**SWITZERLAND**

Gian-Luca WITTWER

Europe.

What is Europe exactly? Is it simply a continent? A cluster of countries that just happen to find themselves neighbours by geographical coincidence? For me and my generation, Europe is far more than that. It represents the notions of freedom, community, security and solidarity. For 70 years the Council of Europe has dedicated itself to this idea of Europe, and has a lot to show for its efforts. From the ruins of two world wars, a society based on peace and cooperation emerged that would transform the entire continent. As European integration was driven ever further forwards, economic cooperation too evolved and borderless travel became a reality for many Europeans.

But what does the future hold in store for us Europeans? Are we heading for a problem-free golden age? Far from it. More than ever before it is important that we continue to press ahead with greater integration, in order to cope with the many tasks that Europe must face. Climate change and the extinction of species are currently in the public eye, although scientists have been sounding the alarm for a long time. It is becoming increasingly clear that international coordination and cooperation will be crucial in solving such problems. Indeed, a common approach to European environmental protection with uniform standards, rules and joint projects is clearly the best response. But it is not only in the area of natural conservation that European cooperation makes sense. Just in the last few years we have seen that gains such as democracy, a free press and freedom of movement – all of which seem natural to my generation – are in reality very fragile.

The idea of Europe is built more than anything on these shared values. Values which we Europeans increasingly have to defend. The European model of liberal democracy is under pressure both from inside and outside, potentially putting at risk the rule of law, freedom of expression, and our tolerant, pluralistic society as a whole. The race between systems is well under way, with totalitarian and anti-democratic states striving for economic prosperity at any price. To them, what happens to the environment is immaterial, while the personal freedom of citizens is in any case expendable. They have no qualms about using mass surveillance and state reprisals whenever it serves their purposes. Meanwhile, governments which up until now have been democratic are eyeing the economic success of these countries with interest.

Then there is Europe. A continent where individual freedoms are bound up inextricably with economic prosperity. One would think that the European nations would defend this system at all costs, but sadly even in Europe we are not completely immune to authoritarian tendencies. In some places the free press is subject to restrictions and political opponents' arguments are denigrated as 'fake news'. New challenges, such as the so-called refugee crisis, are reinforcing this development and exacerbating differences both within and between European nations. The call for simple answers is quick at hand, be it closing borders to protect yourself from migrants, or simply denying human-made climate change in order to avoid any responsibility. If these trends continue, in the long term the very core of what constitutes the idea of Europe could be at risk and, in the future, Europeans would no longer have the unique advantages they currently enjoy.

My vision of Europe is different, however, and many Europeans share it with me. We must work together to solve the problems of our time, leaving a continent worth living in for future generations. Europe will always be in a state of development – a permanent construction site, so to speak, which adapts to conditions as they evolve. The foundations for this process are institutions like the Council of Europe. I am convinced that any differences can be resolved through dialogue and understanding of the other side's point of view. If we stand together as Europeans, collectively we can build the house of Europe brick by brick.

So what will the future be? What will the house look like in 30 years' time? Thirty years on, much has happened. The future Europeans have learnt that everyone benefits from working closely together. Problems are approached collectively and common solutions are the norm. Major infrastructure projects are generally undertaken transnationally, focusing mainly on rail transport. Thanks to high-speed international rail connections, the travelling time between major European urban centres has been halved, bringing cities and regions closer together, even over long distances. Total freedom of movement across the whole of Europe is now a reality, so you barely notice it when you cross from one country into another. The younger generation is especially eager to visit other European countries, to experience their culture and make new friends. Studying the languages ​​of neighbouring countries is an important part of the school curriculum, and travelling around Europe after they leave school has long been the norm for many young people.

Language skills make it easier to communicate with other Europeans, first at university and later in the workplace. So graduates can opt for a scientific career and then benefit from the European research network, the world's largest and most successful of its kind. The fruits of this pan-European cooperation are plain to see in 2050. Five years before in Lausanne, 'DEMO', the first nuclear fusion reactor, joined the grid, marking a milestone on the way to emissions-free power generation. But the real highlight happened just a few months back, when the years of work of countless European scientists culminated in the first manned mission to Mars. Millions of people looked on enthusiastically as an ESA astronaut first set foot on the red planet. These impressive achievements are testament to the strength of a united Europe.

And yet, with all of the privileges and freedoms we as Europeans enjoy comes significant responsibility – they are two sides of the same coin. But people are conscious of this responsibility and are aware of the global consequences of their actions. The preservation of our achievements is also a high priority: every European is proud to act as an ambassador for European values and promotes the ideas of freedom, human rights and democracy. The future Europeans have learnt from history. Emerging from the ruins of the Second World War, people not only rebuilt their countries, but also continued to build on Europe. This process is like a long, never-ending rocky road and negotiating it requires constant effort.

In 2019, the successes of the past 70 years of working together are plain to see. If we continue along this road with ambition and commitment, my vision can become history. For the 100th anniversary of the Council of Europe, there will then be even more cause for celebration!