



**Scenarios For The Future of European Spatial Justice  
Expert Respondents' Draft - August 2021 - Not For Circulation**

## ***Instructions to Respondents***

*Thank you for agreeing to serve as a respondent to the IMAJINE scenarios. You've been chosen because we value your expertise and the additional insights which your reading and response will bring to the four scenarios outlined below.*

*We ask respondents to produce half a page or so of commentary in response to the document below, with reference to your particular sector or field of expertise.*

*We ask respondents to consider:*

- *What are the implications of each scenario for your sector or field?*
- *How might your sector or field look in each of these scenarios?*
- *What present-day or emerging issues, challenges, opportunities, or potential blindspots do they highlight for your sector?*

## **What is IMAJINE?**

IMAJINE (Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe) is a Horizon 2020 European Union research project. IMAJINE's 15 participating institutions represent 13 countries. You can learn more about the project at [www.imajine-project.eu](http://www.imajine-project.eu).

Economic prosperity and standards of living may vary depending on where people live and work. These neighbourhood, municipal, regional, or national disparities go against the principle that EU citizens should have equal rights and opportunities no matter where they live.

IMAJINE explores ways to reduce *territorial inequality* – that is, disparities between different places in Europe.

IMAJINE works to promote *spatial justice* – that is, to ensure different places are treated fairly and equitably, and that people's ability to realise their rights does not depend on where they live.

## **Why scenarios?**

As part of the broader IMAJINE project, one team was asked to look at the future using scenario planning. This approach imagines several plausible futures that challenge current assumptions about where Europe is headed. The scenarios, which are informed by emergent IMAJINE findings, are the first step in developing useful methods to reduce territorial inequality and promote spatial justice in Europe.

These scenarios do not represent desired futures, nor are they predictions of what will come to pass. They are imagined future contexts for the question of European territorial inequality and spatial justice, crafted to stretch plausibility and challenge assumptions about what the future may hold.

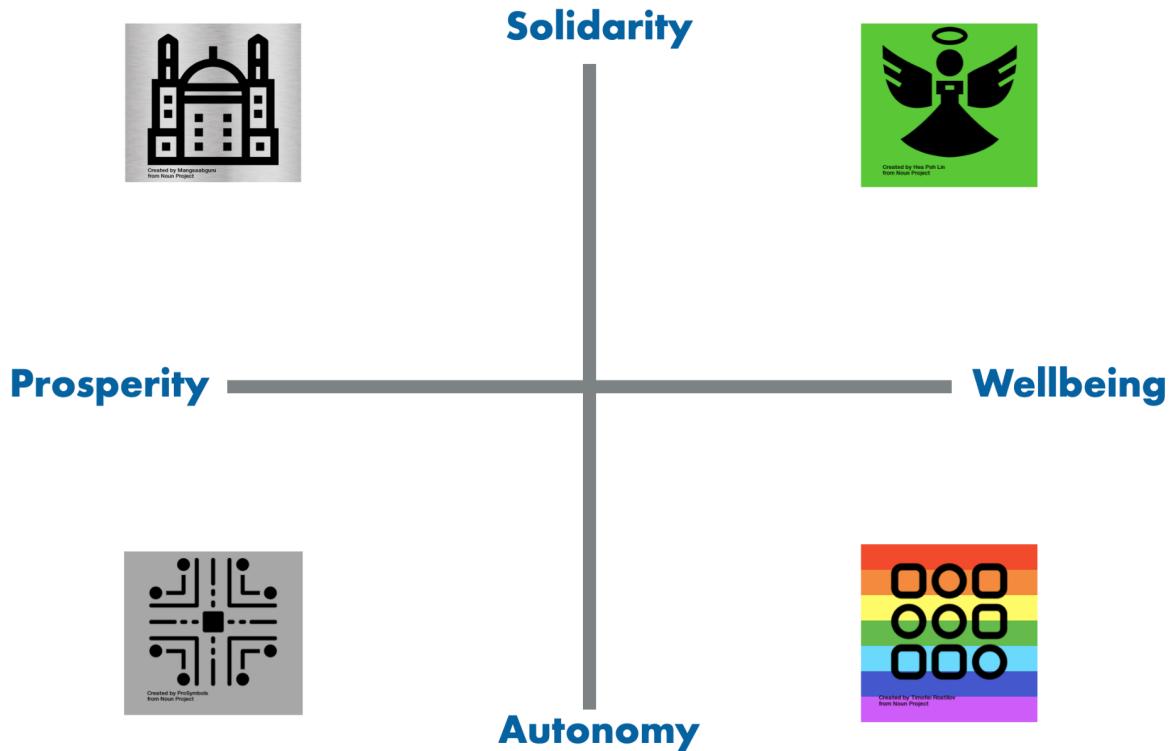
Justice is not computational, even when the courts tell us that they are deciding a case “on the balance of probabilities”, as the standard of proof is sometimes defined. The economist John Kay points out that “legal reasoning uses a narrative rather than a probabilistic approach”: we argue a case in court and seek to win by telling the more compelling or persuasive story.

Given that justice is narratively and socially defined, it is insufficient to merely “run the numbers” when considering the future of spatial justice. We need to think, not just about how Europeans define regional inequality today, but how inequality and injustice might be understood tomorrow. No one has privileged access to the future, and it is impossible to gather data and evidence from events which are yet to happen. Even when foreseeable trends do seem to exist, the experience of COVID-19 has reminded the world how easily a seemingly inevitable curve can be bent or broken by events which decisionmakers had not accounted for.

Therefore, IMAJINE uses an approach which combines narrative and systems thinking, evoking plausible visions of tomorrow in order to challenge assumptions, stretch perceptions, and shift people's mental models: putting the imagined future to work in the service of the present.

The scenarios emerge from a 2 x 2 grid in which the two alternatives represent different outcomes to two key uncertainties:

- the degree of either solidarity or autonomy in policymaking across the European Union, and
- the pursuit of either economic prosperity or well-being as a prevailing goal of European society.



The axes offer a framework that permits the user to examine how the interplay of these factors might affect territorial equality.

These uncertainties affect the business environment of DG-REGIO, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy. DG-REGIO's policy decisions affect issues of spatial justice and territorial equality across the EU.

DG-REGIO disburses regional development funds in seven-year planning cycles. These scenarios are set in 2048, after four of these cycles have taken place.

## **Using these scenarios**

These scenarios are intended for a wide range of stakeholders as the basis for discussion around territorial inequality and spatial justice. Each future can serve as a vantage point on the present, from which we may interrogate and reframe our understanding of the here and now.

Questions might include:

- How might your sector, institution, community, or region fare in this scenario? What strategies would need to be in place for you to achieve your goals?
- How might the dynamics of a pressing current issue, e.g. regional autonomy movements, Brexit, play out in each of these scenarios?
- How might inhabitants of these futures look back on the decisions and choices you are making today?
- What signals of emerging change in the present does each scenario highlight? Are there indicators in your present context which suggest we might be moving towards one of these scenarios?
- What might the near-term of each scenario look like in the context of your sector, institution, community, or region? How might contemplating this near-term affect your choices, policies, and strategies?



### Silver Citadel: *High Solidarity, Focus on Economic Prosperity*

By 2048, the EU achieves prosperity and economic equity. The Union has consolidated decision-making power over its member states, but its culture has changed, and it suffers from threats of internal stagnation and external conflict.

In this scenario, spatial justice means an equitable distribution of wealth between regions, calculated using artificial intelligence. Material inequalities recede as regions benefit from a new state capitalism that includes reindustrialization and redistributive welfare. Spatial injustice occurs when individuals are excluded from centralized decision-making.

**Story/highlights:** Years of immigration and changing attitudes to sustainability have altered European culture and society. The EU appointed its first Muslim president, a Swede of Somali ancestry, in 2035. In this Europe, it is considered strange and old-fashioned to drink wine!

European citizens worry about stagnation, and the limited channels through which they can influence the new centralized politics. Their calls for political and economic freedom accompany a rising pacifist movement troubled by wars to the east and tensions to the south of the EU's territories. In public, Europe's leaders blame peace activism on foreign agitators and next-generation information warfare. Concerns about an ageing Europe are also emerging; what is the fate of Europe when countries like China are also facing an ageing population crisis?

**Culture and Society:** Migration from the global south during the 2020s and 2030s has reshaped European values. Alcohol consumption has dwindled due to cultural, health, and environmental concerns; new recreational drugs are preferred. Europeans embrace a wider range of gender and sexual identities, and have developed new categories to reflect people's preferences.

For 20 years, the EU has taken a mission-oriented innovation approach to tackle Europe's most serious and difficult challenges, collaborating with business and civil society. Collective bargaining with the union movement achieved a "Just Transition" to a sustainable 21st-century economy. The result was a Scandinavian-style "New European Social Model", supported by artificial intelligence. This model balances equity and prosperity, but requires social conformity to function. For example, in-migration has been restricted to maintain the delicate balance of regional equality.

**Economy:** The new centralized pan-European state capitalism includes a unified EU-wide tax and welfare system. This approach distributes wealth equitably across Europe's regions. Next-generation automated "manufactories" create and distribute physical goods locally, complemented by circular economy practices.

**Geopolitics:** The EU has expanded eastwards to include Turkey, Ukraine, and Belarus. Southern expansion is blocked by the influence of China, Europe's rival in Africa. Europe's armed forces, largely automated, are in sporadic conflict on the Russian border. Europe is more isolationist and protectionist. "Fortress Europe" aggressively heads off migration from climate refugees.

**Environment:** The EU sees environmental protection as necessary to ensure growth, not an end in itself. Its model still depends on resource exploitation, despite an increased focus on sustainability. The ecological debate has been reduced to a clear and quantified set of specified criteria for sustainable growth. European Sustainability Goals have evolved to replace the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including a drive to rezone polluting industries into space and develop space-based solar platforms.

**Energy:** Europe's energy economy minimises imports and maximises exports. Fossil fuel use is reduced, and the energy sector focuses on exports from hydrogen and zero-carbon fuels.

**Technology:** Conflict to the East drives technological innovation: within Europe, innovation in manufacturing, transport, and telecommunications is racing ahead. The EU has also become a significant space power. However, Europe lags its rivals in genetic engineering and biotech, affecting medicine, agriculture, and other sectors.



## **Green Guardian:** *High Solidarity, Focus on Wellbeing*

The EU consolidates its powers to monitor and regulate resilience and sustainability on behalf of a new world order, focussed on surviving climate change and other crises.

Here, spatial justice means regions help each other adapt to change. Territorial inequalities remain, but now metropolitan areas decline while once-marginalized rural areas flourish.

**Story/highlights:** After the COVID-19 pandemic, crises and disasters continue. Large parts of the Netherlands have flooded, and Dutch refugees have spread across the EU.

European citizens vilify Western politicians of the past for putting economic growth ahead of the emerging climate catastrophe. The International Climate Court, founded in the 2030s, puts some former politicians on trial for their actions.

Europeans feel remorse for the environmental costs of their old lifestyle. Ideals of sustainability, wellbeing, and civic responsibility dominate.

China has become the preeminent global power, thanks to its leadership through the climate catastrophe. This brings increased esteem for Chinese culture and values, supplanting America's 20th-century cultural hegemony.

Europeans strive to live up to a communitarian ethos, "living as though my fulfilment depends on the fulfilment of the other". People value material security over abundance, and cherish a sense of community, on- or offline.

Europeans prize volunteering, sports, "big culture", and other activities which offer a sense of belonging. A New Olympiad showcases athletic skills, but also gives awards for achievement in the arts, philosophy, and humanitarian endeavours. Europeans send a team to the 2048 Kuala Lumpur Olympics hoping to win gold for Best Regional Reduction in Carbon Footprint.

**Culture and Society:** Europe proclaims that "a society is only as strong, healthy, and prosperous as its weakest, sickest, or poorest member", although practice doesn't always live up to the rhetoric. When the Dutch became climate refugees, it reshaped European attitudes to refugees and to climate change.

The threat of the climate crisis causes people to value human life more than ever before. In the 2020s and 2030s, solidarity became less about having values in common with your neighbours or people who shared your ancestry and more about modifying your behaviour to stop disease, minimise environmental damage, and protect fellow Europeans. This includes wearing masks during a pandemic, accepting public health restrictions, and abandoning unhealthy or environmentally damaging practices like meat-eating. Europeans favour security over privacy and accept tight surveillance and regulation. The EU strives to end inequalities based on race, gender, and age.

The new world order has agreed successors to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2020s. These incorporate new ideas of social and economic justice, emphasising harmony, conflict avoidance, and equity. Businesses and individuals receive sustainability and wellbeing ratings which determine access to contracts and opportunities for advancement. Crime includes attempts to manipulate, trade, and game these ratings to private benefit.

**Economy:** Europeans talk of “yield” and “fair share” instead of “profit” and “net worth”. Today’s regulations include restricted movement of persons, goods, and services. Meanwhile, ownership of second houses was curtailed in the 2030s. As a result, economic decisions are locally scaled and sensitive to spatial issues.

Where possible, the EU forms “bioregions”: self-reliant areas able to maintain their own food, energy, water, and community resources. A Europe-wide network of family farms delivering healthy, sustainable produce replaces factory farming. In the struggling cities, people eke out a living in farmers’ collectives and permaculture projects.

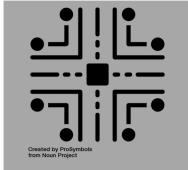
**Geopolitics:** The UN, WTO, WHO, and other institutions have been replaced. Newly risen powers, above all China, have remade the world as the Allies once did after 1945 with the United Nations, Bretton Woods, etc. These powers have set a new international consensus on migration and the management of climate refugees.

The EU has expanded into North Africa with China’s approval and manages the Mediterranean, enforcing and interpreting the “new SDGs” within the territories under its control. The Union also manages payment of “climate reparations” from regions held historically responsible for causing the climate catastrophe.

**Environment:** Dramatic sea level rises have caused people to abandon coastal communities across Europe. The Netherlands have all but ceased to exist. Pandemics spread easily in densely populated areas, so Europeans have also deserted their cities. Urban areas have become ghettos, populated by a new underclass. Rural areas are now highly valued, and people compete for territory seen as safe from the ravages of disease and climate change.

**Energy:** Bioregioning encourages local sustainable energy generation, with any surplus distributed Europe-wide for the greater good. The EU develops massive offshore wind farms and other large-scale projects to share resources and reduce costs. Fossil fuels have been entirely abandoned.

**Technology:** The EU focusses on technologies to protect against or mitigate the effects of climate change. These include artificial shoring and erosion control, sustainable green power, efficient energy storage, and biotechnology. Transport and telecommunications technologies are, however, less advanced.



## Silicon Scaffold: *High Autonomy, Focus on Prosperity*

The EU consists of digital relationships in a world shaped by transnational corporations. City-states and regions with corporate affiliations develop their own authority. The EU's limited strength resides in its ability to regulate the infrastructure on which this virtual world runs, brokering digital access. Its job is to keep the lights on and data running quickly and smoothly through its territories.

Spatial justice means the right of regions to hold on to wealth they have generated. Territorial inequalities are intensified and complicated. Rich regions get richer, poor regions get poorer, and economic life takes new forms in digital space.

**Story/highlights:** In this fragmented, digital Europe, citizenship is more like a software subscription. The lines between government and business blur, and a successful region like “Tesla-Brandenburg” thrives thanks to its world-spanning corporate connections.

In the 2020s and 2030s, richer regions grew dissatisfied with the EU’s mechanisms for redistributing resources. Many citizens felt that European society was becoming more unequal and unfair.

To address inequalities, the EU tried experiments for restructuring the economy and society in defined geographic areas. These experiments led to different regions pursuing different approaches. In time, the EU had to accommodate widely differing economic models and arrangements within its territories.

By 2048, a non-territorial economy has developed in digital space. Powerful cities and regions cut their own deals with corporations around the world. Tensions arise as regions strive to keep the wealth they have generated.

**Culture and Society:** Digital citizenship is now a set of online rights and responsibilities independent of geographical location. People’s identities are tied to the transnational combines employing them. Communications infrastructure and digital literacy affect people’s ability to thrive.

The new digital citizenship can be “remixed”: some rights and responsibilities can be split off and delegated to or shared with relatives, friends, business partners, or autonomous software entities. People can even acquire digital rights from other jurisdictions: a “pick and mix” citizenship with new winners and losers. Although “remixable citizenship” creates new entrepreneurial opportunities, it also creates new threats. Many prefer the comparative safety of a corporate “walled garden” in which their employer’s region provides public services such as utilities, healthcare, and education, integrated into employment contracts and citizenship benefits.

Workers and corporations navigate this form of citizenship to obtain the best outcomes. The “have-nots” include those who are disadvantaged by their citizenship contracts and struggle to renegotiate or opt out of unfavourable “pre-packaged” options created by corporations and territories.

**Economy:** “Economic bridges”, successors to the air bridges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the passporting systems of the finance sector, connect regions around the world. Extended transnational networks are more significant than physical locations. A biotech hub in Europe may have more in common with its corporate partner cities in China or North America than it does with one a few hundred kilometres away within the EU, especially when virtually augmented office spaces and personal implants mean that telepresence is the norm. Regions like “Tesla-Brandenburg” pay a digital tariff to the EU to fund the orbital and terrestrial infrastructure that integrates their systems into the wider European network, and to ensure speed and quality of access.

While many regions develop rewarding international relationships, others lack investment. Less successful regions return to traditional economic activities like heavy industry, resource exploitation, and intensive farming. Such efforts meet with little success.

**Geopolitics:** Europe’s external borders are more porous in a world defined by digital space. “Europeans” – people with digital European citizenship rights – are found around the world. Citizens of other digital jurisdictions can also be found within Europe’s geographical borders. People live and work in shared virtual spaces, and access to opportunities depends on the virtual communities in which one can enroll as an individual or household.

**Environment:** Europe cannot pursue a coordinated sustainability agenda, as institutions have fragmented and digital space is prioritised over the physical. Corporations find ever more innovative ways to export the problems they cause to distant parts of the world, or even into orbit. City-states try to control their local environment to ensure citizen-employees’ comfort, but there is little sense of connection to nature. Some regional renewable superpowers emerge, but this is based on economic, not environmental, benefits.

**Energy:** The energy system is a poorly coordinated patchwork. “Beyond-Net-Zero” homes, generating more energy than they consume, are popular in some regions, but there is no consistent policy or facility to redistribute excess power. The principal concern has been to create platforms that allow innovators and diverse forms of energy production to mingle in a stable energy system. One of the EU’s legacy roles is to regulate and stabilise the interfaces between these diverse energy systems.

**Technology:** Telepresence technologies, telecommunications infrastructure, and energy technologies have been improved - as have technologies to mitigate the effects of climate change. The technologies available to a region depend on its international and corporate affiliations and thus vary across Europe.



## Patchwork Rainbow: *High Autonomy, Focus on Wellbeing*

The EU brokers the last talking shop for a patchwork Europe. Spatial justice is a cultural issue: communities' right to define their own values. Territorial inequalities become more fragmented and pronounced.

The European Union strives to mediate internal conflicts and provide some unity in external relations. It offers a shared informational framework, offering a minimum of trusted information that its diverging members can accept. It holds together, barely, because its constituent parts recognise they are too small to bargain with the new superpowers.

**Story/highlights:** Different regions embrace wildly varied ideas of identity, social value, and human wellbeing. For some, this is a Europe where you can “choose your own paradise”. For others, it feels like being cast back into the Middle Ages. Flows of migration have changed and Europeans from the worst-off regions are emigrating to a thriving, Chinese-sponsored Africa.

Increasingly frequent and bitter culture wars over issues like gender and cultural identity caused European society to fragment in the 2020s. Distrust was rife, and Europeans struggled to agree on common sources of information as they navigated the rise of next-generation social media.

Since 2020, online mapping has varied according to the location of the viewer; by 2030, it had become almost impossible for the public to agree on trusted sources of information.

New forms of knowledge challenge traditional science and medicine. Some of these new forms are effective, others tend towards the irrational. In the 2020s, a series of violent protests against 5G rollout, and the election of politicians holding extreme conspiracy theory views, helped precipitate the widespread collapse of public trust in big institutions and big business. In the wake of this collapse, regions began to break away.

**Culture and Society:** Europeans express strong libertarian values. People move between communities based on their individual preferences. In some regions, gender categories have evolved far beyond those of 2021 and five-person marriages are not uncommon. In others, communities apply strict, regressive interpretations of traditional cultural or religious rules.

In some regions, climate catastrophes have triggered a growing ecological consciousness. These communities have an advanced notion of animal rights, respecting the sentience of nonhuman creatures and treating them as equals. Some rivers and mountains have been granted legal personhood, as happened in Australia and New Zealand in the early part of the century. In other places, even software agents have rights: mistreating Siri in these regions is seen as equivalent to mistreating a pet. Other regions have responded to the same crises by returning to stronger expressions and more conservative interpretations of their traditional culture.

Fragmentation has created new opportunities for people to thrive. Some regions, cities, and villages cultivate the most enlightened, progressive, and compassionate attitudes in the world.

However, the proliferation of identities and antagonistic groups across Europe has led to lower social connectedness and increased conflict.

As inequality increases, and telepresence technologies remain limited, successful regions become more appealing. This causes territorial disputes, as the most desirable communities physically grow. Some autonomous regions now have shantytowns and displaced persons' camps, populated by internal migrants from across Europe.

**Economy:** Huge spatial inequalities exist within and across regions and groups in Europe. Some regions sustain themselves through relationships with international "sponsors", their economies based on strong external affiliations to powers overseas. Others exemplify degrowth and "back-to-nature" pastoralism.

**Geopolitics:** The world perceives Europe as a backwater, although some enterprising European regions have built international relationships to sustain their chosen way of living.

At Europe's southern border, emigrants from the most impoverished regions seek to emigrate to the prosperous communities of a Chinese-dominated Africa.

**Environment:** Some regions lead the world in environmentalism and sustainability, while others show an almost complete disregard for such concerns. Europe's communities define sustainability in different ways. This creates more division among sustainability's champions, as fractious alliances emerge and dissolve when agendas align or diverge.

**Energy:** Varied local energy systems have proliferated that are hard to integrate. The energy network has developed piecemeal, as better-resourced regions sell energy to more challenged places. Some regions' foreign sponsors provide access to advanced energy generation and distribution technologies. Others "go it alone" using local resources or making deals with other regions.

**Technology:** Europe lacks up-to-date artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnologies. While technology has advanced, Europe lags its global peers. This is the least technologically advanced scenario. Some regions may have more advanced tech courtesy of their external partners, but Europe is not a place of high technology or leading innovation.

*These “scenario sketches” are preliminary outlines of the futures being explored by the IMAJINE project “Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe”.*

*Through 2021, the IMAJINE team will be exploring these futures, and their implications for strategic decisions in the present, in greater depth with a range of policymakers and stakeholders from across Europe.*

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*Disclaimer: This document reflects only the authors’ view. The Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.*

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