We Studied Hard. We Worked Hard. Now What?

CIVIL SOCIETY DEMOCRACY DEMOGRAPHY MIGRATION

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In the fourth Love Letter to Europe, Alida Vračić is asking Europe what it intends to respond to young people protesting in the street for a better future.

Dear Europe,

You seem terribly troubled these days. You worry about Russia, China and America. You worry about artificial intelligence, defence capabilities, economic decline and whether the rest of the world still takes you seriously. You worry about having too few children, too many old people and too many foreigners. You worry that your societies are changing, and then you worry that they are not changing fast enough.

Is there anything about the future that you look forward to, Europe? It is a strange predicament for a place that has achieved so much. You built institutions that allowed countries once at war to live together. You made borders less important, expanded education, improved healthcare and gave millions of people freedoms their grandparents could only dream of.

I have been thinking about this while watching young people take to the streets across Europe.

In France, your schoolchildren have been protesting about missing teachers, overcrowded classrooms and a a school system crumbling. In Italy, your students are rebelling over the cost of living, education and the uncertain prospects awaiting them after graduation. In Albania, young people are demanding greater government accountability, an end to corruption and nepotism, and some reason to believe they don't have to emigrate. In Spain, people have marchedover the increasingly extravagant ambition of being able to afford simple housing.

You seem surprised by their unhappiness, Europe. Perhaps you expected more gratitude. After all, you have given this generation quite a lot. Erasmus. Freedom of movement and cheap flights. The chance to study and work abroad. But somehow, the arrangement between generations has broken down. You used to tell them: study hard, work hard, and everything will be fine. Your young people took you seriously, Europe.

They went to university, learnt languages, collected degrees and internships. They became mobile, flexible and adaptable. They were told to regard part-time jobs as an opportunity and uncertainty as a feature of the modern world. Then, somewhere around the age when their parents were buying apartments and starting families, they discovered that a degree did not necessarily guarantee a decent job, a decent job did not necessarily provide security and a salary did not necessarily cover living costs.

According to Eurostat, in 2025, 26.9% of people aged 15–29 in the European Union lived in overcrowded homes. In parts of Europe, remaining with one's parents well into adulthood has become an economic necessity for many young adults. And yet, you continue to expect a lot from your young people. You tell them they are the future. They must work harder, adapt to technology, defend democracy, save the climate and, preferably, have more babies.

It is an impressive list of expectations for a generation struggling to afford its own independence.

I have spent years studying your demographic anxieties, and I know how seriously you take declining birth rates. There are national strategies, financial incentives, tax allowances and what more. Occasionally, someone suggests that young people have become selfish, too interested in careers, travel and personal freedom to think about starting families. Young women tend to receive a particularly generous share of this advice.

Meanwhile, young couples are trying to work out whether they can afford a second bedroom, their rent keeps rising and childcare is not guaranteed. Of course, not everyone wants children. And the freedom to make that choice is one of your better achievements. But there is a difference between choosing not to have children and being unable to afford the children one wants. And it is not only babies you expect from young people. You tell them to save the climate, Europe.

They take you seriously. They organise, protest and demand action. But when they take to the streets demanding climate action, they are told to be realistic and less naive. You list budgetary constraints, economic realities and difficult trade-offs, Europe. When they ask for decent wages, affordable housing or better schools, the conversation becomes even more complicated. You tell them that public services require patience and that housing is a matter for the market. At the same time, governments across Europe are finding increasingly large sums for defence.

Some of these choices may be necessary. But it is remarkable how often young people are asked to be patient about the future they are supposed to inherit. And while they struggle to find secure jobs and homes, you have another problem. You are running out of workers. Fortunately, there are people willing to do the work, but many of them are migrants. And Europe, you are also afraid of migrants. You debate how to keep them out, how many to admit and how quickly they should leave. You worry about their languages, their customs and their willingness to become like you.

But you would also quite like them to clean your offices, drive your buses, build your houses, harvest your food and care for your elderly. Your hospitals need nurses, your construction sites need workers, and your aging societies need people who will pay taxes. You want their labour, but remain suspicious of their presence. So here you are, Europe. You worry that your young people are not having enough children, yet you make it difficult for them to start families. You worry about not having enough workers, yet you fear the people willing to come and work. You tell the young to save the future, then explain why so little can be done about the present.

Perhaps you have become so preoccupied with the people you might need tomorrow that you have forgotten to care for the people you have today. You cannot preserve your cities by making it impossible for young people to live there. You cannot defend a way of life by refusing newcomers the possibility of belonging to it. And you cannot secure the future by asking every generation to recreate the conditions of the previous one. The young people in France, Italy, Albania and Spain are not one movement. Their grievances are not identical, and being young does not automatically make someone right. But I wonder whether you have misunderstood something about their anger.

You think they have lost faith in you, Europe. Perhaps they are angry because they believed you. They believed that education would open doors, that work would bring independence, that democracy meant being heard, that the causes they care about would be listened to, that corruption had no place in institutions and that progress meant each generation might live a little better than the one before it.

These were your promises, Europe. Not theirs. They are simply asking what happened to them. And that is the question you should be asking too. So, fear less, Europe, fear less. Less worrying about the children who have not

yet been born, and a little more attention to those already here. They need good schools, work that pays, a decent place to live, clean air, clean water and the freedom to imagine their own lives.

They may even decide to have children of their own. But that should be their choice. And if they are shouting in your streets, you might listen a bit more. After all, Europe, you taught them to believe in a better future.

With affection and impatience,

Alida

https://europesfutures.com/we-studied-hard-we-worked-hard-now-what/