

"Cancer and Time: The EU's Horizon Mission to Outpace the Disease and Transform Future Care"

By Davide Colombo

The concept of waiting is truly multifaceted, and it is not easy to capture the contrasting emotions generated by it and at the same time maintain its beautifulness. I will help myself with two allegories. In the wild, waiting is steeped in survival. It's an active form of stillness, where every sense is heightened, every muscle ready to spring into action. The tension rises in the quietness of an autumn forest or in a plain sight of an open field, where the soft rustle of dead leaves and the snap of a twig can shift the balance between life and death. A dance between a predator and a prey is staged there. The fox, with its sharp focus and stealth, represents the waiting of strategy and precision. Meanwhile, the hare embodies the vulnerability of waiting, its awareness of danger looming but powerless to anticipate the exact moment it will need to flee. In that space, time almost



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ceases to exist—it's purely instinct and reaction, eat or being eaten.

In contrast, the waiting for a love encounter is wrapped in a different kind of tension. Here, time stretches out and teases, emotions swelling with each tick of the clock. It's the anticipation of something joyous but unknown, where impatience is tangled with hope and desire. The mind fixates on those small details—what to wear, what to say, how the other person might react—making every second feel longer. Yet, unlike the predator and prey dynamic, where waiting is edged with fear and survival, waiting in love is filled with promise, with the nervous flutter of something wonderful just out of reach. Time bends differently here, refusing to move forward quickly enough, making the moments before a first meeting feel like an eternity. It is a



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matter of being desired or rejected, of making the right impression or appearing out of place.

In both cases, waiting is filled with expectation, but the outcome—whether thrilling or terrifying—depends on the space and the subjects involved. Whether in nature's cycle of predator and prey or in the delicate dance of human emotions, waiting is the threshold between what is and what could be.

My thoughts about time have been shaped in all these years by reading a lot about it, and I noticed it is almost impossible to read something and find time as a marginal element, because time is a fundamental element to any story. A story doesn't exist without a beginning, a middle and an end, a flashback or a time leap.



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Sometimes the stories are not fulfilled only with time, but they have time as the main character. Countless stories and books revolve around this idea of waiting. I'm reminded of E.A. Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, where fear steadily builds as a slow, inevitable mechanism inches toward its deadly purpose, capturing the terror of being trapped and condemned. Some stories offer a different take on time, mixing it with regret and sadness, like Italo Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno*. The protagonist, Zeno, reflects on the spiral of his life—a stroke of luck at a casino, his feigned suicide, and his return home for a petty act of revenge against his ex-wife and mother-in-law. He even warns her new husband about the challenges of marriage with these women. Then, there's Alexandre Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo*, one of my personal favourites, where time has



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the taste of revenge. It tells the tale of Edmond Dantès, a sailor who found himself caught in a conspiracy to hide particular secrets regarding Napoleon's last days in exile and the action of some prominent figures of the French Empire. To hide the truth, he was unjustly imprisoned. After years in Château d'If, he escapes, discovers an incredible treasure, and meticulously plans his revenge against those who betrayed him. Another great example is *Il Deserto dei Tartari* by Dino Buzzati, where time becomes the silent master of soldiers at the remote Fortress Bastianini. The protagonist, Lieutenant Drogo, spends his life waiting for an attack from the Empire's enemies, hoping for any sign of battle to justify his years of anticipation. But when the battle finally comes, Drogo is too ill and old and weak to fight, and he is sent back to the intern to leave his place to more



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young soldiers. He will die away from the battlefield, leaving the fame to others. His lifetime of waiting, once so filled with purpose, reveals itself as wasted time. Time and love dance again together in Shakespeare's most famous romantic tragedy, *Romeo And Juliet*. Here, time plays a cruel joke on the young lovers. If only Romeo had waited a minute or two after seeing Juliet's body, he wouldn't have taken the poison. The same goes for poor Juliet. Not all waiting is the same, not for all poets, nor for all poetries. For Alfred Noyes, in *The Highwayman*, it is a reminder of the impossibility of changing events that have already happened. In the poem, Bess waits for her lover to return, but tragically, soldiers come to ambush him. She sacrifices herself to warn him, and though they don't meet again in life, the poem ends with their ghostly spirits reuniting every night in eternity.



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All these stories share a common theme: time and waiting. Without time, the pendulum would never strike our deepest fears, Zeno wouldn't recognize the futility of escaping his life, and Dantès wouldn't realize that revenge cannot return lost years. My mother often said that time is the greatest architect: give dough time to rise, and it will bake; give a seed time to grow, and it will become a plant. Even nature mixes with time, just think about the fact that the butterfly is just the result of time working on a caterpillar. Time is so strong to shape the rocks, gently wearing down rough edges until they become smooth, like a stone polished by water, using nothing more than wind, cold, rain and sunlight.

Waiting is a forced path to perfection of results, of shapes and of intents. From time's perspective, waiting is just the natural flow—it's neither good nor bad, just motion. Yet time

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reminds us that it waits for no one and waiting is not always wise in every occasion. This is a crucial lesson: waiting for change isn't always productive—sometimes, action is needed. When it comes to sustainability, we've already waited too long. Time in this case is not our friend, it is an incubator for chaos and future cries, mostly due to our unbearable behaviour. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and floods are all warnings from time itself, saying, *"I'm running out for you. Flee to the hills—the storm is coming."* Fortunately, organizations like Easysustainability and the EU understand this urgency and have tried over the past few years to erect a barrier to protect the population and biodiversity from these changes.



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EU and green commitment, in particular the EU Green Deal, have a long story and sometimes has passed since the first step has been taken. Before the European Green Deal, the EU was already taking decisive action to address climate change through its 2020 Climate and Energy Package and other initiatives. Adopted in 2008, this package set ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20%, increasing the share of renewable energy to 20%, and improving energy efficiency by 20% by the year 2020. One of the key tools was the Emissions Trading System (ETS), launched in 2005, which aimed to limit CO₂ emissions from industries by setting a cap on total emissions. The EU also played a major role in the Paris Agreement of 2015, committing to limit global warming well below 2°C. In 2014, the 2030 Climate and Energy Framework was introduced,



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raising targets to a 40% reduction in emissions by 2030. These early efforts laid the groundwork for the European Green Deal, which expanded the EU's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. The final stage of this long journey within the EU is the launch of Horizon projects, marking not just a milestone, but a race against time—like the last grain of sand slipping through an hourglass.

The Horizon project needs to be a sprint, not a marathon, because it demands swift action and immediate results. Delays could mean missed opportunities in innovation and competitiveness, making speed crucial to achieving its ambitious goals. Horizon Europe, the EU's flagship research and innovation program, has a budget of €93.5 billion for 2021-2027, according to the Multiannual Financial Framework Midterm Review. It tackles climate change,



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supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and boosts Europe's competitiveness and growth. Horizon promotes collaboration and maximizes the impact of research to address global challenges and shape EU policies. It fosters job creation, nurtures talent, and strengthens economic growth, ensuring Europe remains competitive and innovative. The aim is to generate and share cutting-edge knowledge and technology while building a more resilient European Research Area. All these goals are deeply intertwined with time—time to save the oceans, time to restore biodiversity, time to stop unsustainable behaviours. Yet governments often act as though they have limitless time to address environmental issues. Political terms, typically, last five to ten years, but sustainability requires a longer view. Politicians often focus on short-term



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gains, and many people think similarly, only becoming aware of environmental dangers when they directly affect their surroundings, like during floods or storms. The average person often lacks a deep understanding of biodiversity, leading to inaction until disaster strikes nearby. But nature has its ways of reminding us of who's in charge. Mismanagement, biodiversity loss, and pollution degrade life's quality and cause long-term health issues for both humans and animals. Over the last century, we've witnessed a rise in diseases linked to environmental decline, including the alarming increase of cancer. This disease spares no one—it affects people of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds, placing an immense burden on patients, families, and society. According to the European Cancer Information System, 2.7 million people in Europe are



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diagnosed with cancer each year, and 1.3 million die from it. Without action, new cases could rise to 3.24 million by 2040.

The EU's Cancer Mission is working to reverse this trend. By bringing together citizens, stakeholders, and Member States, the Cancer Mission - alongside Europe's Beating Cancer Plan - aims to deepen our understanding of cancer, enhance early diagnosis, and improve treatments. Ultimately, it seeks to improve the quality of life for patients during and after their treatment. This effort is just one of five key Horizon projects, along with initiatives to protect oceans and restore biodiversity. To tackle these challenges, the EU breaks down its goals into smaller, more achievable missions, following the strategy of "divide and conquer." In total, there are four primary objectives:

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- Understanding cancer
- Prevention and early detection
- Diagnosis and treatment
- Improving the quality of life for patients and their families

The first goal is to understand how cancer develops in relation to environmental factors like air pollution, occupational risks, diet, and socio-economic conditions, as well as genetic predispositions. The second goal focuses on advancing prevention and early detection by studying cancer risk factors and enhancing population-based screening programs. The third objective is to optimize diagnostics and treatments, ensuring equitable access to advanced research and minimally invasive, personalized



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therapies with fewer side effects. The Cancer Mission will also support the creation of a Network of Comprehensive Cancer Infrastructures (CCIs) by 2025, which will establish quality standards across the EU and promote cancer research, training, and public awareness. One key initiative is the development of the European Cancer Patient Digital Centre (ECPDC), where patients and survivors can securely access and share their clinical data. This project also supports various initiatives to measure and improve cancer patients' quality of life, backed by PanEuropean consortia like EUonQoL and PanCare. Through these efforts, the EU aims to ensure that cancer care isn't just about survival, but also about enhancing the quality of life during and after treatment. How can all these initiatives, goals,



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organizations, and projects be embraced and developed across all levels of society?

The Cancer Mission functions similarly to other Horizon initiatives. The EU is striving to develop a unified strategy that includes participation from all sectors of society - from individuals and groups to NGOs and businesses. Cooperation and a shared culture of collaboration are essential for engaging as many stakeholders as possible, financing promising projects, and maintaining high standards throughout the processes, while also monitoring research activities and organizations. The foundation of all projects is societal acceptance and a positive response from the community. There are several small NGOs across the

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EU dedicated to raising awareness on the importance about cancer prevention by promoting healthy lifestyles, environmental sustainability and social well-being, like:

- *The ECL* (European Cancer Leagues), a network of national and regional cancer leagues that not only focuses on cancer care and research, but also on prevention.
- *The Enrich*, another NGO focused on community engagement for cancer prevention. The main educational pillars are a balanced diet, regular exercise, smoking cessation, and minimizing exposure to environmental pollutants. This NGO is a good example of how collaboration with a larger body can be crucial for spreading awareness, like the collaboration with the



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European Code Against Cancer, which provides a simple set of recommendations to help people reduce their cancer risks.

- *Easysustainability* is an Italian NGO dedicated to promoting sustainability and biodiversity conservation through eco-friendly practices. Its mission centres on raising awareness about the crucial link between a healthy environment and cancer prevention. The organization utilizes editorial content, social media, and its website to spread this message, fostering a culture of sustainability. Made up of volunteers from around the world, Easysustainability addresses sustainability from multiple angles, engaging in editorial projects, Erasmus collaborations, and educational tutorials, all aimed at protecting the environment and promoting



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eco-conscious behaviours not only in civil society, but also in corporates and institutions through green jobs.

The illusion of having infinite time when it comes to cancer is not just childish—it's dangerous. In this scenario, we are the prey, like poor Zeno or the anonymous prisoner at the bottom of Edgar Allan Poe's fictional pit. The time to act is now, both for cancer and the environment. The hardest step is often the first, but what could it be? First, it's important to understand the EU initiatives and actively support cancer associations, both national and local. Many of these are located near hospitals and clinics, where cancer patients and their families can find moral and financial support. Great support comes from national associations committed to prevention, such as L.I.L.T., the Italian Association for the Fight Against Tumours, or the A.N.T. Foundation, which



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offers, among other services, home medical assistance to oncology patients. There are numerous associations, both in Italy and around the world, that bear the responsibility of fighting cancer with the help of hospitals and the efforts of volunteers. Sometimes, the inability to make a significant impact in the fight against cancer leads some people to view it as something distant from their lives. However, these associations are the first to fill the gap in medical systems that are sometimes unprepared to intervene immediately when it comes to cancer. It is important to recognize that even a small donation or volunteer work from a single citizen can make a difference. The second step should be adopting a more environmentally friendly lifestyle, as a green culture is essential to preventing harmful habits. Good habits like eating less meat, engaging in more physical



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activity, and avoiding stressful situations can play a significant role in cancer prevention. Studies have shown that consuming large amounts of red and processed meats can increase the risk of certain cancers. Reducing meat consumption, particularly processed meats, and focusing on plant-based diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes can help lower cancer risk by providing essential nutrients and antioxidants that support a healthy immune system. Reducing meat consumption should be paired with an increase in regular physical activity. Exercise has been shown to reduce the risk of various types of cancer, including breast, colon, and endometrial cancers. It helps maintain a healthy weight, and improves immune function, all of which can reduce cancer risk. Being active also helps improve overall well-being and reduces



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inflammation, a factor linked to cancer development. A healthier lifestyle also leads to less stress. Chronic stress can weaken the immune system and lead to inflammation, which may increase the risk of cancer. Stress can also result in unhealthy coping behaviours, such as poor eating habits, lack of physical activity, and smoking—all of which contribute to higher cancer risks. Managing stress through techniques like meditation, yoga, and mindfulness can help reduce these risks and support overall health.

It's important to understand that every small action matters in protecting our lives, as each action has an impact on the environment. Delaying action and failing to adopt sustainable habits would be a waste of precious resources and time—two things we can no longer afford to squander.

As Dino Buzzati wisely wrote in *Il Deserto dei Tartari*: "Time



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is the most precious thing we have, yet we waste it as if it were infinite." The truth is, we don't have endless time, but we can begin today. By educating ourselves and embracing responsible social behaviours, we can better prepare for the future, avoiding the barren desert that awaits if we don't act.

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