

# **Intergenerational Booklet on democratic transition**

**Voices of Freedom: A collection  
of testimonials from people  
who lived through democratic  
transitions**



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## **Project**

Ties of Freedom – Intergenerational exchange as a strategy to promote democratic values

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*We would like to warmly acknowledge the eighty-four individuals who generously shared their personal histories during the seven storytelling sessions of the Ties of Freedom project. Although this booklet can only feature a selection of these narratives, our sincere gratitude extends to every participant, as your collective voices have been the essential foundation of this educational resource.*

*We are profoundly grateful for your courage in revisiting often difficult and deeply personal memories—many of which were shared here for the first time—to ensure that the values of freedom, justice, and human rights are passed on to the next generation. By breaking years of silence and engaging in this intergenerational dialogue, you have provided younger people with an invaluable window into the past and a clear understanding of why democracy was achieved and why it must be actively defended.*



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# Abbreviations list

GPRF: Provisional Government of the French Republic

SFIO: French Section of the Workers' International

MRP: Popular Republican Movement

PIDE: French Communist Party

DGS: Directorate-General for Security

MFA: Armed Forces Movements

PREC: Ongoing Revolutionary Process

FSN: National Salvation Front

ETA: Basque Country and Freedom

PSOE: Spanish Socialist Workers' Party

PCE: Communist Party of Spain



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# INTRODUCTION

## Ties of Freedom: Project description and aims

This Intergenerational Booklet has been created within the framework of the Ties of Freedom project, funded by the European Union. The project responds to recent developments in the international political context, which reveal that democracy is under increasing pressure in many parts of the world.

Challenges originating both outside the European Union and within its Member States demonstrate that the EU is not immune to trends that weaken democratic systems. In this context, Ties of Freedom seeks to draw on collective and individual memory to raise awareness of the need for ongoing commitment to the protection of the EU's core values. To this end, the project adopts an explicitly intergenerational approach, fostering dialogue between different generations.

The content of this booklet is based on contributions from individuals who experienced democratic transitions firsthand and who voluntarily participated in storytelling sessions. Through sharing their personal experiences, these participants have helped younger generations gain a deeper understanding of what life was like before the establishment of democratic systems. Their testimonies offer valuable insights into the social, political and personal realities of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Ties of Freedom focuses on processes of transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, highlighting lessons that remain relevant today. By preserving and sharing these stories, the project aims to encourage reflection on how democracy was achieved and why it must be actively defended. In doing so, the booklet contributes to strengthening awareness of key European values such as democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Through a collaborative and intergenerational approach, this project promotes European memory as a living and shared responsibility, bringing together the voices of different generations to defend and protect the democratic foundations of our future.

# THE INTERGENERATIONAL BOOKLET



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## Collection of testimonies

The Intergenerational Booklet would not have been possible without the contribution of the people who agreed to participate and share their stories during the storytelling sessions. Although this booklet includes only some of their testimonies, all participants have contributed to the creation of this educational resource.

A total of eighty-four people took part in the seven storytelling sessions carried out within the project, 70% of whom were women. At the time of sharing their testimonies, all participants were residing in one of the partner countries involved in the project, although some had different countries of origin. This diversity provided valuable insights into transitional processes and life experiences related to authoritarian regimes beyond those of the participating European countries, bringing these perspectives together with testimonies connected to migration journeys.

Some of the stories shared and presented in this document relate to particularly difficult moments in the lives of the participants. For this reason, the sessions were designed to create spaces characterised by trust and respect. As conversations developed, participants gradually began to recount their own experiences, allowing discussions to unfold in a natural and spontaneous manner. These moments were often deeply moving for both participants and facilitators, and particular care was taken throughout the sessions to maintain a safe and supportive environment. Whenever discussions became emotionally intense, breaks were taken so that participants could pause if they felt the need to do so.

The workshops functioned not only as spaces of remembrance, but also as spaces of recognition. In some contexts, the silence that settled in society during and after periods of politically motivated violence continues to shape how individuals and communities relate to their past. Within this framework, some participants found it difficult to structure or articulate their testimonies, as they had never previously shared their experiences with an audience. The activities therefore generated a range of responses.



Some participants expressed a clear willingness to share their experiences, motivated by the desire to convey a message to younger generations. Others experienced discomfort when revisiting certain memories, sometimes choosing to share their experiences only within smaller groups or preferring to participate primarily as listeners.

For this reason, we would like to acknowledge the effort of all those who took part and express our sincere appreciation for their participation.

## How to use it

This booklet is designed primarily for secondary school students, as well as educators and other individuals interested in the topic of democratic transitions. It can be used as an introductory resource to explore historical experiences of transition to democracy and to encourage reflection on the values that sustain democratic societies. The testimonies collected in this publication offer opportunities to work on themes such as empathy, recognition, memory, and the defence of human rights, supporting discussions about how democratic values are experienced and transmitted across generations.

The booklet can also serve as a complementary resource to the sessions included in the *Democratic Talks Toolkit* developed within the Ties of Freedom project. Individual testimonies may be used as stimulus material within the different activities proposed in those modules, helping to ground discussions in real-life experiences. While some testimonies may also be suitable for younger audiences, it is recommended that educators carefully select the excerpts to be used, as certain stories address difficult experiences that may require contextualisation when working with children.

# TRANSITION PROCESSES



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## Transition process

A **transition process** refers to the set of political, social and institutional transformations through which a society moves from an authoritarian or dictatorial regime to a democratic system. These processes are rarely immediate or linear; instead, they unfold **over time** and are shaped by tensions, negotiations, conflicts and continuities with the previous regime. A transition involves not only changes in political structures, but also a **redefinition of rights, freedoms and forms of political participation**.

Such processes involve a **wide range of actors**, including social movements, trade unions, political parties, economic elites and state institutions, as well as the influence of the international context. **Social pressure and popular demands** often play a decisive role in forcing political change, although the extent to which the transition represents a rupture with, or a continuity of, the former regime varies from country to country. In some cases, transitions occur abruptly following the collapse of the authoritarian system, while in others they are shaped by gradual and negotiated reforms.

Transitions also raise **fundamental challenges**, particularly regarding how societies address the legacy of repression, the persistence or removal of authoritarian structures, and the recognition of victims. For this reason, the processes exposed in the following pages illustrate that there is **no single model** of transition. Instead, each case reflects specific historical circumstances, social dynamics and political balances of power.



# France

To understand France's democratic transition, it is necessary to go back to the context of the Second World War and the **collapse of the Vichy regime**. By 1943, the regime had begun to weaken as the internal Resistance gained strength, coordinated through the **National Council of the Resistance**. The advance of Allied forces after the Normandy landings in the summer of 1944 accelerated the collapse of the "French State". The liberation of Paris in August 1944 symbolised the effective end of the Vichy regime in metropolitan France.

In this context, **Charles de Gaulle**, leader of Free France, became a central figure in the **restoration of republican institutions**. He became head of the Provisional Government of the French Republic (Gouvernement provisoire de la République française, GPRF), which settled in Paris in August 1944. This marked the beginning of the democratic transition, during which France had to restore republican legality, address responsibilities from the past and rebuild stable democratic institutions. This **transition** mainly took place **between 1944 and 1946** and culminated in the establishment of the Fourth Republic.

One of the first challenges of this transition was restoring the legal and political principles of the Republic. **The Ordinance of 9 August 1944** played an important role in this process. It declared the acts adopted by the Vichy regime constitutionally invalid and reaffirmed the core principles of the French Republic. Through this decision, the Provisional Government clearly **broke with the authoritarian past** and laid the foundations for the return to democratic government. At the same time, France faced the question of how to deal with those who had collaborated with the Nazi occupiers.

A process known as the **épuration (purge)** was introduced to sanction those responsible for collaboration, both politically and judicially. This process took different forms. Immediately after the Liberation, acts of spontaneous retaliation occurred in what has often been called the "**wild purge**". Later, a more organised legal process was carried out by the state through **trials and judicial sanctions**. Although controversial, these measures contributed to restoring the moral and political legitimacy of the Republic after years of occupation and authoritarian rule.



Once republican legality had been re-established, the Provisional Government began **rebuilding democratic institutions**. In October 1945, French citizens were asked in a **referendum** to reject the institutions of the Third Republic and to elect a Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting a new constitution. The result showed a strong desire to renew the political system. The **Constitutional Law of 2 November 1945** provisionally organised public powers while the new constitution was being prepared. Debates during this period were intense, particularly about the **balance of power between institutions**, the role of Parliament and the place of the executive. A first draft constitution was rejected by referendum in May 1946, showing how complex it was to reach agreement on the design of the new political system. A second constitutional text was adopted on 27 October 1946, establishing the **Fourth Republic** and creating a parliamentary system in which the legislature had significant authority. The adoption of this constitution marked the institutional **completion of the democratic transition** initiated after the Liberation.

The **democratic transition** was not limited to rebuilding political institutions. It was also accompanied by **important social reforms**, many of them inspired by the programme of the National Council of the Resistance. Among the most significant measures were the creation of a national social security system, the nationalisation of key sectors such as energy, transport and banking, and the strengthening of workers' rights. Politically, the post-war period was characterised by **strong ideological diversity**. Several political parties that had played an important role in the Resistance became central actors in the new political system, including the French Communist Party, the SFIO (socialists) and the MRP (Christian democrats). However, this pluralism developed in a rapidly changing international context. The beginning of the Cold War gradually influenced political dynamics in France and introduced new tensions into the political system.

While the democratic transition mainly focused on restoring institutions and republican legality within France, it is important to note that the **French experience of authoritarian rule differed from that of several other European countries** such as Romania or Spain. In France, the Vichy regime emerged in the specific context of military defeat and foreign occupation during the Second World War. Moreover, republican legitimacy never completely disappeared, as it continued to exist in exile through the Free French movement. For this reason, the post-war transition can be understood **less as a rupture** with a long-standing authoritarian system and **more as a process of restoring republican institutions** after an exceptional historical moment.

Nevertheless, this experience reaffirmed a broader understanding of democracy based on the **defence of fundamental rights**.

Throughout the twentieth century, **France welcomed political exiles** fleeing dictatorships and repressive regimes. In the 1930s, it became a **refuge** for people escaping fascist regimes in Europe, including Italian anti-fascists and German Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. After the Spanish Civil War in 1939, France received a large number of refugees from Francoist Spain, many of whom were initially held in difficult conditions in internment camps in southern France before gradually integrating into French society. During the Cold War, France continued this tradition by **offering asylum** to dissidents from the Eastern Bloc, including writers, artists and political activists. In later decades, the country also welcomed people fleeing military dictatorships in Latin America and authoritarian regimes in other parts of the world.

This **tradition of asylum** has not only been humanitarian but also political and symbolic. By offering protection to individuals deprived of fundamental freedoms, France has sought to reaffirm its **commitment to democratic values** such as freedom of expression, political pluralism and respect for human rights. The right to asylum is recognised in French constitutional law and aligns with international commitments such as the 1951 **Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees**.

However, this historical image of France as a welcoming country of asylum has become **more complex in recent decades**. Since the late twentieth century, and particularly in the last twenty years, immigration and asylum policies have become **more restrictive**. Legislative reforms have multiplied, administrative procedures have become longer and more complex, and obtaining residence permits or refugee status often requires long periods of uncertainty. These changes are connected to broader political developments, including the **growing influence of far-right movements** and the **increasing politicisation of migration issues**.

Despite these tensions, France continues to **maintain mechanisms aimed at protecting individuals fleeing persecution**. The presence of political exiles has also contributed to French democratic life, as many refugees have engaged in **activism, human rights advocacy and international networks**. In this sense, France's role as a country of asylum remains an important, although sometimes contested, dimension of its democratic identity. It illustrates that democracy is defined not only by political institutions but also by the protection of fundamental rights.

# Italy

Italy's democratic transition is rooted in the **collapse of fascism** and in the growing desire for freedom that emerged during and after the Second World War. From 1922 to 1943, Benito **Mussolini's regime** established an **authoritarian state** based on nationalism, censorship, militarism and the suppression of political opposition. Civil liberties were restricted, dissent was repressed and state propaganda promoted the image of the leader (**il Duce**) and the ideals of war and national strength. By the early 1940s, dissatisfaction with the regime was increasing.

The alliance with Nazi Germany had drawn Italy into a devastating conflict that brought destruction and hardship to the country. As bombings intensified and economic conditions deteriorated, many Italians began to question the legitimacy of Fascist rule. In July 1943 Mussolini was removed from power by the Grand Council of Fascism and subsequently arrested. However, this event did not immediately lead to peace or democracy. **Nazi Germany quickly occupied northern Italy** and established a puppet state known as the Italian Social Republic, placing Mussolini again at its head. The country then entered a period of **civil war** characterised by violence and political division.

Within this context, a strong **resistance movement** developed. Partisans from diverse political and social backgrounds—including communists, liberals, Catholics, monarchists, workers, farmers and ordinary citizens—organised themselves to fight against Fascist forces and German occupation. Their struggle was not only military but also political and symbolic, as it aimed to restore values such as freedom, dignity, solidarity and national sovereignty. The **Liberation of 25 April 1945** marked both the practical and symbolic end of the dictatorship and opened a new phase in which the future of the country would increasingly be shaped by popular participation and democratic aspirations. With the final defeat of fascism in 1945, Italy faced a fundamental question: what kind of political system should emerge from the devastation of war?

On **2 June 1946** Italians were called to vote in a **national referendum** to decide whether the country should remain a monarchy or become a republic. For the first time in Italian history, women participated in a national vote. The result led to the **establishment of the Italian Republic**. This event represented more than a simple constitutional change. It reflected a deeper transformation in Italy's political identity. After years of dictatorship and conflict, the country sought to **redefine itself based on democratic principles**, civil rights and popular sovereignty. A Constituent Assembly was elected to draft a new Constitution that would incorporate the lessons learned from the experience of fascism and war.

The **Italian Constitution**, which came into force on **1 January 1948**, became the foundation of the new democratic order. It guaranteed fundamental freedoms, equality before the law and important social rights such as the right to work, education and social protection. It also rejected war as an instrument of aggression and emphasised the importance of democratic participation in public life. Inspired by the pluralism that had characterised the Resistance movement, the Constitution represented a shared commitment to prevent the return of authoritarian rule.

The early years of the Republic were nevertheless marked by **political tensions and ideological divisions**. The structures and mentalities inherited from the previous regime did not disappear immediately, and the reconstruction of the country required both institutional reforms and broader social and cultural change. Despite these challenges, the Constitution served as an important reference point and a framework for democratic development during a period of profound transformation.

Italy's democratic transition did not end with the adoption of the Constitution. The process of **confronting the legacy of fascism** proved complex and, in many respects, incomplete. Although some officials associated with the former regime were removed from public office, a comprehensive system of transitional justice was not fully implemented. As a result, debates about responsibility and accountability continued in the years that followed.

Over time, the memory of the Resistance and the anti-Fascist struggle became central elements of **national commemorations**, civic education and public discourse. These memories helped shape the democratic identity of the Republic and contributed to reinforcing the values associated with the struggle against dictatorship. At the same time, discussions about the interpretation of fascism and its legacy have continued within Italian society, reflecting the broader challenges that democratic societies face when dealing with difficult pasts.

For younger generations, one of the main challenges lies in understanding that **democracy is not simply a given condition** but the result of historical struggles and collective effort. The Italian transition illustrates that democracy must be continually defended and renewed. It depends not only on institutions and legal frameworks but also on the active participation of citizens who remember the past, engage in public life and contribute to shaping the future. In this sense, the experience of Italy highlights how democratic values are sustained through education, dialogue and civic responsibility across generations.

# Portugal

For much of the twentieth century, Portugal lived under an **authoritarian regime** that profoundly shaped the country's political, social, economic and cultural life. The **Revolution of 25 April 1974** marked the end of that dictatorship and initiated a process of **democratic transition** that transformed Portugal into a pluralist democracy integrated within the European space.

The Portuguese dictatorship was known as the **Estado Novo (New State)** and was formally established in 1933 under the leadership of **António de Oliveira Salazar**. It was an authoritarian, nationalist and conservative regime that rejected the principles of liberal democracy, such as freedom of expression, political pluralism and active civic participation.

Political life was tightly controlled. Only one party was legally recognised, the **União Nacional (National Union)**. Although elections were held, they were neither free nor fair. Prior **ensorship** was a central instrument of **repression**, severely restricting newspapers, books, theatre, cinema and music in order to prevent the circulation of ideas considered hostile to the regime. The **political police**, known as the **International and State Defense Police (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado – PIDE)**, later renamed the **Directorate-General for Security (DGS)**, was responsible for monitoring, persecuting and repressing opponents, often through arbitrary arrests, torture and exile.

Socially, Portugal was marked by **deep inequalities**. A large part of the population lived in poverty, especially in rural and more isolated areas. Access to **education was limited** to a privileged minority, resulting in **high illiteracy** rates when compared with other European countries. Labour rights were weak, independent trade unions were banned and strikes were illegal.

In international terms, Portugal remained largely isolated for decades. From the 1960s onwards, this isolation intensified due to the regime's refusal to grant independence to its **African colonies** (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe). This stance led to the outbreak of the **Colonial War in 1961**. Consuming vast human and financial resources, the war lasted for more than a decade and had a profound impact on Portuguese society.



By the early 1970s the regime had become **increasingly fragile**. Salazar's death and his replacement by **Marcelo Caetano** did not bring about meaningful political reform. Despite some limited attempts at liberalisation, known as the "**Marcelist Spring**", repression and censorship largely continued.

The **persistence of the Colonial War** proved decisive in the collapse of the regime. Thousands of young Portuguese men continued to be mobilised for long and unpopular conflicts, facing serious risks to their lives with no clear prospect of victory. **Discontent grew**, particularly among mid-ranking officers in the armed forces, whose careers were blocked and who increasingly questioned the continuation of the war. From this context emerged the **Armed Forces Movement (Movimento das Forças Armadas – MFA)**, a group of military officers who advocated an end to the war, the overthrow of the dictatorship and the establishment of democracy. The MFA planned a **military operation** to bring down the regime, counting on the tacit support of large sectors of Portuguese society.

The **Revolution of 25 April** took place in the early hours of that day, when military units occupied strategic points in Lisbon and other cities, including barracks, airports and radio and television stations. The **population quickly took to the streets** in support of the soldiers, and the regime collapsed with little armed resistance. The head of government, Marcelo Caetano, surrendered and was later **sent into exile**.

Internationally, the revolution became known as the "**Carnation Revolution**", due to the symbolic gesture of a civilian woman who offered red carnations to the soldiers, placing them in the barrels of their rifles as a symbol of hope and resistance, reflecting the largely peaceful nature of the movement. This day marked the **end of forty-eight years of dictatorship** and opened the way to profound political and social change.

Following 25 April, Portugal entered a complex period known as the **Ongoing Revolutionary Process (Processo Revolucionário em Curso – PREC)**, which lasted from 1974 to 1976. During this time, different visions for the country's future coexisted, ranging from liberal democracy to socialist-inspired models.

Important structural measures were adopted, including the **abolition of the political police**, the end of censorship, the legalisation of political parties and trade unions, and the release of political prisoners. **Portugal's colonies became independent between 1974 and 1975**, bringing an end to decades of colonial war.

In 1975, the **first free elections** were held for a Constituent Assembly, with the highest voter turnout in the country's history. This process culminated in the **approval of the 1976 Constitution**, which enshrined **fundamental rights**, civil liberties, universal suffrage and the separation of powers.

Democracy brought profound changes to everyday life in Portugal. Access to education and healthcare expanded significantly, **labour rights were strengthened** and civic participation became a central feature of public life. Freedom of expression and association became guaranteed rights.

**In 1986 Portugal joined the European Economic Community** (now the European Union), consolidating its political, economic and cultural integration into Europe. This step symbolised the country's **definitive break with international isolation** and reinforced the stability of its democratic system.

The Revolution of 25 April 1974 represents a defining moment in contemporary Portuguese history. More than a change of regime, it marked the transition from a closed and repressive society to a **free, democratic and European country**. Understanding this process is essential to grasp Portugal's political and social identity today, as well as the value that Portuguese society places on **democracy, freedom and human rights**.



## Romania

To understand why **Romania's transition was more turbulent** than that of neighbouring countries, it is necessary to consider the rigidity of the political system during the 1980s. While countries such as Poland or Hungary were gradually allowing limited space for opposition movements, Romania remained under a **highly centralised regime** in which power was concentrated not only in the Communist Party but also in the personal authority of **Nicolae Ceauşescu and his family**. This system effectively dismantled independent social organisations and left citizens isolated from one another.

The communist regime relied on a combination of strong nationalist rhetoric and strict political control. Ceauşescu spent years distancing Romania from the Soviet Union, presenting himself as a defender of national independence against foreign influence. However, over time, this narrative contributed to the country's **political and economic isolation**. Complementary, the **secret police created a climate of fear** in which people rarely trusted even their neighbours. In this environment, dissent was not simply treated as political disagreement but was often portrayed as betrayal of the nation itself. Because **organised opposition was almost entirely absent**, the possibility of a negotiated transition was extremely limited.

The **revolutionary events began in mid-December 1989** in the city of Timișoara. The initial trigger was the attempted eviction of a Hungarian pastor, László Tőkés. What started as a local protest quickly grew into a broader demonstration against the regime. The authorities attempted to suppress the protests through force, but the violence only intensified public anger. A decisive moment came on 22 December, when the **army refused to continue firing on civilians**. Once the military withdrew its support, Ceauşescu and his wife fled the Central Committee building in Bucharest by helicopter.

The following days were marked by confusion and political uncertainty. A **power vacuum** emerged and was soon filled by the **National Salvation Front (FSN)**. Many of its members were former officials of the Communist Party who had previously fallen out of favour with Ceauşescu but still possessed political experience and knowledge of state institutions.



During this period, **rumours, misinformation and political tensions** spread widely. Some analysts believe that elements of the former security apparatus contributed to this atmosphere of **confusion**. Although the FSN initially declared that it would act only as a temporary governing body and would not participate in elections, the political situation evolved differently. In 1990 **Ion Iliescu**, leader of the FSN, won the presidential elections.

The following years were marked by continued tensions between political authorities and civil society. **Violent confrontations** known as the “**Mineriads**” took place when groups of miners were mobilised to suppress protests against the government. These events resulted in several deaths and hundreds of injuries.

For many Romanians, the fall of the regime brought an **immediate sense of relief**. One of the most significant changes was the end of the constant pressure to publicly demonstrate loyalty to the dictatorship. People were suddenly able to gather in public spaces, express their opinions and criticise political authorities without fear of immediate repression. At the same time, the persistence of former political elites within new institutions led some citizens to feel that the revolution had been partially appropriated by the old system. The fact that many crimes committed during the violent days of the revolution have **not been fully prosecuted** has left a lasting mark on Romanian society and continues to fuel debates about justice and historical responsibility.

Romania’s transition therefore represented a decisive break with decades of authoritarian rule, but it was also a complex and incomplete process. While citizens gained new freedoms and political rights, **distrust toward political institutions** remained a significant feature of the country’s democratic development.



# Spain

The **Franco dictatorship emerged from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)**, following the military victory of the insurgent forces led by General Francisco Franco. After 1939, Spain was transformed into an **authoritarian state** in which political power was concentrated in Franco's hands, democratic institutions were dismantled and civil liberties were suppressed. Political parties and trade unions were banned, and **repression** was used systematically to eliminate opposition through **imprisonment, exile and executions**.

In the aftermath of the war, thousands of people were imprisoned, executed or forced into exile, and a large network of prisons and labour camps was created for political prisoners. The regime established a **highly centralised state that rejected regional autonomy** and promoted a nationalist vision of Spain based on unity, traditional values and strong state authority. Political opposition was harshly persecuted, and many families continued to suffer the consequences of repression for decades.

The regime exercised **strict ideological and social control** through  **censorship**, education and its close alliance with the **Catholic Church**. Public life was strongly influenced by conservative moral values promoted by the regime, and the education system was used to transmit the official ideology. Although Spain experienced **economic modernisation** from the 1950s onwards and increasing international integration, these changes were **not accompanied by genuine political reform**.

During the 1960s, economic growth and industrialisation transformed many areas of the country and contributed to the **emergence of new urban middle classes and labour movements**. At the same time, **opposition** to the dictatorship slowly began to reorganise through **clandestine political parties, student movements and workers' organisations**, particularly in large industrial cities. Despite these social changes, the political structure of the dictatorship remained firmly in place until **Franco's death in 1975**.

The death of Franco in 1975 marked the beginning of the **Transition (Transición)**, a complex political process aimed at **dismantling the dictatorship** and **establishing a democratic system** through **reform** rather than rupture. This period was characterised by uncertainty, **social mobilisation and tensions** between demands for political change and fears of instability. In the months that followed, different political actors began to explore possible paths towards **democratic reform**.

The institutions inherited from the dictatorship initially remained in place, but growing social demands for political freedoms and participation made the continuation of the authoritarian system increasingly difficult. Gradually, **political reforms** were introduced that opened the way for **pluralism and democratic participation**. During this period, political leaders, social movements and different sectors of society were involved in **negotiations and debates** about the future of the country and the shape of its democratic institutions.

At the same time, opposition movements that had operated clandestinely during the dictatorship began to participate openly in political life. **Political parties and trade unions were gradually legalised**, such as the **Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)** and the **Communist Party of Spain (PCE)**. This process was not without tensions, but it reflected both political negotiation and strong social pressure from sectors that had long demanded democratic freedoms. Social mobilisation also played a significant role during these years, with labour strikes, student movements and civic organisations contributing to expand the public space for political participation and debate.

The **first democratic elections** since the Civil War were held in **1977**. The newly elected parliament then began the process of drafting a democratic constitution through negotiations among representatives of different political traditions, including conservatives, socialists, communists and regional nationalist parties. The **Spanish Constitution of 1978** established the foundations of the new democratic system, defining Spain as a **parliamentary monarchy**, guaranteeing **fundamental rights and civil liberties** and introducing a system of **territorial autonomy** that recognised the country's diverse national and regional identities.



In regard to that diversity, it is important to note that the testimonies presented in this booklet were given by individuals who lived during the transitional process in a region known as the **Basque Country**. This region is located on the **northern coast of Spain**, on the border with France. This detail is important, as the social and political reality of the Basque Country has had its **own characteristics** that need to be considered in order to understand the stories told by the people who lived through it.

During the years of the democratic transition and the decades that followed, the Basque Country experienced a particularly **complex social and political context** marked by different forms of political violence and serious human rights violations. The armed organisation **ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Country and Freedom)**, founded during the Franco dictatorship with the aim of **promoting Basque independence**, continued its **violent activity during the democratic period**, carrying out **attacks** that caused the deaths of hundreds of people and affecting members of the security forces, political representatives and civilians.

At the same time, other forms of violence, **repression and human rights violations** also took place within this broader context of political conflict, including actions by far-right and parapolice groups that emerged during the democratic transition. These dynamics generated a **climate of fear and deep divisions** within Basque society, affecting social relationships, political life and public debate for many years. In response, numerous civic organisations, social movements and institutions promoted **initiatives aimed at defending human rights**, supporting victims and encouraging peaceful forms of political participation.

In **2011, ETA announced the definitive cessation of its armed activity**, marking the end of decades of violence and opening a new stage focused on memory, recognition and the strengthening of democratic coexistence. Throughout the Transition, **social movements** continued to exert influence, both by supporting the **democratisation process and by exposing its limits**. Issues such as the lack of accountability for crimes committed during the dictatorship, ongoing social inequalities and tensions related to political violence remained present.



# TESTIMONIES



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# France

## Nora

Born in **Algeria**, mother of three children, Nora arrived in France in 2019. Her decision to leave her home country was one of the hardest choices of her life. In Algeria, **living conditions were harsh**, particularly for women. Everything had to be paid for, medical care, housing and schooling. As there are no benefits, it was also difficult for a woman to work far from home. She took the decision to leave during the **Hirak social movement**, when the military was regaining control of the country and **women's rights were becoming more and more restricted**. "I could no longer see a future for my children in this context", she recalls.

Upon her arrival in France, **Nora sought asylum**. However, her request was **denied** which put her and her children in a situation of great vulnerability. **Undocumented**, she was first accommodated in a shelter, then in a maternal centre. Shortly after, her husband left her. She had to **face exile alone**, with the heavy responsibility of raising three children in a foreign land.

Today, Nora lives in Saint-Amand, in an emergency shelter run by Afeji. Administrative procedures remain long and complex. Without legal papers, she lives with the **constant fear that her children might be taken away and placed in foster care**. Organizations such as La Cimade help her set things right and ensure her children's access to education. Her material conditions have also gradually improved over time, though she still lives in a **precarious situation**. She receives financial assistance of 225€, paid three times a year, and additional support from local organizations for food and other essentials. "It's not much" she admits, but it allows her to keep a little bit of stability for my children.



With time and reflection, Nora has come to see her journey as **a lesson in resilience** and awareness. “Before leaving your country”, she says, “you must be mentally prepared. Many people think that coming to France will change everything, but it’s not that simple. You need to know the laws, the procedures, how things work in the host country.” In Algeria, she says she never imagined what it meant to be “**without rights**”, but in France, she has felt what it really meant: “**To not exist administratively**, to not be recognized, to **feel invisible**.” Despite these hardships, she is grateful to be better surrounded and accompanied.

By sharing her story, Nora wishes to reach those who are considering exile. She highlights that leaving your country is **not an easy solution**, and that you have to be informed and well prepared beforehand in order to face the daily struggles. For her, speaking out allows her “**to meet and connect with other people, to break isolation, and to regain strength**.” Even if France has not fulfilled all the promises she once imagined, it has given her the **chance to rebuild her life**, ensure that her children can attend school, and feel supported in her daily life.





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## Yasmina

Five years ago, **Yasmina and her husband left Albania** with a single goal: to offer their son A., now eight years old, the chance to receive proper care for his **autism**. Life in Albania was very difficult. A. was born in 2017 and was diagnosed with autism in 2019. At that time, there were **no specialized centres** nor qualified professionals to provide the kind of support an autistic child requires. Consultations were rare, **overly expensive** and located only in distant big cities.

Living in a small village added to their struggles: with almost no public transport, limited job opportunities and **very few financial resources**, balancing work and care was nearly impossible. Yasmina's husband worked both as a police officer and as an ambulance driver, earning around 400€ per month, yet the family had to **spend more than what he earned** to afford just 45 minutes of psychological therapy for 20 days.

Yasmina, who had previously worked outside the home, had to stop working once her son got diagnosed, since she did not have any other suitable childcare options.

Their son faced **rejection** in many areas of daily life, at nursery, at the dentist, and even at school, where he was consistently treated differently. "At nursery" Yasmina recalls that he "was left looking at screens all day, unlike other children." **Autism was poorly understood**, and the parents were met with widespread incomprehension. Financially, the family's situation was **extremely fragile**. Most of their income went toward their son's therapy and finding a balance between work and caregiving was a constant **struggle**.

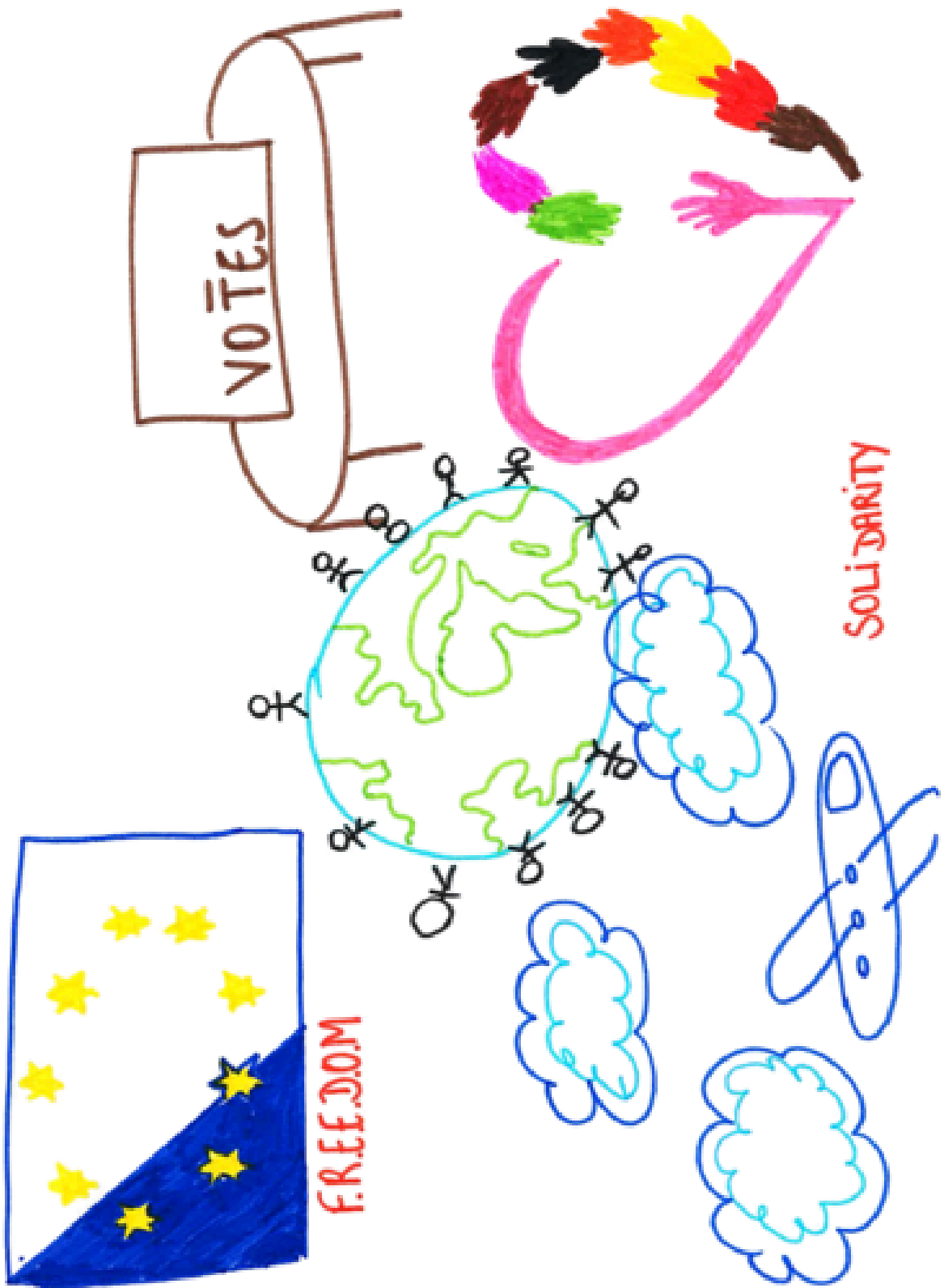
Since their arrival in France five years ago, Yasmina and her husband have seen their situation improve. A. now receives **professional and specialized care through child protection services** and other dedicated facilities. After facing numerous refusals in Albania, they were finally able to enrol their son in a French program designed for children with special needs. The wait for a place in a special needs school was long: two years in Saint-Amand and one year in Valenciennes. The parents chose a facility that allowed A. to stay with them as a family rather than be placed 24/7. "**We wanted to preserve our family bonds**", Yasmina explains.

Some specialized facilities refused to admit A., arguing that hospitals were available in Albania. However, Yasmina and her husband explained that these **facilities were neither financially nor geographically accessible to them**. Despite the obstacles, they emphasize the importance of staying positive and trusting the process.

The family's residence permit makes it difficult to access some social benefits, and their **financial situation remains fragile**. Daily life involves constant pressure: the high cost of living, food, and clothing suitable for A., which wears out quickly. They rely heavily on local organizations and aid networks such as Les Restos du Cœur, but also on local allowances, and occasional financial support of €225, paid three times a year. Support also varies depending on where they live. In Saint-Amand, they have received more assistance than in Valenciennes, where, for instance, free diapers were only provided until the child reached 18 months.

Yasmina and her husband have chosen to share their story to **inform and prepare other families** who may follow a similar path. They want people to understand that arriving in France does not automatically guarantee access to housing, care, or support. The process is long and demanding, and that it's important to be aware of the administrative and social challenges that lie ahead. Their goal is to **offer guidance and practical advice**, helping others navigate the same obstacles with greater ease. Speaking out also gives them a way to express their emotions, release some of the pressure they feel, and find relief through being heard. "Support and understanding aren't available everywhere," Yasmina notes, "but being able to talk about our experience here in France truly helps us.





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## Ahmed, 32

Ahmed grew up in **Cairo**, where he attended a Franco-Egyptian school and volunteered at the Library of Alexandria. It was during a conference on his university campus that he discovered the possibility of pursuing his studies in France.

His **departure took place during the Arab Spring**, a popular uprising that led to the fall of President Mubarak and the subsequent military takeover in Egypt. Seeking to study, to discover new perspectives, and to build a better future in a safer environment pushed him to **leave his country for France**. He recalls with vivid enthusiasm his arrival in Grenoble, in the French Alps, mesmerized by the mountains and by the excitement of discovering a new culture.

From 2012 to 2015, Ahmed studied law at the **University of Grenoble**. However, he was unable to complete his degree as the **academic expectations and the cultural adaptation were far more difficult** than he had imagined. He experienced a kind of **symbolic violence** from certain professors and students who made him feel unwelcome. He remembers that some people would look at him in a threatening way and ask “why are you here?” or say, “It’s not normal that schools and universities in France are free for foreigners.” Before coming to France, Ahmed explained that he had thought everyone could be his friend, like in Egypt, but in reality, the difference became clear to him.

Looking for a more supportive environment, he enrolled at the **University of Law and Political Science in Lille**. There, he found a more welcoming environment and a group of friends with whom he shared common interests. However, he had to deal with **many other challenges**: poor housing conditions in university accommodation (cockroaches, bedbugs, poor hygiene), the loneliness of being far from his country and his family, and the loss of his father. **Lacking legal papers** made everything harder, he could not renew his rights or get housing assistance.



Moreover, Ahmed faced **a lot of administrative hurdles**. For instance, one day, he was arrested in the subway and held in custody for 24 hours. This incident led to a ban from French territory for two years, which prevents him from obtaining legal status even today, despite the support of a lawyer, several elected representatives, and his successful completion of a Master's degree. A job offer he had secured remains on hold, without an official decision. Currently, **Ahmed is homeless**, he is trying to seek refuge with his family in the south of France, but distance and logistics make this difficult.

He also mentions the **rise of far-right movements** in France and the growing lack of consideration by the public administration toward international students. "It should be possible to make mistakes, to fail and to rebuild yourself" he says, "but when you're living in exile, these stages become incredibly hard." **Mourning his father from afar**, without being able to return to Egypt, was one of the most painful moments of his journey.

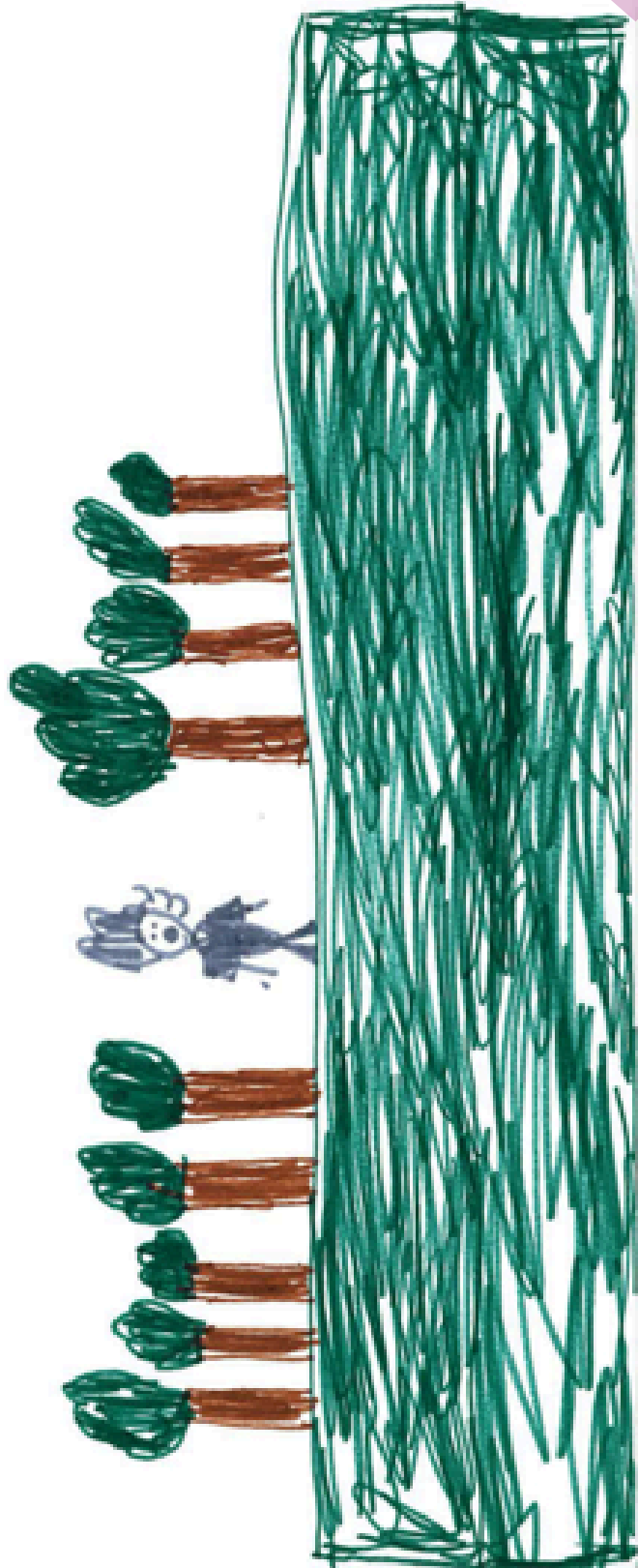
Through his story, Ahmed seeks to encourage foreign students to inform themselves thoroughly about their rights, the laws and the living conditions in the country where they plan to study. He wishes that the French public services will become more tolerant and treat foreigners as human beings.

Despite many obstacles, **Ahmed remains hopeful**. He volunteers regularly and still holds onto a job offer that he hopes to honour one day. "I want to contribute to French society", he says. Sharing his journey allows Ahmed to take a step back and acknowledge his efforts. His testimony **sheds light on the complexity of exile**, the importance of support and the strength of resilience.



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# Italy

## Luigi, 92

I remember clearly what life was like during the Fascist period. Saturdays were not days of rest or choice; they were **Fascist Saturdays**. All the young people of the village were forced to gather and march through the streets. Attendance was compulsory. Names and surnames were taken, and anyone who did not show up was noted. There was **no room for absence, no space for refusal**. The streets filled with marching bodies, but also with fear.

One particular episode has stayed with me all my life. In our village, the Fascist authorities were searching for the Marshal of the Carabinieri. He was not originally from the village, but everyone knew how he was described: tall, strong, imposing. The Fascists were actively looking for him, and **tension spread among the people**. There was, however, a man in the village who was deaf and mute, and who vaguely resembled the description they had been given. He was harmless, well known by everyone, and lived simply, moving around with his mule.

One day in October, during the grape harvest, something terrible happened. My father was a farmer, and at that time we were making wine. A large wooden barrel had been placed outside our gate, as was customary during the harvest. The deaf-mute man passed nearby, close to my house, when **one of the Fascists stopped him in the street and shouted at him**, ordering him to halt. But the man could not hear. He did not understand the command. He did not know what was being said to him.

The Fascist grabbed him by the arm violently. It was a strong grip, full of aggression. The man reacted instinctively, trying to pull away, frightened and confused. He was followed up to near my house, next to the large barrel used for the grape pressing. **The situation was tense and frightening**. This man had done nothing wrong, yet he was treated as a criminal simply because he could not respond, could not explain himself, could not defend himself.



That moment taught me something I never forgot. Under dictatorship, **innocence offers no protection**. **Vulnerability becomes danger**. **Fear replaces justice, and power speaks only one language — force**. This is what Fascism meant for ordinary people: not just slogans and marches, but **humiliation, violence, and the constant threat** that anyone could be punished without reason.

This memory remains with me as **a warning and a responsibility**. Democracy is not something to take for granted. It exists to **protect the weakest**, to ensure that no one is punished for who they are, and to guarantee that dignity is never stripped away by power.



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## Ida, 101

I remember everyday life during those years as something **heavy and uncertain**, even in the smallest and most ordinary moments. My sister used to wash clothes at home, and we lived simply, with very little. Even at home, you could feel that **something was always hanging over us**. Fascism was everywhere. It passed through our streets, through our houses, through our lives. Mussolini himself passed through this area, and everyone knew it. His presence was not just political; it was something people felt in their bodies, in their silence, in their **fear**.

For a long time, we lived in **a state of tension**. People were careful about what they said, how they behaved, who they trusted. **Fear had become normal**. It was part of daily life. Then one day, the news arrived: Mussolini was dead. I remember very clearly how we felt when we heard it. There was no panic. There was no chaos. There was **relief**. We were calm. For the first time in a long time, people felt they could breathe. My mother was calmer, too. The fear that had followed us for years seemed to loosen its grip. It was as if **a weight had been lifted from everyone's shoulders**.

When the men began to return from the war, the feeling was the same. When my grandfather came back from the front, people were happy. Truly happy. The war had taken so much from families — sons, brothers, peace of mind — and its end felt like a miracle. There had been bombs, destruction, and moments when we thought everything was lost. Yet, somehow, people survived. We were happy because the fear was over. We were happy because the war was finished. We were happy because life could begin again, even if it was difficult, even if we had little. What mattered was that we were no longer living in **constant terror**.

Looking back, I understand that this happiness was not about celebration, but about **freedom**. It was the feeling of no longer being watched, **no longer being afraid**, no longer living under oppression. That moment taught me the true value of democracy: not as a word, but as the **possibility to live without fear**.

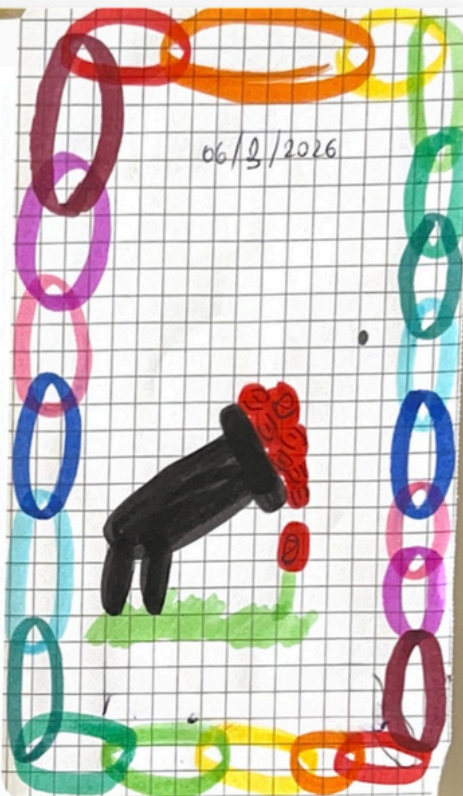


OGGI HO CAPITO  
CHE OGNUNO DEVE  
FARE LE COSE CHE  
SI SENTE. QUELLO CHE  
REPUTA GIUSTO PER SE.  
NESSUNO DEVE DECIDERE  
QUELLO CHE DEVI FARE

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06/03/2026



ho parlato di libertà



06/03/2026

Oggi ho imparato che  
oggi  
Ognuno può esprimere

La propria **Libertà**

senza che nessuno

esprime per noi

6/03/2026

Grazie alla maestra

**Angela**

che mi ha  
**spiegato**



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Project Number: 101196470

## Krishanthi

My name is Krishanthi. I was **born in Sri Lanka**, a country of **immense natural beauty, ancient traditions, and complex social hierarchies**. I come from a family that valued education, dignity, and service. Guided by these values, I pursued my studies with passion and earned **a PhD in Law from the University of Oxford**. But beyond the academic and professional path, I have always been drawn to the language of the arts. I paint and I sculpt; through these forms, I give shape to the emotions and contradictions that words cannot always carry.

My story, however, is also one of **rupture**. In Sri Lanka, family is sacred—and so is tradition. Many families still adhere to **rigid expectations around caste, religion, and social status**. Love, in this context, is not always free. When I met the man who would become my husband, I knew we would have to fight for our right to be together. His family came from a community that believed our union would bring shame, simply because I did not belong to their caste. In their eyes, I was not “suitable”—not because of who I was, but because of what I represented: **a breach in an inherited social order**.

Despite this, we chose each other. We chose **love over fear**. We left everything behind and began again—first in exile, and then in refuge. Today, we live in Italy with our two children. They are joyful, curious, and free. I raise them with the values I believe in: dignity, dialogue, and justice. **Italy has given us safety and the possibility to begin a life without hiding**.

I am at peace now with my own family. After years of silence and pain, we have found a way to reconnect. They may even come to visit us in the near future, **to meet their grandchildren for the first time**. But I cannot say the same for my husband's family. They still do not know we have children. We have kept this truth hidden out of necessity—not from shame, but from fear of further rejection, or worse.

In some parts of Sri Lankan society, **family honour is placed above individual choice**. Marrying outside one's caste is seen as a **transgression that can stain generations**. For my in-laws, the idea that their son married a woman from a different background—and started a family with her—is not just unacceptable; it is unspeakable. As long as this silence persists, I cannot return home. My country remains a place of **beauty and pain, of memory and exile**.



# Portugal

## Maria, 64

Born in **Cascais**, retired and divorced, with two adult daughters, Maria lived in Alcabideche until she was 16, then she came to live in São Domingos de Rana. When a young child, she was diagnosed with **infantile paralysis**, a disease compromising the early years: "I started walking very late, when I was just over 7 years old." She recalls that her parents were very careful, as "they took me to all the doctors". Also, she felt like a privileged kid because "I never went hungry, I had everything and studied until the 7th grade."

However, Maria lived an **unhappy childhood**, with consequences for the entire life, "because my father was a man of many women and then he would come home and beat my mother a lot". In this family reality, she looked for ways to cope with the sense of impunity, as **under the authoritarian regime people were not expected to stop domestic violence**. For instance, she would run away and seek help from the women in her family, and others, including the one who would become her mother-in-law "but she, poor thing, was also suffering as a victim of violence from her husband".

As years went by, her **negative feelings** about the family situation and the way she saw women being treated, began to **take on greater personal significance**. From adolescence onwards, her attitude changed, directly impacting her life: "when I was 12 or 13, I started to turn against my father. I remember this one day he was beating my mother and I stood in front of him, telling him not to hit her anymore. He slapped me and I fainted. After waking up, I remember eating a bowl of soup and getting back to school."

This **resilience and strength traits guided all her decisions** through the years since then. Despite a happy marriage (of almost 3 decades) to this man who "was an excellent husband, because of alcohol, I decided to end my marriage. Even though he never touched me, I decided this was not a life worth living for my daughters".



By sharing her story, Maria hopes to **help younger people make better choices for themselves and their families**. "I decided to live my life, but these are memories that I never let go of, and every time I watch the news on television, I get very upset about it". As an opportunity to use this experience in a positive way, when telling her story, she demonstrates that it is possible to overcome difficulties and in her own words: "it is good for our children, our grandchildren as well, to understand this, so that they realise that the future is theirs" and commit themselves to the values that are passed on to them. "Before 25th April, it was different. **Today, both** – men and women – **work. I think they should come back home and help each other**".

Maria is an **active voice** within her family and community, finding fulfilment in conveying **positive messages** in the face of challenges: "if a relationship doesn't work, each one goes their own way and there's no need for violence. I think that's not what life is about, and that's the message we try to convey, while moving forward with our lives".

The testimony ends on a hopeful note, regarding the place of women in society and in the world, now and in the future: "Before 25th April, it was different, but since then, things have been improving for us, women. It's still difficult, but I believe that from now on, people will slowly start to change their minds, realising that we are all human beings, **women are not objects and must have their rights**".

Also, on a personal level, sharing and elaborating on these experiences can truly **validate her courageous path**, aligning with a time when "we have more freedom of expression". It continues to make sense to do it because "it is still difficult, we still have a lot of sexism, and a lot of people thinking like we did so many years ago, I don't know why". In fact, she believes in the contribution she is making to younger generations, by inviting them to **reflect about "life in the past, life in the present"**.



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## Anonymous, 70

Born in **Alentejo**, she has lived in **São Domingos de Rana** since her teenage years. Married, with two children, she is now retired. She started working when she was 15 years old, as a **factory worker “producing gloves for a German company”**. She describes this as a very positive experience which ended after two good years because the company moved location and as “it was further away, my mother wouldn’t let me go so far”.

Since “**at that time it was very easy to find work**” she found an alternative in “a much larger electrical equipment company” that was closer to home. This second work experience brought up a very different reality because “**the conditions were not good**”. Her concrete examples aim to reveal a reality unknown to many younger generations. Youth must know things like this were real: the production line section was “**very cold, we had no heating**”. Sitting on a bench, not a chair, we ended up with back problems. To use the toilet, there was a metal plate hanging on the wall and we could only go when the plate was there. As that section had around 400 people, it was horrible. We couldn’t eat, we didn’t have a break for breakfast and people couldn’t talk while they were working”.

This was a common situation, reflecting the dynamics of power in a country under the control of an **authoritarian regime**, and it was **in the union of the group that people found the strength and resilience to persist**: ‘We were cheerful, we did our work, but we knew that these things were...’ wrong.

The inability to change the situation only highlighted the value of more positive realities, fuelling the desire for change. “As I had come from a different factory, which was German, I noticed a big difference” and it was impossible to forget this previous experience of contact with “**another mentality, another freedom, another policy**”.

It turns out that after 25th April, things changed completely. It was a **very good change** that must be valued, even by those who did not go through this transition. Concrete examples of this transformation are also reported in detail, because the aim is to raise awareness of a new reality and demonstrate how little achievements, such as having **“freedom to speak, eat, take a break, heating...”** completely changed life: “there was no longer a metal plate on the wall, and we had toilet paper in the bathroom. That was very good”.

“Even though not everything went as expected in the transition to democracy, the testimony reveals the desire and request for new generations to **“value freedom and the values that have been passed on to them”**. Telling her story is an act of pride, honouring the path that has been pursued, but also an act of social contribution, so that what **“once was very, very bad is not forgotten or repeated**. Do not forget that before 25th April, there was a lot of suffering, in every sense”. That’s why focus should be on what became possible once **“we had freedom: we could sing, speak...”** people worked with more enthusiasm and then we got better conditions”.



## Manuel, 74

Born in **Alentejo**, Manuel is married and, although retired, maintains a very active life, being involved in the local community. He recalls that the **difficult life during childhood** led him to leave his homeland in the search for better opportunities. It happened exactly the same way in many other families, as it was common to flee to the city because in the countryside “**there was a lot of illiteracy**. Many children went barefoot and were poorly dressed. When they were older or had finished fourth grade, which was the maximum for the poor, they started working continuously throughout the year. The full-time wage for **children** was around **€0.75 per month, including food and accommodation**”.

His story shows how **social class shaped opportunities**, as “the richest, more powerful, had the power to persuade teachers to excuse from school those they chose for their services”, whether it meant “helping with household chores, looking after younger siblings, working in the fields, feeding animals or running errands”.

Also, it reveals how people lived, assuring they were “**always very careful about what they said for fear of being overheard by informers working for the state police, known as the PIDE**, causing many problems and arrests”. To name some rules: “**you couldn't play cards or other games that weren't allowed by the authorities**. Those who smoked had to ask for a **lighter licence**”.

The lack of freedom was sustained by the absence of real information, something Manuel feels younger people must understand in today's world of misinformation. “There was little news, few people had radios. And on the radio, the news was not real, it had to pass through **PIDE censorship**, where it was cut or cooked to suit the state”.

There was also “**the greatest drama for young people at that time**”: **being sent to fight abroad**. “When someone returned in good health, it was a joyful celebration, although there was a lot of sadness among those who still had to go through the war, not knowing what their future held. **I was lucky that the revolution happened**. I knew we were going to be attacked the day before the revolution. **Because 25th April happened, I survived.**”



Resilience, strength and ambition for a better life guided all the decisions Manuel made, whatever the circumstances. "In Africa, I was very friendly with everyone, and that's why I got to know we were going to be attacked. Fortunately, everything changed. Over the years, with the end of the war overseas, everything changed. **Freedom arrived, bringing great progress and bringing us closer to Europe**, from which we had been apart for decades. And I was able to experience many happy moments, such as meeting my wife, getting married and having a family."

Today Manuel is concerned with the transmission of memories "because there is a **generation gap** in which these stories were no longer told, and **values have been lost**. We must continue to pass on what happened. The younger ones need to know".



# Romania

## Anonymous, 70

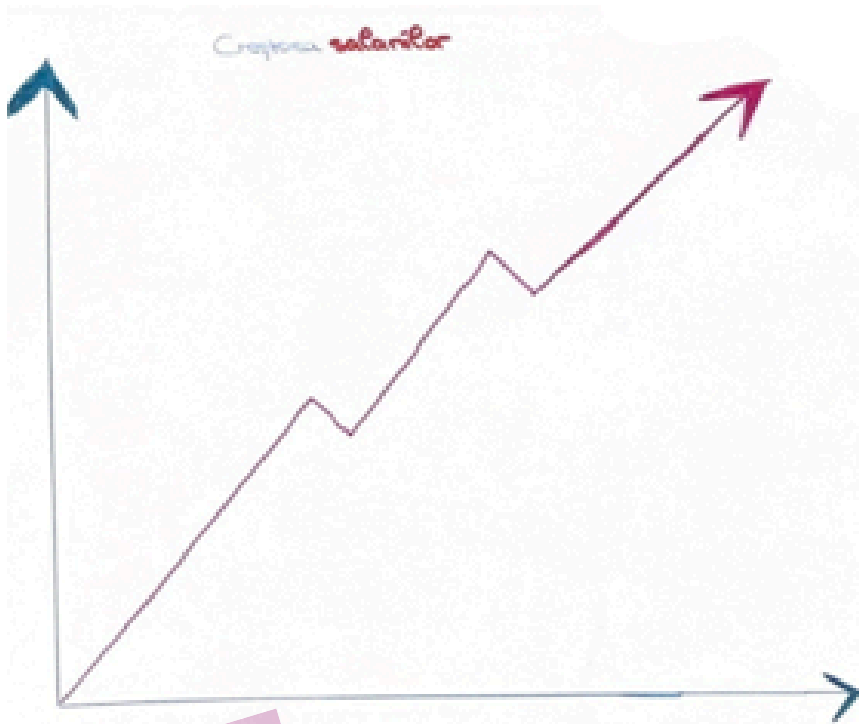
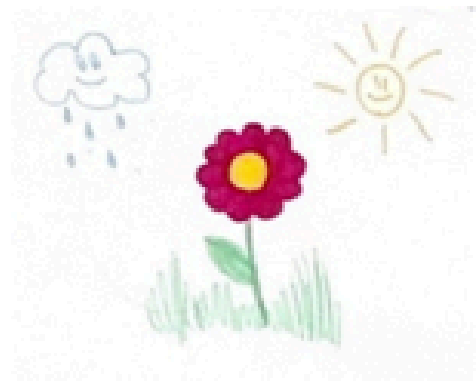
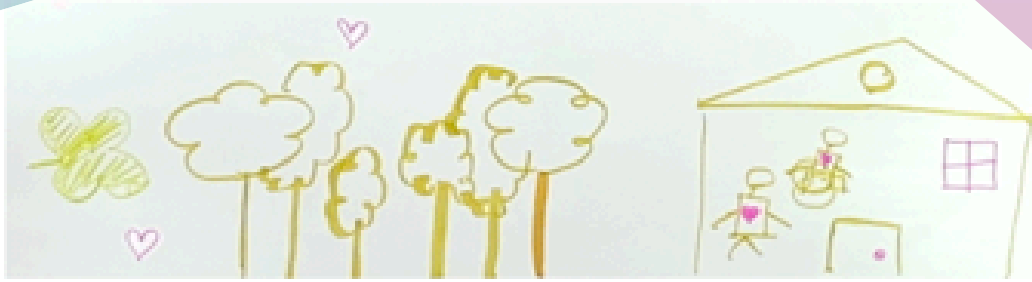
Having turned 70 in May 2025, this participant feels she holds "**1001 stories about December 1989 and what followed**" in her memory. Her primary motivation for participating was a desire to pass on her experiences to her loved ones and the next generation. For her, the transition from communism to democracy was a process defined by "**a lot of anxiety, but, in the end, many achievements**". Professionally, the change in regime allowed her to transition from **factory engineering into her long-desired role as a tenured engineering teacher**.

The 1989 Revolution had a **complex impact on her family**. Her father, a veteran of both the Eastern and Western Fronts, had been denied promotion under the communist regime; after the transition, he finally received the rank of officer and the pension he deserved. Conversely, her mother, who held communist convictions, was deeply pained by the execution of Ceaușescu, warning through her tears that "**a people who had killed its leader would suffer for a long time**". She concludes her reflection with a look toward the future: "**Go, Romania! New horizons, new wars**".

## Anonymous, 77

Now 77 years old, this participant joined the workshop out of curiosity for what she considered a unique experience. She describes her personal experience of the transition as "**natural**," noting that she had long wished for **such a change to occur**. However, her hopes for a peaceful democratic process were shattered by the "**brutality and aggressiveness**" witnessed in 1990 during the Mineriads. She recalls weeping while watching people being beaten on the streets as if they were living in the "**Stone Age**," something she never expected to see after the fall of the previous regime.

She believes it is vital to share these stories because, as scholars warn, "**if you are not careful, history repeats itself**". Her message to **younger generations** is that they must **read and inform themselves** extensively to understand the past and ensure that no one ever has to experience the hardships her generation endured.



## Anonymous, 64

At 64 years old, this participant was motivated to attend the workshop to **discover the perspectives and experiences of others regarding the transition**, many of which were previously unknown to her. She defines the transition as an **"experience as harsh as it was real"** and describes the memories of the 1989 Revolution as being **"very raw"**. She felt a deep sense of resonance with the stories of her peers, particularly regarding the **hardships and struggles that Romanian families faced during those turbulent years**.

Her goal is for today's youth to understand **"the truth that the elders lived"**. She advocates for **greater intergenerational socialisation**, encouraging young people to take advantage of the current freedom to ask questions and listen to their elders—a **dialogue that she feels was much harder to initiate during her own youth**.



# Spain

## Mikel, 79

Mikel shares his experience of the Spanish Transition, a period he describes as “**overflowing with excitement**” and at the same time “**overflowing with work**,” referring to the amount of effort involved. His life was marked by **clandestinity from the age of eighteen or nineteen**, when he joined the ELA trade union. This immersion in secrecy “marked him from head to toe,” forcing him to live under a false name and avoid drawing attention. His goal was not individual advancement but a “**collective emancipation as a people and as a class**” through union work.

It is important to remember that during the Francoist dictatorship, the labour movement, trade unions, and their activities were **harshly repressed** by the regime. Before the Transition, Mikel places his experience within “**pure and hard Francoism**,” a regime characterized by a “**single party, single union (...) and an agreement with the Church, national Catholicism**”. He describes the oppression of this system: “**They controlled us 24 hours a day**, instilling the fear of eternity, of hell, eternal fire without dying”.

This control extended to religious life, such as the annual **obligation to take communion, with records kept of names and addresses**. Mikel explains, “The priests would check who didn’t take communion; young people should know that, that’s how far control went”. The lack of freedoms was evident, for example through censorship, which they circumvented by crossing the border into France: “If we wanted to read decent books, we’d go to Iparralde (French-Basque territory) to buy them—in other words, **Iparralde, Europe, was for us a window of escape**.”

Despite the repression, Mikel describes the 1960s as “**a prodigious decade**” due to the flourishing of arts, theatre, Basque-language song, and literature. It was a time “when we grew, debated, and thought we knew everything.” Yet, during the Franco years, **persecution, arrests, interrogations, and mistreatment by police forces were also common**.

Mikel recalls one episode when he was detained: as he was being taken to interrogations, a group of women imprisoned for prostitution were locked behind a gate in the hallway: “they looked at us with **faces full of... help, of support.**” Remembering those women, Mikel says, “I don’t know if they’re still alive, but I wish them all the best, for the encouragement they gave us after the interrogations, tortured as we were”.

The Transition, however, also had its “**light and shadow**”. Mikel laments that Spain did not return to be a republic, that the monarchy remained, and that the Church’s influence was not fully broken. Despite these disappointments, he and his colleagues devoted themselves to consolidating democracy. He concludes, “**We’re left with the satisfaction of having given everything for that project, and that project, well, was achieved.**” These experiences, with their difficulties and moments of humanity, form part of the memory of a Transition lived firsthand.



## Rosario, 96

Rosario was born in the town of **Hernani** (Basque Country) in 1929, six years before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Like many children of the time, **Rosario was exiled, in her case, to France**. Despite her young age, she remembers the journey that began at the port of Santurtzi **“at night, because we were being bombed,”** adding, **“it’s hard to be torn from your mother’s arms to leave.”** During her stay, she lived with a French couple who took her in for two years, people she remembers with great affection: **“I always call her ‘mami,’ but Madeleine. She was my French mother”**.

After that period, she returned to a country ravaged by **postwar hardship**, which she describes with mixed feelings: “It was hard, even though I was back with my parents, it was hard because there I had a lovely life, and here everything was... it was the postwar, the **war, the chaos, the hunger, everything, so it was very hard**”. During this time, she lost both her parents within just eight months. About her father’s death, she says: **“My father was put in jail, and he stayed there until they took him out to die”**. Despite this, she emphasizes: **“I hold no resentment, really. I am at peace.”**

From then on, Rosario lived with different relatives until she ended up with her sister and brother-in-law, a military man, where “I wanted for nothing, but it was like living in a barracks,” **referring to the strict order at home**. The private sphere takes on great importance in her testimony, especially when recalling the years around the Transition, when society at large was gaining freedoms and rights.

Her story helps us understand women’s lives during that period, as she recounts how under the dictatorship **“we women lived very oppressed** because, listen, you couldn’t travel abroad, couldn’t do anything, couldn’t withdraw money or have a bank account—nothing **without your husband’s consent. That’s just not right.**” Contrary to what some narratives suggest, after the dictatorship ended, she notes that, in the private and family spheres, **change for women in general**, and for her in particular, **was not so drastic**: “Inside the home things didn’t change much either; the laws were the laws, but daily life (...) stayed the same, nothing had changed.” Likewise, she highlights the discrimination she faced for having worked all her life unpaid or irregularly: **“After working my whole life like a mule, at home, in the workshop (...) I ended up without my own pension”**.



When asked about the Basque conflict, she immediately responds: “**The ETA conflict was horrible.** After having lived through one war, as I had, **it was traumatic.**” She recalls an episode with her grandson: “The boy came here, seven years old, to recover from hepatitis so as not to infect his sisters. (...) We closed the blinds because upstairs there was a woman who, whenever the police came, would shout insults at them from her window. And the bullets (fired by police) would hit our window. That child was terrified; we were all terrified.” The **neighbourhood** where Rosario lives, she describes as **very conflictive**, “so much trouble—you couldn’t talk to anyone, couldn’t say anything. Silence, absolute silence.”

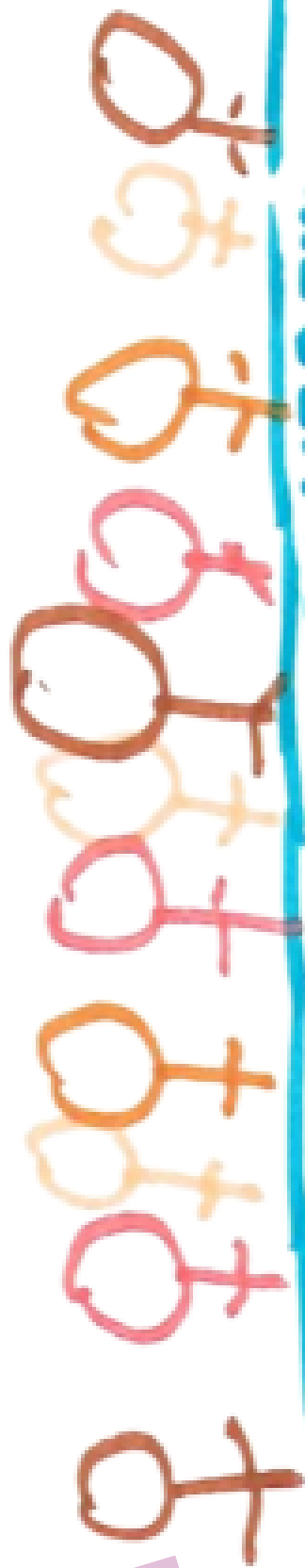
On one of the issues still present today in Basque and Spanish society—the recognition of victims of violence before, during, and after the Transition—she says: “**I think everyone should be recognized** (...). All victims, no matter which side they were on—they’re all victims”.

Thinking about younger generations, she would like to share this message: “For young people, to **be generous, to be generous and to remember that they have rights but also many obligations.**” She also points out how **fragile those rights are**: “If a war or conflict comes, everything ends”.

Rosario’s testimony is marked by **resilience** in the face of historical and personal adversity. Her story highlights her **tireless pursuit of freedom and independence**, and her reflections on the social and political changes in Spain throughout the 20th century. One turning point in that pursuit came when her sister-in-law, who owned a boat, encouraged her to earn a skipper’s license so they could go out to sea. Previously, her husband had refused to pay for her driving lessons, but this time, with her sister-in-law’s support, she achieved her dream: “**You can’t imagine how hard it was at home for me to get my yacht captain’s license. It was a before and after in the marriage.** That broke everything. Me standing up for myself, doing what I wanted—it was awful, but I did it. Yacht captain, the best years of my life!”.

Now Rosario, whom her grandchildren call “Tita”, lives in the same neighbourhood she has lived in for decades, and describes it this way: “**I live alone with my cat, I’m happy, I do whatever I want** and not much else: walking, going to concerts... that’s what I do. (...) **Freedom is the most beautiful thing there is**, no doubt about it, the most beautiful”.





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FREEDOM FOR EVERYONE



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## Carlos, 61

Carlos, **born under the dictatorship**, lived his adolescence under authoritarianism—not only political but personal: “I remember more than the political situation, the **personal experience of living under authoritarianism**, the imposition by those above, not only in politics but in life”. This early experience of “**so much imposition**” and “so much authoritarianism” sparked a rebellion that **led him to anarchist ideas at 15**, seeking self-management and rejecting authority. As he recalls: “At 15 I was going to anarchist demonstrations, **no God, no State, no boss**, I said”.

However, his path took a drastic turn when, after beginning to perceive a sense of “**national oppression**” around him, he moved with his family to **El Salvador**. There, the **reality of war** and the absence of anarchists **led him to immerse himself completely in Marxism-Leninism and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)**. The assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero by the army was a turning point: “That’s when I really started to flip out about everything.” In El Salvador, **Carlos became “politically very conscious”** in the context of a **military dictatorship and constant repression**.

After being **detained and spending time in prison**, he returned to Euskadi in the 1980s, a return that deeply shocked him. Coming from a reality of extreme poverty and violence, he was surprised to find a Basque Country where people “lived well” but **the level of violence was so high**, which caused him **great disorientation**.

He also felt that his experience in El Salvador gave him a certain **immunity to speak critically about the violent actions** carried out by various groups. This frustrated him, as he regretted that others who thought similarly could not speak out without fear: “Come on, what’s going on? So I can say it, but others who think like me can’t?”.

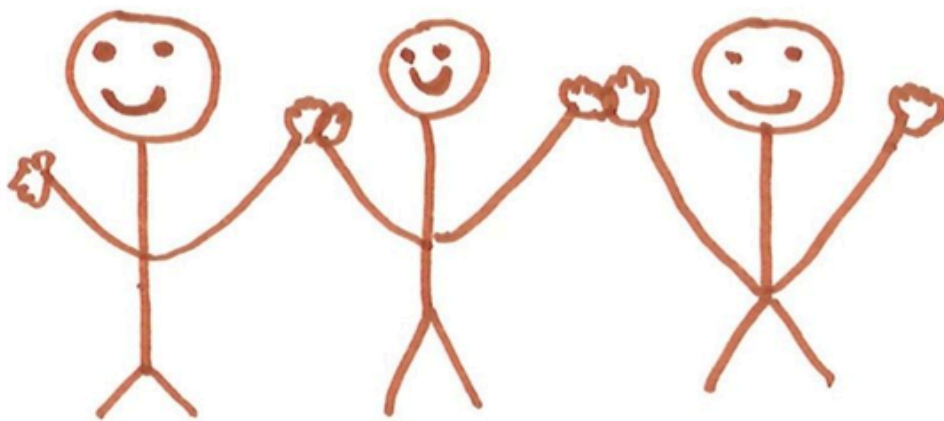
Finally, Carlos expresses surprise at the **slow process of reconciliation in the Basque Country** after the end of violence, the persistence of **taboos, and the lack of genuine “encounters between victims and perpetrators.”** He finds it striking that, thirteen years later, some people and groups still struggle to talk about these issues and that **society has not engaged in deeper self-criticism**. In his view, this lack of reflection may stem from fear or from the pain of “admitting that maybe it wasn’t worth it.”

In one of his recent projects on the role of journalists and the media during the Transition and in the context of politically motivated violence, he highlights that “**there are still people who don’t want to talk, people who still don’t dare to speak.**”





BAKEA  
PEACE



ASKATASUNA  
ZORIONTASUNA



VOTE FOR ALL



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# CONCLUSION



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The testimonies gathered in the Ties of Freedom Intergenerational Booklet offer a powerful insight into the lived experiences that shaped democratic transformations in different parts of Europe. Although each story reflects a specific national context and a unique personal trajectory, together they reveal common themes that resonate across borders: the struggle for freedom, the search for dignity, and the effort to build societies based on rights, participation and respect.

Through the storytelling workshops organised within the Ties of Freedom project, individuals who lived through authoritarian regimes, political violence, migration or profound social change were invited to share their memories and reflections. These encounters created a space where personal experiences could be recognised and preserved, allowing participants to articulate how historical events affected their daily lives, their families and their communities. By collecting these testimonies, the project contributes to safeguarding memories that might otherwise fade with time.

The stories presented in this book demonstrate that history is not only made of major political decisions or institutional reforms. It is also shaped by everyday experiences: the fear of speaking openly, the silence imposed by repression, the courage to resist injustice, or the difficult choices involved in leaving one's country in search of safety or opportunity. These individual perspectives remind us that the transition to democracy was not a simple or uniform process. In many cases, it was marked by uncertainty, contradictions and long-lasting consequences that continue to influence societies today.

Sharing these memories was not always easy. For some participants, revisiting the past meant recalling painful experiences linked to repression, conflict, displacement or discrimination. While many felt a strong motivation to transmit their stories and leave a message for the future, others found it difficult to speak openly about events that still carry emotional weight. These reactions underline the deeply personal nature of memory and the importance of approaching these narratives with respect, empathy and care.

Despite the diversity of experiences represented in the testimonies, several common concerns emerge. Many participants emphasised how fragile democratic freedoms can be and how easily they can be lost when fear, intolerance or authoritarian ideas gain ground. Their accounts are a reminder that rights such as freedom of expression, political participation and social equality were not automatically granted, but rather achieved through long struggles and collective efforts.

The testimonies also reveal how the consequences of authoritarianism, violence or displacement often persist long after political transitions have formally taken place. Silence, mistrust and unresolved memories can remain present within families and communities for decades. In this sense, remembering and speaking about the past becomes an important step toward understanding how societies change and how they can move forward.

At the same time, many stories are also testimonies of resilience. Participants describe acts of solidarity, courage and determination that helped them and their communities confront difficult circumstances. These experiences show that democratic values are sustained not only through institutions and laws, but also through everyday actions that promote respect, dialogue and mutual support.

While the storytelling sessions brought together people willing to share their experiences, the purpose of this booklet goes further. By compiling these testimonies, the project seeks to open a dialogue with younger generations who did not experience these historical moments directly. For many young readers, the realities described in these pages may seem distant or even difficult to imagine. Yet understanding these experiences is essential for recognising the value of the democratic rights and freedoms that exist today.

In this sense, the Ties of Freedom Intergenerational Booklet serves as an educational tool that helps young people engage with the past through the voices of those who lived it. These testimonies encourage reflection on how democracy was built, how it can be weakened, and why it requires constant care and participation. At the same time, they contribute to a broader effort to document and transmit memories of Europe's democratic transformations, supporting discussions on historical memory, civic participation, and democratic institutions. The stories collected here invite readers not only to remember, but also to question, discuss, and critically engage with the challenges that democratic societies continue to face.

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ASOCIATIA  
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