DESTINATION EUROPE

BY LAURENT STANDAERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Poland. Lublin railway station. 9:30 am. 12 October 2049.

Lena has travelled overnight aboard the TransEuropa. She loves this train. Sleeper cars, restaurants, meeting rooms, games rooms for kids, views of the countryside – all for an affordable price. It's her first trip as a Member of the European Parliament. Travel on intra-union parliamentary business is by train, the hyperloop being reserved for crises only. With fellow MEPs, Lena is part of a tripartite commission on reforming education systems and digital learning in rural areas of the European Union. The choice of Lublin was a no-brainer: a green and hyper-connected mid-sized city, gateway to new members Belarus and Ukraine. The city also lies in the heart of the eastern Polish countryside, a poor region for years a source of cheap migrant labour which left generations of children behind.

A Belgian-Polish pianist active in anti-racism and local politics, Lena had agreed to run for office on a trans-European citizens' list. Since their introduction in 2034, transnational lists of parties or citizens set the terms of European elections. Dividing her time between playing the piano and practicing law in the social sector, Lena was able to rely on the European unconditional income to embark on this adventure. Her campaign centred on three main themes: education, inclusion, and digital freedom.

And it is education – or rather learning – that will be the focus of her political endeavour in the European Parliament. The crises of the 2020s

had called into question traditional education systems that were both unequal and obsessed with national language and history. Through a child-centred approach with a European outlook, education programmes have certainly evolved, but much remains to be done. Lena has tasked herself with using the mandate to promote alternative educational methods designed to emancipate children and develop practical and traditional knowledge – seizing the opportunities of digital learning while guarding against its risks. Education rather than competition; transition rather than accumulation.

Arriving at her hotel, Lena logs on to Sharing4EU to borrow a bike to ride over to Motycz, a village an hour outside Lublin. With the afternoon off, she'll meet with teachers, visit her great grandmother's grave, and go for a country walk. "It's funny," she says to herself as she pedals, "apart from greener farming, the absence of smog, and gradual repopulation, not much has changed around here!" Standing beside the grave, it strikes Lena that none of this was a given 10-15 years ago. Born in 2016, she grew up in the 2020s when the European Union was rocked by existential political crisis. Nativist and socioeconomic populists increasingly tended towards authoritarianism. Through success in national elections, they rose within the European institutions.

This was a brown decade of fascistic politics, part of a wider global trend, a response to the excesses of the ordoliberal and unequal Europe of earlier years. But beneath the surface, European solidarity was being rebuilt in cities. From Stockholm to Riace, cities broke with national agendas by welcoming, integrating, and training refugees and migrants, fighting climate change, and transforming lifestyles for the better. Although the broken promises of the national populists became ever more apparent, it wasn't until 2027 that the shocking video capturing the torture and murder of Yara, a Syrian refugee living in Gdańsk and famous creator of the open-source European alternative to Facebook, jolted consciences and led to change.

Throughout the 2030s, a new generation set foot in the political arena. Erasmus students and apprentices of the 1990s and 2000s – children of cultural exchange, socially aware and broad minded across the Union –, they were the face of a Europe that emerged from the gloom to renew European integration. And the people were with them.

During the dark years, socio-environmental movements and feminists continued to nourish another Europe. The green movements, adopting a glocal and ecosystemic approach, saw the European project as a space in which to fundamentally change the way we produce, consume, and live together. The #MeToo movement culminated in 2029 with an unprecedented wave of rejection of an outdated patriarchal-conservative and dogmatic politics. These actors brought the debate forward on the politics of time, digitisation, migration, inequality, and humankind's cohabitation with nature and animals.

The Europe of 2049 is far from perfect. But the dialectic between the national and the European has been rebalanced to place citizens at the heart of democracy. The European Council is headed by a female-male co-presidency approved by the European Parliament. The 2033 Treaty of Tallinn not only marked a return to the international stage with a post-national and pacifist foreign policy, it saw the 'unionising' (in a new sense of the term that would enter the dictionary in 2035) of social and economic competences, which laid the foundations of the European unconditional income, the European healthcare card, and an overhauled industrial and monetary policy. As a result, while not completely obsolete, the Stability and Growth Pact and the nation state are no longer central obsessions of political and democratic life.

Rights and democratic life have made great leaps forward in the digital era. Cyberattacks and digital electoral interference are now under control. Today, the Union is an undisputed leader in digital rights and data protection. 'Portable rights' guarantee the same fundamental rights to all residents in the Union, wherever they are and towards all levels

of power. Everybody can participate or vote online either directly through the citizens' assembly or indirectly through trans-European lists. The public sphere has become transnational: instant translation into various languages, trans-European newspapers, funds to support investigative journalism.

As she daydreams around the streets of Lublin, Lena thinks about how far Poland has come since the turn of the century. Stubbornly wedded to a suicidal climate policy and riddled with identitarian tensions, it would have to wait until 2025 to see change. Nevertheless, the young representative is keenly aware that the future lies, and will always lie, in fighting the adherents of closed society and corruption. The Europe of 2049, while once again a credible leader in global climate policy, still imports too much energy and products that do not correspond to its values and model. The struggle will continue through trade and climate diplomacy, but also through unsatisfactory alliances such as the one with an environmentally progressive but socially repressive China.

In these battles, Lena knows education underpins all potential for change. In five years' time, she will leave elected office, as all citizens' candidates commit to do. It is this long-term commitment that continues to motivate her. Just before she began her campaign, she came across an old magazine from 2019 which imagined what the Europe of 2049 could look like. Its theme – the future is a political force to be represented in the present – had inspired her campaign slogan: "tomorrow is now".