



2012 -2022

Ten years, ten stories

European Young Leaders
programme

Introduction

Ten years ago, motivated by the urgent need to tackle the increasing disconnect between citizens and policymakers, and to rebuild the trust that is vital to democracies, Friends of Europe crafted a leadership programme unlike any other: the European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme.

Building on the understanding that diverse voices make better policy, we wanted to craft a pan-European programme that not only involved policymakers, civil society and business but also included the voices of artists and athletes, unicorn entrepreneurs, leading journalists, activists and scientists. And so, we brought together **a diverse selection of young leaders** from different nationalities, backgrounds and political viewpoints for the first time in 2012. It is the group's growing dynamism that has allowed these committed and engaged leaders to exchange, debate and form ideas on how to **better serve their communities, challenge traditional policy outcomes and rebuild trust with citizens.**

By crossing these borders and boundaries, we have been able to build a supportive community that looks beyond exchanges of pleasantries and business cards, and rather towards **genuine connection and collaboration.** Even outside of programme activities, the young leaders support and team up with one another. It's fantastic to watch this trusted environment among peers grow and evolve.

When asked to describe the EYL40 programme in one word, I would respond without hesitation: "Inspiring." The leaders who are enrolled in the programme represent **an alternative leadership for an inspiring Europe.** They represent real change.

To celebrate the programme's anniversary, **we travelled through the past ten years and shared ten inspiring stories,** presenting one European Young Leader from each class, their biggest leadership challenge and their hopes for the future of Europe.

I hope you will enjoy this journey as much as we did.



Nathalie Furrer
Director of the EYL40 programme

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Lindsey Nefesh-Clarke



A towering figure in the world of women's empowerment and information technology, Lindsey Nefesh-Clarke, alumna of the EYL40 Class of 2012, is a British CEO and Founder of the Women's WorldWide Web (W4), an online crowdfunding platform dedicated to protecting girls' and women's empowerment in developing and developed countries around the world, promoting human rights and access to technology.

The mission of W4 is to enable socially minded investors to contribute – either financially through crowdfunding or in-kind through mentoring and skills sharing – to innovative grassroots projects that empower girls and women in terms of access to information and communications technology (ICT) but also in education and training, healthcare, financial services, culture and the environment.

This latter aspect is now very much at the fore of W4, as the platform works with UN agencies and other organisations to drive the green digital transition that Nefesh-Clarke is convinced is needed. She founded W4 in 2010 upon graduating from business school – having previously worked in human rights and microfinance – and joined the EYL40 network in 2012.

Asked what the EYL40 programme has brought her, she takes a metaphorical deep breath. "It's impossible to express and do justice in a few words to the myriad ways that I've benefited," she says. **"I've met so many incredibly inspiring people!** Professionally, thanks to opportunities to participate in EYL40 events, explore partnerships, contribute to publications and collaborate on projects, **my work and career have taken a quantum leap,**" she goes on, noting that W4 is now a co-founder, in partnership with other

organisations working in the field, of a global programme to promote girls' and women's digital inclusion, equality and leadership.

"This is a chance to really move the needle," she says. "As societies undergo the digital transformation and we work to promote inclusive, sustainable development, girls and women must be equal participants. **Our common future depends on it.**"

"Where I am today is in great part a result of how I've grown thanks to EYL40," she remarks. In the current geopolitical situation, when it would be easy to despair, she is "deeply grateful" for the EYL40's "precious community [...]" and the **opportunity to collectively work toward peace.**"

All this feeds into her diagnosis of current leadership challenges. **"In the past, I would have said the greatest challenge was managing humanitarian programmes in autocratic countries and contexts where leaders systematically violate human rights,"** she says. "Today, within the framework of a multi-stakeholder partnership between W4, the International Telecommunication Union and others, **the priority is to close the global and gender digital divides.**"

In the end, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced her conviction that W4 was on the right track. "Before, I was clueless about topics relating to the environment and zoonotic spillover," she recalls. "There was so much I didn't see coming. **The pandemic threw into sharp relief the link between the protection of girls' and women's rights and their empowerment, and sustainability.** Digital equity underpins all this," she stresses. "Pre-pandemic, my work sought to promote greater gender parity in leadership – and the tragic consequences and repercussions of the pandemic drove home how urgently the world needs to achieve this."

The Russian war against Ukraine has also brought things more into focus: **"I believe the future of our planet urgently depends on a new kind of leadership** if we are to survive this violent 'strongmen' era and the threat of nuclear catastrophe. It depends on courageous leaders driving an inclusive digital green transition and, I believe, espousing feminist foreign policy." As an "unabashed idealist" she hopes that "Europe will emerge stronger and more unified, as **a geopolitically stronger and irresistible moral force in the world,** upholding the values on which the EU was founded: democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, equality, unity and solidarity" and that "the EU will be a global leader in driving a global digital green transition and embrace a common feminist foreign policy, building a future where the threats of nuclear Armageddon and environmental, planetary catastrophe are like relics in museums."

Perspective is also provided by the multi-disciplinary nature of the EYL40 network. "The EYL40 programme brings together a richly diverse, pan-European community; it's an incredible chance to meet and learn from passionate and visionary leaders from a diversity of cultures and sectors, with great opportunities to work together," she says. **"It's been transformative for me. I never really thought of myself as a leader," she admits. "I just did my work.** My background is in humanitarian work and I fell into the domain of digital inclusion and equality while managing programmes in informal settlements in the Philippines. "Thanks to EYL40, I've connected with inspiring leaders with **a wealth of vision, determination, strength, integrity and passion.** I derive courage and inspiration from their examples."

The programme has also encouraged her to embrace her own role. "Irrespective of our political affiliations, the EYL40s share the values that underlie the EU project, and we all aspire to a peaceful, prosperous Europe and world," she says. "The programme has made me acutely aware that each of us, even at the seemingly most modest individual level, can influence outcomes, to build the future we aspire to in Europe and globally." She particularly praises the EYL40 programme's "citizen-centric" focus: **"It's about creating real, positive impact in people's lives and for our planet, bringing together diverse cultures and sectors,** and fostering dialogue and the co-creation of solutions to challenges that we all face."

"An opportunity to collectively work towards peace"

To the leaders of tomorrow, her advice is "courage!" – a nod to her country of residence, France. "I'm European, born in Britain, with some Italian-Maltese-Egyptian in the mix, with the privilege of living and working in France," she explains. "To borrow a quote I came across: **'Courage is another word for heart – or navigating leadership.' We need compassionate leaders who walk the talk.**" She also cites the play "The Arsonists" by Swiss writer Max Frisch, an absurdist satire published in 1953 that depicts moral weakness in the face of evil, and which was supposed to allude to the rise of fascism or to the atomic bomb. It remains, says Nefesh-Clarke, "a cautionary tale for the world we're navigating today."

The cross-sectoral approach – combining experts with laypeople, politicians and citizens – has, she says, "enabled me to better understand how my own work to promote digital equity and gender equality fits into the European and global picture and is linked to a host of other crucial issues. It has powerfully taught me how my actions as a citizen and in my professional work – and you could apply this to everyone, really – can truly shape societal values, influence political outcomes and even, ultimately, contribute to socio-economic and environmental progress, geopolitical stability and peace." Asked to describe the EYL40 network in one word, she does not hesitate: **"Hope!"**

Rokhaya Diallo



Rokhaya Diallo, alumna of the EYL40 Class of 2013, is a journalist, filmmaker and human rights activist committed to anti-racism work. She hosted and co-edited “Egaux, mais pas trop” (“Equal, but not too much”), a series of reports on diversity issues in France, and has previously held a number of noteworthy positions in the television field. Widely lauded for her work in favour of racial and gender equality, and exposing injustices in these and other areas, Diallo has become one of France’s most prominent figures in this space.

Leadership can take many forms but as a journalist – and potential opinion leader – Rokhaya Diallo sees the main challenge in her own sector as “ensuring attention is paid to questions that don’t get enough of it, especially in Europe.”

Lending her voice to causes that she sees as unjustly marginalised, her own approach spans both the theoretical and the eminently practical.

One recent instance is the petition against Muslim (and Jewish) children being forced to eat school meals containing pork or not eat at all. In the face of resistance by some mayors to the idea of alternative or exclusively vegetarian menus, parents in schools where pork is often the only choice have launched an online petition to demand alternatives. Diallo is among the prominent figures to have backed the petition and encouraged others to sign it.

At the same time, she is making a name in France as a public intellectual, theorising on issues such as the need to question “European universalism” – the idea that ostensibly universal values (civilisation, progress or development) are in some way uniquely enshrined in Europe. Many see this view as a smokescreen for

“Maintaining these links has helped me to understand some issues and perspectives”

Western intervention and dominance to this day. The need to ensure a broader media focus, Diallo says, is an issue for journalists but also for society as a whole and one that should be top of mind for leaders in the sector. It is, she says, all about “being able to voice the consciousness of people who are not usually seen and heard, taking the initiative, going to places that the media usually don’t.”

That all fits with what she says is her hope for the future of Europe: that it will be possible to tackle the far-right and its political parties “that are appearing everywhere” and which she perceives as the biggest political threat in Europe at the moment. “We need to convince people that the far-right does not have answers to their problems,” she says firmly.

Against that backdrop, Diallo’s advice to anyone who would like to become a European leader of tomorrow is to make an effort to really listen to the population, their hopes and anxieties. “The biggest crisis is people feeling that they’re not being listened to, that there is an elite that has switched off or misunderstood them,” she says.

The COVID-19 pandemic, she recalls, served as a reminder of the importance of leaders getting the basics right when it comes to dealing with human beings who, whatever their potential, are also vulnerable.

“For everyone, and for leaders above all, it was a question of priorities,” she says. “Taking care of each other and of oneself – it is something that was very concrete and a priority.” It should, she adds, remain a priority in the wake of the pandemic.

Diallo stresses that the EYL40 programme not only helped her to reflect on her own approach to leadership but also fed into her views on political leadership in general.

“It’s above all a space to meet, to be open to different problems and subjects,” she explains. “As a journalist, it has helped me to understand these.”

The cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary nature of the EYL40 network has at times benefited Diallo in her work. “Of course, as a journalist I am already in contact with a wide range of people, although I’ve seen other people’s careers benefit greatly from being in this network,” she says. “But maintaining these links has helped me to understand some issues and perspectives.”

More than once, she admits, she has had the occasion to make use of information from, or even quoted, another EYL40 network member in an article or report of hers.

Asked to describe the EYL40 network in one word, Diallo chooses “dynamic” – a term that could equally apply to her own brainstorming approach to her work, but which here reflects the multifarious and at times unpredictable benefits of being a part of the EYL40 family.

Diallo does have some suggestions for the network’s future as well. “As a French person, I would be happy if the EYL40 could reach out to France’s overseas territories, which are on four continents” – to more actively seek out potential future European Young Leaders in regions whose physical remoteness from national and European decision-making centres mirrors the social and political distance from power of so many people who live in geographical Europe itself.

Christel Heydemann



Christel Heydemann, alumna of the EYL40 Class of 2014, is the CEO of Orange renowned for her experience in the telecoms sector and in managing business transformations, and the second woman at this level of responsibility in the entire CAC 40 Stock market.

As CEO of Orange since April 2022, Christel Heydemann leads a company whose operations span not just Europe, but also much of Africa. Her move to the French telecommunications giant is the latest step in her rapid rise in the sector: from Alcatel, she joined Schneider Electric in 2014 – the same year she was named a European Young Leader. Three years after that, she became Schneider's Vice President for Europe Operations, the post in which she had to face up to the pandemic.

"It was something that nobody thought would happen," she recalls. "Employees' expectation of the company increased: people were scared and needed support. The link with the company and being able to work was very important."

The period highlighted companies' role in society, even if leadership has always been about being prepared. "As a leader, managing through crises has always been at the top," she says. "But mental health and health generally became an issue – for example, when employees had to work in the field, they had to be protected." In the wake of the pandemic, leaders are dealing with changing attitudes towards work.

"Now we expect new ways of working, mixing personal and professional times," says Heydemann, citing the phrase 'The Great Resignation' – the trend reported in many countries for workers to resign in large numbers, without necessarily rushing to find a new job. "I've not met one CEO where I'm not talking about the need to attract talent," she admits.

Now, the war in Ukraine and soaring inflation are highlighting the interdependence of societies. **"All these crises show the links between the company and the rest of society,"** she reiterates. "We are highly dependent on suppliers and the ability to connect with other sectors."

Resilience and security – including cybersecurity – have emerged as crucial, with telecoms central to that. "The sector was shown to have even more responsibility," she says. "The war in Ukraine and the geopolitical context of security and sovereignty means this is a very high priority." Against that backdrop, EU policymakers' longstanding approach of prioritising competition is, in her view, still inappropriate.

"European policy for telecom has been focused on

price, which has held back investment," she argues. **"So, there's a disconnect between 5G ambitions and the regulatory environment.** Europe is a highly fragmented market compared with the US."

EU officials should, she says, recognise the sector's strategic importance and the pressures it faces. "There is rising inflation in telecoms, which are more than ever critical for citizens," she says. "And what about the link between Europe and Africa? We've never been more important to society."

The multiplicity of crises presents many new challenges. **"We live in a highly complex world: even things we took for granted are now at stake,"** says Heydemann. "As a CEO, this context is very important. "In this highly uncertain environment, more than ever, we need leaders with vision and the ability to attract and engage people with different opinions," she adds, acknowledging that the situation is "even more difficult for political leaders" compared with a few decades back.

"There's a question mark over 'what is Europe?'" she asserts. "It's not easy to get the mechanics working. I hope that we overcome the Ukraine situation and energy crisis – and that we can leverage the current environment to go beyond individual country approaches. "Europe's diversity means that there is only one way to move forward: for the more privileged to support, or bring on, the less privileged," she continues. "The EU was created in the wake of World War Two, and if we can't cope with the war in Ukraine, **there's a question mark over the future of Europe. I don't think Europe can be the same after this war.**"

"I hope all countries' leaders are convinced of the need for Europe, but with specific topics, the detail is more difficult," she concludes ruefully.

In Heydemann's corporate roles, she has had regular interactions with EU officials, and she describes the

EYL40 programme as "a good base" for this. While her perspective on leadership "has been shaped more by my work experiences" – from overseeing human resources at Alcatel through to Orange – EYL40 did offer "exposure to other European leaders, European construction – beyond what we can read in the media, which is always biased."

EYL40 participants, she notes, are "convinced of the need to tackle problems at a European level" and aware of what this requires. "Whatever it says in the books, leadership matters: the need to build trust," she says.

On whether the multi-disciplinary nature of the EYL40 network has shaped her understanding of issues, she is clear: "Absolutely! It brings together businesspeople, politicians, scientist, artists, entrepreneurs and large companies. It's very useful because it brings us back to individuals, and **understanding each other's stories and perspectives helps us understand the environment we're in.**"

In her view, France and Germany – the traditional engines of European integration – are "the two most complex countries to connect" but programmes such as EYL40 embrace other perspectives.

"I had a fantastic meeting in Rome in 2014," she recalls. "It was great to spend time with all the leaders – we took part in some games on roles relating to Europe. "I've always been a convinced European citizen, even if in my daily work life I am not always focused on that. But EYL40 helped create that background for me as a leader."

Asked to describe the EYL40 network in a few words, she responds with: **"A very diverse group of leaders, all convinced of the need for a stronger Europe, but also the challenges that Europe is facing, what they can contribute."** And in two words? "European commitment," she replies, without hesitation.

"We need leaders with vision and the ability to attract and engage people with different opinions"

Ivan Stefunko



Selected as a 2015-2016 EYL40 member when he was a serial entrepreneur, Ivan Stefunko co-founded and became the first chairman of Progresivne Slovensko, a social-liberal pro-European political movement that saw the President of Slovakia and a European Parliament VP elected, as well as committed itself to transforming the education system, extending same-sex marriage rights and introducing better well-being to Slovakia.

A long-time entrepreneur and business angel, Ivan Stefunko still prefers to describe himself as a political activist – a status cemented in 2018 when **he helped found Progressive Slovakia**, as social-liberal and pro-European movement whose vote share has waxed and waned, but which boasts the election of the current president as one of its successes.

Though Stefunko has stepped back from frontline politics, he is the first to admit that, in Slovakia, he is still known as “a super-Euro-optimist”. He dates this ‘European’ outlook back to well before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when he had the opportunity – unusual for the time – to travel to cities across the continent with his engineer father.

Nevertheless, his 2015-2016 stint as a European Young Leader was a milestone for him, both personally and professionally. “EYL40 was a great opportunity and helped me a lot,” Stefunko says. “It enriched me intellectually. Before, I was just in Slovakia or I was working in a particular business area, so the programme helped me to understand many other international positions.

“It was also interdisciplinary, so you learn a lot very fast,” he adds. **“People need to go outside their bubbles.”** That particular conviction was only reinforced during the pandemic.

“It was really difficult to ‘meet’ and lead as there was no personal interaction,” Stefunko recalls. “Discussions became very rational, with little emotion. And **social media channelled many bad things, irrationality** – people became even more closed in their bubbles.” All the more need, then, for an idealistic approach to leadership.

“In all my ventures I have been lucky to be surrounded by people who are better than me in their own field,” he explains. “So, it was not just a working relationship but united behind a shared vision. Leadership is about reminding them daily of that vision.”

In terms of what the EYL40 programme meant to him, he is effusive. “I was formally a leader at 22 [running a newspaper] so I was used to managing people,” he points out. “But when you meet so many others, you see that you haven’t achieved so very much. **So many**

“So many people that I met are role models to me”

people that I met there are role models to me: their strength, courage or intellectual capacity.”

It is not just the initial participation, but the follow-up contacts and events, for professional purposes or just to obtain new vistas. “I have used – not abused – this network so many times: say, meeting a venture capitalist from a Nordic country, which helps me to find an investor or understand how to go forward in different business space,” Stefunko says. “And every day we have a WhatsApp discussion with more than 200 former EYL40s about different issues and initiatives.”

During the pandemic, Stefunko missed the usual periodic in-person reunions greatly, and since they restarted, he has made the most of them: “These weekends are extremely intellectually stimulating, but you don’t get a lot of sleep!”

As for what the EYL40 programme brought him in terms of a better understanding of the EU and its relations with the rest of the world, it is more the latter than the former.

“My academic field was European studies and I worked on Euractiv [a pan-European media network specialised in EU policies] so I was well informed,” he recalls. “But in terms of transatlantic and MENA [Middle East and North Africa] issues, it helped a lot.”

To people who have not heard of EYL40, Stefunko describes it as a programme that was, and continues to be, intellectually very important to him. He is, he says, eternally grateful and “very honoured” to have been nominated to what was “a super group” of young leaders. As well as all the networking, some “true friendships” have arisen from it.

“I would really like to thank Friends of Europe and its supporters for this initiative,” he stresses. “As an entrepreneur, I know there are products that bring a profit and others that don’t. **This one only has a**

long-term return.” He employs a favourite phrase to describe the EYL40 programme: it is, he says, “**political altruism**”.

With EYL40 and other such programmes, he stresses, the question arises of how to make it sustainable – or even scale it up. “When I was at Euractiv, I had the chance to meet the founder of the Erasmus programme,” he recounts. “We discussed how it could be replicated – for example, for businesses or in other areas.

“How to extend such programmes to other groups of people?” he muses. “It’s not easy to make them sustainable. They’re not elitist as such, but could we redefine what we mean by ‘leader?’”

As for what he wants for the future of Europe, he has an original take: “That Europe will never ask itself if it has a meaning.” **The EU cannot, he argues, be “constantly questioning its own existence” if it wants to move forward with self-confidence.** “The EU is a great project that doesn’t need modesty,” he says firmly.

More specifically, he laments the attitude – common in Slovakia, he says – of being in it for what one can get out of it.

“It’s because they joined 15 years after the end of communism, when the attitude was no longer optimistic, but rather, pragmatic,” he says of his homeland and other relatively new member states. “We take it as granted – the euro, Schengen...” The limitations of this approach are, he argues, now being laid bare.

“We were not the ones supporting other countries in the migration crisis,” he points out. “But now we are suffering because of gas prices – and now we want to discuss protection. **There is not much idealism and there should be.**”

Eneko Atxa



One of the youngest chefs to rise in the ranks of the restaurant world, and member of the EYL40 Class of 2017, Eneko Atxa has opened several restaurants in Spain, Japan, Portugal and Brussels, including the 3-star Michelin restaurant Azurmendi in Basque Country. His culinary endeavours champion sustainable practices, from rainwater collection to seed bank production, and have received distinctions from gastronomic gurus, including The World's 50 Best Restaurants, Elite Traveler and Fourchettes, among others.

There is no question that Eneko Atxa is a European and world leader in his chosen field of haute cuisine – and not just because of the many plaudits that he has won.

Azurmendi, the restaurant that he opened in 2007 in the scenic town of Larrabetzu in Spain's Basque Country, amassed three Michelin stars in just five years, and consistently places highly in global rankings. But this nationally and internationally renowned chef is not just highly skilled and creative, his cuisine is also deeply rooted in his homeland's culture, and he sets great store by being conscious of the impact of his work on its surroundings and ensuring that it is as positive as possible.

"Undoubtedly, one of the great challenges of leadership is trying to involve the people who are part of our team – with values such as excellence and commitment – but, above all, how to use the world of gastronomy as a transformative tool that goes beyond the simple search for pleasure and understand that [by] using knowledge we can contribute important values in sustainability, in health and in social commitment from our own field."

These are not just words: Azurmendi was in 2014 named the 'Most Sustainable Restaurant in the World' by the

compilers of The World's Best 50 Restaurants list and regularly features in or tops other 'most sustainable' rankings.

His own restaurant was built using recycled aluminium, glass, plastic and other materials, and has its own renewable energy systems to source around 50% of its energy, as well as relying on rainfall for the bulk of its water needs.

And as part of his commitment to preserving the natural world, Atxa teamed up with a local university and foundation to set up a seed bank in Larrabetzu for hundreds of local vegetable varieties, which is also aimed at raising awareness about the importance of preserving such wealth of genetic diversity.

This aspect of his own vision was not disrupted by the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but Atxa acknowledges that it did prompt many of those working in the industry to adjust their priorities.

"It changes the perception of people more than the leadership itself," he explains. **"People in the gastronomy sector understood that new ways had to be found in order to continue enjoying this exciting profession, but at the same time reconcile it with their personal life."**

"This has led us to change the focus of how we see the paths that lead us to achieve excellence and how we can optimise resources, our time, to be able to combine our passion for work with our more personal or family life," he goes on. "We have had to look for alternative ways, so as not to lose an entire young generation that loves this profession but is not willing, logically, to give up having time to dedicate to other more personal areas as well."

Looking back on his time in the EYL40 programme – he was named an EYL40 in 2017 – he recalls how it has helped him reflect on his approach to leadership and shaped his outlook in sometimes unexpected ways with an "understanding that knowledge is the most important tool we have to transform not only our world, but also

across the board to have the capacity to make our work available to society in areas of maximum global concern, such as sustainability, health and social commitment."

More generally, EYL40 also helped give him a better understanding of the EU and its relationship with Europe in the wider sense and the world.

"Seeing that there is so much multidisciplinary talent, with a sense of commitment and solidarity as its main axis, makes us rethink our way of understanding the world," he says.

That cross-sectoral nature of the EYL40 network has fed into his understanding of the world, while also serving to motivate him further.

"I think it is a forum to listen, to share and to know that our society has enormous potential based on the ideas of talented young people who really do dream of being able to transform Europe into a territory that is at the forefront of solidarity and social commitment, of sustainability, of health," he enthuses. "In short, to work towards the creation a better future."

On a personal level, it enabled him to "meet different people, from other disciplines, with very often absolutely different visions that allow you to look at the world in a different way."

Asked to summarise the EYL40 programme in just a word or two, he comes up with a few alternatives: **"plurality, solidarity, avant-garde.** A better world is definitely being built."

On that theme, in terms of his hopes for the future of Europe, his wish is for **"a fairer Europe, that believes in people and their well-being."**

He goes on: **"A Europe that does not discriminate, that puts people before its own interests, that believes in young people, and that at the same time values older people,"** warning to his theme. "A friendly, intelligent Europe, which must continue to be the example for the rest of the world's citizens to follow."

"Seeing that there is so much multidisciplinary talent makes us rethink our way of understanding the world"

Kaja Kallas



Kaja Kallas, the first female Prime Minister of Estonia, is a stalwart of European values and solidarity. Named among the TIME100 Next rising individuals, she is a strong voice of support for Ukraine and champions ambitious climate and energy policies. She was nominated as a European Young Leader in 2017 while serving in the European Parliament.

Kaja Kallas became prime minister of Estonia at the age of 43 in January 2021, right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over a year later, she was confronted by the unprecedented triple crisis represented by the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and soaring inflation.

Yet despite the threats to her tiny country – which was part of the Soviet Union only a little over three decades ago, and whose leaders are understandably nervous about the intentions of its giant neighbour, Russia – she professes hope for its future and that of Europe. “My feeling is quite strong,” she says, highlighting the impact of the current crises on the way the EU works. **“There’s something positive in everything negative. We have never been able to be so united in Europe.”**

Although Estonia joined the EU back in 2004, she says, in some ways it is only in the current crisis that it has been given full consideration due to its geographical position and historical experience. **“This is the first time we feel we are equal at the table,” she says.** “We feel we are being listened to. For my people, after being independent for 31 years, we’re at the point where we’re on a level with our European peers.” This, she says, boosts her hope and support for **“a Europe stronger than before” the crisis.**

“‘Never alone again’ was our slogan,” she says of Estonia after the restoration of its independence in 1991. “Now I feel we are listening to each other more.” She cites her term as a member of the European

Parliament, from 2014 to 2018 – during which time she was nominated as a European Young Leader. “Everyone there was talking about their own history and story, but nobody was listening to the stories of others,” she recalls. “Many countries have a difficult past. **In Europe we are a small continent, but we are so diverse.**”

There are, Kallas notes, “so many challenges” facing Europe’s leaders. “It’s going to be a very hard winter: you can’t make this pain vanish,” she laments. **“Our enemy is not within our society, but outside it. So, if we are divided within our society, we will lose.** The biggest challenge is to keep together so as to not leave anyone behind but also to not spend all our resources on short-term problems when we have long-term challenges.”

While there is certainly a need to “put all pressure on Russia to end the war” as part of efforts to restore “a rules-based international order” – and to deal with the challenges stemming from the war, such as the energy crisis and high inflation – **it is important for leaders not to lose sight of underlying issues, among which climate change is the most serious.** “These are long-term challenges,” she says. **“Don’t spend all your political capital on short-term challenges.** We must keep people united.”

Keeping that sense of perspective was, she says, particularly difficult during the pandemic. “People want someone who has a strong hand,” she recalls. “If you are a liberal at heart, it is very hard closing everything. It was a very difficult time, trying to balance between keeping society as open as possible but not compromising our health system.” She notes that not only the general public but many senior officials were not always good at taking account of all those affected by the different decisions.

“People empathise with visible victims but what about the invisible ones?” she queries. “Those with mental health problems, school-age children and companies that might go out of business.” In addition, there is the issue of the short versus the long term, particularly where children’s education is concerned. The government was, she says, at times more or less evenly split on whether to close schools down or keep them open.

In terms of offering advice for prospective leaders of tomorrow, Kallas hesitates at first but then dives in with a personal recommendation. **“One principle is very important to be a leader is to treat every person with respect,”** she says. “They say that you meet people twice: once on the way up and then again on your way down.” Then she stresses the need to find ways to remain open to new ideas and perspectives. “Reading is good for opening up your mind and thinking,” she says. “Also meeting others and really listening, so you can **pick up perspective.** You must approach them with an open mind.”

She cites Henry Kissinger’s maxim about information being available online, but books are a better source of deeper knowledge, properly digested, while in-person learning, for example through personal conversations, is a route to real wisdom. All this, says Kallas, is needed to work out “how to put the pieces together to build a foundation” that will serve you in good stead in a crisis. “When you have built this strong foundation, you can reach wise decisions,” she argues.

The EYL40 programme was interesting precisely because of the opportunity to learn directly from other participants, she notes. **“This network stays with you,”** she says, adding that this is the kind of tool that Estonians have traditionally lacked. “Old European [Union] countries already have networks that help them navigate” institutions and structures, while the Estonia and its neighbours “were behind the Iron Curtain so didn’t have those.”

She also praises the fact that in the EYL40 programme “we all come from different backgrounds – the economy, NGOs... **These different approaches help make the picture bigger.** In the real world it is all combined and the different aspects are very important. “Personally, it gave me a lot of new and interesting ideas – and very many book recommendations!” she says, summarising the EYL40 programme in one word as **“enlightening”**.

“To be a leader is to treat every person with respect”

Bastian Obermayer



Bastian Obermayer, alumnus of the EYL40 Class of 2018, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning German investigative journalist with the Munich-based newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) and the reporter who received the Panama Papers from an anonymous source in 2016 and the Paradise Papers. Obermayer was part of the ICIJ's Offshore Leaks, Luxembourg Leaks, China Cables and other projects. After the Knight-Wallace Fellowship in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Obermayer helped found the investigative non-profit newsroom Forbidden Stories in 2017.

As an award-winning journalist, Bastian Obermayer is usually more used to posing questions than having them put to him, but he responds readily when asked what he thinks of the EYL40 programme.

"It's a wonderful programme, offering the opportunity to see many other examples of leadership," he says of his fellow young leaders. **"All those people are so easily accessible – only a WhatsApp away to ask for help or insights – even if sometimes you agree, sometimes you don't. So many inspiring women and men who show how to lead and do great things."**

When asked what the most important thing about the programme is, he replies that it's having a contact base of diverse leaders. "That's the most important thing: each of us has enough contacts in our respective fields, but I need to hear from engineers, doctors, artists, politicians to get their perspective," he expands, adding a vivid German phrase: **"So that you're not 'cooking in your own water' all the time!"**

Obermayer gained many personal friends from the programme, and with them "insights into many aspects of European life I didn't have before, and some very interesting discussions." The professional benefits, he says, are an offshoot of this: "It's more that I can

translate these insights into my professional world. Politicians' contacts helped in some investigations, but it's more something that helps you as a person to grow." **He sums up EYL40 in one word with a vast domain: "Humanity."**

Obermayer, who works for the Munich-based newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung, is probably best known as the reporter who received the Panama Papers from an anonymous source, as part of work that won him and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists of (ICIJ) a Pulitzer Prize in 2016.

He remains clear that **investigative journalism needs to break with the past**, using collaborative models of the sort that, with the Panama Papers, saw reporters at media outlets based around the world delving into the documents. **This, in turn, requires journalistic teamwork of a kind that does not fit easily with the traditional image of the maverick reporter, working alone.**

"I've been involved in setting up a new investigative start-up [Paper Trail Media] for the last six months, so now my responsibility with my partners is to let it grow," he explains. "We want to do as much as possible but not get overstretched. My role is rather complicated to understand in terms of leadership. **We're trained a lot to get rid of the 'lone wolf' image,**" he says. "With the Panama Papers we had 400 reporters around the world working on them. In certain circumstances it's a really good idea to be a team." This kind of collaborative journalism, he says, means "more truth, more good investigation."

Unfortunately, he still sees resistance on the part of some in the business. **"I've got a little tired advocating for an idea that's a good one but which many newsrooms ignore for their own profit,"** he says. "Many joint investigations have shown that sharing is a really good thing."

The COVID-19 crisis, he adds, reinforced his conviction of the need for teamwork. "The pandemic assured me that we were on the right path," he says. "You don't need to be constantly motivating everyone because they have their intrinsic motivation. **People don't need to sit in the same room to work together: you need to give them good circumstances to work in and then you don't need to control them.**"

However, remote working can make it harder to notice when people are struggling. "We have tried to tell people that if they have too much on their plates, they must tell us," Obermayer says. "That means more formal conversations." The pandemic also generated lots of subject matter, notably the mismanagement of

public funds, some of which, Obermayer notes bluntly, were "directed to people who were thieves." Though he himself has not focused on these topics, he leads a team with two colleagues who "did a lot" on them.

Returning to the theme of Europe, Obermayer feels **that the war in Ukraine "shows how important solidarity is"** and also how crucial it would be for Europe to have one voice. "It's a pity we're not hearing that voice," he says, citing the focus of Hungary in particular on what it can get from Russia, rather than on what is good for Europe as a whole.

For the European leaders of tomorrow, "I don't have any big advice" but he does offer a few pointers. **"Listen to people you're working with, as in many cases they already have solutions," he says. "If you're a leader, you need to be in constant conversation."**

On the challenges facing journalism, he has no illusions but issues a call to arms. "In most places where journalists are working, we see a decline of financial stability and people working on a more fragile basis," he laments. "But at the same time journalism is as important – or even more important. And I think **as leaders it's now our responsibility to keep journalists focused on what's important and still make impactful journalism with less financial resources.**"

He goes on: "That's the biggest challenge for democracy right now. It's not going to get better in the coming years. I don't see a business model that will bring back the golden years of having no major financial issues."

While The New York Times has struck gold with a subscription model, it is the exception that proves the rule: most publications have no hope of fully funding investigative work that way. "It's a challenge, and to solve it probably we need to look at different ways, **such as partnering with NGOs, and in non-profit journalism,**" he says, citing partnerships such as the ICIJ's with the US-based Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) in handling the Panama Papers, while stressing the need to choose allies with care. "We work a lot with non-profits – but not those who want to shape public discourse."

"Get rid of the 'lone wolf' image"

Viktoria Modesta



Viktoria Modesta is a British Latvian-born bionic pop artist, futurist and creative director. She has established herself as a multidisciplinary artist and a creative leader, connector and innovator in the post-disability community – bridging pop culture and art with academia, medicine and brands in hyper-collaborative multimedia productions.

The European Young Leader, alumna of the 2019 class, sometime model, singer, self-styled “bionic pop artist and futurist” and campaigner for rights for all, is emphatic about the need to retain a freshness of vision.

Speaking to us from the US, she says she is still on a high – so to speak – after taking part in the Space Exploration Initiative called Mission Astro Access. “The world feels so rigid,” she says. “Realising that up there, there is an entirely different reality, and then coming back down to Earth, you realise that things are not so set in stone as they seem to be.”

For her, **the central leadership challenge is “maintaining the things I believe without being unduly influenced by what’s going on in the world.** Things become trendy and people adopt ways of talking about things, but you need to ask: should it be happening?”

This was brought home to her even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. “It’s very easy to get swept up in the way people are thinking and feeling,” she recalls. “No matter how momentous things seem, you must ask: is this the best thing I could be doing with my time? What people want from you isn’t necessarily the best thing for you to deliver.”

One of her main causes is innovation accessibility for future humans: she describes herself as “post-human and post-disability”. The EU’s new 10-year Strategy in this field “made me so happy,” she says, stressing the EU’s importance in such fields. “It’s a more unanimous

“Central to leadership is belief without compromise”

voice on really important issues at a time when the world is being split up into pieces,” she says.

Having spent her teenage years in the UK, she is very conscious of the impact of Brexit. **“It’s quite disheartening to be British but not part of ‘Europe’ anymore,”** she laments. “But for those remaining, I hope they find a way to keep working together.”

Modesta long had a distant relationship with Latvia, where she was born (as Viktorija Moskaļova) when it was a part of the Soviet Union and where she had what she terms a “dramatic” childhood. She spent years in and out of hospital there, after one of her legs was injured at birth; it was only in her teens, in the UK, that she requested to have one of her legs amputated, to finally take control over her body and life.

But her participation in the EYL40 programme – as part of the class of 2019 – brought her an unexpected and unlooked-for opportunity to re-establish ties with her country of birth. At an EYL40 event she met Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica, Parliamentary Secretary at Latvia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a 2017 EYL40, and that led to Modesta to visit Latvia for the first time in decades – and coming away full of plans for initiatives.

“I even went on the local news,” she says. “It gave me some ideas for the future. “That was a huge shift for me – it pulled together my past, present and outlook, and made me think about what are the conversations I could have,” she says. “I’m still keeping in touch.”

“Personally, EYL40 has given me a bridge to reconnect with Latvia, although beforehand I didn’t want anything to do with it again,” she confesses. “I feel grateful to have that connection with political and government bodies; if I want to influence things now, I have a better idea how to do that.”

While her native town is mostly Russian speaking, which is “having a difficult time at the moment” due to the current conflict in Ukraine, she is upbeat about future links. “There’s talk of reinstating my citizenship, how to bring my artwork over – even a conversation about Eurovision! **But on a professional level it’s about what I can do to come back with a fresh positive energy to influence people there.**

“For me, people’s work and jobs are not fuelled by personal feelings and experiences enough,” she says.

“You do need to feel in sync with your work – that it is not just a job. For me, it’s a matter of how to transmute an experience and association, so that you find it empowering and can come back and do something good. I feel like I could.”

Of EYL40 in general, she says that the couple of events that she has attended have definitely given her a feeling of community – and modified her view from the US of Europe’s shortcomings. “Right before I joined, I moved to the US,” she says, where she was made a Director’s Fellow at the MIT Media Lab. She goes on to explain that her experience in the US was very rich, particularly surrounding tech. **“Tech issues were not highlighted in conversations in European rooms,” as they should be.**

“Sometimes, when travelling in and thinking about Europe, you’re intimidated by the wealth of history and culture,” she argues. “It can stifle free thinking. It’s a backdrop of so much stuff.” But the EYL40 programme served as a very positive return into Europe. “When I arrived there, I was really pleased,” she recalls. **“We were in a room having deep conversations, and both experts and non-experts contributed. I thought: ‘I’ve found my place.’** It gave me motivation, that there are people who are thinking about these subjects.”

The EYL40 programme is, she says, very well-organised: “Like a well-curated dinner party – although less formal.” Asked to sum it up in a word, she is torn between “tapestry” and “kaleidoscope” – both conveying its diversity and colour. “It’s really wonderful to see that it exists,” she says. **She would, though, like to see more conversations about culture, alongside the politics.** “I don’t subscribe to the idea that interests can be isolated from each other,” she says. **“We need to be connecting with people more.”**

Her advice for future leaders is to be ready to collaborate and not to be afraid of new things, so as to “take important things from the past [...] into the future”, especially with regard to new technologies. In Europe she feels a certain lack of awareness that technology can be a tool of expression for everyone. **“People are hesitant about change and we need bold leaders,”** she says. “You see the same kind of people always going into politics. **We need very different kinds of leaders: today they need a very broad range of human skills and understanding of human life and issues – more well-rounded.**”

Qëndron Kastrati



Qëndron Kastrati, alumnus of the EYL40 Class of 2020-2021, was elected the youngest mayor in Kosovo, leading the town of Kamenica at only 29. As mayor, he has been resolute in his mission to make his town a genuinely multi-ethnic community and to bridge existing ethnic divides. Now ex-mayor, his inclusive approach still earns him national attention. He continues to be a staunch advocate of constitutional rights to education in Kosovo.

Back in 2018, Qëndron Kastrati became the country's youngest mayor, in the town of Kamenica, at the age of 29. His political career has seen a change since then, as he now serves as Vice Chair for the centre-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. He also describes himself as a human rights activist and "tech geek".

In pondering his leadership challenges, Kastrati immediately cites ethnic tensions in Kosovo and the wider region, and how these are exploited by less scrupulous politicians. "Depending on current developments, responding to populist tendencies and regimes in the Western Balkans and Kosovo," he says. **"It's not easy to fight populist leaders, especially those who use nationalism."**

He attests in particular to his experience in Kamenica, which, like Kosovo as a whole, is majority ethnic Albanian, but with Serbs representing a significant proportion of its residents, around 16%. **As mayor, Kastrati sought to promote ethnic harmony**, but that was not the only reform of his that was countered with populist arguments.

"I pioneered reform in the education system – closing schools with fewer than 15 pupils and then paying for transport," he explains, recalling that

"Cooperate with countries from whom we can learn"

opponents made allegations of a non-existent ethnic objective on his part. "Some said, 'you are using this for our enemy.' Also, when I chose a deputy mayor from the Serb minority, a Roma director, they tried to use Albanian nationalism against me."

Kastrati was in charge during the pandemic – an experience that brought home to him the need to build and maintain trust. **"I understood how important it was to have a strong community,** and also greater transparency to let citizens know how we are using resources and trying to help people in need, for example, with the equal distribution of goods," he says. "When we worked harder, people understood very well and wanted to contribute. We tried so many things, including not letting people know what was happening," he recalls of the infections and lockdowns. "Then we understood how to work: to **make things transparent.**"

For all the region's troubles, Kosovo and its neighbours see joining the EU as a beacon of hope and potential, he says, appealing to everyone involved to do more to make this happen. "It is important to work harder, for the EU as an institution to finish the process of enlargement for the Western Balkan states and others," he says. **"Europe should work harder in this direction. The six [Western] Balkan states, for example, have [just] 18mn citizens who are not integrated with the [EU's] 400mn."**

"What is most important now is that **countries that are not in the EU wish to be,**" he reiterates, stressing that future leaders in Europe should not lose sight of this. On the EYL40 programme, Kastrati says that it taught him "so many important things" thanks to **the direct contact with other young leaders from diverse backgrounds.** "I also understood some reforms that other countries did years ago," he adds. "I learned a lot and am trying to think how to implement that in our context. Situations are different, but we can learn."

The multi-disciplinary nature of the EYL40 network has also helped his understanding of policy issues. "For example, now I understand that more developed countries that have lower unemployment have a tendency not to focus on higher degrees, while those with high unemployment wanted them," he says. "So it's most important to **cooperate with countries from**

whom we can learn." One, he says, is Estonia, whose education system developed relatively late. "From other countries we can learn more on the environment," he goes on. "There are some very good examples across Europe."

In terms of what the EYL40 programme gave him, personally it brought him lots of contacts, and professionally, he learned "from different points of view how they deal with other things." In addition, he says, "I get more respect in Kosovo because I'm part of the EYL40 programme."

He is not the first to use the word 'hope' to summarise EYL40. Hope is something that is in short supply at the moment in the Western Balkans, as governments jostle to position themselves for EU accession while not forgetting to pander to their domestic constituencies. **"What we are dealing with now is that Kosovo and Serbia are under pressure to find agreement to further their EU accession bids,"** Kastrati says, noting that in Kosovo's 2018 elections, the Vetëvendosje party won over 50% of the vote, and so feels it has something of a free hand. It is trying to use police in the northern part [of Kosovo] where the Serbs are in the majority," he explains. "So, the Serbs are feeling afraid."

In fact, Kastrati says, Serbia is also exploiting the Serb minority in Kosovo for its own ends. "They're also using them to make a better position for a final agreement," he says. "Serbia wants for them to have autonomy and the option to be part of Serbia in future, and Kosovo is using force [against demonstrators]. So both are using them as a bargaining chip."

It is precisely the kind of situation where good leaders are needed and bad leadership can result in disaster.

Valentina Diouf



An Italian professional volleyball player who played with the national Italian team at the 2014 World Championship, Valentina Diouf's career has seen a meteoric rise, being a true role model for girls and women in sport. Valentina, alumna of the EYL40 Class of 2022, has won gold medals with her national team at the U20 World Championship and Mediterranean Games. She currently sports the #7 jersey for LKS Commercecon Łódź in Poland, prior to which she played for Wealth Planet Perugia in Italy.

Having played for clubs as far afield as Brazil and South Korea, as well as her native Italy, Valentina Diouf knows all about the importance of teamwork and the role of a leader. "As the one that takes all the responsibility, I take all the team on my shoulders," she says. **"But that doesn't mean that only the captain has to lead."**

Diouf understands the importance of being a role model for girls. "I work with girls – it's common that we have some issues, mental or otherwise – and I also depend on my teammates," she points out. **"Everything needs to work smoothly, and communication is important to push everyone to give their best and create a good mood."**

Professional sportspeople usually spend a lot of time together; from that point of view, the pandemic at first sight brought little that was new for those living in a bubble. "During the pandemic I was in South Korea, playing there," she recalls. "Nothing changed that much in sports. We were always together anyway. But when I came back to Italy, I found that people had lost their balance quite a lot. They were not used to spending a lot of time at home, and especially for mental health and relationships between people...they're different now: there's not so much trust."

Diouf herself likes being surrounded by people, even if after the pandemic it was difficult to get used to packed sports halls again after months of playing in front of empty stands. **The quality of human relationships is at the centre of what she wants for the future of Europe.**

"I hope there is a change in mindset and that people don't see so many differences with those of different ethnicities," she says, stressing also the need to take account of individuals' experiences.

At a European Young Leaders seminar in Lisbon, participants were asked whether they 'feel European' but Diouf sees a need to dig deeper. "I am Italian and sometimes I don't feel it," says the Milan-born sportswoman, whose father is from Senegal and who has sometimes been treated differently for that reason.

"We should start from the beginning," she says. **"The final target is to feel like a European citizen, but we are not one thing."** As yet, she argues, "I don't think we have the mindset or mutual respect" to be European citizens.

At EYL40 seminars, Diouf herself learned "a little bit more" about EU structures but also "about every single country in Europe". As for the European leaders of tomorrow, she highlights the difficulty of older people communicating with youngsters.

"We are talking about the new generation, and first we have to find a way to inspire them," she says. "They don't trust us. I'm 29 and I don't feel I have a connection with them. I think we grew up in a really different way," she goes on, noting that youngsters grew up surrounded by tech and can even "seem arrogant" about what they can see as outdated attitudes. "They have another way of facing up to everything that's happening to them," she acknowledges.

what I like to do," she goes on. **"I'm learning a lot, and I really like to talk with people who have had so many different experiences."**

She is particularly fascinated by the career of 2022 EYL40 classmate Marko Russiver, an Estonian designer and innovator, but is also close to Bastian Obermayer, the German journalist best known for his work on the Panama Papers leak, from the EYL40 Class of 2018.

"I like to know the dark side," she says of the need to dig up unsavoury facts. "We can share a lot." At the same time, Diouf acknowledges that coming into contact with the EYL40 involved in public affairs across Europe has made her more aware of how complicated the issues can be.

"In Italy we are facing a lot of political challenges – economic ones, too," she says. "When I share my point of view as an Italian citizen, and then talk with some politicians at EYL40 events, they show me the other side: it's easy to see something isn't working, but it's not easy to be a politician, to really change things. Now I know better how things work."

Not that she is discouraged; the EYL40 programme has brought her much, personally and professionally. "I'm super-motivated now," she enthuses. "The first seminar in Zagreb I was kind of confused – why did they choose me? I'm just a volleyball player. **But at the second seminar, everything changed. It helped me find my way after my career.**"

Her EYL40 fellows "inspired and motivated me to [...] share my experience in terms of leadership, teambuilding, diversity and inclusion," she explains. "I found that in Italy they are looking for athletes who can share their experience in companies." She has signed contracts for such work with Bosch and several banks, and also goes into schools to give pep talks – all of which, she says, makes her "super proud".

"A kind of superpower"

But Diouf herself is carving out a role in shaping the future, as a speaker highlighting the need for diversity in companies and institutions. The EYL40 network, she says, was what made her do it.

"It's inspired me a lot," she admits. "I'm an athlete but that won't last forever. The European Young Leaders I met are already friends; some are older and have already faced issues that I face now. I'm almost at the end of my career and they're pushing me to invest in

She describes the EYL40 network as **"a kind of superpower: you can count on all of these people who can help you, and if you have connections, you can do everything."**

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