawk and Seneca Lords, then it shall be discussed and passed by the Oneida and Cayuga Lords. Their decisions shall then be referred to the Onondaga Lords, for final judgment.” Today, that sounds an awful lot like a precursor to a bicameral legislature with judicial review. The Great Law also goes further to define the procedure that will govern the councils, outline the rights, duties and qualifications for Lords, establish laws for adopting legislative measures, war powers, religious protections, and punishment for treason — all key features in our own system today.

Six hundred years later, the United States had yet to come into existence but the 13 colonies were struggling to find common cause, even under British occupation. In 1744, a leader of the Onondaga Nation offered advice to the colonies which Benjamin Franklin conveyed to his compatriots. The text read: “We heartily recommend

*“The Iroquois Confederacy is matrilineal, and women historically played a key role in family, society, and politics.”*

Union and good Agreement between you our Brethren. Never disagree, but preserve a strict Friendship for one another, and thereby you, as well as we, will become stronger. Our wise Forefathers established Union and Amity between the Five Nations; this has made us formidable; this has given us great Weight and Authority with our neighboring Nations. We are a powerful Confederacy; and, by your observing the same Methods our wise Forefathers have taken, you will acquire fresh Strength and Power; therefore, whatever befalls you, never fall out one with another.”

### **Mirror images... Almost**

According to a fascinating comparative study by journalist Terri Hansen for PBS, several clauses of the U.S. constitution are nearly facsimiles of the Great Law of Peace. The Emoluments Clause — made famous in recent years by Donald Trump’s repeated commingling between his private business interests and official duties as president — is drawn directly from the Great Law prohibiting members from holding more than one office in the Confederacy. Another particularly useful clause in today’s U.S. political climate is Article II, Section 4 of the Constitution. It sets out the terms for removing a president or vice president from office, as defined by Iroquois leaders 881 years ago. The power to declare war is assigned in the Great Law and in the War Powers Clause of Article I in the U.S. constitution.

Unfortunately, the Founding Fathers ignored one of the core principles of the Great Law. The Iroquois Confederacy is matrilineal, and women historically played a key role in family, society, and politics. One quarter of the clauses in the Great Law are dedicated to granting and protecting the rights of women. As we well know, women’s rights didn’t merit a single mention in the U.S. constitution, an omission that wasn’t rectified until the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment, giving the women the right to vote.

### **Lessons still to learn**

Alas, achieving democracy is perpetually a work in progress. Over the past two decades, democracy has been in decline around the globe. Populism, disinformation and corruption have accelerated this backsliding, but an equally pernicious factor is the disappearance of core democratic principles that parties of all stripes from every corner of the globe can agree on. The Great Law of Peace offers us a guide. The first principle is peace. The second is equity for all — not just in rhetoric, but in practice. The third principle is unity. The failure to adhere to these basic principles in Athens long ago ultimately resulted in its demise. Will leaders of democracies around the globe learn from the past, or are we already doomed to repeat it? If we’re going to avoid the latter, we better start getting the former right. •

How an Eastern Belgian town is revitalising democracy

# A Citizen's Council



*Written by*  
**Juli Simond**

*Photography by*  
**Jan A. Staiger**

In the German-speaking Eastern Belgian town of Eupen, we find an example of democracy that puts citizens at the heart of decision-making. This is done in the “Bürgerrat”, or citizen’s council, which is permanently in place to ensure citizens — who are drafted by lot — can have a say in which themes they wish to discuss and come up with policy recommendations to present to the local parliament. In this sense, ordinary citizens and elected officials are in recurring, structured dialogue.



“Systems of deliberative democracy  
can mend an often fractured bridge.”

The Bürgerrat is made up of 24 members, each serving on the council for 18 months. Once the council has decided on the appropriate themes for discussion, they organise the “Bürgerversammlungen”, or citizen’s assemblies. In these assemblies, up to 50 citizens come together to hear from experts, discuss the topic at hand and — together — find possible policy solutions to draft. Future council members of the Bürgerrat are pooled from previous participants of Bürgerversammlungen, to take on the responsibility of representing their region. The only requirements to become a council member are to be over the age of 16 and to not hold any political office. Council members do not need to be Belgian, and their costs will be covered while they serve.

A dentist by day, a mechanic by day, or a school teacher by day. All can be called to serve on the council and partake in this fresh model for political participation. The essence of the council is its consistency: this is not a temporary experiment, but rather a chosen method to ensure that there is no divide between the people and their elected officials. At a time where a global pandemic, economic insecurity, inflation and a boom in disinformation has impacted worldwide trust in government, systems of deliberative democracy can mend an often fractured bridge.

The Eastern Belgian region may be small, but according to David Van Reybrouck, a Belgian cultural historian and author of “Against Elections” published in 2016, it “has a substantial amount of power comparable to North Rhine-Westphalia and Scotland”. To try and institutionalise this kind of deliberative democracy, the setting of Eupen was a perfect fit. In his book, Van Reybrouck had outlined the idea for a different kind of democracy — one that relies on a system of sortition rather than election — where members of the public are selected to serve on a council through lottery. In 2018 Oliver Paasch, then the minister-president of the German-speaking

community in Belgium, reached out to him to initiate the process. Van Reybrouck states that, at the time, the idea “existed on paper”, but had not yet been realised.

“There is a lot of distrust in politics. Citizens don’t trust their politicians, but politicians don’t trust their citizens either. That second distrust is much less strong in a parliament where MP’s work directly with citizens,” continues Van Reybrouck. The proximity of politicians and citizens plays a consequential role in fostering trust through exchange of good practices and policy-forming discussion.

A typical citizen’s council meeting bears no large difference from what you would expect to see in a parliamentary session. On May 6 2023, the council members take their seats in the light-flooded plenary of the East Belgian parliament in Eupen. The enormous curtain obscuring an equally enormous window is lowered and the agenda is set. The atmosphere is both tranquil and orderly. One can almost feel that personal gain is a non-issue in these sessions. After all, no one here has their potential re-election in mind. Still — and perhaps naturally — as the discussions begin, debates flare with passion. Members engage in civil, target-driven conversations that are only briefly interrupted to grab cups of coffee from a small, improvised table in the empty hallway outside.

Since its implementation in 2019, the citizen’s council thrives. In its conception, a process such as this one is ever-evolving. In fact, regular evaluations are scheduled to happen every two years — although the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed this process. The essence of deliberative democracy is that it is able to grow alongside the people participating in it. Van Reybrouck confirms: “This model can only survive if it has the capacity to learn and improve.” The citizen’s council of the future may yet be in the works. •



**“One can almost feel that personal gain is a non-issue in these sessions. After all, no one here has their potential re-election in mind.”**



Written by  
Sara Leming



Censored



Content

What do “To Kill a Mockingbird”, “The Grapes of Wrath”, and “The Color Purple” all have in common? Aside from being bestselling and award-winning novels, each has been banned in public schools and libraries in the United States. Although it may be surprising to some, the banning of these books is hardly unprecedented. According to Pen America, a nonprofit organization raising awareness for

the protection of free expression in the United States and worldwide, they are three of the 2,532 books in the U.S. that were challenged by law makers, local school boards, and parent activists from June 2021 to June 2022. A majority of the books on this rapidly expanding list have been barred for their content on topics such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and race.

#### Chapter 1: Banned throughout the ages

While the list of banned books in the United States for 2022 has increased at an alarming rate of 33% since 2021, it is not a new trend. Censoring so-called “controversial” books is a concept older than the nation itself. The earliest record of a book that ruffled feathers on American soil can be traced back to the year 1637 when Thomas Morton’s book, “New English Canaan”, was banned by the Puritans for heavily criticizing their lifestyle. Perhaps the most famous banned book is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”. After Stowe’s novel was published in 1852, it quickly began to fly off the shelves. The novel exposed the brutal truths of slavery, and the influence of prosperous plantation owners in slaveholding states ensured a prompt ban. Although the novel went on to become the bestselling novel of the 19th century worldwide, countless copies were burned and in 1852 one man was even arrested and jailed in the state of Maryland for simply carrying a copy.

In 1873, the federal government under the Grant Administration passed the Comstock Act which made it a misdemeanor to sell, gift, or possess an “immoral” or “obscene” book. Since the law itself

did not define either of the terms, the ambiguity sparked a contentious debate in society. Between the 1870s and 1930s, the Boston area became a hotbed for literary censorship due to the efforts of the New England Watch and Ward Society. The highly conservative group used its powerful influence to have books removed from bookstores and even kept objectionable works under lock and key at the Boston Public Library. Although their strategy was primarily effective in censoring content in Massachusetts, the tagline “Banned in Boston” gained national traction. Banned book sympathizers around the country purchased the blacklisted books. Authors of books that were “Banned in Boston” even considered it a badge of honor and the stamp of disapproval often helped increase a book’s popularity.

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court intervened on the book censorship issue when it decided in *Island Trees School District v. Pico*, with a 7-2 vote. The court held that local school boards could not remove content in public school libraries because they disliked the ideas contained in the books. Yet, over 40 years later, an ongoing battle persists — fueled by a growing number of U.S. states banning books from public libraries and schools.

*“In 2022, the state of Texas had 801 individual cases of contested books.”*



*“A group of booksellers and publishers sued the state of Texas on the grounds that the new law compels publishers and sellers to express the government’s views and violates the First Amendment right to freedom of speech.”*

### **Chapter 2: The lone star**

In 2023, book banning remains prevalent nationwide, but one state stands out as the leader of the movement. According to Pen America’s most recent report, in 2022, the state of Texas had 801 individual cases of contested books. This list includes the award-winning book on racial injustice, Ashley Hope Pérez’s “Out of Darkness”, and George M. Johnson’s bestselling memoir on sexual identity, “All Boys Aren’t Blue”. The uptick of contested books in Texas can be traced back to 2021, when a state representative from the Dallas-Fort Worth area dispersed a list of over 850 books that covered topics including race and sexuality to school districts and inquired about their availability in libraries. When the results showed that a majority of the books were publicly available, it triggered an immediate fiery reaction from parents, local school boards, and private groups that called the books “pornographic” and “inappropriate”. A Texas public school librarian commented that before the spike in 2021, she only encountered three book challenges in her 29-year career.

In June 2023, Governor Greg Abbott proudly signed the Restricting Explicit and Adult-Designated Educational Resources Act. When Abbott signed the bill into law, he emphasized that it would “get trash” out of Texas schools and “protect Texan children”. The law now requires all sellers to Texas schools to rate books based on their references to sex and allows the Texas Education Agency to review those ratings. Book sellers that do not participate will be barred from selling books to Texas schools.

A month after the law came into effect, a group of booksellers and publishers sued the state of Texas on the grounds that the new law compels

publishers and sellers to express the government’s views and violates the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. In addition, Texans who are unhappy with the new law have united to push back against the State. The local YMCA in El Paso collaborated with citizens to install a banned books section at the city library. In Austin, a pop-up bookstore that sells content focused on diversity and inclusion, Black Pearl Books, recently moved to a permanent location due to its popularity. Finally, a group of high schoolers have started a “banned book club” in the suburbs of Austin. As the flurry of book bannings in the U.S. captures global attention, a similar situation unfolds 5,784 miles away in the Hungarian capital of Budapest.

### **Chapter 3: The pearl of the Danube**

Across the Atlantic, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán is the leader of the far-right party, Fidesz. Orbán’s party was formerly part of the center-right leaning European People’s Party (EPP) until 2021 — when Orbán left the political family after the group threatened to oust Fidesz for undemocratic behavior. Shortly after leaving the EPP, Orbán introduced a new law that would ban content featuring homosexuality for groups under the age of 18 in order to “protect innocent Hungarian children.” The Hungarian Parliament quickly passed the act in June 2021. The law states that children’s books depicting homosexuality and changing gender identity cannot be located within 200 meters of a school or church. The government ordered booksellers to place children’s books that include the outlawed subject matter in what it vaguely describes as “concealed packaging”.

Despite a fiery condemnation from Brussels, the law remained a top priority for Orbán’s government. In 2021, European Commission President Ursula von

der Leyen called the law an attack on the LGBTQ+ community and a violation of European values. In 2022, the European Commission — joined by 15 EU member states — filed a lawsuit against Hungary in the European Court of Justice, calling the law discriminatory against minorities. While the lawsuit is still ongoing, Orbán has replied that Hungary could not let Brussels have its way.

In 2023, the Orbán regime continued to push forward its agenda. In June, the largest bookstore chain in Hungary, Libri, announced that there would be an immediate change in its ownership. Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a conservative, government-funded talent incubator, increased its stakeholder share from 30.9% to 98.5% — essentially rendering the bookstore state-controlled. Less than a month later, a hefty fine of 12 million forints, the equivalent of \$36,000, was imposed on the second largest Hungarian bookstore chain, Lira. The government claims that Lira broke the law by not properly concealing the popular novel “Heartbreaker” that depicts the romance of two male teens. Lira quickly rebutted, saying that the law is vague and does not define “concealed”. The chain plans to fight the fine in court.

Despite the Hungarian government tightening its grip on power, a unique group has come together in Budapest. In late August, approximately fifteen university students formed the group “Tiltott Könyvek” which translates to “banned book” in Hungarian. The student activists organized themselves, brainstorming ways that they could peacefully protest and express their disapproval of the Orbán government’s recent actions.

Vince Sajosi, the 22-year-old group leader, decided that he wanted to get involved after he learned about the recent government acquisition. Sajosi explains that the group reached out to independent

bookstores, publishers, and authors requesting copies of the “concealed” books. After receiving over 100 books, the students organized tables outside of the newly acquired Libri chain in the city center of Budapest. For an entire week the group handed out free copies of the books to interested passersby. When asked about his motivation, Sajosi emphasized that he is not asking people to agree with his views but believes that society must have the opportunity to learn. “After having the chance to educate themselves, what people decide is their own responsibility,” he explains.

### **Epilogue**

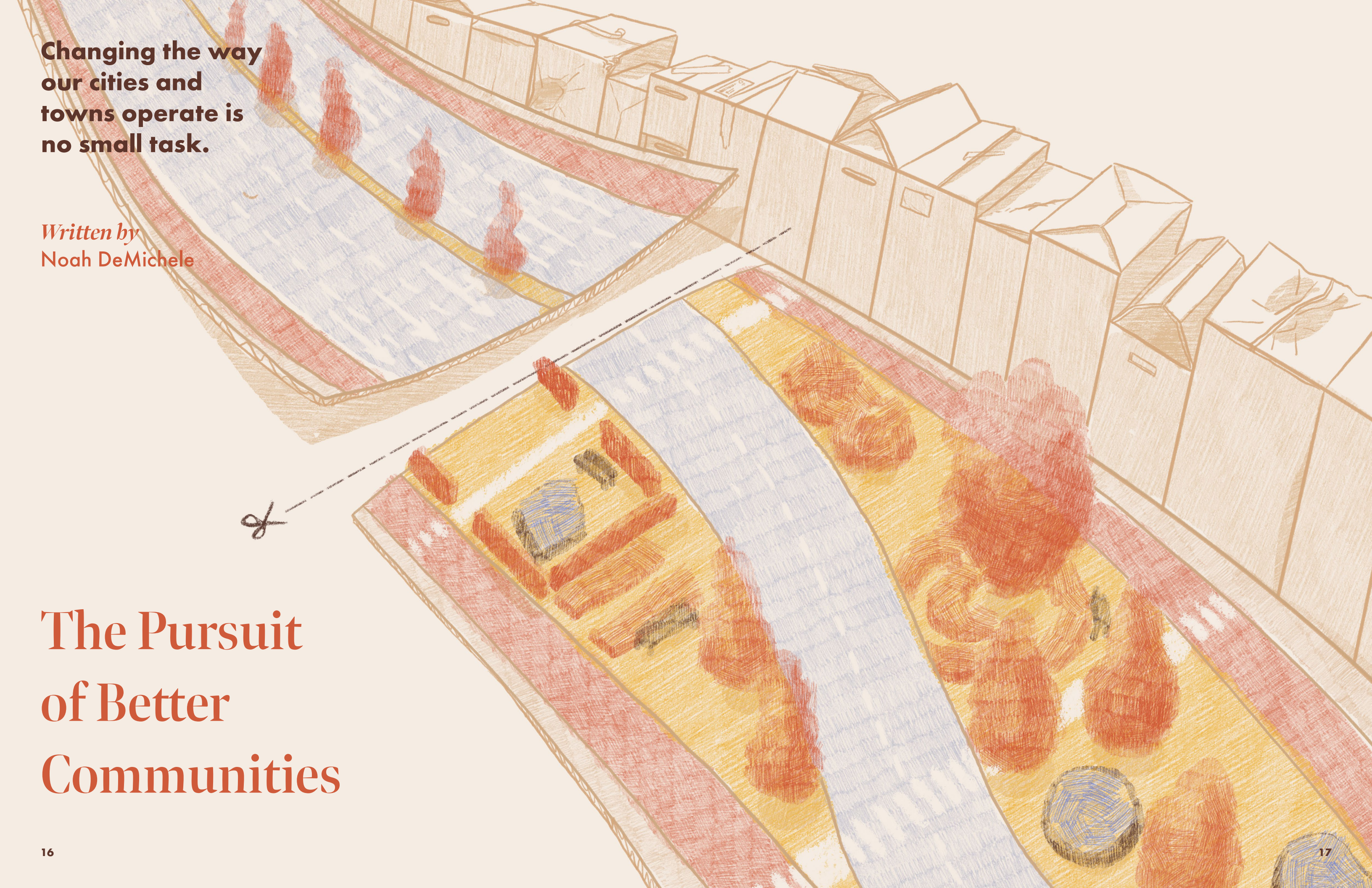
While they are an ocean apart, there are notable similarities between the state of Texas and the EU Member State, Hungary. In both cases, political power is being leveraged to stifle progressive ideas and silence voices. There are clear cases of legislative discrimination towards marginalized communities based on homophobia and racism. Political figures claim that they are protecting children and family values but perhaps the real root is a fear of others thinking differently and an unwillingness to listen to a perspective that is different than their own. This dangerous behavior is not being unchallenged. Groups on both sides of the Atlantic such as Tiltott Könyvek and the EL Paso YMCA have banded together to stand up for the right to freedom of expression and will relentlessly continue to do so. Throughout history, book banning has reappeared as a tool when people feel their way of life is being threatened due to change or the extension of opportunities to outside groups. But by excluding others from the conversation, we are only limiting society. Vince Sajosi sums it up well, “Society will never fully agree with one another, we are too different. The only way to reach a conclusion is to listen, educate yourself, and have discussions.” •

*“After having the chance to educate themselves, what people decide is their own responsibility.”*

**Changing the way  
our cities and  
towns operate is  
no small task.**

*Written by*  
Noah DeMichele

# The Pursuit of Better Communities



**“To our detriment, the explosion of suburbanism has coincided with the decline of public plazas, main streets, and community-centric places.”**

**“Dutch people realized that democracy is not a spectator sport and they demanded a different future than the one decided for them.”**

### The suburban experiment

Rampant suburbanization, automobile supremacy, and a propensity for sprawl have made walkable, human-centric places hard to find — or even a luxury — in the United States. To understand how American life has changed in real time, you can trace a line back to the period that followed World War II. It was a time that saw simultaneous rapid adoption of cars and exponential economic expansion. To see how highway projects and parking mandates turned your city into a parking lot, check out @cars.destroyed.our.cities on Instagram. Careful, though, it may upset you as it has me.

Although, I was mad *before* I knew about the financial drivers behind suburbia. It wasn't necessary for me to be well versed in 20th century transfer payments or public-private debt in order to resent the strip malls, copy and paste chain restaurants, and constant “one more lane” attitude applied to our roads. To our detriment, the explosion of suburbanism has coincided with the decline of public plazas, main streets, and community-centric places. Lengthy commutes and increasingly sedentary lifestyles take a toll on our physical health, while streets that fail to prioritize pedestrians and cyclists are active dangers to our safety — especially for youth. Socially, we've become more isolated as Main Street becomes less trodden and chance encounters diminish due to a decline of gathering places. The macroeconomic growth that's fueled American suburbanization has done little to advance the crucial elements of healthy and happy living.

This trend of suburbanization and sprawl continued through the latter half of the 20th century and has now become the standard across much of the United States. It's even been encouraged and financed. Strong Towns, a nonprofit trying to alter the United States' development course, refers to this process as the “growth ponzi scheme”. They explain that the federal government has long prioritized macroeconomic growth by incentivizing physical growth — funding suburbia with instant cash along with the obligation for local municipalities to handle long-term maintenance. Strong Towns goes on to explain that this has created an “illusion of wealth”, as American communities become mired in an unwinnable cycle of sprawl in order to stay ahead of the financial liabilities that have accrued over half a century of unsustainable, unproductive growth. This cycle perpetuates car dependency and isolationist living.

Opposition to the way our communities have developed is not a “city or bust” position, either. Small towns can cultivate life, just as some American cities' most desirable neighborhoods do. Frostburg, Maryland, my hometown nestled in the Appalachian Mountains, has a vibrant Main Street complete with bustling third-places where people can gather and associate outside work and home. Yet, small towns with vibrant life are often the exception, while

great neighborhoods in cities tend to carry exorbitant price tags. It's not impossible to find great, walkable places in the United States, but it's not the norm either.

In many ways, our friends across the Atlantic have managed to mitigate the worst of the rise of cars and develop communities through human scaled development that features mixed-use design, blending residential, and commercial spaces. Certainly, Europe is not a monolith featuring fairy-tale communities that have perfected development and community design. But it's not exactly uncommon for Americans to return from a trip to Europe marveling at its walkability and cozy streets. We romanticize European activities like cycling in Amsterdam, Parisian café culture, or (my favorite) Berlin's plethora of well-loved public parks to the point that good urbanism and walkable space have become commonly associated with Europe. But even in Europe, good design is a work in progress. In Paris, Mayor Anne Hidalgo has led a charge to evict cars from the city center. Barcelona is pursuing similar policy by aiming to turn large swaths of its city center into pedestrian-friendly, green areas void of cars. In Copenhagen, urban planning policies encourage proposals that have a “strong orientation to public life”.

### Amsterdammers saved their city

Within Europe, the Dutch capital city of Amsterdam often emerges as the archetype for good urbanism, with its picturesque canals and incorporation of cycling into daily life. However, the very same canals were once in danger of being filled and Amsterdam could have very well gone down a different development path.

In the post-World War II period, the Netherlands looked to rebuild and revitalize. Suburbs began to develop, life was pushed out from the city center, and the street level became a conduit for cars to shepherd people in and out of the city — as opposed to the place for congregation it had been before the war. This shift was advocated for in 1961's “Geef de Stad een Kans” (Give the city a chance) by David Jokinen, a traffic engineer and lobbyist for the auto industry. Jokinen's vision for the city included American-style highways, a plethora of parking garages, and carried the assumption that Amsterdammers would embrace car commuting. In the following years, car use exploded in Amsterdam and, in 1972, the Amsterdam city council began to consider a new official traffic plan that would incorporate Jokinen's ideas. The plan would give Amsterdam's streets to cars by way of constructing highways through the city and razing neighborhoods.

Unenthused, Amsterdam's residents pushed back on the plan to take over their city. Grassroots activists and civic engagement groups led campaigns intended to preserve Amsterdam's livability, primarily by dethroning the car as king of the street. Translated from Dutch, some of the most influential groups were the counterculture

group “Provos”; “Stop Child Murder”, citing the danger cars posed to children in the streets; “The Troublesome Amsterdammer”; “Amsterdam Cycles”; “Car-Free Amsterdam”; and “De Pijp Neighborhood Group”. The citizens of Amsterdam advocated fiercely for their future. Within a year, the city council voted to scrap the city highway plan by a single vote. The activist groups kept up their efforts, organizing ever-growing annual protests in favor of progressive transportation policy for the city. In 1978, a new city council was elected and their new Traffic Plan, passed 38 to 7, prioritized walking, cycling, and public transport. According to Chris Bruntlett, an urban mobility advocate who authored “Building the Cycling City: The Dutch Blueprint for Urban Vitality” with his wife Melissa, “Amsterdam has only retained its human scale, mixed-use compact cities, its great walking, cycling, and public transport networks because the Dutch people got involved in their community. They realized that democracy is not a spectator sport and they impacted the decisions made in their cities to demand a different future than the one decided for them.”

### Can we do it in the United States?

In recent months, online urbanist discussions have debated whether North America is too far gone for progressive urbanism to ever take hold. The debate was sparked by Jason Slaughter's viral comment “People should just give up on good urbanism in North America.” Slaughter is an influential urbanist who runs the popular YouTube channel “Not Just Bikes” which covers good urban design and life in the Netherlands. Slaughter's comments reflect the cynicism that can prevail when comparing American and European urbanism. His take has garnered pushback from individuals and organizations who are doing the work to advocate for better places to live. Indeed, there are civic engagement efforts underway in the United States that are fighting for better urbanism.

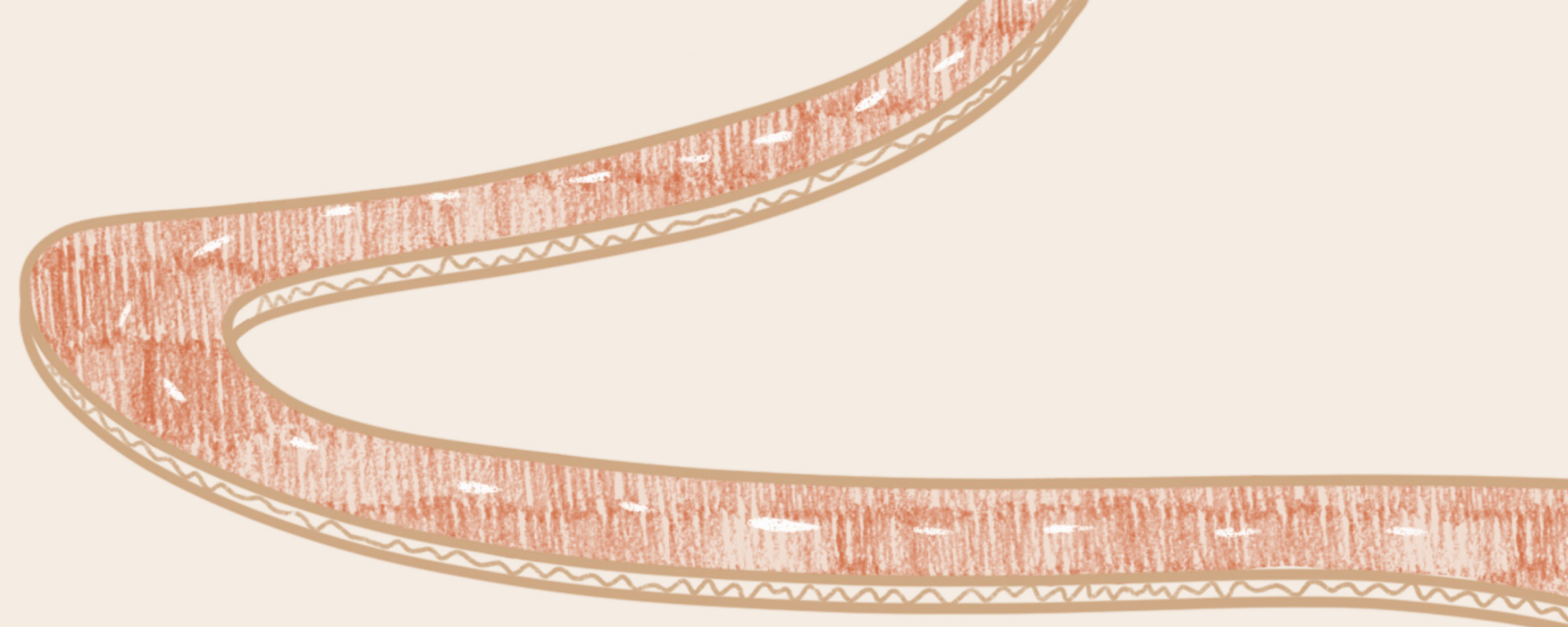
The Congress for a New Urbanism champions walkable urbanism with chapters spread across the country focused on providing the resources and education people need to advocate for change in their communities. America Walks is a national nonprofit that advocates for safe, walkable, public places through both federal advocacy and local collaboration on campaigns like “Building Better Streets” and “Reconnecting Communities”. Main Street America's model focuses on community driven revitalization to transform neglected main streets into vibrant places of gathering and prosperity. StreetsBlog USA is a network of news sites which cover these efforts, all the while advocating for reducing the United States' car dependency. They're out there, attempting to educate and advocate for better places.

Perhaps one of the most recognizable organizations doing this work is Strong Towns. The organization pushes for several core campaigns central to creating better communities: ending highway expansion, ending parking mandates and subsidies, incremental housing policy, safe and productive streets, and transparent local accounting. Yet, this approach inherently revolves around civic engagement and community activism — no one size fits all.

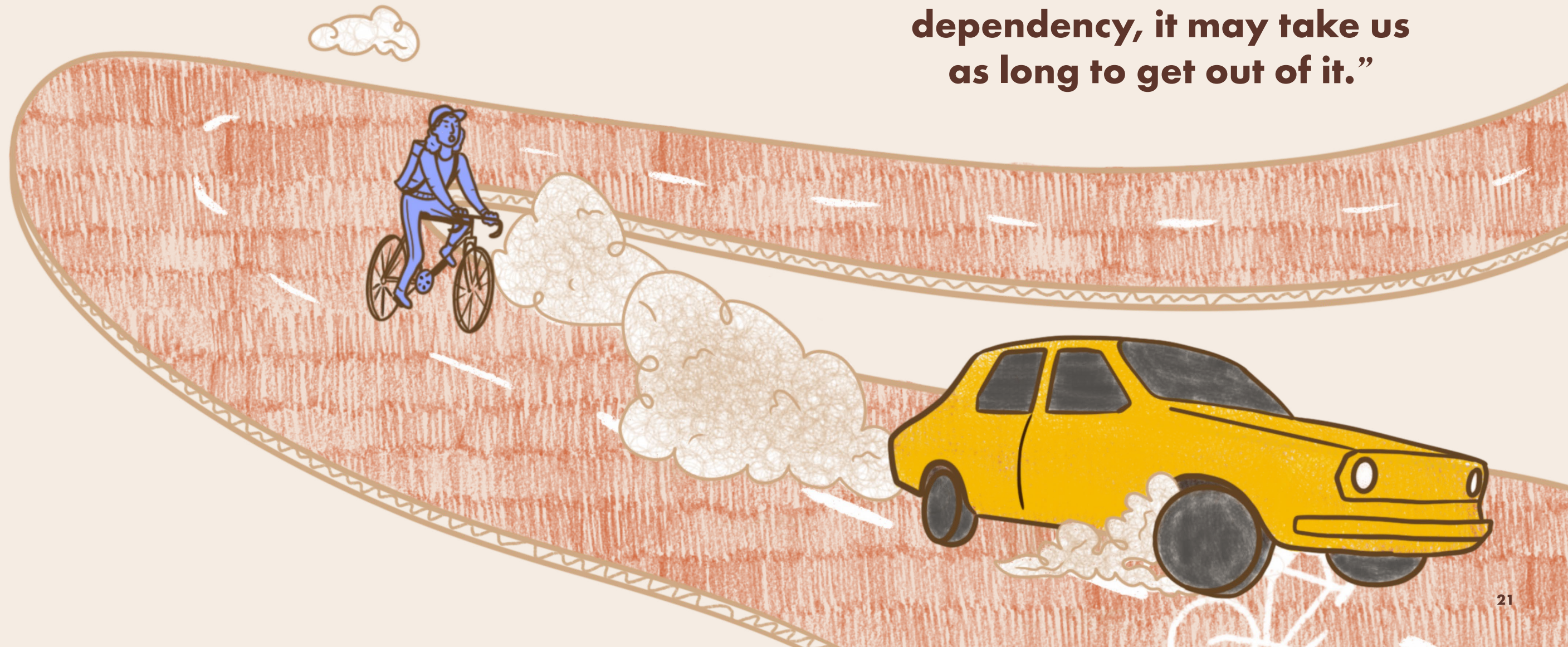
Wins will be incremental, as Alan Fisher — who runs the popular YouTube channel Armchair Urbanist — notes, saying “it took us 50 or 60 years to get to this level of car dependency, it may take us as long to get out of it.” But real change is happening in the U.S. today. In Denver, Denver Streets Partnership, a coalition of community organizations, has seen success in lobbying city officials for greater funding for sustainable, people-scaled transportation that prioritizes pedestrians. In New York City, transit groups have lobbied the city and state

governments to move forward with congestion pricing in order to tackle traffic, promote public transportation, and give streets back to people.

Civic engagement can help to urge the process along, by educating citizens to the benefits of good urbanism and empowering them to advocate for the change they want to see in their communities. Kea Wilson, a senior editor at Streetsblog USA, told me that individual action can bring about collective change and that it can be as banal as shoveling your sidewalk. Indeed, civic engagement is likely essential to progress in the United States, just as it was for Amsterdam. Chris Bruntlett sums it up best, saying, “I don’t think it’s an understatement to say the Netherlands wouldn’t enjoy the quality of life it enjoys today without the civic engagement, social movements, and political activism that took place in the 1970s.” Civic engagement can move the needle if we get involved and advocate for better cities and towns to be enjoyed by all in the United States. •



**“It took us 50 or 60 years to get to this level of car dependency, it may take us as long to get out of it.”**



# From the Peaceful Revolution to Protest

Written by  
Courtney Flynn Martino

Democracy in  
Eastern Germany

On Monday, September 4, 1989, over a thousand people gathered in the courtyard of Leipzig's St. Nikolai church. For several years, local pastor Christian Führer had been leading a prayer service for peace. After decades of sham elections and restrictions on travel, the people of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were not just there for prayer, but action. Carrying banners demanding the ability to travel

beyond the Iron Curtain, the protestors staged a peaceful, orderly, but determined demonstration that Monday, and nearly every Monday thereafter until East Germany's first — and only — free elections in March 1990. One thousand earnest advocates in Leipzig created the initial ripple of the tidal wave that became the Peaceful Revolution, crashing down on 40 years of surveillance and repression in the GDR.



“HOW CAN THE REGION RESPONSIBLE FOR GERMANY'S GREATEST DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT BE A MAIN SOURCE FOR ITS CURRENT DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING?”

When reporters began covering the scene that first Monday, the East German state security service, known as the Stasi, tried taking away banners and breaking up the protest. They were met with cries of “Stasi raus!” (Stasi get out). The arrests began the following week. Despite this, each week saw more and more people taking to the streets of Leipzig — and across the GDR — under a slogan of no violence, culminating in the Monday demonstration of October 9, 1989. Two days after the massive military parade in Berlin celebrating 40 years of the GDR, over 70,000 people from across the country gathered in Leipzig, armed with banners, candles, and hope for the future. However, the fact that those marching were committed to peace was no guarantee that the state would reciprocate in kind. After all, the protesters in Tiananmen Square that same year were peaceful, too. Just four months later, facing tanks and soldiers of the Volksarmee (National People’s Army) with machine guns at the ready, it would have been impossible for the Leipzig protesters not to see the parallels.

Nonetheless, the people marched on, chanting for “Freedom and Free Elections”, “No Violence”, and most famously “We are the people!” (wir sind das Volk). The state did not turn violent against the protestors that day, nor when over 500,000 GDR citizens gathered in Berlin’s Alexanderplatz on November 4 with the same demands. Five days later, the Berlin Wall fell. “Long live the GDR” no more.

#### An accidental unification

Although it was the courage of the Peaceful Revolution protesters that ultimately led to the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and paved the way for the unified democracy Germany is today, it is important to remember that neither reunification nor liberal democracy were the movement’s driving goals — especially not in September 1989. The ability to travel freely and host fair elections were the main reasons people took to the streets in Leipzig; not to dismantle the German

Democratic Republic, but to have it live up to its name and allow for these core democratic tenets. Alex, a 30-year-old born and raised in nearby Saxony-Anhalt, saw the Peaceful Revolution as a catalyst to create change within the GDR, without the primary end goal of merging with West Germany.

“I really think it was about having more independence, more democracy, and actually being able to vote. They didn’t want to be like the West, to have the stuff that the West has. It was more about traveling to get to know the world and to know other people, including West Germany. They wanted to be reconnected with West Germany, but I don’t think reunification was the main point.” Nonetheless, reunification was the result, and on October 3, 1990, the citizens of the now-defunct GDR became part of a true democratic republic, the Federal Republic of Germany.

#### From peace to PEGIDA

Twenty five years later, in October 2014, the streets in eastern Germany were once again crowded on Monday evenings, but for a very different reason. Members of Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA) began organizing Monday evening walks in Dresden, a little over an hour away from Leipzig. Spurred by anger over the influx of primarily Muslim refugees from Syria and Iraq, PEGIDA members marched through the streets holding signs scrawled with anti-immigrant slogans, expressing their displeasure over the policies of the Merkel administration and the “lying press”. Like in 1989, the movement was not limited to one location, with local chapters of PEGIDA such as Bogida in Bonn, Bãrgida in Berlin, Mũgida in Munich, and Legida in Leipzig all staging their own demonstrations.

Just as Leipzig was a hub for peace, Dresden was the core of PEGIDA — at its peak in January 2015, over 25,000 people gathered for a Monday walk through the city. They, too, bore signs proclaiming no violence and the slogan “We are the people”. But instead of peace doves, the words were plastered over an image of Angela Merkel in a headscarf. PEGIDA’s formal operations have largely ceased, in part due to increased scrutiny of the movement after photographs of PEGIDA founder Lutz Bachmann wearing a Hitler-style mustache and hairstyle were posted online — following Bachmann’s racist tirades against migrants on social media. Although there are no more Monday walks, the ideals of PEGIDA and many of its supporters have found their way to a larger audience in the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party. Campaigning on an anti-migrant platform with slogans straight off of a PEGIDA poster, including “We are the people”, the AfD became the third-largest party in the Bundestag with 12.6% of the vote in 2017, and 10.3% in 2021.

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“WHEN DISCONTENT EMERGES, DEMOCRATIC COURSE CORRECTION IS MADE AT THE BALLOT BOX...”

BUT THE SYSTEM ONLY WORKS IF CITIZENS BELIEVE THEIR VOICES ARE BEING HEARD AND THAT THEIR VOTES COUNT.”

Although the next Bundestag election is not until 2025, the AfD is surging in polls, with nearly 22% of respondents in a September 2023 survey saying they would vote for the AfD if the election were held that week. In eastern Germany, voter support for the AfD is between 29% and 33.4% in each of the five post-GDR states (not including Berlin). And in each of these states, the AfD or its youth wing, the Junge Alternative, has been investigated by their respective State Office for the Protection of the Constitution for extremist and undemocratic actions. The leader of the AfD in Thuringia, Björn Höcke, will stand trial for his use of a Nazi-era slogan in a campaign speech prior to the 2021 federal elections.

### Democratic ideals, disappointing realities

How can the region responsible for Germany's greatest democratic movement be a main source for its current democratic backsliding? Since 2000, the Thuringia Monitor has been conducting public opinion polling on a variety of issues in the eastern German state, including support for democracy. In 2001, 83% of Thuringians believed democracy was "the best of all state ideologies", but only 48% were satisfied with it in practice. Against the backdrop of reunification, political upheaval, and mass unemployment throughout the 1990s, it is understandable that democracy had not yet wormed its way into the nature-laden region known as Germany's green heart. But in 2022, the figures were almost exactly identical — 84% of Thuringians supported democracy as a concept, but only 48% in practice. It is not that the trends are static; in 2020, support for democracy in practice was at a record high of 68%. But COVID-19 restrictions, inflation, the Russian war in Ukraine, and political infighting at home have left Germans across the country skeptical, and the eastern part particularly ripe for anti-democratic discontent. This extends beyond Thuringia — a June 2023 survey from public broadcaster MDR found that two-thirds of eastern Germans want more authoritarian government structures like in the GDR.

**"THE NOTION THAT WORKING HARD AND GIVING TO THE SYSTEM ENSURES THAT IT WILL PROVIDE IN RETURN HAS OUTLASTED THE SYSTEM ITSELF."**

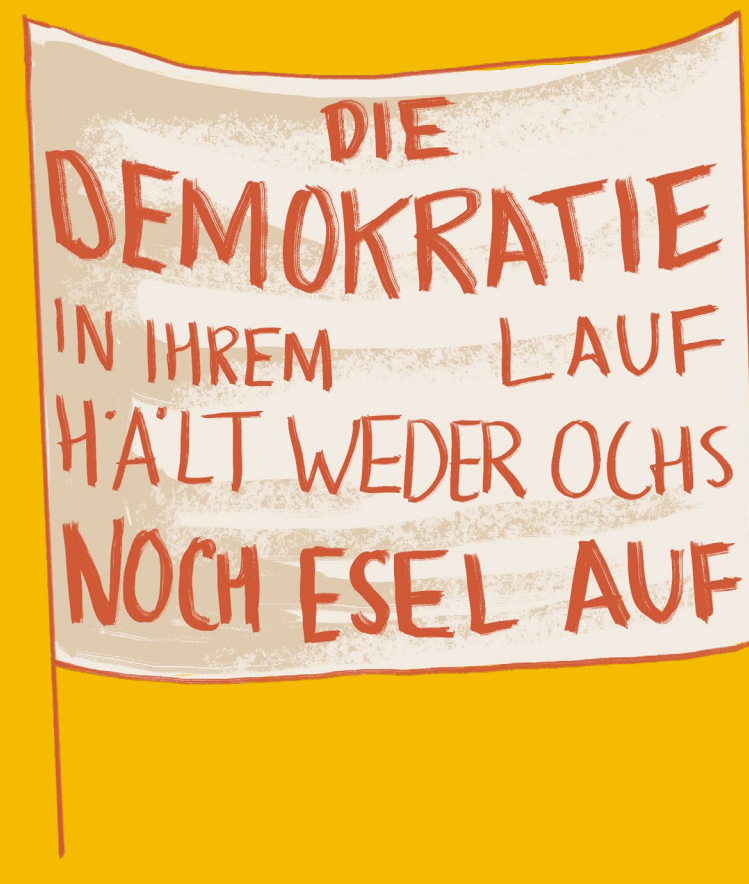
To Alex, this democratic divergence boils down to one major issue: trust. In the era of disinformation, trust in democratic institutions is waning across the globe, but for eastern Germans — many of whom lacked that foundation to begin with — the slope is all the more slippery. "East Germans saw a whole government collapse. I think they had trust issues after this, and felt they couldn't trust governments anymore. After the wall came down, they were promised a lot of things that didn't happen. And now it's kind of the same."

When taxes go up on the property that Alex's father — an AfD supporter — owns, he complains that it is because the costs of arriving refugees are being passed onto the average person. The irony is that this same criticism of "paying for the other" has been lobbed at eastern Germans by western Germans over the cost of reunification for years, including within Alex's own social circle. One would think that knowing what it is like to integrate into a new society, eastern Germans would extend a hand to help new arrivals — and many have. But for some, anxiety over the future turns into anger and xenophobia instead.

### Reunification without representation

A hallmark of democracy is the value in every voice being heard — from the direct democracy of ancient Athens to the representative democracy typically in practice today, a vote is a civic contract between a government and its citizens to serve the latter's needs. When discontent emerges, democratic course correction is made at the ballot box. But the system only works if citizens believe their voices are being heard and that their votes count. If trust is lacking, citizens may not bother voting at all, or some may even vote for radical parties out of protest or frustration. This frustration over not feeling heard has, in part, driven eastern Germans to the AfD. To some extent, their complaints have merit — at the federal level, eastern Germans are not being represented. When Chancellor Olaf Scholz formed his 17-member cabinet after taking office in 2021, just two ministers had grown up in the east. In 2022, of the 33 undersecretary positions across Germany's various ministries, only one was held by an eastern German. The same study identified 111 departmental heads in federal ministries. Four were from eastern Germany.

The rhetorical fabric of the GDR was built on all citizens being equal — making equal contributions and reaping equal rewards. Above all else, work was prized as the ultimate contribution to GDR society. While the reality was often not so egalitarian, with corruption rampant amongst elites, it is the type of conditioning that takes generations to shake. The notion that working hard and giving to the system ensures that it will provide in return has outlasted the system itself. Alex describes her father's frustrations: "He's just working, working, working, working. It's always



that you have to work to make a living. He wishes that the government would give him something back. But this won't happen. You have to do it for yourself, you have to fight for your own. And they didn't grow up like this. They weren't socialized like this, to only think for themselves."

### Alternatives to the Alternative

More than 30 years after reunification — in a system where every voice is meant to be heard — some eastern Germans are feeling more ignored than ever. The democratic freedoms they fought for a generation ago have come with a systemic shift that they could not have foreseen. Some eastern Germans have turned their back on democracy, while some are actively supporting a party whose representatives have been referred to as "enemies of democracy".

When asked about how to close this democratic gap, little by little, Alex's response is clear. Empower locally. "They don't trust in the government anymore because

no one is listening to them. They don't feel heard", she explains. The gap between politicians and their constituents needs to be bridged in a personal way. "Politicians have to start working in small villages again. They need to include the people living there and say, 'I can help you, but you have to do this yourselves.'"

That is not to say that concerns over migration, the economy, and defense can be cured overnight at the village council. And it is also not true that all AfD voters in eastern Germany are just acting out of frustration and fear — many genuinely support, in part or whole, the AfD's platform. But without opening channels of communication and really listening to their concerns, it will be impossible to discern who is who. Engagement is always harder than exclusion, but it is an integral part of building the trust lacking between eastern Germans and the government. With trust comes open, constructive dialogue: the foundations of a complicated but robust democracy. •

# Beijing's Propaganda Flood

Written by  
**Sinan Arda**

*“Under the surface lies a soft but important message to the audience: China’s political and economic system is working, and the population is satisfied.”*





For almost a decade, Xi Jinping has been encouraging Chinese state media to go out and “tell China’s story well”. In October 2007, then-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Hu Jintao announced a new push to “shape public opinion and perceptions around the world”, now commonly referred to as the global propaganda expansion. This pro-Beijing content has been primarily pushed in Europe and the United States.

Beijing’s propaganda initiatives are geared to change our perception of China, as well as erode our trust in our own political systems

and threaten our democratic systems. By pursuing its propaganda expansion, China is attempting to weaken governance in the long term. It does so by sharing false narratives in American and European media outlets through its official state news agency Xinhua that is kept alive by the CCP’s subsidies. A surge of propaganda targeting democracies sounds worrisome, right? If not addressed, Beijing could use its increasing media power to inject conspiracies into the political discourse and affect U.S. and European politics by targeting ordinary voters. China is playing a long haul game, and the consequences could be dire.

#### **Building the Great Wall of Propaganda**

Propaganda has become synonymous with the systematic dissemination of falsehoods — typically the spread of information in a biased or misleading manner with the overarching goal of promoting a particular political cause or point of view. Since the CCP’s founding in 1921, it has utilized means of domestic propaganda to influence its citizens and has recently shifted to strengthening its external propaganda. In targeting Europeans and Americans, China’s propaganda aims to send five mutually reinforcing messages: promote a positive view of the CCP and China, advertise official party policies and Chinese culture, counter the existing understanding of China as an authoritarian country, and exploit cleavages to exert pressure on liberal democracies.

Beijing does not hesitate to finance its external propaganda machinery to flood the world with subtle propaganda using digital means, traditional media outlets, as well as diplomatic channels. The Economist estimates that President Xi Jinping is allocating well over \$10 billion to effectively convey the chosen narrative. Most recently, during the CCP’s 20th National Congress in October 2022, Xi instructed the CCP Propaganda Department to “accelerate the development of Chinese

discourse and narrative systems, effectively communicate the voice of China, and portray a credible, attractive, and respectable image of China.” As a consequence, it is safe to assume that the propaganda seen so far is just the beginning of a significant increase in output to come.

#### **International exposure to Chinese influence**

According to the China Index 2022, a report of the Taiwan-based research organization Doublethink Lab, both the U.S. and Germany are facing relatively substantial exposure to the CCP’s external communication strategy. The China Index investigated Beijing’s influence in 82 countries, looking at nine elements: media, foreign policy, academia, domestic politics, economy, technology, society, military, and law enforcement. The results were clear and comparable. Pakistan, Cambodia, Singapore, and numerous countries located across Asia and Africa happen to be the most affected by China’s influence.

Within the transatlantic community, the United States and Germany are struggling the most to keep Beijing at bay — particularly when it comes to China’s efforts to influence academia, media, and domestic politics. Overall, out of the 82 surveyed countries, Germany finds itself occupying the 19th position and the United States

*“Beijing has a record of placing its propaganda content through advertorial supplements in prestigious newspapers, which has included the...*

*Wall Street Journal,*

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*Handelsblatt, and*

*Süddeutsche Zeitung.”*

## *“Despite the repeated attempts to stoke a divisive fire, Beijing’s disinformation efforts have received much less scrutiny than Putin’s.”*

the 21st. When looking specifically at academia — the traditional engine of societal progress — the United States is the most influenced out of all the surveyed 82 countries, immediately followed by Germany. Within the domestic politics domain, which evaluates efforts to influence the political landscape, the United States is ranked second, only surpassed by South Africa.

Additionally, Germany is the most affected European country and shows high vulnerability to Beijing’s influence in the public media.

### **Good news or bad news?**

Germany, Europe’s biggest economy, is home to the fifth-largest newspaper market in the world after China, India, Japan, and the United States. Media outlets provide an important entrypoint to distribute false narratives in German and American society. Western media outlets represent a key — and generally well-trusted — tool to spread subtle propaganda. The China Daily, an English-language paper owned by the CCP’s Propaganda Department, is easily accessible in both Washington D.C. and Berlin. In fact, Beijing has a record of placing its propaganda content through advertorial supplements in prestigious newspapers, which has included the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Handelsblatt, and the Süddeutsche Zeitung. By providing free supplements to respected media outlets, the PRC’s state news agency Xinhua tries to provide a positive narrative of China, one that does not leave room for critique. To illustrate one of the many narrative-setting attempts: Handelsblatt published a eight-page newspaper-style supplement called “China Watch” in 2021. It incorporated a detailed article about Xi Jinping, arguing that the PRC is promoting peaceful development in the world. The editorial team of the German newspaper itself was not involved in the content as it was composed and paid for by Beijing’s propaganda apparatus.

For those who think print is dead, Beijing is pursuing a similar media strategy in television. It has paid for image polishing during primetime across regional television outlets based in Berlin, Hamburg, and Saxony. In a

45-minute documentary, available in the online media library of the regional channel Sachsen Fernsehen, a German emigrant declares the Chinese city of Taicang as a better home than where he lived previously. Unsurprisingly, the distribution of the documentary itself is paid for by Xinhua.

China’s external media output might not look political at first glance as it often focuses on China’s growing economy, technological innovation, tourism, and culture. Yet, under the surface lies a soft but important message to the audience: China’s political and economic system is working, and the population is satisfied. The aim is to improve the global perception of China’s political and economic system and position it as a viable alternative to our liberal democracy.

### **Divide and conquer**

China’s propaganda apparatus appears determined to tell a well-tailored version of the country’s story. Simultaneously, it consistently points out flaws in American and European domestic politics to create political cleavages and steer division. It is copying Russian disinformation techniques that include the use of fake social media profiles to foster online hatred on dividing topics. For example, during the 2022 midterm elections, Meta and Google revealed China-based operations on social media platforms that sought to divide Americans by pushing narratives around racial strife and abortion, as well as ones questioning representative democracy. Although social media propaganda directed by Beijing is not a new phenomenon, the new operation pushed messages targeted at Americans on both sides of divisive issues — indicating the CCP’s efforts to influence domestic politics.

Efforts to manipulate search results on global search engines add to the complex melting pot of increased Chinese propaganda on traditional and modern media platforms. According to a report published by the Brookings Institute in 2022, China exploits search engines to spread state-backed media that amplify the

CCP’s narrative. Users trying to inform themselves on the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang or the origins of COVID-19 end up being strongly exposed to propaganda articles due to their high presence in the top results sections. Despite the repeated attempts to stoke a divisive fire, Beijing’s disinformation efforts have received much less scrutiny than Putin’s. Yet, it is important to be aware of both Russia’s and China’s propagandist efforts simultaneously to successfully build societal resilience.

There are also future plans in the works. In September 2023, Microsoft Threat Intelligence released a report arguing that China has expanded its influence operations and is constructing a large network of fake accounts that could be used in future misinformation operations. The researchers suggest that Beijing is planning to interfere in the upcoming U.S. presidential elections with AI-generated images and other means of propaganda.

### **The resilience of liberal democracies**

When targeting foreigners, China’s propaganda apparatus is surprisingly effective — according to a recent research project published in January 2023 by political scientists at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Groningen. The scientists surveyed around 6,000 citizens across 19 countries and 6 continents to gauge how global audiences respond to propaganda material. It found that exposure to Chinese state media strengthens perceptions that the CCP delivers economic growth, political stability, and competent leadership. However, there is a twist — one that indicates that citizens in liberal democracies across the transatlantic spectrum are showcasing a high level of resilience to Beijing’s propaganda. While the CCP’s message was persuasive among audiences in Africa and South America — regions where China is heavily investing in its media apparatus — it was not as successful in Europe and North America. Dysfunctional democracies provide an opening door for China’s propaganda as the CCP effectively targets appealing issues such as development, poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and innovation.

### **An uncertain future**

Innovations such as Artificial intelligence and the use of personal data will come in handy for Beijing’s Central Propaganda Department. With 2024 marking an important election year for both the United States and Europe, the transatlantic community cannot be cautious enough when it comes to foreign interference and propaganda. Enhancing resistance to state-sponsored propaganda and misinformation cannot be fulfilled by the government alone; the private sector and civil society organizations bear an increasingly important responsibility in defending democracy.

After all, building effective resilience against state propaganda will require more than just strengthening and promoting democratic values. Governments need to improve their ability to expose and counteract fake news while increasing public awareness on the issue of state-financed propaganda and misinformation. Tech companies need to accelerate their efforts to identify and remove fake accounts as propaganda is amplified in online spaces. Civil society has an important role to play in strengthening the firewall against disinformation by pushing tech companies for more action and educating the population on how to identify propaganda material.

To ensure that resilience remains a long-term investment, citizens need to be reminded of the values underpinning their liberal democracies. In the face of a propaganda stream that will likely never stem, resilient citizens will remain resilient actors in society. No matter where the propaganda comes from. •

*“Efforts to manipulate search results on global search engines add to the complex melting pot of increased Chinese propaganda.”*

# The New Frontier of Public Diplomacy

Written by  
**Chloe Laird**

*“Understanding that a compelling online presence requires style as well as substance is a critical step forward.”*



In 2021, the “Feuille de Route de L’influence” was released by the French Government as a roadmap for its soft power strategy moving forward. One of the core concepts presented in the document was the “diplomacy of ideas”. The goal was to help further open debate abroad and simultaneously combat disinformation harming French democracy. To achieve these ends, one of the priorities listed is for the French State to be “present wherever influence is able to be made”, as well as a call to increase general investment in digital influence. The two together provide fertile ground for boosting France’s social media presence across the diplomatic board.

### The new age of storytelling

“The best idea we ever had was the decision to tell stories that speak to people,” explains Pierre Leonard, Head of Communications at the French Embassy in Washington, D.C. “We continuously adapt but our objective is always to reinforce Franco-American ties and put forward that relationship. And for that, social media is extremely important.”

These different platforms have allowed for a new avenue of conversation starters with the “several hundred thousand Americans” that follow the French Embassy in the U.S. (at the time of writing their X, formerly Twitter, account has over 65,000 followers).

“We can’t tell stories without featuring individuals and their personas,” Leonard goes on to add. He gives the example of French President Emmanuel Macron’s state visit to the United States in November of 2022. “We asked ourselves, who is at the heart of the visit?” This question led the French Embassy to interview James Sinopoli, Senior Executive Chef of Blair House — the U.S. President’s Guest House — asking what meals he prepared for the two statesmen. The interview showcased the rich history of these presidential visits to Washington, D.C., as well as the important cultural role of food.

The stories told go beyond presidential visits, including a podcast interview with Nicolas Maubert, Space Counselor at the French Embassy. Maubert shares his experience crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a rowboat and his personal tale is one of the many conversations shedding light on France. Other examples of storytelling with a personal touch include Instagram posts from Franco-American influencer @LeanneAnsar who shares the 80th anniversary of the much beloved French

children’s book “Le Petit Prince” and the history behind it. Here, French stories, history and anecdotes are shown to an American audience that otherwise might be unaware of the impact of France.

The specific use of influencers is a bold choice, but one that is done with intentionality. Leonard explains that it was a logical step for the French Embassy’s social media team: “We find ourselves on social media, so pairing with people who are already active on social media makes sense. The influencers we pair with are often individuals who already engage with our events.” That’s how the team achieves their overarching goal of telling their unique French stories: directly from French mouths to American eyes and ears.

### Why it works

Presence in the digital space is only effective if the content being created speaks to those it’s attempting to target. One of the reasons behind the success of @FranceintheUS’s strategy is the composition of the social media team itself: a mixture of Americans, French and Franco-Americans all work on their strategy. They understand the audience they are aiming to reach, because they are that audience. The content itself is tailored minutely: understanding what might work and what might not. The proper use of language, following the latest social media trends in the U.S., and understanding the humor and emotions of their viewers — this is all critical for effective engagement.

Another successful yet unconventional choice is the embassy’s continued engagement on TikTok. As of November 2023, the only embassies in the U.S. with a presence on the Chinese-owned platform are France and Israel. Leonard explains that the over 100 million

*“We can’t tell stories without featuring individuals and their personas.”*

Americans on the application made it necessary for the team to include it in their social media plan. It’s clear that understanding where your audience consumes content is essential in order to succeed.

It’s difficult to gauge the effectiveness of a digital soft power strategy but there are a few metrics that could indicate some results. For example, French continues to be one of the top languages selected to be taught in schools in the U.S, France continues to be a top destination for study abroad, and the U.S. remains the top foreign direct investor in France when it comes to job creation.

### Why it matters

We live in an age of competition for digital narratives and where disinformation runs deep. Having a heightened awareness and correct sense of the online world is critical in order for governments to keep up with these modern, digital times.

This is particularly crucial because other governments have already actively invested in this space. President Xi Jinping stated in 2017 a need to “tell China’s stories well, present a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.” A Chinese influencer, Li Ziqi, portrays her quaint life in the Chinese countryside to her 11 million YouTube followers. She generates over 10 million views on a single video in a matter of weeks. China Central Television, the Chinese Government’s official broadcast station, congratulated the YouTuber for introducing “Chinese culture to the world, telling China’s stories and showing the confidence and wonderful lives of China’s youth.” This strategy contributes to a younger generation of Americans having a friendlier view of China than older generations. In one survey, about 25% of 18- to 44-year-olds viewed China

as an enemy of the U.S., compared to the 52% of those aged 45 and over. Keeping pace with the competition for ideas is critical in this new age of social media diplomacy.

The “Feuille de Route de L’influence” clearly understands this reality check: “the diplomacy of influence is not only in action — it is also in narrative.” The stakes are high, as “the battle of influence is also a battle of narratives. Today, and even more so in the era of social media and the viral effect they provide; a thing, an event, an action carried out by the State, is also — and sometimes primarily — what is said about it.” These days “diplomacy and foreign policy are primarily deployed through speech, storytelling, narratives”. And engaging in “influence diplomacy” is no longer optional but rather, as the French government emphasizes, “an integral element of the foreign policy of states that want to make their mark on the international stage”.

Investing time in showcasing stories and the individuals telling them is a constructive digital strategy that more democratic governments should be actively investing in alongside France. Understanding that a compelling online presence requires style as well as substance is a critical step forward.

As we know, a younger population of digital natives consume their information overwhelmingly through social media. The power of individuals and their unique stories on these social platforms should not be underestimated. The success of these stories is no longer limited to influencers with hundreds of thousands of followers or celebrities with millions. Every single day an average, individual story shared becomes an overnight sensation that is viewed millions of times and can shed important information on a culture shared, a history of a place, or an economic impact. This is our new era of influence. •

# Deep Fakes and Deep Trouble

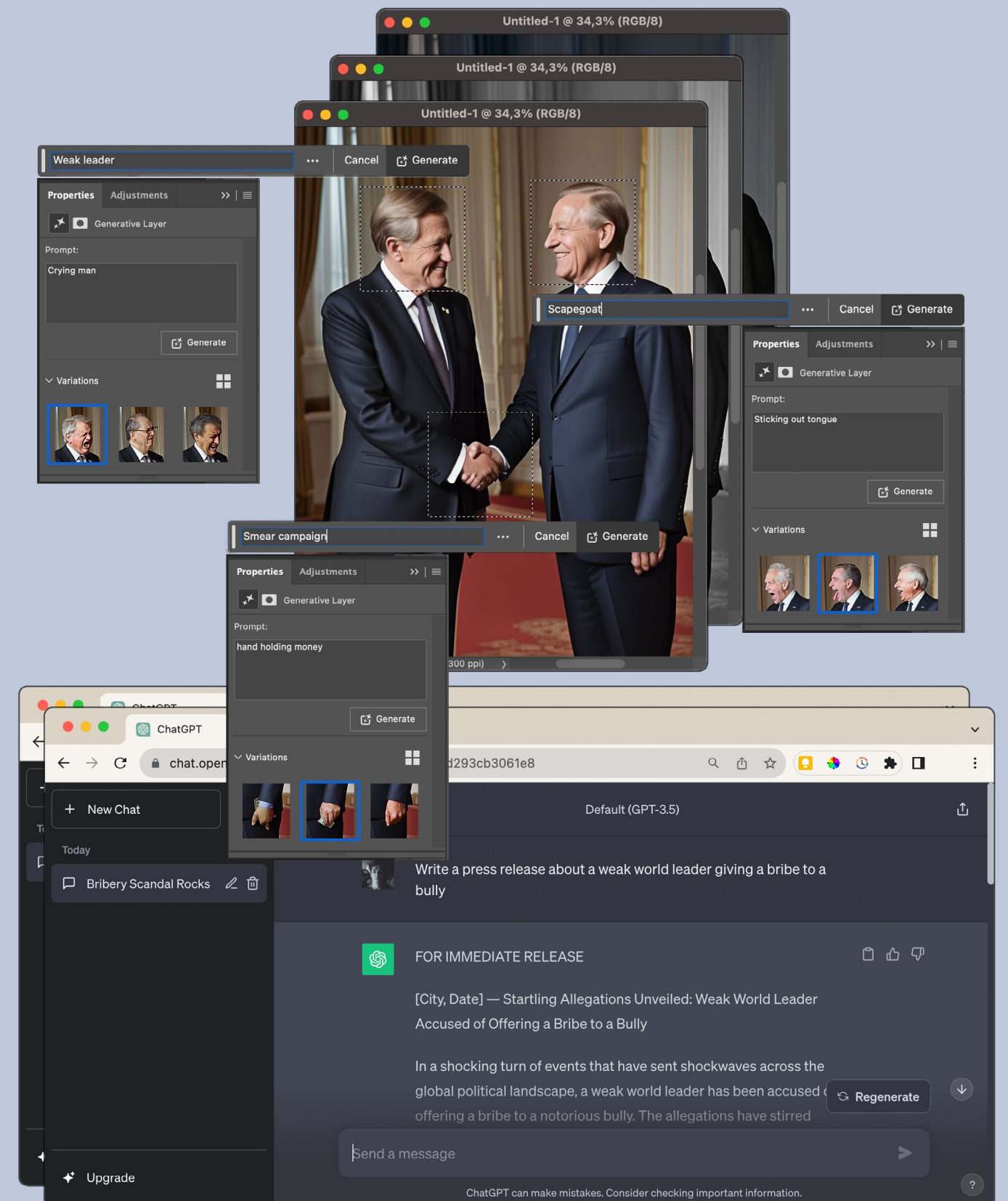
## The Political Consequences of AI-Generated Ads

Written by  
**Daniela Rojas Medina**

Digital marketing experts estimate that most Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 ads each day. Advertising is now a part of our daily lives and as a society, we've become accustomed to their constant presence — on TV, buses, train stations and whenever we open browsers or social media platforms on our phones. Online advertising is tailored to consumers' specific needs, interests and purchasing habits, thanks to the large amount of data that companies are able to gather on users' online behavior. Artificial intelligence (AI) has facilitated

this data gathering process and helped social media companies to not only feed users targeted ads, but also highly targeted content through algorithms that keep users engaged on their platforms for hours with the ultimate goal of consuming more ads. In today's digital world, social media companies are not only competing with each other, but also with the entertainment industry, TV networks and streaming services like Hulu. They all compete for a user's finite amount of attention.

**“There are currently no rules in the U.S. that prevent election campaigns from using AI-generated content in political ads, even if it is being used to mislead voters.”**



## Modern marketing

Today, the rise of generative AI is a game changer for online advertising, as it allows for the hyper-personalization of ad content. This is based on consumers' online behavior and interactions, both past and predictive. Generative AI's ability to produce realistic text, images, audio, and video could help advertisers quickly and inexpensively target specific audiences. According to Mark Read, CEO of the world's biggest advertising agency, WPP, AI-generated ads are 10 to 20 times cheaper than traditional ad campaigns that require hiring actors, film crews and production teams. Large consumer goods companies, such as Unilever and Nestle, are already experimenting with using generative AI in ad campaigns that have so far proven to be highly successful. For example, an AI-generated ad video from Nestle subsidiary La Laitière generated 700,000 euros in media value at almost no cost to produce.

**“An AI-generated ad video from Nestle subsidiary La Laitière generated 700,000 euros in media value at almost no cost to produce.”**

The use of generative AI in commercial advertising does not come without its own set of challenges. There are security, privacy and intellectual property threats — like companies' ability to protect their ad content from copyright infringement. Additionally, there are the dangers of generating ads that reproduce human biases and social stereotypes that are embedded in the data used to train the AI models. However, with human intervention in AI-generated ads and companies already thinking about security and privacy as they experiment, these challenges can largely be resolved by the industry without much government intervention.

## Republicans, Democrats and deepfakes

One of the biggest concerns associated with generative AI is the use of the technology to create deepfakes — false images, video or audio content developed to purposely spread misinformation and disinformation. With regard to commercial advertising, there are existing laws in the United States that prevent companies from releasing ads with false or misleading content. The Truth in Advertising Laws, administered by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), were established to protect consumers from being manipulated into buying a given product with false advertising, and would, in theory, also apply to AI-generated ad content. Political ads, on the other hand, are not subject to those same laws.

Since the FTC can only regulate practices in commerce, the political ads that run on TV and social media platforms during election season are not subject to commercial advertising laws and are protected under the First Amendment right to free speech. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) only requires that political ads have disclaimers from candidates or political parties authorizing the ad, alongside a disclaimer about the campaign or Political Action Committee (PAC) that paid for the ad. The images and messaging in the political ads themselves are not regulated. Political candidates who believe an ad from an opponent's campaign includes false or misleading information that is detrimental to their candidacy can sue the makers of that ad for defamation. However, these defamation cases are difficult to win as the plaintiff has to provide evidence that the makers of the ad spread false information knowingly and with malice.

There are currently no rules in the U.S. that prevent election campaigns from using AI-generated content in political ads, even if it is being used to mislead voters. As we approach the 2024 U.S. presidential election, this will become a key issue for the FEC to consider. Generative AI has the power to replicate a political candidate's voice, likeness, and hand gestures, which can in turn be used to fabricate events or conversations that never took place.

## Generating 2024

Candidates vying for the Republican nomination are already using AI in their campaign ads. Ron DeSantis' PAC released an ad in July that used AI to generate an audio clip of Donald Trump criticizing Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, making it seem like a statement from a phone interview. Although the text was pulled from a real Tweet posted by Trump, it was not his real voice. Another ad posted by DeSantis' campaign team on X, formerly known as Twitter, included deepfake images of Trump hugging Dr. Anthony Fauci in a collage mixed in with real photos — making it difficult to discern the real images from the AI-generated ones. After President Biden announced his re-election campaign, the Republican

National Committee (RNC) also released an AI-generated ad under the “Beat Biden” campaign. The ad featured a dystopian version of what the U.S. would look like should Biden win re-election in 2024, one filled with crime, financial collapse, escalating tension with global powers, and no southern border.

While the RNC ad did include a disclaimer that the ad was “built entirely with AI imagery”, it was very small and almost translucent in the top corner of the video. The two ads from the DeSantis campaign and PAC, on the other hand, did not include any type of disclaimer. The use of AI technology in political advertising makes it increasingly difficult for voters to discern what is real from what is false and further complicates an already confusing digital environment. This is especially true for senior voters who may not be as exposed to new technologies and unable to easily detect deepfakes or notice the small disclaimers on the screen, if there are any.

There needs to be a discussion in the U.S. about whether the use of generative AI should be allowed in political advertising and, if permitted, whether it should be regulated to prevent the spread of disinformation and voter manipulation. In August, the FEC began a process to potentially regulate AI-generated content in campaign ads that are “deliberately deceptive” to voters, following a petition from the non-profit organization Public Citizen. At the time of writing, the regulator is seeking public comment on this petition to amend existing regulation prohibiting candidates from fraudulently misrepresenting other candidates or political parties.

Given the significant consequences that the use of the technology can have on democracy and the election process, the best course of action would be for the FEC to prohibit the use of generative AI to falsely depict real people or events on political ads for the 2024 election season. Regulators could then use this time to evaluate the right course of action moving forward, implement policies, and create an enforcement mechanism for advertisers that do not comply with the rules.

Should the FEC decide to continue to allow candidates' use of generative AI for the upcoming election, there are transparency rules that can be put in place to prevent campaigns from using AI to purposely mislead voters. One option is for the FEC to require advertisers to issue a very visible disclaimer that AI is being used in the ad accompanied by an audio voiceover, both of which would complement the existing disclaimers about ad financing. The disclaimer should ideally mention where exactly AI was used in the ad to help voters to better identify AI-generated content in the future.

Another option is to rely on tech companies to create their own guidelines for political advertising that best suit the needs of their specific platforms. Recently,

Google announced that from November 2023 it will require election ads posted on YouTube that make use of AI to include prominent disclosure regarding images and audio content that have been synthetically altered. Google's announcement is a positive sign that tech companies are willing to be proactive and adopt measures when the stakes are high. However, this approach is not sustainable because it requires buy-in from all the other tech companies, including Meta and X. Once Google's new guidelines come into effect, it could put pressure on the other platforms to follow suit. Nonetheless, this may not be the case as there are currently no incentives for the companies to adopt such measures for political ad content.

**“The use of this technology during elections could exacerbate the erosion of trust that U.S. citizens have in democratic institutions and the electoral process.”**

Whichever path the FEC chooses to take, one thing is clear: the government cannot continue to allow the unchecked use of AI-generated content in political advertising, as these deepfakes could have a significant impact on voter behavior and the democratic process. More importantly, the use of this technology during elections could exacerbate the erosion of trust that U.S. citizens have in democratic institutions and the electoral process. There is a risk that voters who cannot tell what is real from what is fake might not want to vote at all. The clock is ticking us to 2024, and it's time to act. •



# Lithium

*Global Megatrends Meet Local  
Democracy in South America*

Across the globe, a new energy dynamic is coming into focus. From the cars we drive, to the computers we work on, to the cell phones with which we take thirst pics, it is a future powered by rechargeable batteries.

In many ways this is already true. If you're recharging it, it's probably a lithium-ion battery. But with the promise of electric vehicles for the masses inching towards reality, the demand for these batteries — and the raw materials they require — is expected to spike. For the developed world, the lithium-ion battery could offer a pathway to greener energy. For developing countries

that possess the minerals needed to make a battery, the promise of transformational riches dangles on the horizon.

The common, if crude (pardon the pun), analogy is that the raw materials required for rechargeable batteries in the 21st century will mirror the strategic importance — and economic value — of oil in the 20th century.

It is precisely for this reason that a plethora of voices, ranging from wide-eyed speculators on Wall Street to resource nationalists in the Andean altiplano, have circled Bolivia as the future “Saudi Arabia of lithium”.

*Written and photographed by*  
**Samuel George**

After all, beneath the South American country's 4,000 square miles of bright white salt flats lies a quarter of the world's known lithium. With lithium prices at \$85,000 per ton in early 2023 and Bolivia's potential reserves at over 21 million tons, the economic potential is staggering. Such a windfall could alter the future of a country that has long lagged as one of the poorest in the Americas.

Yet, some 17 years since then-President Evo Morales declared that Bolivia would begin to industrialize lithium, the country's exports are negligible. Despite billions

of dollars of state investment, the lithium remains buried beneath the salt. The lack of production stands in stark contrast to neighboring Chile and Argentina, which Forbes Magazine lists as number two and four respectively, in terms of lithium production.

There are many explanations for Bolivia's underperformance. One explanation, however, stems from the politics of resource extraction in the country. Herein lies an example of a broader global challenge. Resource security and the future of energy are long-term

trends that will dictate the figure of our world. However, in many cases, the development of these trends plays out in democracies where political decisions are based on historical factors, traumas, as well as short-term political goals and needs.

Bolivian efforts to industrialize lithium do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is the latest chapter in a long history of resource extraction that has primarily benefited developed nations, while the majority of Bolivians remained in poverty. Thus, the visions of a lithium

powered future collide with a democratic will that demands that the mistakes of the past not be repeated.

I recently returned from a trip filming in Bolivia and Chile for an upcoming Bertelsmann Foundation documentary on the lithium battery. Here, I share some observations about the interplay between rare earth minerals and democracy in the heart of South America.



Bolivia's salt flats sit atop perhaps the world's largest deposits of lithium

*“The clock is running, and Bolivia is stuck in the salt.”*



### A window of opportunity

One important thing to know about lithium is that it is not as rare as one might initially imagine. Yes, Bolivia has massive deposits of the metal, but so too do Chile, Argentina, and Australia. New lithium reserve bases — some of tremendous size — are increasingly being discovered around the world, for example in Serbia, Zimbabwe, and in the Western United States.

Secondly, lithium is a critical component of the lithium-ion battery. However, there is no guarantee that this will continue to be the case. It is conceivable that a different battery technology will overtake the lithium-ion battery, and that such replacement may not require lithium at all.

For example, the Chinese battery leader CATL is exploring the potential of a sodium-ion battery. In West Virginia, Form Energy is developing iron batteries that

the Wall Street Journal reports “can discharge power for about four straight days — far longer than the standard four-hour discharge capability of lithium-ion batteries”.

Taken together, these facts highlight Bolivia’s precarious position; to be sure, a window of opportunity exists for the Andean country to emerge as the frontrunner of the battery era. But Bolivia must take advantage of this window, as it could easily close.

It is clear that the government of President Luis Arce — of the same leftist party as Evo Morales, but now a political rival — is feeling the pressure. Over the last 15 years, Bolivia has invested billions of dollars into its state-owned lithium company with little to show for it. But making the changes to redirect its efforts could be difficult to implement. The clock is running, and Bolivia is stuck in the salt.



Bolivia approaches its lithium bounty informed by a long history of resource extraction

*“I don’t want my children to have to live like this.”*

### The politics of resource extraction

On my trip, I frequently asked interviewees: “Is lithium in Bolivia political?” The answer, across the board, was a resounding “Yes!”

Bolivia’s centuries-long history of resource extraction hangs heavy over the country’s democracy — the consequence of enormous profits going abroad and leaving Bolivians behind. There is no clearer example of this than Cerro Rico, a mountain just outside of the city

of Potosí, in the same department as the lithium-filled salt flats.

In 1545, Spanish conquistadors discovered vast silver deposits in Cerro Rico, a find that sparked massive mining operations with profound implications for the global economy. According to writer Charles C. Mann, between the 16th and 18th century, 80% of the world’s silver supply came out of this mountain. The silver funded the Spanish empire, and to this day, the Spanish phrase “vale un Potosí” (it’s worth a Potosí) is used to say “it’s

worth a fortune”. The popular saying holds that you could build a bridge of silver from Cerro Rico to Madrid based on what was mined from that single mountain.

Yet, despite the spectacular wealth it created, Potosí remains one of the poorest regions in Bolivia. When we visited Cerro Rico, we found hundreds of miners still working the mountain — trying to scratch out whatever scrapes of silver might be left for a few dollars a week in pay. Over the centuries, the mountain itself has been hollowed out like Swiss cheese, and the foreboding

specter of its self-implosion — a disaster that could kill hundreds — grows by the day.

Inside the mine, the air is hot, stagnant and thick with the smell of minerals, the pathways claustrophobic and dark. Why would anyone work this dangerous and thankless job? That’s what I ask Germán, a silver miner who lives with his wife and five children on Cerro Rico.

“I’m from a village, but there was no work,” he explains. “So, we came to the mine. I don’t make much, but at

*“Both Chile and Argentina are exporting significant quantities of lithium carbonate, developing industry know-how and global networks along the way.”*



A lithium worker at a plant in Chile's Atacama desert

least I can work. Now, there is not much silver. There is not much life. And any richness that is left doesn't stay here in Bolivia. It gets sent abroad, where it's worth double or triple. I don't want my children to have to live like this."

For Roxana Graz, the president of Potosí's Civic Committee, enough is enough. As she explains to me, "We are Bolivia's top producer of silver. We are Bolivia's top producer of tin. We are the top producer of zinc. Yet, paradoxically, we are the poorest department in Bolivia.

International companies have taken out the resources and left nothing in Potosí. With that history of extraction, contamination and sickness, we see lithium as an opportunity that we can't allow to slip from our hands; an opportunity for true economic retribution and economic development for Potosí."

#### **For Bolivians, by Bolivians**

Against this backdrop, inviting international consortiums to help Bolivia extract its lithium has not been politically

viable. To the contrary, over the last decades, resource nationalism emerged as a powerful force in Bolivian democracy. Led by Morales — the country's first Indigenous president — Bolivia sought to develop lithium plants internally.

The idea sounds reasonable enough. Instead of letting foreigners extract the country's riches and refine them elsewhere, President Morales wanted to position Bolivian government-run companies to mine and refine the mineral. Keep the process in Bolivian hands, the thinking

went, and while we are at it, let's also conduct more advanced, and higher-value processes on Bolivian soil.

In practice, however, it became a daunting task. For one thing, extracting lithium from the salt flats proved to be more complicated than, for example, across the Andes in the deserts of northern Chile. With very few days of rain a year, Chilean lithium producers can count on stable environmental conditions. Bolivia's salt flats, by contrast, have seasonal rains; a wet period that complicates the logistics of lithium carbonate production. The country

*"We see lithium as an opportunity that we can't allow to slip from our hands; an opportunity for true economic retribution and economic development for Potosí."*



Tomás Colque Lopez is an Indigenous community leader in Uyuni

struggled mightily to produce the internal talent to solve these engineering riddles.

Wilson Caral, a Bolivian environmental engineer, worked for the state-run lithium company, YLB, for seven years from 2015 to 2022. Hailing from one of the villages around the salt flats, he was the first in his family to attend university. “My parents, my grandparents, they lived working the land,” he tells me. “They didn’t have the chance to finish high school. I always dreamed of being a professional.”

“We see lithium as a great hope for the future,” he explains, “also in terms of employment for the communities. But to reach that dream, we need to accelerate our progress. For seven years, we worked extremely hard, under brutal conditions, always believing that we as Bolivians were going to pull it off. But now, I do believe we need the support of outsiders and outside technology to accelerate this process. So that we can start producing and competing with our neighbors.”

Arguably, the country needs international support and expertise to capitalize on its lithium reserves. Even Evo Morales was unable to achieve this without provoking the wrath of citizens unwilling to accept another instance of international resource extraction.

In 2019, President Morales entered into an agreement with the German firm ACISA to develop a massive lithium extraction project. However, the move prompted outrage and protests across Potosí. In a stunning turn, President Morales canceled the project — just prior to abdicating the presidency and fleeing the country.

“It’s too bad that deal fell apart,” Caral, the former YLB employee tells me, “because with it, we might be producing lithium carbonate by now. But that deal would have been for 70 years. That’s too long!”

### Back to square one

Now, Bolivia appears to be arriving at a crossroads regarding its lithium deposits. Both Chile and Argentina are exporting significant quantities of lithium carbonate, developing industry know-how and global networks along the way.

Meanwhile, the Bolivian economy hurtles towards crisis. The country had enjoyed positive momentum over the last decade thanks to exports of natural gas. But gas production has been dwindling. The president of the state oil company, Armin Dorgathen, recently stated that production has fallen from 59 million cubic meters per day in 2014 to 37 million in 2023. President Arce himself warned that the country was "hitting rock bottom" when it came to its gas reserves.

The government needs the lithium fields to pick up the slack of decreased gas exports. And President Arce seems to understand that this will require international assistance. After a supposedly competitive bidding process, the Bolivian government signed lithium agreements with Russian state nuclear firm Rosatom and China's Citic Guoan Group in July of 2023.

According to Fernando Molina, a journalist, La Paz may find it politically easier to work with the new partners than it would with the U.S. or its allies.

“In Bolivia, there is a sense that the United States has an imperialist attitude towards Latin America,” Molina states. “It is viewed as dangerous to have the United States involved in something as important as lithium, because this could bring the U.S. government back to interfering with Bolivian affairs. Bolivian socialism rose in contrast to that history.”

One thing is certain: the folks in Potosí are watching very closely. In the dusty town of Uyuni — just 40 kilometers or so from the salt flats — I speak with Indigenous community leader Tomás Colque Lopez, and his message is clear.

“We are in favor of mining lithium,” he announces in his office, a pile of coca leaves on his desk, “but only if the department receives its fair economic share. We need to be part of the process. That’s what we are asking for. And if we don’t get it, we’ll go to the lithium plant ourselves and block the whole thing.” •

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**“Systems of deliberative democracy can mend an often fractured bridge.”**

**—*Juli Simond*** page 10

