

L'EUROPA DEL SENSO

*The Human Dimension in the Age
of Artificial Intelligence*

English Executive Summary

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In the industrial economy, capital was scarce.
In the knowledge economy, information was scarce.
In the AI economy, meaning will be scarce

The industrial revolution built material infrastructure
The digital revolution built informational infrastructure
The artificial intelligence revolution demands that
we build social infrastructure

*The social dividend was not born to correct the injustice
of industrial capitalism
It was born to stabilise society in the era of technological abundance*

PREFACE

by Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia President Emeritus, Pontifical Academy for Life

There is a question that returns, with growing frequency, in the encounters I have with people of every age, culture and condition: what will remain of what is human in a world increasingly governed by machines? It is not a question for philosophers or technicians. It is a question that rises from life itself — from the concern of a worker who sees his trade changing, from the anguish of a young person who does not know what future awaits him, from the loneliness of an elderly person who feels he no longer recognises the world handed down to him by his fathers.

This question lies at the heart of the essay you hold in your hands. And the fact that it is posed with seriousness, with rigour and with a sincere concern for the human person is already, in itself, a valuable contribution to the public debate of our time.

We live in an age of extraordinary transformations. Artificial intelligence is not merely a new technology: it is a force that is redrawing the boundaries between what human beings do and what machines can do in their place. It is changing not only production processes but the ways we think, decide, communicate, and relate to one another. It is concentrating enormous power in the hands of a few, while millions of people bear the consequences of choices they had no part in making.

Faced with this scenario, the most widespread temptation is to entrust ourselves entirely to the logic of technological development — as if the speed of innovation were, in itself, a guarantee of human progress. But progress is not measured in algorithms. It is measured in the quality of people's lives, in the strength of social bonds, in a community's capacity to remain united as it changes.

Fraternity as a Criterion

The Church's Social Doctrine has always maintained that the economy is at the service of man, and not man at the service of the economy. This principle, which may seem obvious when stated, becomes harder to practise every day in a world where economic value concentrates with growing speed around technological infrastructure, while human labour — in its most ordinary, most widespread, most dignified form — risks being progressively marginalised.

The theme of fraternity, which Pope Francis placed at the centre of contemporary reflection in *Fratelli Tutti*, is not a sentimental theme. It is a political and economic criterion. A society that grows by generating exclusion is not a fraternal society: it is a society that accumulates tensions, erodes trust, and weakens the bonds on which civil coexistence rests. And a society weakened in its bonds is not only a less just society — it is a society less able to face the challenges the future holds for it.

This essay moves precisely from this awareness. It is not content to describe Europe's technological and economic challenges. It asks what happens to people when these challenges are not governed with sufficient attention to the human dimension. And it asks, with courage, how to build instruments that preserve the dignity of the person amid the great transitions we are living through.

The Pact Between Generations

There is a dimension of this essay that struck me in particular, because it touches one of the concerns I consider most urgent in our time: the relationship between generations.

The decisions being made today — on which technologies to adopt, on what forms of social protection to build, on what cognitive infrastructures to develop or on which to depend — will shape the world we hand down to our children and grandchildren. Every economic choice is also a generational choice. Every failure to govern the processes now under way is a form of irresponsibility toward those who will come after us.

The Christian tradition knows this responsibility well. Over the centuries it has called it by different names: stewardship of creation, responsibility toward those who come after us, care for the common good. Today that responsibility takes on a new form, but one no less urgent: the capacity to ensure that technological transformations do not produce a rupture in the pact between generations, a concentration of advantage in the hands of a few at the expense of many, a loss of meaning for those — young or old, worker or pensioner, resident of a metropolis or of an inland area — who find themselves on the margins of change.

From Protecting the Job to Protecting the Person

One of the reflections this essay develops in greatest depth concerns the need to shift attention — culturally even before politically — from protecting the job to protecting the person.

John Paul II, in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, forcefully recalled that work is for man, not man for work. The person precedes the function he performs. Dignity does not depend on one's position in the productive system. This principle, which in the context of the twentieth century was a response to the excesses of industrial capitalism, becomes even more urgent today in the face of technological transformations that render entire professional profiles obsolete within a matter of years.

This is not about opposing change. It is about governing it. About ensuring that no one is left behind without the tools to cross the transition. About building networks of protection — not welfare-based, but enabling — that allow people to preserve their dignity and to participate actively in building the future, even when the work they once did ceases to exist. This is, in my view, one of the most urgent questions of our time. And the fact that it is addressed not with the rhetoric of inevitable change, but with concrete and verifiable proposals, is what distinguishes this work from many reflections that stop at diagnosis without indicating a direction.

A Word on Shared Responsibility

It is not my custom to intervene in the contingent disputes that animate public debate. But there are moments in history in which those who bear institutional and moral responsibilities are called to say what they see — not to take sides, but to contribute to the clarity the moment demands. The reflections contained in this essay do not belong to any of the categories into which we are accustomed to divide worldviews. They belong to an older tradition: that of those who believe the economy must serve people, and not people serve the economy. That of those who know that growth, by itself, is not enough — if it does not reach those left behind, if it does not include those who have been left on the margins of the transformations under way.

The Europe these pages imagine is not a perfect Europe. It is a possible Europe — a Europe that chooses to stand on the side of the person, of every person, regardless of what economic and technological transformations have reserved for them. It is worth thinking about. It is worth building. What I recognise in this work is the spirit that animates every authentic reflection on the common good: the conviction that power — economic, technological, institutional — is not an end but a means. And that the end is always, and cannot be otherwise, the dignity and the flourishing of every human being.

Rome, 7 July 2026

1. Purpose and Central Thesis

This essay emerges from a conviction: Europe's greatest challenge in the twenty-first century is not technological or economic alone. It is civilisational. The question is not merely how to grow the European economy — it is how to ensure that growth serves people. All people. Not only those who already possess the tools to benefit from the transformations underway.

Europe stands at a genuine historical inflection point. The two foundational assumptions on which the post-war European project was built have simultaneously collapsed: that an open, rules-based international order presided over by the United States would guarantee security and prosperity; and that Europe would never again need to manage the great questions of power and security on its own. Both assumptions have proved unfounded. Their simultaneous failure has left Europe exposed — economically, technologically, and strategically — in ways without precedent in the post-war era.

Yet the essay's central argument is not a counsel of despair. It is a call to action, grounded in a precise intellectual proposition: social sustainability is not a secondary objective of economic development, nor a corrective distributed after wealth has been produced. It is a systemic precondition of growth itself — an infrastructure, in the precise sense of the term, without which no other infrastructure can function sustainably. An Europe that grows while producing new fractures is not a stronger Europe. It is one that cultivates the conditions of its own weakening.

From this thesis flow the essay's three original propositions: the concept of the *Capitalismo del Senso* (Capitalism of Meaning); the qualification of systemic AI systems as Cognitive Services of General Interest; and the Systemic Social Dividend (DSS) as a concrete institutional architecture for redistributing value generated by the knowledge economy.

Identity as a Strategic Urgency

There is a dimension of the European crisis that most analyses treat as a secondary consequence rather than as a problem in its own right: the question of identity. The American withdrawal from the postwar international order does not only reshape Europe's security architecture. It removes an implicit ordering factor — military but also symbolic — that for decades made it possible to defer the question of what unites Europeans, substituting it with a shared Atlantic identity under American leadership. That deferral is no longer possible.

The risk is not only military exposure. Without the external American bond, the ties among Europeans could weaken, giving way to renationalisation and to an every-nation-for-itself logic that history has already shown to end badly. The parallel with the aftermath of the First World War is not merely rhetorical: a continent formally integrated but structurally unstable, lacking a shared ordering principle, is a continent at risk.

The answer cannot be only economic, infrastructural, or military. Funds, energy grids, and shared defence capacity are necessary but insufficient without a shared narrative of who Europeans are. That narrative already exists: it is the principle of the inviolable dignity of every human person — rooted in the Christian tradition that shaped European civilisation, yet requiring no specific faith to be shared, since it underlies both the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the founding Treaties of the Union. From this single principle the rest follows without needing to be imposed: dignity implies solidarity; dignity implies that the fruits of growth cannot concentrate in a few hands; dignity implies that institutions have a duty to protect it concretely, not merely proclaim it. Meaning comes first. The instruments of meaning come after.

2. The World That No Longer Exists

For nearly three quarters of a century, the international architecture built after 1945 functioned as an implicit protection for Europe. That world has ended — not in a single day, but through a series of transformations that accumulated and accelerated over the past decade.

The Fall of the Two Foundational Assumptions

The financial crisis of 2008 revealed the structural fragilities of the globalised economy. China's rise as a technological and military power shifted global balances of force. The war in Ukraine brought armed conflict back to Europe's borders and forced the continent to confront energy dependencies that had been ignored for too long. And the shift in American foreign policy made visible what some had long intuited: that the US security guarantee was not unconditional, that the Atlantic alliance could be used as a negotiating lever, that decisions with profound consequences for European economies could be taken unilaterally, ignoring the rules the United States itself had contributed to building.

This does not mean that the transatlantic alliance is dead, nor that American and European interests have become irremediably divergent. It means that the relationship between the two shores of the Atlantic must be rewritten on new foundations — more balanced, more mature, founded on mutual strength rather than asymmetric dependence. A Europe capable of defending itself, producing clean energy, competing technologically, and speaking with a single voice in international fora will be a more valuable ally, not less.

Three Structural Vulnerabilities

Beyond the external shocks, the true root of Europe's difficulty is internal. The contradiction at the heart of the European economic model is that a continent opened itself to the world without completing the market at home. From this contradiction derive three structural vulnerabilities that today weigh heavily on Europe's capacity to respond to the challenges of the moment.

- Dependence on external demand: European firms, finding insufficient scale and demand in the internal market, were pushed toward global markets — creating a degree of trade openness unmatched among major economies, with corresponding exposure to the policy decisions of others.
- Strategic dependence: In energy, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, critical minerals, and digital technologies, Europe depends significantly on external suppliers — dependencies that could have been much smaller had Europe invested earlier and better in its own productive autonomy.
- Technological lag: Since 2019, the productivity gap between Europe and the United States has widened by nine percentage points. AI compounds this: it improves with use, meaning those already behind tend to fall further behind, since early movers accumulate data, capabilities, and learning cycles that create self-reinforcing structural advantages.

And yet this moment is, paradoxically, richer in possibility than other crisis phases. There is, for the first time in many years, a broadly shared diagnosis of Europe's difficulties. Nine out of ten European citizens want a more united Europe in the face of major challenges. Three quarters want the Union to have more resources for the future. The pressure of external events has done what decades of internal debate could not: it has made the cost of immobility visible.

3. The European Model and Its Contradictions

The European project has been one of the most ambitious and successful political experiments in modern history. But its extraordinary architecture was built on two foundations that have now proved fragile: the conviction that Europe could rely on global markets to generate the growth that its internal market could not yet produce autonomously; and that the great questions of power could be delegated or indefinitely deferred.

The Incomplete Single Market

Europe's most profound economic contradiction concerns its flagship achievement. Capital markets remain fragmented along national lines. An innovative Italian or Spanish firm struggles enormously to access the risk capital it needs to grow — and often ends up seeking it in the United States, where the market is deeper, more liquid, more willing to accept risk. The result is that European savings — abundant, among the highest in the world — finance American innovation, not European innovation. Half of the capital invested through European funds flows back across the Atlantic.

Energy networks remain insufficiently connected. Services markets — representing over seventy per cent of European GDP — remain fragmented in ways with no equivalent in goods trade. European firms lack an internal market large and integrated enough to allow them to reach the scale needed to compete globally. A technology firm born in California can immediately serve three hundred million consumers with a single regulatory framework, a single business language, a single capital market. In Europe, the same firm must navigate twenty-seven different regulatory systems, seventeen languages, fragmented capital markets.

The Pragmatic Federalism Solution

The way out is neither utopian federalism — a United States of Europe built in one stroke — nor a return to nation states. It is what the essay calls pragmatic federalism: the willingness of countries that share the same urgency and the same will to act to deepen cooperation in concrete areas, building common institutions with real authority and producing results that citizens can see and measure. The example of the euro is instructive: not all countries together necessarily, but with the door open to those who will join when they see it working. The same principle can be applied to energy, defence, technology, and capital markets.

4. The Technological Challenge and Cognitive Dependence

There is a form of dependence that cannot be seen. It does not produce blackouts, does not block ports, does not stop trains. Yet it is, among all the dependencies Europe has accumulated, potentially the deepest and most difficult to reverse: cognitive dependence — dependence on the AI systems through which our institutions, businesses, and public services are beginning to interpret the world, make decisions, and deliver services to citizens.

AI as Infrastructure, Not Merely a Tool

Artificial intelligence is not simply a technology that stores or transmits data. It is a technology that interprets, classifies, generates, synthesises, translates, advises, predicts, selects. It does not merely hold information: it contributes to constructing the operational meaning of that information. When a social security agency uses algorithms to classify millions of communications, when a healthcare platform provides diagnostic suggestions, when a ministry uses a generative assistant to draft administrative acts, we are no longer dealing with a simple software application. We are dealing with a new cognitive infrastructure — an infrastructure that, if it stops or is restricted, does not merely halt a service. It halts a capacity of the state.

Physical critical infrastructure — power grids, water systems, transport networks, communications — have long been subject to specific regulation because their continuity is considered a condition of civil and democratic life. Cognitive infrastructures are becoming equally critical. But the legal and political framework to govern them as such does not yet exist.

The Extent of Institutional Cognitive Dependence

A silent but significant transformation is already underway in European public administrations. AI systems produced by large extra-European technology operators are entering administrative processes, welfare systems, healthcare platforms, and the digital infrastructure of the state — not through conscious strategic choice, but through the accumulation of individual operational decisions: software licences, cloud platform adoption, integration of generative assistants into daily workflows.

The Italian case offers concrete documentation of this dynamic. The National Strategic Pole includes AI and machine learning capabilities

enabled by extra-European technology operators. The national social security institute uses AI systems to classify and route millions of communications and has activated generative virtual assistants for the management of fundamental social benefits. Dozens of central and local administrations have purchased proprietary generative assistant licences to automate the drafting of administrative acts. Taken one by one, these developments may seem like normal technological updates. Looked at together, they tell something more significant: a growing share of the cognitive capacity of the state is migrating into proprietary, non-European environments that are difficult to replace.

The Risk No One Wants to Name

The risk is not the malevolence of technology providers. The risk is structural, not intentional. It derives from concentration: a small number of private actors, by virtue of technological scale, financial capacity, control of models, and computing power, are becoming de facto infrastructure without being treated as infrastructure of general interest. When a great power decides that a frontier technology constitutes a national strategic asset and restricts access to it, it can do so in hours, by sovereign decision, without notice and without appeal. If that day European administrative, healthcare, social security, or judicial systems depend on that technology, what would happen to the services that use it? What alternative plans would European states have? How quickly could they be activated? These are not rhetorical questions. They are questions to which European public administrations do not yet have a satisfactory answer.

5. The Human Dimension of Development

There is a question that the most rigorous economic analyses, the most accurate policy documents, and the most ambitious investment plans systematically fail to pose. Not because it is irrelevant — it is, if anything, the most relevant of all. But because it is uncomfortable, because it does not lend itself easily to quantification, because it introduces into economic reasoning a variable that conventional economics struggles to handle with its own tools. The question is: growth for whom?

It is not an ideological question. It does not belong to the right or the left. It is a pragmatic question, of systemic stability and democratic resilience. Because the history of the last thirty years — in Europe as elsewhere — has demonstrated with growing evidence that economic

growth concentrated in few sectors, few geographies, and few segments of the population does not produce cohesion. It produces fractures. And fractures, over time, become political instability, distrust in institutions, and a crisis of democratic legitimacy that is today perhaps the deepest threat to the European project — deeper than American tariffs, deeper than the technological lag, deeper than institutional fragmentation.

Social Sustainability as Systemic Infrastructure

The essay proposes a precise concept: social sustainability is the capacity of a system to maintain internal cohesion and trust, ensuring a balanced distribution of the economic, informational, and relational benefits necessary to the continuity of collective life. A socially sustainable society is not necessarily an equal society. It is one in which inequalities do not crystallise into permanent exclusions, in which opportunities do not depend entirely on the fortune of birth, in which those who fall can rise again.

In this sense, social sustainability is not a policy among many. It is the condition that makes all other policies possible — and for this reason a genuine security infrastructure: not military, not energy-related, not digital, but equally essential. The infrastructure that holds a society together while the world around it changes. A society in which large sections of the population are excluded from the benefits of economic development destroys the human capital on which growth itself depends. It produces distributional conflicts that paralyse the decision-making capacity of institutions. It feeds that diffuse distrust that makes necessary reforms impossible. And it erodes the base of democratic consensus without which no economic policy can be sustained over time.

The Knowledge Economy and the Distribution Problem

The knowledge economy has a characteristic that distinguishes it profoundly from previous economies: its returns tend to concentrate. Digital technologies and AI produce network effects, economies of scale, and first-mover advantages that structurally favour concentration — of wealth, market power, and innovation capacity — in a few actors, in a few places, in a few countries.

The value generated by AI and the digital economy does not appear from nowhere. It emerges from data, relationships, work, languages, cultures, and the collective knowledge of millions of people. Every search performed on a search engine, every transaction completed on a

digital platform, every text written and published online contributes to training the models that generate value on a global scale. European citizens are unwitting producers of a wealth that is captured elsewhere — by private actors operating on market logic — without anything returning structurally to the community that made that production possible. This dynamic is not different, in its structure, from those history has already known: the extraction of natural resources from territories that did not benefit from them, the exploitation of labour without adequate remuneration. It is simply more invisible, more difficult to name with existing legal and economic concepts.

The Capitalism of Meaning

Contemporary capitalism is extraordinarily effective at producing economic value, but increasingly incapable of producing meaning — that sense of belonging, utility, dignity, and shared project that human beings seek not only in consumption but in work, in relationships, in participation in collective life. This incapacity is not merely a moral or philosophical problem. It is an economic problem, because people who find no meaning in their work and community are less productive, less innovative, less disposed to invest in their own and their collective future.

The Capitalism of Meaning is not an alternative system to the market. It is a market that incorporates, in its rules and incentives, the production of human value as well as economic value — a market in which firms that generate social cohesion, invest in communities, distribute the fruits of their activity more equitably, and take responsibility for the negative externalities they produce are recognised, valued, and supported by an institutional framework that measures and remunerates their systemic contribution. This idea is not utopian. It is emerging, in various forms, in many of the most advanced reflections on contemporary economics — from Mariana Mazzucato's mission economy to the World Economic Forum's stakeholder economy, from conscious capitalism to proposals for reforming corporate governance circulating in advanced academic and institutional fora.

6. The Systemic Social Dividend (DSS)

The most concrete and original proposal the essay advances is the Systemic Social Dividend (Dividendo Sociale Sistemico — DSS). The core idea is straightforward: if the value generated by the knowledge economy and by artificial intelligence is nourished by collective contribution — the data, relationships, knowledge, and work of millions of people — then a portion of that value must return to the community that made it possible.

Not as charity, not as a subsidy, not as residual welfare — but as structural recognition of a real contribution: as a dividend, precisely, that belongs to those who participated in the production of that wealth.

The DSS is not a universal basic income. It is not a traditional redistribution measure. It is something more precise and more ambitious: a governance instrument for the knowledge economy that recognises the collective character of digital value production and creates institutional mechanisms to ensure that the community benefits. Crucially, it is not the Social Income (Reddito di Cittadinanza) under another name — and the distinction is fundamental, both technically and politically. The Social Income promised a predefined amount financed from the ordinary budget, permanently exposed to the accusation of fiscal unsustainability. The DSS does not promise a figure: it promises a mechanism. If the Fund grows, the dividend grows. If the Fund is more limited in the initial phase, the dividend is more limited. Sustainability is built into the architecture, not entrusted to the goodwill of future governments.

The Mechanism in Three Stages

The conceptual framework of the DSS is that of social sustainability — analogous, in its structure, to environmental sustainability. Just as the ETS (Emissions Trading System) imposes on firms that exceed emission limits the obligation to purchase certificates proportional to the damage produced, Social Impact Certificates (Titoli di Impatto Sociale) perform the same function in the social field: they certify the negative social externalities produced by an organisation and generate a contribution obligation to a National Fund.

The mechanism articulates in three sequential elements. Social Impact Certificates measure the negative social externalities produced by organisations: who damages more contributes more, who damages less contributes less, in a system of automatic self-rebalancing analogous to the carbon market. A National Fund collects and manages these contributions according to publicly defined governance rules established by law. The dividend distributes periodically the Fund's returns to all residents, modulated territorially (an Italian example) on the basis of the Social and Material Vulnerability Index (ISVM) — already developed by ISTAT and already used by the Italian state to allocate public funds among municipalities. The conditioning falls on the territory, not the individual: no individual stigma, no means testing. And it self-regulates: when the index improves because the dividend has produced real effects, the increased allocation reduces automatically. The territorial modularity of the dividend is not a feature specific to the Italian context: it is a principle replicable at Euro-

pean scale. At community level, analogous instruments already exist. The EU Regional Social Progress Index — developed by the European Commission's DG Regional Policy and the Joint Research Centre, now in its 2024 updated edition — measures social progress across all EU regions and is already used to orient cohesion policy funding. A European version of the SSD could draw on these indices to modulate the distribution of the dividend across Member States' regions, ensuring that resources reach the most vulnerable territories with greater intensity — regardless of national boundaries.

From Security of the Post to Security of the Person

There is a dimension of the DSS that must be named explicitly, because it constitutes its deepest logic and distinguishes it from any form of traditional welfare. The DSS was not born to protect the jobs that exist today — a promise no system can keep for long in the age of AI without paying unsustainable economic and social costs. It was born to protect the people who perform those jobs. This is a shift of axis: from security of the post to security of the person. Not the freezing of the present, but the construction of the conditions under which each person can navigate the transformations underway without being overwhelmed — maintaining dignity, competences, and the capacity to participate actively in the future. In this sense, the dividend is not a payment: it is an enabling.

The Documented Scale of the Problem

The negative social externalities that the Certificates must certify are not abstract. Amazon has announced the objective of avoiding 600,000 hires in the United States by 2033 through automation. In 2024–2025, the major global technology companies — Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, Google, Intel — eliminated over 257,000 positions, of which approximately 37,000 are directly attributable to the adoption of automation and AI. The most emblematic case is Klarna, which replaced 700 customer service employees with an AI system, announcing \$40 million in additional profits in 2024 — only to rehire human staff a year later due to deteriorating service quality. The pattern is precise: profits increase, workers diminish, the social costs of the transition fall on the community. It is precisely this asymmetry that the DSS intends to correct.

The Geopolitical Dimension

The DSS has a geopolitical dimension that deserves explicit recognition. In June 2026, from opposite political directions, the same question found simultaneous response in the United States: who captures

the value produced by artificial intelligence? From one side, public participation in the capital of major AI laboratories was proposed to distribute the proceeds to Americans as a dividend. From the other, an extraordinary levy on AI laboratories to finance a US sovereign fund was suggested. Different answers, but to the same question — one that, if answered by Americans before Europeans, risks leaving Europe in the worst possible position: paying the social costs of transformation without collecting the economic fruits, because the major platforms are headquartered elsewhere and concentrate there the value they extract from the entire world. The DSS is the structured answer to this challenge — not a political improvisation, but an institutional architecture with governance, verifiable parameters, and democratic guarantees that Italy can propose in European fora as a model.

7. The Operational Path: Three Axes

The essay translates its conceptual framework into a concrete operational path articulated on three principal axes. These are not independent proposals: they form a coherent architecture in which each axis presupposes and reinforces the others.

Axis One: Security as Systemic Cohesion

When security is discussed in European public debate, the reference is almost always to external security — military defence, border protection, deterrence. These are real and urgent dimensions. But there is an equally essential form of security that is systematically undervalued in strategic analyses: the internal security of a society, understood as its capacity to maintain cohesion, trust, and democratic stability in the face of the transformations it undergoes.

The IMF estimates that four jobs in ten worldwide are already today at risk of automation. In advanced countries the share rises to six in ten. The World Economic Forum projects that by 2030, eight hundred million global jobs will undergo significant transformations due to automation. The jobs eliminated concentrate in industrial peripheries and interior areas; those created concentrate in technological metropolises. In Italy, 13.3 million citizens live in interior areas where automation eliminates work without creating new work. The purchasing power of wages has decreased by four and a half per cent in the last decade — against the European average trend. Working, for many, is no longer enough to guarantee a dignified life. These are the material conditions that feed distrust, political anger, and rejection of elites and institutions in many European democracies.

Axis Two: Cognitive Sovereignty

The cognitive sovereignty axis has three layers of intervention that must be pursued simultaneously. The first is legal: AI systems that affect essential public functions must be qualified as Cognitive Services of General Interest — a normative category imposing obligations of operational continuity, data portability, interoperability, independent audits, and transition plans. This category does not yet exist in European law in the complete form proposed, but fits coherently within the path already underway: the Digital Markets Act disciplines digital gatekeepers, the AI Act — fully in force for high-risk systems since February 2026 — regulates high-risk systems. The next step is to qualify as public-interest infrastructure those AI systems that have become indispensable for public functions.

The second intervention is industrial: building at European level an AI ecosystem that offers credible alternatives for critical public functions — European language models trained on the continent's languages and cultures, open source platforms that public administrations can adopt without creating new proprietary dependencies, shared computing infrastructure that allows the necessary scale without replicating the same investments twenty-seven times. The third intervention is institutional: a coordinated European governance of cognitive sovereignty that produces common standards, registers of systemic operators, uniform transparency obligations, and democratic supervision mechanisms functioning at the scale of the digital single market.

There is a logical connection between cognitive sovereignty and the DSS that must be made explicit. The firms that have already won public procurement contracts and are already inside the state's infrastructure cannot simply leave. Once qualified as providers of Cognitive Services of General Interest, the cost of evading the obligations that derive from this qualification becomes prohibitive: sanctions for whoever unilaterally interrupts a service qualified as essential are proportional to global turnover, on the model already envisaged by the European AI Act — up to seven per cent of worldwide revenue. No platform can afford to pay that price. An enterprise that cannot afford to exit the European public ecosystem cannot afford to refuse its rules either — including the restitution of a portion of the value it extracts from it.

Axis Three: The Technical Work Still to Be Done

Translating the DSS into operational reality requires solving a precise technical problem: constructing the measurement parameter for social externalities. In the environmental field there exists a universal physical

indicator — the tonne of CO₂ — measurable objectively and comparable across different sectors. In the social field an equivalent with the same properties does not yet exist. The most promising candidate is a composite index based on the net labour-automation substitution rate — a concept developed at MIT and Boston University by economists Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo, published in leading international journals. What is required is applying it at firm level rather than at the level of aggregate national economies.

The principal obstacle is not a lack of raw data — which in Italy exist at INPS and ISTAT — but the absence of a shared method for verifying that the substitution of human resources is effectively attributable to AI-driven automation. No country has yet resolved this problem. Whoever defines this indicator first acquires the ability to orient the European standard, positioning itself as the leading country on one of the most relevant regulatory nodes of the next decade. The operational proposal for Italy: establish a mixed technical commission — with an institutional core formed by ISTAT, INPS, and the Bank of Italy, open to the participation of social partners and independent research centres — tasked with defining the parameter and proposing its adoption in European fora. The political demand exists. The structured proposal exists. The moment is now, before others occupy the space.

8. International Benchmark: What Europe Can Take and What It Must Invent

Every serious proposal for transformation must confront the reality of those who have already attempted it. Four international experiences merit attention — not to copy, but to learn: what has worked and why, what has not and why, and what of all this is applicable — with the necessary adaptations — to the European context.

Singapore: AI Governance as State Policy

Singapore offers a systematic approach to AI governance: targeted policies using public procurement as a lever to open new markets, lower adoption costs, and build diffuse competences. The state as primary commissioner of innovation — not as direct manager, but as a catalyst orienting the market toward the applications of greatest collective utility. What Europe cannot take is Singapore's centralised governance structure or its six-million-person scale. It also cannot take Singapore's silence on distribution: the question of who benefits from technological transformation cannot be left to the market in a continent with Europe's territorial and social fractures.

South Korea: Technology Transition and Human Capital

South Korea demonstrates that massive and continuous investment in human capital — universal high-quality education, continuous worker requalification, diffuse access to technological competences — can be the principal mechanism through which the benefits of growth are distributed. Not through passive subsidies, but by building the capacities that allow people to participate actively in transformation rather than suffer it. What Europe cannot take is the development model guided by the state through large national industrial conglomerates, difficult to reconcile with European values of competition, transparency, and economic pluralism.

Canada: Distributing Value in Knowledge Economies

The experience of Alberta's sovereign fund fed by petroleum revenue demonstrates that it is possible to build institutional mechanisms that transform extractive wealth into long-term collective investment — with a degree of continuity and independence from annual political discretion that traditional welfare systems rarely achieve. The logic is analogous to that of the DSS National Fund: not current redistribution of income, but capitalisation of a portion of the value extracted from collective resources to finance investments that produce lasting benefits. What Europe cannot take is Canada's position as a single country negotiating bilaterally with the United States: the European Union, as a union of twenty-seven countries, has an enormously superior negotiating mass.

Denmark: From Security of the Post to Security of the Person

The flexicurity model offers perhaps the most mature example of how an advanced society can manage labour market transformations without sacrificing either economic competitiveness or social cohesion. At its core is a conceptual shift identical to the one the DSS intends to operate at European scale: Denmark has chosen to move the axis of social protection from the job to the person. Firms can hire and dismiss with relative ease; workers who lose their jobs receive economic protection of up to eighty per cent of previous salary for two years and guaranteed access to requalification pathways; the state invests approximately two per cent of GDP annually in active labour market policies.

The caveats are equally important. Denmark is a country of five and a half million inhabitants, with institutional trust built over centuries, a degree of cultural homogeneity that is as much cause as effect of the

model, and a capacity for public spending that reflects one of the highest tax burdens in the world. None of these elements is quickly replicable in larger, more heterogeneous contexts. It is precisely for this reason that the DSS envisages mechanisms of systematic verification, annual parliamentary reporting, and publicly verifiable impact measurement parameters — to build progressively that institutional trust without which no social protection system can truly function.

What Europe Must Invent for Itself

The comparison with these four experiences converges toward a conclusion worth formulating with clarity: Europe does not lack models for inspiration. It lacks the capacity to synthesise them into a coherent proposal adequate to its scale, compatible with its institutional structure, and capable of responding simultaneously to its specific challenges.

None of the models examined addresses the problem Europe must confront in its full integrated complexity: how to govern a technological transition of historical proportions, in an economic area of five hundred million people with twenty-seven different political systems, while simultaneously maintaining the social cohesion necessary to sustain that transition democratically, the cognitive sovereignty necessary not to lose control of essential public functions, and the economic competitiveness necessary not to cede ground definitively to the other major global technological powers. This combination of challenges has no historical precedent. No country has faced it before. No model can be imported. Europe must invent its own answer — and has, to do so, resources no one else possesses in the same measure: the world's largest free trade area; a tradition of democratic regulation of the economy that has already demonstrated the capacity to set global standards; an extraordinary cultural and linguistic heritage that constitutes, in the age of AI, a unique competitive resource; and a tradition of social market economy that is all the more precious as the rest of the world seems to have forgotten it.

9. A Manifesto for the Europe We Want

This essay has been written in the conviction that Europe's crisis — its deepest since the founding — is not a crisis of the project itself, but of the model. And that a different model is possible: more ambitious, more coherent, more attentive to the people who make it possible every day.

We have said that Europe's structural vulnerabilities are not externally imposed — they are the product of missing choices, deferred reforms, contradictions left unresolved in the hope that time and growth would absorb them. We have said that the technological challenge is not only a problem of economic competitiveness: it is a problem of democratic sovereignty. We have said that the human dimension of development is a systemic precondition of growth itself, not a secondary objective. And we have said that concrete instruments exist to address these challenges.

But there is something this essay has not said, and that the conclusion must say — not because it has been forgotten, but because it deserves to be named explicitly, without the mediations of technical language or economic analysis. Europe is not merely a market. It is not merely an institution. It is not merely a set of treaties and rules. It is a civilisation — one of the richest, most complex, and most contradictory that history has produced. A civilisation that has learned, at heavy cost, that freedom is not a given, that peace is not a natural state, that human dignity does not defend itself.

It is this memory — painful, complex, irreducible to simple narratives — that gives the European project its deepest meaning. It is not a project of economic efficiency, though it produces economic efficiency. It is not a project of collective security, though it guarantees collective security. It is a project of civilisation — the attempt, unique in history, to build a political order founded on the dignity of the person, solidarity among peoples, and the rejection of violence as a means of resolving conflicts.

There is a question that runs through this essay from first page to last. It is the question from which everything begins and to which everything returns: growth for whom? It is not a question against growth. It is a question about growth — its meaning, its direction, the conditions that make it sustainable over time. Because growth that produces exclusion is not merely unjust: it is self-destructive. Because innovation that destroys the social fabric on which it rests is not efficient: it is short-sighted. Because a Europe that becomes richer while leaving millions of citizens behind does not become stronger: it becomes more fragile.

The Europe this essay proposes is not a perfect Europe. It is a possible Europe — stronger, because more human. A Europe that has chosen to face its contradictions instead of denying them, to invest in its people instead of abandoning them, to build common institutions instead of retreating into national sovereignties that alone are no longer enough. The Europe of Meaning is not a destination. It is the journey through which a community of peoples can transform its vulnerability into a new season of cohesion and of future.

10. Key Concepts

The following concepts are developed in the essay and constitute the original intellectual contribution of the Human Economic Forum to the European debate.

Capitalism of Meaning (Capitalismo del Senso) — A market framework that incorporates, in its rules and incentives, the production of human value alongside economic value — recognising and remunerating firms that generate social cohesion, invest in communities, and distribute value equitably. Not an alternative to the market, but a market that measures what the market has so far left unmeasured.

Cognitive Sovereignty — The capacity of public institutions to govern their essential functions without structural dependence on extra-European actors. A precondition for democratic sovereignty in the AI era: a democracy that does not control the tools through which it understands its own data and organises its own decisions is an assisted democracy.

Cognitive Services of General Interest — A proposed legal category for AI systems that have become indispensable for essential public functions — social security, healthcare, justice, education, administration — imposing obligations of operational continuity, data portability, interoperability, independent audits, and democratic supervision. The legal instrument that makes cognitive sovereignty enforceable.

Systemic Social Dividend (DSS) — An institutional architecture that returns to the community a portion of the value generated by the knowledge economy, via Social Impact Certificates, a National Fund, and a territorial dividend modulated on the Social and Material Vulnerability Index. Not a universal basic income, not the Social Income under another name: a governance instrument whose sustainability is built into the mechanism, not entrusted to the goodwill of future governments.

Social Impact Certificates (Titoli di Impatto Sociale) — Instruments analogous to carbon credits in the European ETS: certifying the negative social externalities produced by organisations — above all the net substitution of labour with automation — and generating contribution obligations proportional to the damage produced. Who damages more, contributes more. Who damages less, contributes less.

Social Sustainability — The capacity of a system to maintain internal cohesion and trust, ensuring balanced distribution of the economic,

informational, and relational benefits necessary to collective life. Understood not as a secondary objective but as a systemic infrastructure — the condition that makes all other policies possible, and without which no economic model can sustain itself democratically over time.

Pragmatic Federalism — An integration model based not on uniform treaty reform requiring unanimity among twenty-seven but on coalitions of willing countries deepening cooperation in concrete areas, producing results that attract others to join progressively. The opposite of both utopian federalism and nationalist fragmentation.

About the Author

Vincenzo Maria Naschi (Rome, 1965) is an entrepreneur, engineer, and cultural promoter. He is President and co-founder of the Human Economic Forum (HEF), an international dialogue platform uniting representatives of institutions, academia, business, and civil society to promote new models of development founded on the centrality of the person and on social sustainability. Holding a degree in Engineering and an MBA from SDA Bocconi, he has developed managerial experience in national and multinational firms before dedicating himself to entrepreneurship and to the enhancement of historical and cultural heritage. In Umbria, he promoted the recovery and regeneration of an ancient medieval village, transforming it into a place of hospitality, culture, and social innovation. He is the author of *La Grammatica del Futuro* and *Nel Cuore degli Uomini*.

About the Human Economic Forum

The Human Economic Forum (HEF) was founded on the conviction that the great economic and technological transformations of our time cannot be governed — nor truly understood — without placing the human dimension at the centre. Not as a sentimental corrective to otherwise cold and rational reasoning, but as a structural variable: as an element without which economic models do not function, institutional reforms do not hold, and technological innovations produce more harm than benefit. The III HEF Forum is scheduled for 9 December 2026, Sala della Regina, Italian Parliament, Rome.

