



EUROPEAN WOMEN LEADING THE WAY





Opening remarks

The Foundation has launched the project 'European women - Leading the way' as it aims to explore how the European Union has contributed over many years to achieving gender equality in all areas of activity.

The European Union is fundamentally rooted in the respect for human rights and the principle of equality, recognising that the full involvement of women in the political, scientific, economic and social spheres is a determining factor for innovation, competitiveness and cohesion within its 27 Member States. Too often, however, the narrative of European integration has downplayed the impact and essential contributions made by women who, through their daily actions and professional achievements, shape the continent's future.

This publication, produced with the support of the European Commission, aims precisely to remedy this perspective by providing a platform for these exceptional women and recognising their contributions to Europe's standing in several fields. It features 27 portraits of influential European women, each representing a Member State, thereby illustrating the wealth and diversity of their experiences. Our selection covers a wide range of strategic fields and professions to show that nothing is out of reach for the women of Europe. It includes iconic figures from the institutional and political spheres (President of the Republic, Member of Parliament, Minister, diplomat), bold business leaders who are transforming the economy (industry, agriculture, trade), pioneers in the scientific and technical sectors (doctors, astronauts, researchers), security and legal specialists (military, police, lawyers), as well as representatives from the cultural and media sectors (writers, journalists).

Through these personal accounts, we have pursued a threefold objective: to highlight the contribution that women are making to the Union, to demonstrate that Europe is a place where there are no barriers to women's success and, above all, to empower new generations by providing young European women with ambitious role models, thus asserting that women are the future of Europe.

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Austria



Ulrike Rabmer-Koller

CEO of a construction company

“My path was clear: I would become an entrepreneur.”

Ulrike Rabmer Koller has been at the helm of the [Rabmer Group](#) since 2002. She has also represented SMEs in the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, chaired the association of craftsmen and SMEs in Europe, [SME United](#), and been appointed to the high-level round table ‘Industry 2030’. Organised by the European Commission in December 2017, it includes 20 experts who advise the EU on industrial policy.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

Born three years after the family business was founded in 1963, I always considered myself to have the ‘entrepreneurial gene’. My path was clear: I would become an entrepreneur. After completing my studies, I first moved to the United States to work for a start-up before returning to Austria. My father then asked me to join him in the family business. Specialising in construction, a field still predominantly male, this sector was not unfamiliar to me as I grew up surrounded by building sites and teams. When I first became involved, I told my parents that I wanted to take the company in a new direction, with a dual specialisation in construction and environmental technologies. We were pioneers in Europe in the refurbishment of water pipes. We now operate in ten countries and are developing projects all over the world. During this period, I was unique in being the only woman to have reached that level of responsibility in the sector. At the same time, I was actively involved in representing the interests of businesses. First within SME United, where I was chair from 2015 to 2019.

“I’m aware that I’ve had to prove myself twice as much as a man would.”

As a staunch advocate of equal opportunities for women and men, I became Vice-President of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce in 2019. My priority now is to relaunch the development and sale of our environmental technologies on a global scale.

Have you faced any obstacles in your career?

I am aware that I have had to prove myself twice as much as a man would, but I was accepted fairly quickly. I often found myself at negotiating tables surrounded only by men, and being a woman ultimately worked in my favour: I felt that people negotiated a little less harshly with me than they would have with a male counterpart. There was one real difficulty, however: family

life. I was fortunate to have a home help and the support of my husband, family and friends. Our children’s school also looked after them until 5 p.m. But this is a real issue in Austria. Too many women have to choose between their careers and their desire to have children. It is crucial to create childcare facilities that look after children all day long. In fact, schools in Austria sometimes only take children until noon. That’s why I offer my employees the option of flexible working hours and teleworking so that they don’t have to sacrifice their careers for their family life.

How does the European Union influence your work?

In Austria, 99.8% of businesses are SMEs. However, European regulations are designed with large companies in mind. That is why I have always sought to convince decision-makers at European level to think “small” first, explaining to them the impact of regulations on our entrepreneurial activities. It is imperative to simplify and reduce their number.

“It is vital to simplify and reduce the number of regulations.”

We were involved in creating the slogan for the European Green Deal, and our intention was to stimulate the economy and industry on the continent, but the accompanying regulations are far too burdensome. Many companies have even halted their initiatives. I am trying to persuade entrepreneurs to invest in sustainable environmental technologies. My argument is simple: saving electricity and water also means saving money. We must make our industries greener, but above all we must keep them in Europe. We cannot afford to let them relocate outside the continent because of regulations that are far too restrictive.

How can we involve more young women in technical fields?

Rabmer employs 110 people, but the number of women is still too low, as construction sites are mainly occupied by men. However, we

are actively involved in Girls' Day. This is a day in Austria when we invite young girls to the company to introduce them to technical professions. We also organise 'Kids' Day', during which we welcome children aged 5 to 14 to introduce them to our professions through fun activities. In the first year, we hosted 30 children, with only one girl taking part. Now, between 40 and 50 per cent of the 70 or so children who take part are girls.

In your opinion, what obstacles to gender equality remain in Austria?

The maternity leave system is not optimal. At the start of their careers, young women and young men progress at a similar rate. A gap emerges when young women become mothers. As maternity leave lasts for around two years, it is very difficult for them to catch up with men who have continued working.

“But Europe must change.”

That is why my advice to my female employees has always been to continue working, even if only for a few hours a week.

In your opinion, what are the advantages of being part of the European Union?

As a business, selling within the European Union is a major advantage. We no longer have to deal with the burden of administrative formalities, customs duties and documents that we have to manage when exporting outside the Union. The ability to move freely, the absence of borders and the single currency are a real economic advantage. The second advantage is the peace we maintain within the EU. However, Europe must change. We must not focus solely on regulations, but also on the need to rally citizens once again. And it is clear that excessive regulation does not help to achieve this goal.

Is there a European woman who inspires you in terms of her commitment?

My mother first. Then Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Minister for Foreign Affairs and European Commissioner, who is an extremely competent and inspiring woman. But there are many women who have inspired me, and I could name many more.

Belgium



Catherine de Bolle

Executive Director of Europol

“I still believe that a woman has to prove her competence more convincingly than a man.”

Catherine de Bolle has been Executive Director of [Europol](#) since 2018. She studied law at Ghent University and then joined the Royal Gendarmerie School to become an officer. She went on to join the police force, taking command of the Ninove constabulary. She was Commissioner-General of the Belgian Federal Police from 2012 to 2018. In 2015, she became European representative on the Interpol Executive Committee before being elected head of Europol in 2018 and re-elected in 2022.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

As a child, I was stopped by the police because the lights on my bike weren't on. At a time when the police inspired fear, the officers showed me the merits of the law. This interaction created my initial motivation: I wanted to belong to a community that helped people. I joined the police force after studying law. I then passed the exams to join the Gendarmerie and become an officer.

“This operational focus has increased our impact and made Europol a reliable and indispensable partner for Member States.”

My first managerial post was as head of the Ninove police force. I enjoyed this position because I witnessed the direct impact of the decisions taken. After ten years, I moved on to national responsibilities. As Vice-President of the Standing Committee on Local Police, representing the regional police forces to the government, I wanted to try and solve problems at federal level, until I was appointed Commissioner General of the Belgian Police. Aware of the European dimension of serious crime and terrorism, I finally applied to Europol.

At what point in your career did you come across European regulations?

I studied European law at university. My commitment to Europe was strengthened at the Gendarmerie, because the European institutions in Brussels give greater responsibility to the Belgian security services. Naturally, as Director of Europol, I have to work with European regulations on a daily basis. The Commission determines our budget and proposes legislation. It also provides us with decisive support on various aspects, such as the development of the strategy to combat organised crime.

How are relations structured between the national police force and Europol, the embryonic European police cooperation organisation?

Europol is a Union agency that supports the Member States' police forces. Our mandate essentially covers organised crime, terrorism and cybercrime. Our role is one of support and coordination. In practice, Europol collects operational information related to its mandate and establishes links between national investigations. Countries retain full ownership of their criminal data and control over judicial investigations. The information collected by the Agency is systematically forwarded to their police services. We are also developing new technologies to support investigators. Historically, Europol was primarily a strategic agency focused on internal security analysis and threat mapping. My experience as head of the Belgian police gave me a clear understanding of the type of operational support needed at European level.

I therefore initiated a profound transformation towards more concrete operational support on the ground. In the wake of the 2015-2016 terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels - a period in our recent history that I experienced painfully in Belgium - Europol and the Member States had already strengthened cross-border cooperation to complement national capabilities in the counter-terrorism field. We then consolidated our resources in the fight against organised crime. We have created a centre dedicated to economic and financial crime, which did not exist before, to assist Member States with complex financial investigations.

Our aim is to make it easier for countries to come together. Once contact has been established, we manage the European, and often global, dimension of the cases and identify the appropriate partners. We have also set up a drugs unit and an operational analysis unit. We are now able to identify emerging problems, issue early warnings and inform countries of potential threats. This operational focus has increased our impact and made Europol a reliable and indispensable partner for Member States.

How is the cooperation with Eurojust organised?

We maintain close cooperation with Eurojust, formalised in an agreement that

we renew annually. Like Europol, Eurojust is a stakeholder in the Joint Investigation Teams (JITs). These teams bring together the judges and police services of the Member States that wish to participate. Because of their in-depth knowledge of our tools, Eurojust magistrates can ask us to take part in these teams. Europol can be asked to provide support by both the Member States and Eurojust.

What obstacles still prevent women from moving forward? What advice would you give to young women?

Many women are still forced to choose between their career and family life when children arrive.

“However, it is crucial not to rely solely on female solidarity to make progress.”

It is imperative that managers and decision-makers facilitate work-life balance, in particular by optimising teleworking opportunities. I also believe that a woman

must demonstrate her skills more convincingly than a man, particularly in the police service. You must really believe in what you are doing and not simply be seeking power. My advice is to act with determination in the face of your convictions and not let yourself be influenced by gender prejudices. You also have to accept that failure is part of the process and must not undermine your self-confidence.

It's also vital to find mentors to guide and advise you in your career choices, whether you're a man or a woman. Personally, I'm involved in mentoring, particularly with my friends' daughters, two of whom regularly ask me for advice. But it's crucial not to rely solely on female solidarity to make progress. More broadly, we need to be inspired by the idea of collaboration and cooperation. We can no longer meet all the challenges we face on our own.

Are there any European women whose commitment inspires you, and why?

Gabrielle Chanel for establishing herself in fashion, then considered a man's business. Ylva Johansson, former European Commissioner for Home Affairs, for her passion and perseverance.

Bulgaria



Mariya Gabriel

Former MEP, former European Commissioner, former Minister

“In my view, Europe represents freedom.”

Mariya Gabriel is a member of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party. In 2009, she was elected Member of the European Parliament (EPP). She was appointed European Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society in 2017. In 2019, she became Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, before joining the Bulgarian government in 2023 as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Tell us about your career path. How did you choose this direction?

After studying French and Bulgarian, I continued my studies at Sciences Po Bordeaux. My interest in European institutions has always been very strong, as I believe that Europe represents freedom. Driven by a desire to contribute to Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, I decided to sit the European institution entrance exams. My membership of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party was prompted by the importance it attaches to the role of the regions. My commitment took concrete form in the drafting of the programme for the 2009 European elections. People spotted my passion for Europe, which resulted in me being asked to stand for election, marking my entry into the European Parliament.

“I firmly believe in the Union’s ability to reinvent itself and actively defend its place in the new world order.”

I was re-elected in 2014, before being elected coordinator of the European People's Party (EPP) in the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. My work on gender equality earned me the MEP of the Year award. In 2017, Bulgaria designated me as its candidate for the position of European Commissioner. I am grateful to President Juncker for the trust he placed in me by assigning me the highly strategic portfolio of Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society. He allowed me to redirect the agenda and priorities that had been established several years earlier. I then initiated major work on digital skills, the fight against disinformation and the development of the first European strategy for artificial intelligence. In 2019, as the lead candidate in the European elections, I was once again Bulgaria's candidate for the position of Commissioner. President von der Leyen then conferred the portfolio covering research,

innovation, education, culture, youth and sport on me. I immediately set a new agenda, considering it essential to update the last innovation strategy, which dated back to 2011. More recently, Bulgaria sought my expertise to lead negotiations to form a government following the 2023 parliamentary elections. Although my vocation has always been European, the need for my country to accelerate the pace of digital, technological, industrial and commercial progress compared to other Member States compelled me to respond to this call. I subsequently served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs in that government.

My goal was also to move Bulgaria towards greater priorities: integration into the Schengen area, adoption of the euro, and establishing the country as a regional hub for security and innovation. After eleven years of waiting, I had the honour of finalising the Schengen accession process.

What progress remains to be made for Europe in the sectors you have worked in? And in general?

In the cultural sphere, it is essential to develop common European policies while respecting the diversity inherent to the Union. It is noteworthy that Member States jealously guard their powers in this area. Europe has yet to fully exploit the potential of its cultural and creative industries, a crucial sector that generates more jobs than the automotive and construction industries.

“Europe has yet to fully exploit the potential of its cultural and creative industries.”

It is imperative to create an environment that encourages young talent to stay on the continent. Significant progress has been made in education, particularly through European university alliances. The European Union must aspire to have its own equivalents of renowned academic institutions such as MIT or Harvard. The aim is to give every student

the opportunity to spend a semester at another institution, to open up to another country and ultimately to obtain a degree that is recognised throughout the Union. We are at a turning point: Europe has all the necessary assets – its history, its culture, its experience – to maintain a leading role on the world stage. However, this position cannot be taken for granted, and the world is changing rapidly. What is remarkable about European integration is its historical ability to recover from every crisis. I firmly believe in the EU's ability to reinvent itself and actively defend its place in the new world order.

What has been the main obstacle you have faced in your career?

Stereotypes! People always wonder whether women will be competent enough, whether they will be able to make the right decisions and find the right solutions, particularly in the field of diplomacy. That is why, during my term as minister, I brought together female ambassadors in Bulgaria to discuss the challenges they face. We set up the 'Ambassador for a Day' initiative: a competition inviting young girls to write an essay and present their ideas on the place and life of women in international relations. The winners were offered the opportunity to spend a day with the ambassador of their choice. It was a revealing experience, especially for the young girls. I would still tell them today to have confidence in themselves, to be bold and to remain curious. They should also be mindful of those around them.

What obstacles do you think still exist for women in Europe?

When I was re-elected to the European Parliament in 2014, I did not understand the existence of the Committee on Women's

Rights and Gender Equality. In my country, few positive things remain from the Soviet era, but gender equality was not an issue.

“Only 8% of start-ups are run by women.”

However, my work on this committee revealed a very different reality in many other Member States. Obstacles remain in terms of work-life balance for women. The figures in some areas are particularly alarming: in Europe, only 8% of start-ups are run by women, and the venture capital invested in them represents only 2.2% of the total. To improve this situation in the long term, the European Union should systematically involve women in the decision-making process. It is essential to give visibility to women who already hold senior positions so that they can serve as role models.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

I am inspired by the women I meet, notably Doris Pack for her commitment to the Balkans and a Bulgarian teacher, Lyudmila Staykova from Haskovo, who voluntarily set up a club to teach coding to children. People driven by such passion and a desire to pass on their knowledge are a source of inspiration.

Croatia



Nina Obuljen Koržinek

Minister of Culture

“I was actively involved in the negotiating team for Croatia’s accession to the European Union.”

Nina Obuljen Korzinek was an advisor at the Office for Gender Equality at UNESCO, then chief of staff to the Croatian Minister of Culture. In 2000, she became head of the UNESCO department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, before being appointed Deputy Minister and Secretary of State at the Ministry of Culture in 2006, then Minister of Culture and Media in 2016. At the same time, she was a research associate at the [Institute for Development and International Relations \(IMRO\)](#) in Zagreb.

Tell us about your career path. How did you choose this direction?

I have always been drawn to art and culture. But I also had a strong instinct and interest in public activism. At the age of 21, while still a student, I became involved in numerous activities, particularly humanitarian ones, to support the fight for Croatia's recognition. My career has been divided into two phases. I first worked as an academic and researcher, focusing on cultural and media policy in the context of international relations and European integration. I then devoted the second part of my career to public service in various forms: chief of staff to a minister, secretary of state and then minister. In particular, as secretary of state, I was actively involved in the negotiating team for Croatia's accession to the European Union.

Have you faced any obstacles during your career?

I was raised in a family where women were very strong, and where no attention was paid to the difference between women and men. This environment was the source of my own strength. I never perceived my position as being more powerful or more fragile because I was a woman.

“It is more constructive to highlight the journeys of those who have succeeded, rather than dwelling on the persistence of these obstacles.”

However, balancing a political career with family life presents major challenges, given the time commitment and the importance of the responsibilities involved. I do not see politics as a power struggle, but rather as an honour to serve the public good. Nevertheless, men tend to perceive politics more in terms of power, which can make the path more difficult for women.

What obstacles still remain for women in Croatia?

Women still face obstacles, but these are constantly evolving. These challenges vary depending on societies, their cultures and religious traditions. In Croatia, the main barrier is that senior positions require a personal investment of time and effort that is very time-consuming. However, it is more constructive to highlight the careers of those who have succeeded than to dwell on the persistence of these barriers.

“Women are extremely privileged when they live in Europe.”

It is important to remember that men also face challenges in accessing senior positions.

What obstacles remain for women in Europe, compared to the rest of the world?

I worked at UNESCO in Paris, in the gender equality department. At the time, it was almost inappropriate to say that there was gender inequality in Europe because there were other parts of the world where women did not have access to education or healthcare and were not allowed to work or drive. As a result, women are extremely privileged when they live in Europe.

What do you think of European cultural policy? What are the challenges in this area?

It is important to distinguish between issues related to culture and those related to the media. Culture has always been seen as a competence that must remain sovereign. As for the media, we have been working towards greater integration since 1989, which requires the implementation of regulations at European level. Our action is focused on promoting media independence and pluralism, as well as combating disinformation, which has a devastating effect on our societies. It is important to highlight the work accomplished over the last ten years in protecting intellectual

property rights, particularly in the face of the challenges posed by artificial intelligence. The digital revolution has opened up incredible opportunities for human and artistic creation, giving us access to previously inaccessible global content. However, at the same time, we have created a certain amount of chaos in which it is difficult for citizens to find their way, deal with disinformation, distinguish between truth and falsehood, and make informed choices without being influenced by algorithms. This is why media literacy is becoming one of the fundamental skills we need to pass on to our fellow citizens.

“Media literacy is becoming one of the fundamental skills we must pass on to our fellow citizens.”

It will make them more resilient to the negative effects of digital technology and better able to make informed decisions.

How do you perceive European unity in Croatia?

Croatia is the latest country to join the Union, in 2013. Croatians are probably the most enthusiastic supporters of enlargement. They see it as a means of promoting democracy, as membership requires the adoption of standards and respect for fundamental values. Croatians see the concrete benefits of membership through various projects and opportunities.

However, in my view, the Erasmus programme is the Union’s most valuable contribution.

“The Erasmus programme is the Union’s most valuable contribution.”

It gives our young people the opportunity to travel, to open up to the world and other cultures, to grow and to be both proud of their own country and European citizens. It is an extremely enriching experience that will undoubtedly ensure a very positive attitude towards the Union throughout their lives.

What advice would you give to young women?

Follow your own path and choose a career that you are passionate about. There will be difficult moments, but if you believe in what you are doing, Europe is a wonderful place that offers equal opportunities to everyone.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

It’s difficult to choose just one person, that wouldn’t be fair. I’ve been lucky to always have had amazing women with me, showing that it’s possible to achieve your dreams. Each of us should look for inspiration around us and recognise the role of successful women, our teachers, our mothers, our grandmothers.

Cyprus



Elena Tanou

Deputy Chair of a travel agency

**“In Cyprus, women face the same difficulties
as everywhere else in Europe.”**

Elena Tanou founded her own travel agency after studying in Switzerland and working in the United Kingdom. She is Deputy Chair of Cyprus's largest travel agency, Topkinisis Travel. Since 2006, she has also been a member of the Board of Directors of the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

After completing my studies in Switzerland, I was fortunate enough to work in the United Kingdom for six years. At the age of 26, when I returned to Cyprus, I set up my own business in a competitive market that already had 480 travel agencies. To stand out, I focused on developing holiday programmes to faraway destinations that were little explored at the time by Cypriot customers, who preferred Greece or the United Kingdom: Africa, Latin America, Alaska, China. My success was based on the principle of only selling destinations that I knew. In ten years, my agency established itself as a benchmark in the market. In 2000, with the stock market on the rise, several companies were looking to merge. I was approached by two large organisations. I then went ahead with a merger that led to my appointment as Deputy Chair of Topkinisis Travel, which became the largest travel agency in the country and was listed on the stock exchange.

When Cyprus joined the European Union, did this have an impact on your work?

Integration into the European Union has played a major role in my career by providing me with new opportunities. Since 2004, I have been invited to the SME Assembly, which has opened the door to fruitful partnerships. In 2014, Topkinisis was awarded the title of “European Digital Icon” for developing an online travel booking platform. This initiative was innovative at the time in Cyprus, which was lagging behind European digital trends.

“Women-led businesses can (...) benefit from EU funding and support.”

The European Union has also meant that I have been able to participate in European projects. In addition, together with European partners, we are developing activities based

on strictly ecological principles. I am also a member of the board of directors responsible for designating the ‘European Capital of Culture’ and, as chair of Tourism in Nicosia, I led the bid for the European Youth Capital Award, in which we came second.

What difficulties and opportunities do women face in Cyprus?

In Cyprus, women face the same difficulties as elsewhere in Europe. It is undeniably more complex for a woman to balance a professional career with family life. In particular, we lack adequate infrastructure to support working women, such as childcare facilities. Historically, grandparents played a vital role in supporting mothers who wanted to work, but this dynamic has changed: the majority of women in their sixties, now grandmothers themselves, are still working.

“Local investors do not provide sufficient support for women’s initiatives.”

The second major obstacle is the prevailing mindset within boards of directors, which remain largely ‘men’s clubs’. In 2006, I had the opportunity to serve as President of the Organisation of Business and Professional Women, which opened the doors to the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry, where I have been a member ever since. Although female representation has increased slightly, it has not yet reached the desired level.

Furthermore, local investors do not provide sufficient support for women’s initiatives, which often forces us to turn to foreign investors. However, we have made significant progress: when I began my term at the Chamber of Commerce in 2006, the rate of female entrepreneurship was 14%; it is now 30-32%. During this period, we also established the first cooperative bank dedicated to women, which helped 900 women start their own businesses, with no failures to report. Unfortunately, this institution was forced to close in 2013 during the economic bailout.

Are you involved in mentoring young women?

Firstly, I sit on the economic advisory board of three universities: the European University, the University of Nicosia and the University of Cyprus. In addition, I mentor seven young female entrepreneurs, which allows me to share my experience and the challenges I have faced during my career, but above all to open up my network to them. Being involved in many influential associations (Rotary Club, Cyprus Integrity Forum, etc.), I try to integrate these young women into these professional circles. This approach of helping and networking applies to anyone who seeks my support.

What do you think of European regulations on gender equality?

There has been a real improvement. The participation of all European countries in this initiative has helped each Member State to make individual progress and has led to the adoption of many good practices in Cyprus. My country has officially endorsed the European Union's roadmap on women's rights, which focuses in particular on

economic empowerment, equal pay and increased political participation. Above all, women-led businesses benefit from EU funding and support, particularly through technology and research programmes such as Horizon. This is very positive, as women do not traditionally gravitate towards technology sectors. I strongly encourage women to consider careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). For example, of the approximately 135 employees at Topkinis, three quarters are women.

Is there a European woman who inspires you in terms of her commitment?

Christine Lagarde is my idol! Her leadership qualities are incredible. Her diplomatic yet firm and decisive approach when facing a crisis is unique. She brings a truly new perspective to economic governance, something few men have done so far. She champions hot topics that are essential in Europe and beyond: climate change, ESG (environmental, social and governance criteria), inequality, women's empowerment, and she promotes them on a global scale. She has a global vision, she is very influential, she brings added value to Europe.

Czech Republic



Romana Křížová

CEO

**“The European Union is a formidable source
of great opportunities.”**

In 1992, while still a student, Romana Křížová founded her first company. Initially a language and translation school, it later became an educational centre. She was then approached by the European Commission to work as a consultant on various projects, before setting up an audit and verification company dedicated to drafting European projects. This experience led her to become an advisor to the Financial Mechanism Office and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism. Today, she heads her own company, Business Friends, a platform that brings together businessmen and women to generate new contracts through mutual assistance.

How does the EU influence your work? And your country?

The European Union represented a great opportunity because I was involved in many European projects from an early stage. This adventure began unexpectedly thanks to my hobby: bobbin lace-making. As a member of the international manufacturing committee, I had the opportunity to travel and carry out projects with other Member States. Building on this experience, I set up my own audit and verification company, specialising in drafting projects for the European Union... even before the Czech Republic joined.

My expertise led me to become a consultant to the EEA Financial Mechanism Office and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism. My company then obtained a framework contract for project evaluation and monitoring, which meant I could provide practical help to other companies in implementing European projects. In 2004, accession to the European Union profoundly transformed my country. Numerous opportunities arose thanks to the funding provided by the EU. Those who wanted to expand internationally had the opportunity to do so. Anyone who so wishes can benefit from the programmes set up by the EU.

What opportunities do you think exist for women in Europe? And in your own country? Do you see any obstacles to the development of women's rights?

Generally speaking, whether you are a woman or not, you have to take control of your own destiny. No one will wait for you, no one will hand you opportunities on a plate. There is no point waiting for the ideal opportunity; you have to take action. In fact, the European Union is a tremendous opportunity.

Of course, historically, women have often had to choose between their careers and their family commitments. But we have to accept this, deal with it and take the necessary steps to succeed. Although obstacles still exist for women, the situation is changing and improving.

I am convinced that the rise of artificial intelligence will bring new tools that could

help us greatly, making it much easier to work from home.

“You have to take matters into your own hands. No one is going to wait for you, no one is going to hand you opportunities on a plate.”

In reality, opportunities arise every day. You just have to be willing to step outside your comfort zone, even if it can be scary, in order to seize them.

Tell us about your experience as a mentor.

My involvement in the tech world led to an invitation to become the manager and assessor for the Women Tech EU programme. This programme is particularly interesting because it funds young women involved in deep tech technologies. I try to replicate the dynamics of this programme in my own company. Our goal is to connect entrepreneurs to bring them new contracts. With this in mind, we have also set up clubs dedicated to women entrepreneurs. In addition, we are partners in a national competition that organises an annual contest to designate the company and entrepreneur of the year.

What do you think about the place of women in the tech sector, and more specifically in the business world?

In the Czech Republic, numerous initiatives are emerging to encourage women's involvement, particularly in tech. Examples include 'Czechitas', an organisation that helps young women to become actively involved in IT activities, and the 'Holka is marketingu' initiative, which means 'women in marketing'. Their aim is to train women in marketing techniques, targeting housewives in particular, so that they can find employment and work from home. Thanks to all these efforts, the number of women involved in the IT sector is steadily increasing in the country.

What are the main challenges facing women in your country?

Broadly speaking, the government wants to involve women more in all areas, and these improvements are visible.

“The European Union offers many opportunities, but it also generates too much regulation.”

However, there is a wider challenge that affects both women and men: everything is moving faster, everything has to be done immediately, which creates a lot of stress. It is

therefore essential to achieve a good work-life balance. Younger generations are particularly sensitive to this issue. It is one of the major societal challenges we will have to face.

What do you think about attitudes towards Europe in your country?

There are positive and negative aspects. As I said, the European Union offers many opportunities, but it also generates too much regulation.

Is there a European woman who inspires you in terms of her commitment, and why?

Simona Kijonková, a Czech entrepreneur. From a modest background, she has built up a remarkable career. She now devotes a significant part of her energy to supporting young women entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic.

Denmark



Hanne Fugl Eskjær

Diplomat

“I have often been (...) the only woman in the room, but I have never considered that to be an obstacle.”

Now a diplomat, Hanne Fugl Eskjær began her career as an editor and consultant. In 2001, she joined Denmark's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York as First Secretary, before being appointed Deputy Head of Mission at the Danish Embassy in the Czech Republic two years later. In 2004, she became Deputy Secretary of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Folketing (Danish Parliament), then continued her career as Deputy Head of Mission in Syria. In 2010, she joined the North Africa and Middle East Directorate as an advisor and then as Deputy Director. She was appointed Ambassador to Bangladesh in 2013, to the Arctic in 2016, and to Canada in 2019. Since 2024, she has been Ambassador to France and Monaco.

Talk to us about your career path.

I have always wanted to work internationally, to meet people from different cultures and speak different languages. I studied abroad at the *Institut d'études politiques* Aix-en-Provence before receiving a Fulbright scholarship to study in the United States. My goal at the time was to build intercultural bridges, convinced of the benefits of moving from the national to the international stage.

Have you encountered any obstacles in your career?

I cannot identify any specific obstacles that I have encountered. I'm sure there were some, because I was often in situations where I was the only woman in the room, but I never considered that an obstacle. I chose to respond by investing in networking and encouraging talented young women to quickly seek positions of influence so that they could participate fully in decision-making processes.

When did you first come across the European Union during your career?

My involvement with Europe began as I undertook my Erasmus programme in Aix-en-Provence, where I rubbed shoulders with other European students every day. This period, marked by an experience at the European Commission in Marseille and voluntary work with the European Movement, was formative.

“The European dimension has (...) marked my entire career.”

It was a very intense chapter. The European dimension has since been a constant feature of my career. I worked in the Czech Republic at the time of its accession and collaborated closely with the Union in my various positions. Whether within Member States or in third countries, I have always perceived the European Union as a strong voice.

Your country held the Presidency of the Council during the second half of 2025. In your opinion, what has been the most significant event of this Presidency?

I will particularly remember the unity of European action in a new geopolitical framework, notably marked by defence and security issues. We have maintained strong unity on Ukraine with the adoption of new sanctions and substantial funding for the next two years. At the same time, the enlargement process continues. Another point worth highlighting is the agreement on the 2040 climate target. It is extremely important to show that we are a credible player and that competitiveness and the green transition go hand in hand. We have also made progress on simplification.

In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing the Arctic region?

Security challenges in the Arctic have reached unprecedented levels, fuelled by growing tensions between Russia, China and the West.

“Security challenges in the Arctic have reached unprecedented levels.”

The principle of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’, which aimed to protect the region from external rivalries, is giving way to a need for increased investment in security, in consultation with our NATO allies. Denmark holds the chairmanship of the [Arctic Council](#) until May 2026, with clear priorities for maintaining regional cooperation. With regard to Greenland, the visit by French President Emmanuel Macron, followed by that of his Foreign Minister, sent a strong signal. It was greatly appreciated by the Prime Ministers of Greenland and Denmark. This solidarity and support for increased security is the sign of robust cooperation between France and Denmark.

How do you view the integration of the Baltic countries into the Union?

Solidarity between the Nordic and Baltic countries has been extremely solid for a long time. The fact that all Nordic countries are now members of NATO greatly improves our ability to discuss and plan the defence of this area. Defending Ukraine's sovereignty and a fair peace agreement are crucial issues that we share with our Baltic neighbours.

What are the major issues you have dealt with since the beginning of your term in France?

The first few months of my mission in France were marked by a series of significant events. In addition to President Macron's visit to Greenland in June, there was the royal couple's state visit in October, the first in 47 years. A strategic partnership was signed between Denmark and France on key issues: defence, health, technology and energy. Seeing the Danish flags in Paris for three days was a thrill. This was followed by the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which focused on a stronger Europe in a changing world. One of my first assignments was also to follow the Paralympic Games. It was a unique experience.

What do you think about gender equality in Denmark?

There is always room for improvement, even though we are among the most egalitarian countries in Europe. Many women work full-time, which has been made possible by excellent childcare facilities and a flexible labour market. We have adopted significant reforms on parental leave. But legislation alone is not enough; it must be accompanied by awareness-raising and a change in culture. There is still a gender pay gap of almost 13% for the same qualifications and work. While there is gender parity in parliament, this is not yet the case on company boards.

What advice would you give to young women?

You have to be brave and seize opportunities without having too narrow or "perfect" a vision, because it is often an unexpected door that opens onto an exciting circumstance.

***"The Union (...) gives
Denmark (...) a stronger
voice in the world."***

Be open-minded and proactive. If you have ambition, go for it! But do so while maintaining your ethics and values.

Do you think the younger generation still believes in the Union?

Support has never been higher. During this presidency, we have seen immense confidence in European institutions, in enlargement and strong support for Ukraine's accession. Around 73% of Danes believe that the European Union is a good thing because it improves cooperation, protects peace and strengthens security. The Union gives Denmark, which is a small country, a stronger voice in the world. Geopolitical insecurity in Europe, the feeling of having less influence and the need to be able to protect oneself have contributed to this awareness among Danes.

Is there a European woman who inspires you for her commitment, and why?

I have known many women who have been role models. I like strong women who take up space in the right way. But to name just one: Christine Lagarde, who has been a pioneer in finance, a predominantly male field, and who holds a major European role, while continuing to advocate for equality for women.

Estonia



Triin Agan

Head of Eesti Loto

**“I wanted to give back to my country
the opportunities it gave me.”**

Triin Agan studied economics before launching her tech career in 2009. This entrepreneur, who has founded three start-ups, is a member of the Estonian Founders Society. She is particularly committed to opening up the tech sector to women, devoting much of her time to mentoring and business angel activities to encourage the next generation of female entrepreneurs. After 15 years dedicated to entrepreneurship, she took over as head of the national lottery.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

Originally, I wanted to be an economics teacher, but I was inspired by the success of Skype, Estonia's first IT unicorn. After the failure of my first start-up (a parking payment app), I went to Silicon Valley. The difference between Americans and Europeans is that they 'dare to dream big' instead of just being pragmatic. I learned a lot there and wanted to use that knowledge when I returned to Estonia by investing in the local ecosystem. In 2015, I founded another start-up. The goal was to provide mobile app developers with software that could automate their workflows. That same year, I joined the Estonian Founders Society.

Noticing the lack of women in tech and the persistent stereotypes, I became actively involved in mentoring and business angel activities to encourage young women. Whenever possible, I participate in conferences and speak at schools to encourage women not to be intimidated by preconceived ideas. In addition, I have set up quarterly meetings where 'female entrepreneurs' come to share their experiences to inspire other women and help them dare to get started.

I then ran a company that sold algorithms, but we had to close due to lack of funding. This is a recurring problem for start-ups: the lack of funding deprives us of the time needed to prove the viability of our project. That's why 9 out of 10 start-ups generally fail.

After 15 years of setting up companies in the private sector, where only growth counts, whatever the cost, I wanted to give back to my country the opportunities it had given me. For the past year, as CEO of the national lottery, a public company, I have felt invested with a mission towards Estonians. I can finally focus on the human aspect and the well-being of our citizens.

Are there many women in your sector? What do you think about women's rights and gender equality in your country?

Things have changed recently in my profession. In particular, I took part in an event involving the heads of national lotteries

from Member States, many of whom were women (Poland, Slovenia, Denmark). This is something new; it hasn't always been the case. Of course, the stereotype that women are confined to certain areas (marketing, public relations) persists, but we are actively working to diversify these roles. With this in mind, we are also working to break down stereotypes from an early age, in particular by offering girls school activities to train them in areas such as technology and robotics.

"The pay gap between men and women (...) is still too wide."

In Estonia, we still have a long way to go. Although the situation is gradually improving, the pay gap between men and women for the same job is still too wide. I would like to see faster progress. It is crucial to talk about it openly and show the figures to raise awareness. Despite this, women today are more confident in demanding the salary they deserve and are more aware of their value. I feel that they have a greater thirst for success and achievement. Young women are also better informed about financial independence and how to invest their money.

Does the European Union influence your sector of work? How is it perceived in your field, and more generally in your country?

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, there has been a strong and genuine sense of solidarity and mutual understanding. Europe is more present than ever in our hearts. In the tech sector, we attach great importance to European values. We are keen to demonstrate European unity. For example, the Estonian Founders Society is actively involved in the European Commission's initiatives on digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI).

However, the European Union could be more daring and assert its voice more forcefully in the resolution of major global issues. For

too long, we have had our eyes fixed on the United States, when we are perfectly capable of doing much more and much better.

“However, the European Union could be more daring and assert its voice more forcefully.”

We should take more of a lead, clearly assert our values, and protect the Union, not only through diplomacy, but also through concrete actions.

What do you think of Europe’s strengths in the tech sector?

Major progress is being made to simplify procedures, reduce bureaucracy and

harmonise regulations. This is a truly collaborative effort, with Member States working to standardise administrative procedures, for example. The aim is to establish common rules or laws, rather than maintaining different systems in each country. We have also discussed the question of digital currency, which could accelerate this transition. All these issues, which are common to the various European countries, should be addressed with much greater momentum and ambition.

Is there a European woman who inspires you through her commitment, and why?

Kinga Stanisławska, a Polish entrepreneur deeply involved in the European Innovation Council (EIC), which works to promote the inclusion of women in the financial sector, particularly in venture capital funds.

Finland



Lieutenant Colonel Annukka Ylivaara

Assistant Secretary General of the Security Committee

**“I was driven by a deep desire to defend
my country and to be useful.”**

Lieutenant Colonel Annukka Ylivaara began her career with voluntary service in the Jaeger Brigade, which specialises in training military forces to operate in Arctic climates and harsh weather conditions. She then became head of the national security team at the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and aide-de-camp to the Finnish Defence Forces Command. Following that she took command of the Uusimaa Jaeger Battalion and became the first female battalion commander in the Finnish Army, leading 650 soldiers. She is now Deputy Secretary General of the Security Committee of the Finnish Ministry of Defence, a cooperative body that focuses on preparedness and global security issues.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

I grew up in a military family in Sodankylä, in northern Finland. Both my parents served in the Finnish Defence Forces: my mother as a civilian and my father as a non-commissioned officer. This family environment undoubtedly influenced my decision to do voluntary military service alongside my studies in international relations. I was driven by a deep desire to defend my country and be useful, but I was also attracted by the prospects offered by a career as an officer.

What impact did the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, and then Finland's entry into NATO, have on your role and responsibilities?

With 1,340 kilometres of shared border with Russia, we have been preparing for the possibility of devastating conflict since the end of the Second World War. Our approach contrasts with that of other European countries, which have, to varying degrees, moved away from national defence in favour of crisis management. We have always kept in mind that the threat comes from the East.

“Our membership of NATO has profoundly altered our defence doctrine [and] has led us to adopt a collective defence approach.”

Our membership of NATO has profoundly changed our defence doctrine. Rather than defending Finland separately, we are now part of a collective defence system. Although we have maintained numerous bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements and were already partners with NATO, it is fundamentally different to prepare alone with the support of other nations than to integrate into a collective defence framework.

What was the most interesting assignment you have ever undertaken in your career?

I couldn't limit myself to just one. My experience as Aide-de-Camp to the Chief of Defence Staff was very formative in terms of observing Finland's political strategies up close, given that the Chief of Defence is under the direct authority of the President of the Republic. This role also provided me with an opportunity to study inter-state cooperation and analyse the leadership and management of the Defence Forces. My time as a battalion commander was very rewarding.

“In Finland, the highest rank attained by a woman in the army is that of lieutenant-colonel.”

It provided me with fundamental knowledge of leadership in the field.

What are the challenges faced by women in the armed forces?

Although gender discrimination is illegal, any remaining inequality is likely linked to past practices and legacies. Currently, women are promoted faster in the Air Force than in the Army. The Finnish system, which is male-dominated due to compulsory military service (voluntary for women), differs from that of its neighbours. Unlike Norway and Sweden, which integrated women into military service ten to twenty years before us, the highest rank achieved by a woman in the army to date is lieutenant-colonel. Nevertheless, I hope that we will have our first female colonel by the end of the year.

How does the EU influence your work?

My current duties are heavily influenced by the European Union, particularly from a global security perspective. We are actively promoting a [“preparedness union strategy”](#). As a result, my responsibilities will evolve

in line with European legislation and NATO decisions. Although the defence sector is central, our approach to security is 360 degrees. We therefore integrate international cooperation, the well-being of the population, security of supply, infrastructure, the economy and psychological resilience.

How do you perceive European sentiment within your country?

In general, European values are being tested and challenged: human rights, equality, freedom. We are seeing a trend towards more conservative values. Nevertheless, Finnish citizens appreciate the concrete benefits of the EU, such as freedom of movement.

“European values are being tested and challenged.”

They realise that the EU provides the essential framework that enables European countries to face current challenges and survive in this difficult context, particularly in view of the power dynamics between the United States, China and Russia. An entire generation has now only known the EU and no longer questions its existence. Public opinion is fundamentally pro-European. Our membership of NATO was, in fact, the final step in European integration. Of course, in

every Member State, certain political actors seek to exploit the EU's internal divisions to promote Euroscepticism.

Do you have any advice for young women?

My advice would be to encourage them to define their own interests and passions, to think independently, and to pursue their goals without being dictated to by social norms or pre-established expectations. The key is for them to make their own choices. The best way to guide them is to present the advantages and disadvantages of this environment in a transparent manner, so that they can make an informed decision. It is crucial to be realistic and not make false promises. However, I can say that it is possible to balance a career in this field with motherhood, and that they will not have to give up their personal lives.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

Several Finnish women inspire me. Helvi Sipilä, the first female Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, is a notable figure, even though she did not work strictly within a European context. Elisabeth Rehn was the first woman to hold the position of Minister of Defence in Finland and in Europe. She embodied and promoted fundamental European values: human rights, equality and freedom. It was during her term of office that voluntary military service for women was introduced.

France



Claudie Haigneré

Former astronaut and former minister

“The European narrative does not live up to what Europe is capable of achieving.”

After becoming a Doctor of Medecine she was selected as a candidate astronaut by the French National Centre for Space Studies (CNES) in 1985, where she became head of space physiology and medicine programmes. In 1996, she made her first flight aboard the Russian orbital station Mir. She was the first French woman to fly in space. Then, in 2001, she became the first European to fly aboard the International Space Station (ISS). In 2002, she was appointed Minister Delegate for Research and New Technologies and then, in 2004, Minister Delegate for European Affairs. In 2009 she founded *Universcience*, which brings together two Parisian scientific and technical cultural institutions: the Palais de la Découverte and the Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie. She was its Director until 2015.

Tell us about your career path. How did you become an astronaut after being a doctor?

It took a certain amount of daring and a genuine passion to embark on the space adventure, which at the time was largely male-dominated and essentially reserved for military pilots. In 1969, mankind's first step on the moon sparked a kind of fascination in my young mind: the idea that the impossible had become possible. I turned to medicine, where I had an exciting career. In 1984, I saw a call for candidates to work for CNES, the French space agency. At that time, space stations had become laboratories offering unique research opportunities in an exceptional environment where the effects of gravity no longer apply. Recruitment was open to new profiles such as doctors, scientists and engineers.

“The impossible had suddenly become possible.”

Suddenly, my dream became possible, and this difference in skills has always been an asset, overcoming the pitfalls of gender discrimination. I was lucky enough to be selected as an aspiring astronaut in 1985. I completed my training with a PhD in Neuroscience. In 1999, I joined the European Astronaut Corps in Germany. My first mission in 1996 was a Franco-Russian mission to the Mir space station. I carried out a second mission in 2001 with the European Space Agency to join the ISS. My training took place mainly at Star City near Moscow so that I could fly with the Soyuz rocket. At that time, only the United States and Russia were able to send crews into space. I then spent 10 years working and training on the Russian side, contributing to the establishment and scientific operation of the ISS. This scientific and operational cooperation for the safety of crews and the success of missions is still valid today, and the ISS is one of the few areas of cooperation to continue with Russia since 2022.

Have you faced any obstacles in your career due to your gender?

I was recruited at a time when, in order to make the best use of orbital stations, doctors and scientists in many fields were in demand, hence

their selection, and these profiles are becoming increasingly important. When I arrived at Star City, there were only male cosmonauts and astronauts. I was the only woman, but also the only scientist. As this skill was essential, I was easily integrated into a crew with the aim and determination to perform as well as possible for this collective mission. And thanks to this intensive and rigorous work, this is what happened twice in a fraternal atmosphere, with true collective intelligence. I never felt any discrimination, and inclusion through gender and skill diversity came naturally.

How can we attract more women to science and technology sectors?

In the manned spaceflight sector, in 1985, only 10% of applicants were women; in 2008, the figure had risen to 14%; and in 2022, women represented 24%. Of the 17 people selected by the ESA at that time, eight were women. They impressed everyone with their CVs and their determination to achieve their goals. With Samantha Cristoforetti, an Italian ESA astronaut, our undoubtedly inspiring example proves to young girls that it is possible to succeed in the space industry. I was put in the spotlight because I was the first European female astronaut. You have to accept that responsibility and be the one who speaks out, shares your journey, your enthusiasm and your passion. For me, it was a way of giving back everything that had been given to me. This idea of empowerment through choosing a career in science still needs to be promoted in Europe. We need to change the narrative of science and how it is taught by making it more appealing and connecting it to the reality of the challenges we face. These are essential tools for building the future and levers for promoting international cooperation, the common good and progress. We have to find a way to talk about it using shared language, because that of science is often impenetrable.

Do you think Europe is sufficiently equipped in the space sector to face the competition?

The European narrative does not live up to what Europe is capable of; Europe does not make its strengths and successes known to its citizens. No one knows Galileo or Copernicus, even though

we use them every day and these achievements are at the highest international level. Europe is at the forefront of major scientific advances: the extraordinary images of the universe transmitted by the Euclid space telescope are European, and we were the first to land on a comet with Rosetta and Philae. We have the European spaceport in Kourou, which is an ideally located launch base.

“Europe provides the long-term perspective that is lacking at national level.”

We are highly competitive in certain sectors and at the forefront of international cooperation, but we do not publicise this enough. It is a shame not to make this a source of European pride. Furthermore, we have not always found the means to promote innovation. An overly technocratic approach and the difficulty of reaching consensual decisions, in European synergy, are slowing our progress and inhibiting an entrepreneurial culture that includes risk-taking. The space sector is a field full of hope and promise, but it must be driven by incentives and agility rather than constraints, and by a European vision of responsibility that transcends narrow national interests to reduce our dependence and strengthen our autonomy. The fact that we have not always been willing to pursue this European ambition means that our young talents are moving elsewhere, attracted by a dream of freedom that is considered unattainable on our continent.

What decisions have you made as a minister that you are most proud of?

I have had some wonderful experiences in Europe. In 2002, I was Minister for Space when the Ariane 5 accident occurred. We then had to rebuild the entire launch vehicle industry. This commitment to national transformation, with European support, meant that we were able to return to success throughout its operation. We succeeded in re-establishing the European solidarity needed to guarantee our independent access to space. We have Ariane 6, Vega and some great initiatives involving small, reusable launchers that are repositioning us in the international competition.

I also contributed to the drafting of the White Paper on European space policy. The ESA is an intergovernmental research and programme agency, relying on the political support of its Member States and the European Commission for its implementation. I was involved in ITER, the international experimental thermonuclear fusion reactor. I have advocated the importance of nuclear fusion around the world, as well as its implementation where the expertise was greatest, namely in Europe and in France at Cadarache. These are great European successes.

How do you perceive European sentiment among the French population today?

In 2005, with France’s “no” vote in the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty, we entered a phase of disillusionment and mistrust, which has led to a form of scepticism. But today’s younger generation remains very European, thanks in particular to the Erasmus programme. Europe provides a long-term perspective that is lacking at national level, where management is often focused on day-to-day and short-term issues. Although young people feel European, they nevertheless perceive that the Union does not sufficiently address their concerns and they struggle to understand its institutions. While the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have revealed the tangible value of the Union, there remains a lack of credibility regarding Europe’s ability to be a strong player and to provide a common vision for the future. Young people understand the effectiveness of action taken at European level to address major challenges. The issue of European strategic autonomy is a welcome lever for mobilisation. Europe may no longer be the dream of the last century, but it is a vital tool of resistance in an unstable world; it is a strategic necessity.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

Simone Veil was a real inspiration for me in my career. Sophie Adenot, a brilliant young French ESA astronaut who is preparing for an amazing space mission aboard the ISS in February 2026, is a wonderful source of inspiration for young European women and an opportunity to convey a sense of pride and a shared European identity.

Germany



Antje Boetius
Oceanographer

**“I grew up believing that ‘Planet Earth’ was,
in fact, ‘Planet Ocean’.”**

Antje Boetius is an oceanographer and researcher specialising in polar regions and the deep sea. Since 1 May, she has been director of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI). She was director of the Alfred Wegener Institute, has led or participated in more than fifty expeditions, and has coordinated ocean-focused research programmes. She has also been elected as an external scientific member of the Max Planck Society and the [Leopoldina](#) Academy.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

I am an oceanographer and researcher specialising in the study of the deep sea. My interest in this world is fuelled by the work of pioneers such as Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Hans and Lotte Hass. I grew up believing that 'planet Earth' was, in reality, 'planet Ocean'. I then studied biology and oceanography at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. My research focuses on cold-water regions, particularly the Arctic, where I have had the honour of leading major expeditions. I work in constant conjunction with an international team of scientists representing some thirty countries. I am currently devoting myself to developing the next major Antarctic programme, which aims to fill the gaps in our knowledge of this crucial region. At the same time, I am studying the impact of heat waves on marine life.

During your career, have you had to overcome any obstacles due to your gender?

Ever since university, I dreamed of taking part in sea expeditions. I quickly had the chance to participate in major missions with the European fleet. I never felt that my situation was more difficult than that of a man. However, I started out at a time when sexist comments were common.

“Europe has a network of institutions specialising in deep-sea oceanography that is highly competitive on a global scale.”

These remarks were never made with malice, though. Later, these colleagues expressed their pride in me. They told me they always knew I would become a renowned oceanographer thanks to my hard work. When I first started going on expeditions, I worked alongside the very first women to go to sea on these ships. There were only a few of us. Fortunately, the

situation has changed enormously over the last thirty years. I have just returned from the [Arctic Circle](#) Assembly in Reykjavik, a meeting of polar institute leaders, where there were only women.

How does the Union influence your work?

My career has been linked to supporting Europe. During my studies, the European Commission invested heavily in establishing a deep-sea research network. As a young scientist, I took advantage of all the programmes initiated by Europe to further knowledge and protection of its seas. Europe has a network of institutions specialising in deep-sea oceanography that is highly competitive on a global scale. Later on, European research grants (ERC) were decisive in helping me to set up a large-scale laboratory. The European Joint Programming Initiative, which provided the opportunity to address emerging ocean-related topics such as the assessment of the impact of deep-sea mining, also played a fundamental role in my career. The Green Deal is an ambitious framework, but Europe could be bolder in the multilateral agreements it establishes with certain regions of the world, particularly Latin America, the Pacific, the Indo-Pacific and India. We are sometimes too focused on our internal processes, which means we miss opportunities for cooperation with other nations. Europe is also working to promote the concept of the blue economy and to establish regulations applicable to all Member States, such as the treaty on the high seas ([United Nations Agreement on the High Seas - BBNJ](#)). Achieving sustainability is still a big challenge in areas like fishing, mineral resources, and shipping, making it tricky to set up a single framework for Europe.

You hold a position at an American institution. Why did you choose to pursue your career in the United States?

Europe has some fantastic research vessels, but it is lagging behind the United States in terms of innovation, particularly in environmental robotics, AI and digital technology. The MBARI is funded by the

Packard Foundation. When I was offered the position of president, I accepted immediately because it is an incredible centre of innovation. There is no other institute of this kind in Europe or anywhere else in the world.

“Europe (...)is lagging behind the United States in terms of innovation.”

My choice was not based on the country, but on the opportunity to join an institution that embodies innovation and focuses on future prospects for environmental challenges.

What are the main changes that Europe should implement to address the challenges facing the oceans?

The health of our oceans is under enormous pressure, resulting from decades of resource extraction, widespread pollution due to poor management, and the massive presence of plastics. We also face the urgent challenge of climate change, including heat waves that are accelerating the melting of sea ice. Given these challenges, Europe must maintain its course towards highly competitive and innovative frameworks. It must use its in-

depth understanding of sustainability to establish multilateral agreements with willing partners. I would like to see increased investment in innovative infrastructure for maritime presence, specifically in the polar regions. I welcome the announcement of a [European Ocean Pact](#) to address these crucial challenges.

What advice would you give to young women?

It is important to understand that our profession plays a very significant role in our lives. That is why it is crucial to follow your dreams. Even if the dream is big and the challenges are great, it is worth it.

“Maintain the course towards highly competitive and innovative frameworks.”

Do not be afraid, do not be too shy: follow your path with passion and curiosity.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

Lotte Haas, Françoise Gaill and Myriam Sibuet have been of great inspiration to me.

Greece



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Afroditi Panagiotakou

Artistic Director of the Onassis Foundation

“Europe’s true strength lies in culture, education and people.”

Afroditi Panagiotakou is Artistic Director of the Onassis Foundation and deputy director general of the Onassis Cultural Centre. Previously, she held various positions in communications, notably at the Ministry of Culture and the National Opera.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

I have never viewed my professional commitment from the perspective of a career in the strict sense of the word, as a rigid, premeditated path that excludes any form of change and sometimes leads to a certain disenchantment. My professional activity is one of the most creative expressions of my being. It is a vocation: the imperative was to get closer to artists and contribute to changing the world.

How do you perceive the role and influence of the EU in your sector?

The Onassis Foundation participates in EU programmes to establish and develop partnerships. Our aim is to support, strengthen and complement the provision of public goods such as health, education and culture, which must remain public, free and state-funded. We must not and cannot replace the state or the Union in these areas. The vast majority of the projects we support do not generate money, but they certainly produce value.

What does the EU mean to you?

I understood what it means to be European when I received the [Marshall Memorial Fellowship](#). At the beginning of the programme, there were twenty of us, from Hungary, Germany, Greece and elsewhere. By the end of the journey, we were all Europeans.

“European unity is an ongoing quest.”

European unity is an ongoing quest. While the outcome may still be a work in progress, our commitment remains unwavering.

Do you think that collaborative efforts at the European level are inconsistent or sufficient?

In the cultural sector, they are a means of survival for many organisations. They

create a European territory beyond political, institutional and geographical borders. National funding for culture is often reduced. Yet culture stands out as the primary refuge in these times of uncertainty. We must guarantee funding that supports collaboration at national and European level and pay particular attention to the selection of those who appraise cultural productions and budgets. Europe must use culture as a soft weapon.

Europe must accept its history and its imperfections as a path to progress. It must realise that it is always stronger thanks to the crises it goes through. This world is no longer one of empires. Europe’s true power lies in culture, education and people: invaluable assets that cannot be bought, but require constant and deep investment.

What obstacles still remain for women in your country?

Gender-based violence and femicide. Age-related sexism. An infinitely demanding society that defines what a woman must do, be, and achieve. It is a universal problem. And then there are the practical obstacles: equal pay, equal opportunities, equal rights. Ultimately, women still have less time for what they want to do, for what they want to be.

How does the balance between contemporary and historical culture, as well as education, enrich your approach to leadership?

Access to the ideal of Homo Universalis requires a thorough classical education. To anchor ourselves in our cultural heritage, it is essential to adopt a global mindset. This is a profoundly European approach: recognising the importance of great civilisations, beyond temporal and spatial limits. We do not focus enough on contemporary culture and art that concerns the present. Democracy must be accessible to all. Everything that is contemporary and significant will one day become heritage, and everything that is heritage was once contemporary. The future of the future is the present.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership positions?

Do not be afraid. Build your team. Be serious, but do not take everything too seriously. Mistakes seem smaller as you get older. Be human and humanistic. Enjoy the journey.

You have a unique library. Do you think Europe should do more to preserve its heritage?

You are referring to the Onassis Library, which indeed houses rare editions on antiquity and more than 10,000 volumes. What matters is that all of the library's archival collections are continuously enriched, digitised and made available to the public free of charge.

“Europe’s greatest strength has never been uniformity, but our ability to understand each other and safeguard our differences.”

The aim remains to unlock this rare cultural treasure trove so that as many readers as possible can discover it, even electronically. As for Europe, it must encourage its citizens

to discover their cultural heritage. It should not be seen as something static, but as a field of exploration to which new meaning must be given, a living dialogue between historical memory and creativity. Europe's greatest strength has never been uniformity, but our ability to understand each other and preserve our differences. I believe that the best way to preserve European heritage is not necessarily to build monuments or organise archives, but to ensure that European citizens continue to meet, create and debate across borders. Above all, we must preserve the privilege of public curiosity by investing in education, art and languages. This is the best way to imagine the future.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment to Europe, and why?

The women who inspire me are not famous. My friend Elli walked to Greece from Albania. She studied every day after work and after taking care of her children and putting them to bed. She cried when she became a European citizen. She is a woman who has been saving money for years so that she can take her children to a different European country every year, giving them experiences that will help them lead a better life than hers. This woman, who has fought so hard, understands better than anyone what it means to be a European citizen.

Hungary



Krisztina Tóth

Writer and translator

**“The greatest fear of this country (...) is that it will disappear (...)
that it will be absorbed by neighbouring countries.”**

Krisztina Tóth is a Hungarian writer and translator. Her literary career has been marked by the publication of 45 different works. In 2015, her novel *Aquarium* was shortlisted for the German Internationaler Literaturpreis. She has received the most prestigious literary awards in Hungarian poetry, including the Attila József Prize.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

My career path was not so much a choice as a natural progression, since I have been writing since the age of 10. Having grown up in a family of artists, I could only choose an artistic path. I was encouraged to persevere after winning a prize in a writing competition at the age of 16. I first studied sculpture before turning to literature and linguistics.

“Women still have to work twice as hard as men to have their work recognised and respected.”

I then furthered my knowledge of contemporary French literature at the Sorbonne, where I compiled an anthology of contemporary poets. I published my first collection at the age of 20, which immediately earned me a prestigious award. Since 1989, I have published 45 volumes of poetry, prose, young adult literature and children's books. My works have been translated into 24 languages.

How do you perceive European sentiment in your country?

It's a complex issue. Belonging to a generation that grew up behind the Iron Curtain, we were quite isolated. Hungary's greatest fear, since the year 1000, has been extinction. The fear of being absorbed by neighbouring countries. The current government plays heavily on this fear. The authorities often present the European Union as a threat to the nation and the uniqueness of countries, even though Hungary is dependent on its subsidies. But anti-European voices remain strong; the government has organised advertising campaigns against the Union and Viktor Orban prides himself on leading an 'illiberal democracy'. This fear is deeply rooted in our history. When the first king, Saint Stephen, received the crown in the year 1000, he had to choose between the Byzantine crown, and the support of the East, or the

crown of Pope Sylvester, which symbolised the support of the West and progress. By accepting the latter, he made a decisive symbolic gesture. It is essential to understand that our country is located on the border between the West and the East, and has always been subject to pressure from the surrounding great powers. The threat from the East has always been extremely strong. That is why Hungary's accession to the Union in 2004 was truly symbolic: it meant that the country was regaining its rightful place at the heart of Europe. The greatest danger of Viktor Orbán's government is that it will make Hungary dependent on Russia once again. Despite everything, part of the population remains pro-European.

Are there any particular obstacles that persist for women in your country? What advice would you give to young women?

When I began my career as a writer, women had a very limited place in Hungarian literature. It was a man's world, so women were not taken seriously. Although the situation has changed since then, there is still a long way to go. Women still have to work twice as hard as men to have their work recognised and respected. In other EU countries, there is not such a marked difference in how women and men are regarded. Succeeding in this environment has required considerable resilience on my part. I have been the target of violent attacks in the Hungarian press. That is why I do not plan to return to Hungary while Viktor Orbán is in power.

Does the political situation in your country inspire you? Does it influence your writing?

It is essential to emphasise that writers are not journalists; they leave their mark, but in a more elaborate way. I write about current life in Hungary, attempting to highlight historical parallels and understand why things unfold in this manner.

Do you think literature can provoke dialogue between social groups?

Literature has the power to build bridges and open up dialogue, even when that dialogue proves difficult or heated. The key is to make

discussion possible. My role as a writer also involves understanding what goes on in the minds of people who are very different from me. I need to be able to create characters whose personalities are very different from my own.

How do you manage being a public figure and the visibility that comes with it? Do you feel you have a responsibility towards your readers?

It is obviously a responsibility. By showing courage and dignity, I believe I am supporting those who have also been viciously attacked in the press. The current government is trying to create an atmosphere of fear and pressure where no one feels safe. As a divorced woman with a child, I was unfortunately an ideal target for attack.

Is there a book or work of art that has made a particular impression on you?

At the age of 14, reading Sophocles' Antigone was a revelation. I identified with her because I was a rebellious teenager, and her resistance made a deep impression on me. Then I read Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger. As a lonely child, this work helped me understand that I was not alone in the world. Reading Marina Abramović's memoirs, Walking Through Walls, made a big impression on me. Finally, the work of Pina Bausch, a choreographer

and dancer who influenced modern dance, touched me deeply.

What do you get out of teaching, and how does it feed into your work?

When dealing with a different generation, you have to restructure everything you've learned about an author or a work because perspectives are constantly changing. You always have to find a new way of teaching because that's what drives progress.

“Always find another way to teach.”

It's difficult to capture young people's attention and keep them focused, interested and engaged. I try to find a connection with their personal lives and help them understand that literature is not just another subject to study.

Is there a European woman who inspires you in her commitment?

Marina Abramović, visual artist, for her performance art.

Ireland



Jennifer Baker

Journalist and presenter

“Independent journalism is essential to democracy to ensure that citizens are represented.”

Jennifer Baker is a journalist. After completing her studies, she began her career as a radio sports news presenter. She was then appointed deputy editor-in-chief of a Maltese daily newspaper (Malta Independent). She joined the newspaper sector in London before finally settling in Brussels. Specializing in European politics and legislation in the technology sector, she is a regular contributor to several media outlets, including the BBC. She is a member of the advisory board of the [Journal of Data Protection and Privacy](#).

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

At university, I hesitated between archaeology and journalism, which ultimately seemed more in tune with my personality, because I disliked the idea of being confined to a university classroom. My first job was as a radio journalist covering sports news. That effectively launched my career. Then I moved to Malta as deputy editor of a daily newspaper, *Malta Independent*. This period, marked by Malta's accession to the European Union, sparked my interest in European affairs. I then worked in the press in London. I founded my own publishing house there, then moved to Brussels where I now work as a freelance journalist. As a correspondent for IDG News Service team, I gradually moved into moderation work, which now makes up the bulk of my activity. I do not work for a particular editorial team or country, which gives me a broader perspective. Independent journalism is essential to democracy to ensure citizen representation.

How has the European Union played a role in your career? How does the EU influence your work? Has your perception of the EU changed over the course of your career?

The European Union has been instrumental in my career and the opportunities that have come with it. My career path has been enriched by the opportunity to work in several Member States. This has given me access to high-level figures that I would not have been able to meet otherwise. Finally, as a woman, I would probably not have enjoyed the same degree of freedom.

*“Independent journalism
is essential to democracy
to ensure citizen
representation.”*

Having mastered the workings of the European institutions and the legislative process, it has become relatively easy for me to tackle a

multitude of subjects without being an expert. Given my understanding of the dynamics in Brussels, I often find that I can speak in some depth on technical issues without being a specialist.

I am very supportive of the European Union and consider it one of the greatest opportunities of recent generations. Deeply committed to the social model and free movement, the rule of law and fundamental rights, I find it easy to regard the European Union as a precious asset. However, there are laws and proposals with which I do not always agree, and it is my duty to remain critical of them.

You are regularly mentioned as one of the most influential figures in Europe. How do you perceive this influence? How do you use it?

My role as a moderator means I get to chat with people from all walks of life and backgrounds. But my independence and influence come from how carefully I do my job and how free I am to pick the topics and guests I want to focus on. I'm lucky enough to be the one asking the questions, so I see that as a real way to influence things.

What challenges have you faced as a woman, and how have you overcome them?

In Malta, I quickly became deputy editor-in-chief. But there was a kind of prejudice against women, especially young women, particularly in these positions. When it came to giving instructions to men, they ignored me because they would not accept my authority. It was difficult, but I persevered.

In your opinion, what role should journalism specialising in European affairs play?

The most important thing is to be honest and ethical. It is important to adopt a critical mindset, without resorting to unjustified criticism. It is important not to try to create a “buzz” at any cost. It is difficult not to have an opinion on the facts reported, especially after many years of experience. I even wonder how interested a journalist really is in their subject if they have no opinion about it.

What obstacles do you think still stand in the way of women in your country? And more generally within the EU?

As far as Ireland is concerned, the situation is relatively satisfactory. Women face universal problems inherent in our patriarchal societies: they are more likely to be victims of violence, to be paid less, to be the main carers at home and to bear the burden of domestic responsibilities. In the United Kingdom, Malta and Belgium, the mindset is perhaps slightly more conservative. The ban on abortion in Malta springs to mind.

“The most important thing is to be honest and ethical.”

But overall, in the European countries where I have had the opportunity to live, the status of women is not so negative.

How do you perceive European sentiment within your country?

Ireland has traditionally always had a very positive view of the European Union, which it sees as a major source of prosperity. The Union has helped to curb some of the corruption that was fairly endemic in Ireland before it joined in 1973. Since Brexit, this sense of belonging has grown stronger. The Irish have questioned the reasons behind this decision and its implications for themselves, given that they are very directly affected by Northern Ireland.

Is there a European woman who inspires you for her commitment, and why?

Mary Robinson, former President of the Republic of Ireland, who has done remarkable work in raising awareness of human rights globally.

And also, Margrethe Vestager, former European Commissioner, whose approach and determination in tackling the tech giants has inspired me.

Italy



Marta Cartabia

*Jurist, President Emeritus of the Italian Constitutional Court and
President of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe*

“Diversity (...) is a fundamental asset.”

Marta Cartabia is a professor of constitutional law, President Emeritus of the Italian Constitutional Court, the first woman to hold this position, and subsequently Minister of Justice (2021-2023). Co-President of the International Society of Public Law and co-founder of its Italian chapter, she has been a member of the scientific and editorial boards of numerous academic law journals since 2018. Since December 2017, she has been Italy's alternate member of the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission).

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

In the beginning, I wasn't passionate about law and even found my legal studies rather boring. My motivation came from discussions with my lecturers, whose vision of law was captivating.

“A passion for European law.”

I thus became a researcher and teacher, embarking on an academic career out of a passion for European law. However, becoming a member of the Constitutional Court and, even more so, Minister of Justice, was completely unexpected. My appointment to the Constitutional Court came as a surprise: the President of the Republic called me to offer me the position. At 48, I was the only woman and the youngest among the much older male members. While becoming a judge was not an obstacle, establishing myself and gaining the respect of my peers within the Court was the real challenge. After three years, other women were appointed, which made the situation easier. I was then appointed President of the Court during a difficult period: the Covid-19 pandemic, with the major challenge of ensuring the continuity of the institution's functioning despite the constraints. I now put my expertise at the service of the [Venice Commission of the Council of Europe](#).

Tell us about your time as Minister of Justice.

My role was particularly demanding, especially given my status as a politically independent figure, much like Mario Draghi. Our mandate took place against the backdrop of post-pandemic recovery, with the imperative to implement the European Next Generation EU plan for Italy. A €209 billion package was conditional on the success of reforms, particularly of the judicial system. Although I had no direct political experience, I benefited from exceptional national support. This period

was marked by a heavy workload and intense pressure, but it proved to be a fascinating experience. I consider these two years to have been the most stimulating and memorable of my professional career.

What was the most significant decision you made as a minister?

Firstly, the introduction of restorative justice in Italy. This is an innovative and extremely promising approach for our judicial system.

“Europe has always been part of my work.”

Secondly, the creation of professional court clerk positions within the courts. We have recruited around 16,000 young lawyers, thereby promoting intergenerational co-operation, which is essential to the proper functioning of the justice system. This initiative is crucial because I am convinced of the value of plurality of perspectives. Diversity, whether generational, gender or cultural, is a fundamental asset for the effectiveness and legitimacy of the judicial system.

How does the Union influence your work?

The European Union has influenced my career from day one. I am a specialist in constitutional law, but I became interested in European law during my final years of study. My thesis was on the European Constitution. In my work, I have always sought to reconcile national law with European law. My time at the Constitutional Court was marked by a notable openness in case law towards European principles. Europe has always been part of my work.

Have you faced any obstacles during your career?

Becoming a mother marked the beginning of a particularly demanding period, especially in terms of balancing my professional commitments with my role as a mother. As an academic, obtaining a position often involves

geographical mobility, which meant that I had to work in a region far from where my children were living. Although this balancing act required a great deal of discipline, I do not see it as an insurmountable obstacle. Looking back, I do not consider that I encountered any major difficulties or significant obstacles during my professional career.

What do you think about gender equality in Italy? And in Europe?

It is clear that there have been significant improvements in terms of equality. It is important to remember that in Italy, women were barred from the judiciary until 1963.

“Women were barred from the judiciary until 1963.”

Now, we are seeing a growing female presence in the civil service. Furthermore, Italians are more accepting of women in positions of power; the fact that they have a female Prime Minister is a sign of normalisation. However, from a cultural point of view, there has been a worrying regression in terms of violence against women, revealing the persistence of a culture of possession. It is crucial to remain vigilant and never take achievements for granted. Change can happen quickly, and unfortunately it is easy to take one step forward and then two steps back.

What advice would you give to the young women reading this?

Be yourself. Think about what you want to achieve and the person you want to be.

“There are no limits for women.”

Commit to the path that suits you best. Not everyone has to follow a specific model. There are no limits for women.

Is there a European woman who inspires you through her commitment, and why?

As a constitutional scholar, I have always taken Lorenza Carlassare, the first woman in Italy to become a fully-fledged professor of constitutional law as a model. Eleanor Roosevelt also inspired me because she succeeded in uniting different cultures in a very divided world around the thirty principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Finally, the empathic style of Jacinta Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand from 2017 through 2023, fascinated me for her empathic style.

Latvia



Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga

President of the Republic (1999-2007)

“The Union represents Europe’s only chance of surviving the major global changes.”

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga became a child refugee when her parents fled Soviet occupation in Latvia and sought refuge in Germany, which was occupied by the Allies after the end of the Second World War. When UNRRA began closing displaced persons camps, her family emigrated to French Morocco and then to Canada. There she obtained her doctorate and became a professor of experimental psychology, a member and leader of several university and government committees, as well as national and international scientific organisations, and vice-president of the Science Council of Canada. She returned to Latvia in 1998 after being invited to create and head the Latvian Institute. In 1999, she was elected President of the Republic and re-elected in 2003. During her two terms of office, she enabled Latvia to join the European Union and NATO in 2004. In 2005, she was appointed Special Ambassador for United Nations Reform, then became the official candidate from Eastern Europe for the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations the following year. As a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations, she became Vice-Chair of the Reflection Group on the Future of Europe (2007-2009). At the request of the Latvian Prime Minister, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga agreed in October 2009 to stand as a candidate for the presidency of the European Council. She is also the former president of the Club of Madrid and current co-president of the Nizami Ganjavi International Centre. An honorary fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford University, she has received numerous honorary doctorates, 37 Merit Awards (1st class) and numerous prizes.

What are the most important European issues you have dealt with?

Latvia's accession to the European Union was, in my view, a foregone conclusion, especially since Estonia had already been invited to begin negotiations with a view to joining. Nevertheless, in the first week after my election, I was asked to amend the law on the official language to make it more favourable to the Russian-speaking minority. I had seven days to find arguments and convince the Latvian parliament to amend the law to bring it into line with European Union rules. Alongside this legislative challenge, crucial preparations were underway for NATO enlargement. The aim was to integrate the new democratic countries of Eastern Europe, including Latvia, which were seeking to consolidate their newly regained sovereignty after the end of the USSR.

What are the main challenges facing the European Union today?

Security and defence are paramount issues and now represent a matter of survival for Europe. The European Union must take over from NATO, as the United States, which was its fundamental pillar and main arms supplier, is showing increasing disinterest. With the election of President Trump and the hardening of his position during his second term, it is necessary to consider the United States as a former ally that is now behaving like an enemy of Europe and democracy. Europe finds itself alone in the face of the Russian president, and it is time for it to take full responsibility for its own security. To do so, it must, in particular, commit to a policy of harmonising its military armaments so as to ensure their interoperability and enable all European forces to have the capacity to defend its interests. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has completely changed our understanding of military conflict, which is no longer just a classic inter-arms confrontation, but now extends into the realm of electronic and cyber warfare. The Union represents Europe's only chance of surviving major global changes. Not only does President Trump's policy threaten the international

free trade system, but Europe's demographic decline, in contrast to the demographic and economic growth of emerging countries, demands a response.

"The United States must be regarded as a former ally who are now behaving like enemies of Europe and democracy."

Europe must pool its assets much more effectively than the current treaties provide for if it is to preserve its place and influence on the international stage.

What is your interpretation of the meeting between Presidents Putin and Trump in Alaska on 8 August 2025?

It was pitiful and made no sense. There was no valid reason to extend such an invitation to the Russian president, who is a pariah banned from the international political arena. He was welcomed in the proper manner, with all the formal courtesies, even though he is a dictator and mass murderer whose crimes against humanity have been officially recognised by the International Court of Justice.

You were one of the first women to sit on the European Council. What is your view of European policy on women's issues? And in Latvia?

The number of women in positions of responsibility is increasing every year. In Latvia, for example, three women have been presidents of the Assembly (Saeima), two have been Prime Ministers, and many others have been ministers. So far I am the only woman to have been the President of my country, and also the first woman in the whole of Eastern Europe. I recently took part in an event that perfectly illustrated this reality, bringing together three former presidents from Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The Baltic countries thus stand out as major players

in female representation. Nevertheless, one major challenge remains: equal pay for women and men. The pay gap for equivalent qualifications is still far too wide. In Latvia, the Soviet era established a system of widespread nurseries, facilitating women's participation in the workforce, often in factories and for minimal wages. Since my return to the country, significant progress has been made in terms of social support, whether in the development of early childhood care facilities or the introduction of paternity leave.

What advice would you give to young women today?

Do whatever you like! Do what you're good at, discover your talents and what you enjoy doing. You need to have the strength of character to follow your heart. This means resisting societal, family and media pressures

that dictate the role women should play - how they should behave, their career and personal paths, their appearance, etc. It is essential to remember that neither marriage nor motherhood are obligations. Furthermore, it is alarming to note the increase in the suicide rate among adolescents, particularly young girls. The media, and social media platforms in particular, convey rigid and stereotypical models. Although our societies consider themselves open, liberal and democratic, young people are subject to very brutal psychological pressures.

Is there a European woman whose commitment inspires you, and why?

I was very impressed and inspired by Marie Curie's research.

Lithuania



Jolanta Balčiūnienė

Diplomat and Representant to UNESCO

“We [take] our rights and benefits for granted. That is dangerous.”

Like many other women of her generation, Jolanta Balčiūnienė found herself caught up in the whirlwind of her country's independence in 1990-1991, first as an interpreter for the Supreme Council, then as an advisor on international affairs to Professor Vytautas Landsbergis from 1996 to 2000, when he was president of the parliament. She worked at the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence from 1995, then at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2000 onwards. She served at the Permanent Representation of Lithuania to the European Union, then was appointed Ambassador to France and Italy. Since September 2021, she has been Lithuania's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

It is a path that I owe to history. At the time of independence, as a young graduate, I found myself working in Parliament as a freelance interpreter. I worked with the French press, actively participating in this revolutionary period that marked the rebirth of an independent state. Such an opportunity only comes once in a lifetime. Vytautas Landsbergis, the first president, offered me a position on his team. I gradually evolved, moving away from interpreting to focus on external relations, particularly with France. After the first free elections, I passed the entrance exam for the *École nationale d'administration* (ENA) in Paris, in the René Char class. When I returned to Lithuania, I worked for a while at the Ministry of Defence, then joined a private bank. I consider this immersion in the private sector to have been an extremely interesting and useful experience, which should be compulsory for all civil servants. When Vytautas Landsbergis was appointed president of parliament, he asked me to be his adviser. This position opened the doors to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, marking the beginning of my career as a diplomat.

Have you faced any obstacles in your career due to your gender?

We have the same opportunities as men, but after that it becomes more complicated. I don't feel that I have encountered any major obstacles in my career because I am a woman. However, it is true that considerable effort is required when women become mothers to balance their professional and family lives successfully. This is the most difficult aspect of a professional career. I have always made sure that I give equal importance to both spheres. It's not easy. But ultimately, your private life is what matters most. Nevertheless, I still believe that women should show more solidarity with each other.

What was the event that marked your first encounter with the European Union?

Lithuania has always been European, in terms of its territory, culture, history and civilisation. However, my first encounter with the European Union was during my studies in France. For Lithuania, this encounter took place on the very day of independence. One of the political objectives clearly expressed by almost all parties was to regain our place within the European family by joining the European Union and NATO. I have very vivid memories of 1 May 2004, the day we joined the Union. It was a doubly satisfying moment: the fulfilment of our national aspirations and, on a more personal level, the satisfaction of having made a modest contribution to the achievement of this dream.

How do you perceive the European Union today, compared to the one Lithuania joined in 2004?

I see a rather positive dynamic. The Union has this remarkable ability to emerge stronger from major crises. For the moment, it is demonstrating an ability to reinvent itself and learn from its mistakes. Is it doing so quickly and effectively enough? That is another question. We tend to take our rights and social benefits for granted. That is dangerous.

“Explain to citizens in clear terms the actions taken within the Union and the benefits these bring them.”

But I am optimistic. While it is necessary to call out the critics, it is equally crucial not to ignore anti-European sentiment and instead try to understand and defuse it. Perhaps we should explain to citizens in clear terms the actions taken by the Union and the benefits that these bring them.

What do you think about European sentiment in Lithuania?

Despite attempts by populist parties to undermine the European idea, polls confirm that Lithuania remains one of the most pro-European countries in the Union. This situation requires us to surpass ourselves, to constantly do better and never rest on our laurels.

How does the Union influence your work?

UNESCO is an international organisation in which the Union has a very strong presence. This is primarily because the Union and its Member States are its main donors.

“These European priorities (...) are actively defended and promoted at UNESCO.”

In addition, all European States are also members of UNESCO. While each country naturally defends its national interests, we work closely together on issues that are priorities for the Union, such as freedom of expression, the safety of journalists, equality and human rights. As representatives of our

respective countries, we also collectively represent the EU. Even candidate countries already adopt an approach, voting patterns and behaviour similar to those of Member States. This is the strength of Europe: despite our differences, we always manage to reach a compromise because we share a common set of values.

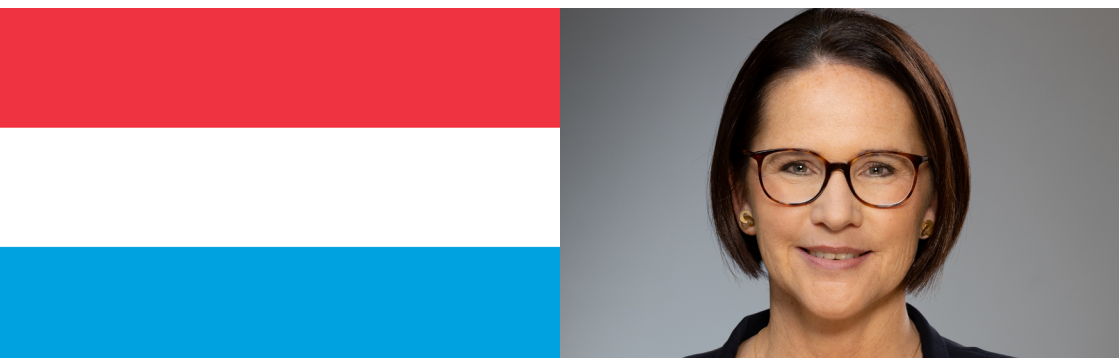
What advice would you give to young women?

My advice is to never compromise your integrity, never compromise your dreams. There will be difficult days, difficult moments, but they will eventually pass. And above all, have the courage to choose the side of the forces of good.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

Some are highly controversial, such as Margaret Thatcher. I have immense respect and admiration for Ona Šimaitė, a Lithuanian librarian who used her position at Vilnius University to save Jewish children from the ghetto. Historically, I would mention Anne of Brittany and Florence Nightingale. Others are not European but have inspired me, such as Golda Meir. I admire their determination, intelligence, courage, sensitivity and modernity. They all transcended their era.

Luxembourg



Yuriko Backes

Minister of Defence

“Citizens sometimes underestimate the benefits and concrete achievements of the Union.”

Yuriko Backes began her career in 1994 as a Chargé de Mission at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and has held various positions, including at Luxembourg’s Permanent Representation to the United Nations in New York and then to the European Union in Brussels. Following that she became Deputy Director of the International Economic Relations Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then diplomatic adviser and sherpa to Prime Ministers Jean-Claude Juncker and Xavier Bettel before becoming the European Commission’s Representative in Luxembourg. Subsequently she was appointed Marshal of the Grand Ducal Court, then Minister of Finance in 2022, then Minister of Defence, Minister of Mobility and Public Works, and Minister of Gender Equality and Diversity in November 2023.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

My dream was to become a diplomat and I worked hard to achieve it. I was fortunate enough to become diplomatic adviser to Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, who was also President of the European Commission, as well as Xavier Bettel. I held diplomatic posts in Brussels, New York and Tokyo. I then had the honour of being the first woman to represent the European Commission in Luxembourg, before being the first woman to be appointed Marshal of the Court, the head of the administration of HRH the Grand Duke, Luxembourg's Head of State. My aim was never to enter politics. I chose diplomacy, and that led me into politics. I was the first woman to hold the post of Minister of Finance, then Minister of Defence.

Have you encountered any obstacles in the course of your career? Are there still stumbling blocks for women in Luxembourg?

I've always tried to do my best in every role. It's true that I've always been offered new responsibilities, which I've accepted. Personally, I've experienced very few obstacles. Some remain, as everywhere, but it's worth noting that significant progress has been made on pay inequality in Luxembourg. In terms of hourly pay, it is the only country in Europe where women earn slightly more than men. Nonetheless, equal representation has not yet been achieved, especially at the highest levels of responsibility, either in politics or in the economy. While women account for around 60% of university graduates, they hold only 8% of board chairmanships, and 32% of seats at European level. Correcting these structural imbalances at national level is one of my fundamental responsibilities as Minister for Equality.

How has the EU influenced your career?

The role of the European Union has been fundamental to my career. My studies at the College of Europe in Bruges marked the beginning. I then worked for five years at

the Luxembourg Representation to the EU in Brussels, before representing the European Commission in Luxembourg for four years. This experience convinced me that citizens sometimes underestimate the benefits and concrete achievements that the Union has brought us, such as free movement within the Schengen area, the adoption of the euro, mutual recognition of diplomas or the abolition of roaming charges on mobile phones. All these advances have a direct impact on my life as a European citizen.

“Our support for Ukraine must be unwavering.”

As a diplomat, I was able to negotiate numerous texts in Brussels. More recently, as Minister for Transport, I negotiated the reform of the driving licence, and as Minister for Defence, I negotiated the first programme for the European Defence (EDIP), which aims to increase defence preparedness by improving the competitiveness and responsiveness of the European defence technological and industrial base, and to support industrial cooperation with Ukraine.

How do you see the future of defence issues in Europe?

The situation has changed fundamentally with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. We must not forget that Russia maintains powerful conventional military assets and a robust nuclear arsenal and so represents the main security threat to the entire Euro-Atlantic area, which is why our support for Ukraine must be unwavering. In recent decades, we have invested too little in our European defence. We need a strong European pillar within NATO. Interoperability at European level is essential, as is support for defence innovation. Our strength lies in our ability to speak with one voice, which is not always the case. There is strength in numbers!

How do you perceive European unity in Luxembourg?

The vast majority of the population is pro-European. Luxembourg owes a great deal to Europe. But Europe must continue to show its added value to its citizens. We have to keep reminding ourselves why Europe was created.

*“Over the past few decades,
we have invested too little in
our European defence.”*

We have had 80 years of peace, and we would never have imagined that war would return to Europe. Europe represents peace, prosperity, diversity, solidarity, freedom and fundamental rights. Everyone can help to ensure that this remains a positive force.

What are your priorities as Minister for Equality?

Over the past two years, my ministry has coordinated the adoption of three action plans, with around 300 concrete measures to be implemented to make equality between women and men a reality and to combat gender-based violence. But I don't want to portray women as victims. We need to

support them in shaping their own destiny and as key players in our societies. At European level, I support the Commission, which has presented a [roadmap for women's rights](#). I am also committed to the United Nations [Commission on the Status of Women](#) and the [Women, Peace and Security](#) Agenda.

What advice would you give to young women?

Be daring! All too often, women don't dare. Sometimes they receive interesting, specific offers that they don't dare accept.

*“All too often,
women don't dare.”*

I haven't turned any of them down, but I've had to work up the courage. We need to support women, encourage and inspire them to follow their dreams.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

We have remarkable women at the head of European institutions, who have led Europe through successive crises. They are doing an exemplary job. I hope there will be many more of them in politics, as in other fields.

Malta



Natalie Psaila Stabile

General practitioner and co-founder of 'Doctors for Choice Malta'

**"A united European bloc, sharing a liberal vision,
is an invaluable force."**

Natalie Psaila is a general practitioner and co-founder of the NGO 'Doctors for Choice Malta'. She campaigns for women's rights, particularly the right to abortion and better access to contraception. In 2023, she co-founded a helpline for women seeking abortion services.

Why did you choose this path and what are your main interests?

I was raised in a Catholic school with the belief that abortion was a sin. But very early on, I was confronted with patients who, for various reasons, often tragic, found themselves needing to have an abortion. These women come to me for help, as if crying out for assistance. I have also met fifteen-year-old girls who find themselves pregnant and unaware of how they got pregnant, since sex education is virtually non-existent in Malta. I wanted to help these women, but I couldn't. That's why I co-founded 'Doctors for Choice Malta' with my mother in 2019. Our organisation campaigns for the decriminalisation of abortion, the introduction of sex education, and free contraception, which is still very expensive in Malta. Many women do not know where to get it, how to use it, or what forms it comes in.

How does the European Union influence your work?

We had hoped for support. We went to the European Parliament to meet with several MEPs, who were very receptive. However, it is very difficult to change national law. We are also working with other organisations within the European Union, particularly in Ireland and Croatia. Last year, we launched an initiative inspired by similar initiatives in France and Germany: a group of women publicly testified that they had had abortions.

"I wanted to help these women, but I couldn't."

Unfortunately, this led to several arrests, and one of these women is currently being prosecuted.

How do you view European integration? What changed for you when Malta joined the EU?

Membership has opened many doors for Maltese people: it has given us the opportunity to study and work abroad,

broaden our horizons and gain a better understanding of other cultures. In the current geopolitical context, I firmly believe that a united European bloc with a shared liberal vision is an invaluable force.

What do you think of European regulations promoting women's rights? What improvements could be made?

It would be wonderful if more women were to attain positions of responsibility. The majority of our politicians and board members are still too often men. Women are too frequently forced to choose between their careers and their families. I would like to see the introduction of measures that would allow them to pursue both and find a balance between them. This is an issue that is encountered throughout Europe.

Moreover, MEPs have expressed their wish to include the right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. If this were to happen, it would be a real step forward for women. Because in reality, not all European women have equal access to the same healthcare. Ideally, the criteria for EU membership should be changed. This would encourage countries wishing to join the EU to modernise their laws and adopt more progressive values.

Are you the only members of Doctors for Choice?

Only my mother and I work at *Doctors for Choice*. But within the pro-choice movement, which includes several associations, more and more young women are getting involved. I am convinced that their commitment will make a huge difference because they have new ideas for raising public awareness on this issue.

What difficulties do you face in Malta in your efforts?

Patriarchy is our biggest obstacle, and it is expressed through the Church, which has a great deal of influence in Malta. With 90% of the population identifying as Catholic, agreements between the State and the Church ensure that abortion is not decriminalised.

At first, we felt quite alone and were the target of a lot of hate speech. But the situation is changing and attitudes are evolving.

In 2023, you were named in the BBC's 100 Women list. Why were you chosen and what has it changed for you?

It was a great honour. I was appointed to represent the pro-choice movement in Malta.

*“Not all women have
equal access to the same
healthcare.”*

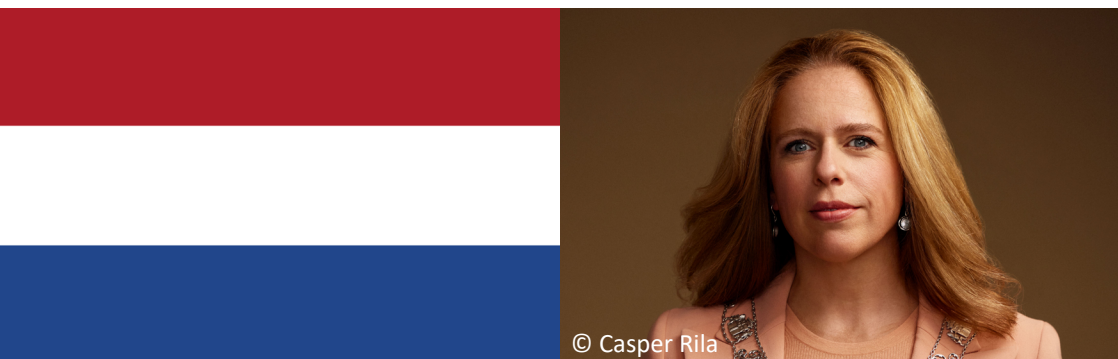
This helped politicians realise the importance of this issue and made it less taboo. The fact that the BBC recognised and talked about

abortion highlighted the existence of this problem and the need to debate it publicly. This media coverage also raised my profile. Women seeking solutions came to see me, and other people realised how important this issue is. If anyone wants to talk about abortion, I'm the person they come to.

Is there a European woman who inspires you in terms of her commitment?

Daphne Caruana Galizia. A highly committed and courageous journalist who always spoke her mind loud and clear. That is why she was killed. She inspired me to speak out loud and clear to bring about change.

Netherlands



Carola Schouten

Mayor of Rotterdam

“If they tell you it’s impossible because you’re a woman, you’ll know it’s possible precisely because you’re a woman.”

Carola Schouten grew up in a farming family, which strongly influenced her political interests in agricultural and rural matters. In 2011, she became a Member of Parliament (2011-2017, 2021-2022), before being appointed Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality in 2017, then Minister without Portfolio responsible for Poverty Policy, Participation and Pensions (2022-2024). Since October 2024, she has been the elected Mayor of Rotterdam.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

Initially, I hadn't considered a career in politics. My management studies made me aware of the lack of information about how politics directly influenced business. To fill this gap, I did an internship at the Ministry of Social Affairs. It was there that I discovered I had a strong opinion about the work being done, which created the need to engage more with policy development. So I joined a political party. After a few years, I was put forward on an election list. So my entry into Parliament, where I sat for seven years, was not intentional at first. When my party entered government, I became Minister: first of Agriculture and Fisheries, then of Participation in the Fight against Poverty and Pensions. Later, following the departure of the Mayor of Rotterdam, I stood to succeed him. It wasn't a planned step, but an excellent opportunity to serve my city.

Have you faced any obstacles in your career because you are a woman? Do you think barriers still exist for women in the Netherlands?

Women always have to be one step ahead. They always need to prove that they are capable, experienced or that they have enough knowledge, and so on. So I've worked hard to ensure that I'm always on top of my game.

“The biggest challenge is successfully balancing work and personal life.”

The biggest problem in the Netherlands is managing to combine your professional life with your private life: it's not always easy, especially for me as a single mother. It's important to have good childcare facilities, but we still have some way to go in this area.

Has EU regulation influenced your work?

My entry into Parliament coincided with the financial crisis, during which time I was my party's spokesperson on the subject. Then when I was Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, I spent a considerable amount of time in Brussels, focusing mainly on the budgets allocated to farmers and fishermen.

“I have seen the profound impact the European Union has made on our national legislative framework.”

I saw the profound impact the European Union has made on our national legislative framework.

As a Minister, you sat on the Council. Which decision are you most proud of?

As Minister for Agriculture, I was responsible for negotiating the budget for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), one of the European Union's main budget items. Our priority was to steer agriculture towards greater sustainability. We succeeded in implementing significant changes, both in the Netherlands and at EU level. These advances marked a major break with traditional funding methods, although there was considerable resistance at national level. Our approach was to financially reward farmers for their commitment to more ecological systems and sustainable farming practices, a commitment that is crucial to the future of agriculture and fisheries.

How do you view European cooperation at the local level?

At a meeting in Brussels with my counterparts from Antwerp and Hamburg, we discussed the crucial importance of safety and security

in our ports. These ports are facing an upsurge in crime, particularly drug trafficking, which exploits the ease of movement and free circulation. This is a major problem for our cities, but it also concerns the European Union, which needs to ensure that its ports are both accessible and secure. Hence the need for effective European legislation.

“Need to implement effective European legislation.”

Our cooperation with the European institutions is excellent. We now have a European Ports Strategy that will soon be implemented. It is essential to ensure a level playing field with other ports.

What is the European sentiment in the Netherlands?

Opinions are fairly divided. There are political parties that are fundamentally opposed to Europe, and others that are very much in favour of the Union. This polarisation is a sign of the existence of a major problem: how to unite the citizens? How can we make them understand that what is decided within the Union affects their lives, but that they can have an influence on the decision-making process? How can we show them that we need Europe and that we are now linked to

each other, particularly in terms of security? Faced with the new geopolitical context, we need a strong Union. War is on our doorstep, and it is vital that we join forces to ensure that our continent is safe. But it's sometimes difficult to show people how important it is for us to remain strong and united, together.

What advice would you give to young women?

If you have a genuine belief or passion, a subject that's close to your heart, and you really want to achieve that goal, it's possible.

“We need a strong Union.”

It's not always easy, but surround yourself with people who will support you in your ambitions, stay strong, don't give up, believe in yourself. And above all, if one day someone tells you that it's impossible because you're a woman, you'll know that it's possible precisely because you're a woman.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

Angela Merkel. She has remained true to her principles, she has the ability to bring people together and to take decisions even if they are not popular.

Poland



Monika Lason

Farmer

“Women are no longer confined to stereotypical roles.”

Monika Lason is a Polish farmer. In 2011, she settled with her husband near Łódź to start a holding initially focused on pig farming. Following economic difficulties, she reoriented the business towards goat rearing and processing, creating her own cheese dairy and brand, Groser. She also holds an engineering degree from Warsaw University of Life Sciences, specialising in biochemistry and microbiology. Her career was honoured by the European Union in 2023, when she was a finalist for the Innovation Prize for Women Farmers.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

I was originally a city girl, but I moved to the countryside to join my husband in 2011. Together we took over a small holding specialising in pig farming. However, the Russian meat embargo in 2012 and 2013 caused major disruption to the market, leading to financial difficulties for our business. To overcome this, we bought our first goats in 2012. Unfortunately, a new embargo prevented us from selling the milk, which was accumulating and needed to be processed. My previous experience in a large Dutch cheese company was the trigger. That's how the idea of building a cheese dairy came about. I rounded off my training with specialist studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the biochemical and microbiological processes involved in making cheese. I graduated as an engineer from the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW). The main objective of our cheese dairy is to guarantee safe and tasty products for the consumer, in line with the European strategy 'From Farm to Fork'.

How does the Union influence your daily work?

The rigorous application of the 'From Farm to Fork' strategy is central to our approach, and we share its values with our consumers. We also integrate the principles of animal welfare and the Green Deal for Europe. Although these frameworks are sometimes debated as to their relevance or consistency, we strive to make the most of them. These requirements and standards force us to adapt constantly, but they are also an asset for our communication and our brand image. Our link with the Union is also crucial in financial terms: we benefit from subsidies that are essential to the development and equipping of our business. Finally, we comply with all European standards, whether in terms of food safety, the layout of our facilities or the nutritional requirements of our products.

What does the European Union mean to you?

For me, the European Union is first and foremost a true community, an area that encourages the exchange of ideas, the opening up of borders and the facilitation of the flow of trade, whether for the export or import of goods and services. I also see it as a secure area, comparable to NATO. This feeling is heightened by the proximity of the current conflict on the Union's doorstep.

“The Union is a genuine community (...) [and] a secure area.”

We are not an isolated entity, but an integral part of a group of states. I am convinced that this union gives us greater freedom of thought, action and planning. We form an inspiring whole. Before the Union, we had to be much more creative. Today, we have the incredible opportunity to share cultures and ideas.

How can the EU further encourage farmers to adopt more sustainable and environmentally friendly methods without exposing them to financial losses?

It's a complex issue. Financial incentives naturally come first: subsidies are essential to help them adopt new working, organisational or production methods. The second point, which is just as crucial, is training. In my opinion, there is a significant lack of clear, targeted information for farmers, or at least a lack of access to it. If I want to learn about a particular subject, I have to do some proactive research to identify relevant training. Farm advisory centres and agencies need to commit to organising ongoing training. The use of e-learning platforms would be an ideal solution, as it is often impossible for farmers to free themselves up to attend a conference at the other end of the country. Time is a limited resource for us, and yet these training courses are essential if we are to master the use of the funds available, comply with European standards and, ultimately, avoid losing subsidies simply through a lack of knowledge.

In your opinion, how can the European Union further promote short food supply chains to strengthen local economies?

Compensation plays an undeniable role in creating a positive impetus. However, I believe that the EU should also fund platforms dedicated to putting consumers and producers in direct contact with each other. The real obstacle for farmers often lies in logistics and the complexity of administrative requirements. It is crucial to support producers in resolving the practical problems they encounter in developing and using these short distribution channels. In short, the strategy should focus on three key areas: educating farmers about these opportunities, providing them with the logistical and technical means to access them, and finally, continuing to reward their efforts with compensation and incentives that open up additional funding.

How do you think people feel about Europe in Poland?

For several years now, Poland has experienced a period of deep national division, largely fuelled by the political rift. The discourse is often binary: the EU is either perceived in a very favourable light, or presented as a threat. As a result, opinions are highly polarised in Poland. This diversity and polarisation is also reflected within the farming community.

What challenges still remain for women in Poland? Have you ever faced obstacles because you are a woman?

The situation has changed considerably, and women are no longer confined to stereotypical roles. The introduction of maternity and paternity leave now gives couples a choice: a woman can return to work quickly while her partner takes

over to look after the baby. What's more, women increasingly have access to technical fields where they are recognised for their expertise and skills.

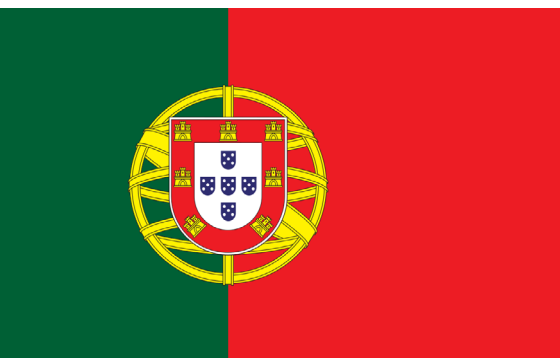
“The real obstacle (...) often lies in (...) the complexity of administrative requirements.”

In the agricultural sector, more and more women are running farms. Initiatives such as the award I received highlight our skills and the many opportunities available to us. On a personal level, I've often been complimented for my driving role in our farm's projects. I embody the Groser brand, and it would never occur to anyone to think of my husband as my superior. I've never felt inferior or discriminated against.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

I don't have a single inspirational figure to mention. My work is my main source of motivation, and I read a lot. It's impossible for me to name one woman who stands out from the rest for a particular reason. In fact, it's all the women who dare to break codes and stereotypes who inspire me on a daily basis. I could mention Anne-Marie Bonneau, who promotes regenerative agriculture, short distribution channels, local production and respect for food. Her actions are inspiring the creation of more sustainable and resilient farms. But also, Maria Noichl, MEP and former farmer who fights for equality in agriculture and supports small farms and artisanal processing. There's also Anna Nacher, who is deeply committed to agro-ecology and permaculture, and Birgitta Laurent, a Scandinavian farmer and promoter of sustainable dairy farming.

Portugal



Cristina Fonseca

Entrepreneur in new technologies

“The difficulty in creating innovative jobs (...) stems (...) from our chronic underinvestment in the innovation sector.”

Cristina Neves Fonseca is the CEO of the start-up [Cleverly](#) and a partner at Indico Capital Partners. Previously, she co-founded Talkdesk, a cloud-based call centre infrastructure company. She invests in numerous companies in the fields of digital transformation, business applications, mental health, e-commerce and AI. In addition, she strives to improve inclusion and diversity, which has earned her several distinctions and awards. She is the youngest member of the Board of Directors of [Galp](#), where she chairs the [Sustainability Committee](#).

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

My commitment to a career in engineering did not stem from absolute certainty, but from a deep curiosity about the future. I deliberately chose a degree in network engineering, which could be defined as Internet engineering. The goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Internet works, as we already sensed that it would generate many opportunities. At the time, this was not the easiest path to take, as the doors it would open and its possible uses were not yet clearly defined. Being an excellent student, those around me often encouraged me to pursue more traditional professions, such as medicine. Nevertheless, I was convinced that this path towards new technologies would be extremely rewarding. But if, in the end, I hadn't liked it, I would have reconsidered. We always think that our decisions are irreversible, but that's not true. In life, you take risks. It may work out, but if it doesn't, you can start again on a different path, and that's okay.

Have you ever felt that you encountered obstacles in your career because you were a woman?

I perceive more positive than negative discrimination. Nevertheless, starting my own business presented significant challenges. I cannot say for certain whether this was solely related to my gender, but I was a woman working in tech, taking on a leadership role in a field largely dominated by men. Some clients expressed surprise at my ability to provide them with expert technical advice. I always chose to approach these situations with humour and light-heartedness. For me, if some people had preconceptions, it was their problem, it wasn't linked to the fact that I was a woman. I always chose to focus on situations I could command, rather than dwelling on those beyond my control.

Are there still barriers to women pursuing careers in Portugal?

One of the main challenges facing Portugal is the high proportion of women who do not return to work after maternity leave.

We suffer from a lack of effective policies to ensure a satisfactory work-life balance. Current maternity leave is short, and access to childcare solutions is particularly complex. Mothers are effectively forced to return to work while managing these logistical constraints. Although I enjoy my job, balancing work and family life can be difficult when children are young. This is an issue that Portugal should focus its efforts on. This problem is all the more critical as it compounds major demographic challenges, including an ageing population and a declining birth rate.

How does European regulation influence your work?

Regulation is necessary. However, in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), which I am particularly fond of and to which I devote a large part of my time, it is imperative to give companies a certain amount of leeway and freedom to experiment. Regulatory oversight is a delicate matter. To judge the relevance of the software I sell, the only valid method is to talk to my customers. Regulation should work on the same principle: it must be based on real situations to assess its necessity and appropriateness. We sometimes attempt to legislate before technologies have matured sufficiently, running the risk of stifling innovation rather than providing useful guidance. Furthermore, a generic regulatory approach is often ineffective.

“Regulations (...) must be based on real situations to assess their necessity and adequacy.”

Taking the example of AI again, it is impossible to establish standards that apply to all sectors. Specific regulations will be needed, whether for financial services, customer service or retail. Attempting to apply a universal solution only increases complexity unnecessarily.

What European regulations do you expect to see in your sector?

In the venture capital sector, it is essential to establish incentive mechanisms to encourage private capital investment or direct investment in research and development (R&D). The aim is to ensure that a more significant share of resources is allocated to innovation.

“We always think our decisions are irreversible, but that’s not true.”

Younger generations are often typified by their hard work and high motivation. It is unfortunate that they are sometimes assigned purely repetitive tasks. If we offer them truly stimulating challenges, their commitment will be all the greater. However, the difficulty

in creating innovative jobs for these young people stems directly from our chronic underinvestment in the innovation sector. It is with this in mind that we founded [Invest Europe](#), a venture capital association that promotes cooperation between companies within the European Union.

What advice would you give to young women?

Choose a job that will allow you to learn. And take risks! The worst that can happen is that you change your mind and switch careers.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

I am very impressed by female researchers, particularly in cutting-edge science and technology. I deeply admire these individuals who carry out challenging work and transform their sector, but they are not recognised enough.

Romania



Mariana Gheorghe

Former CEO of energy companies

“The Union [is] a major player in peace.”

Mariana Gheorghe began her career before the 1989 revolution. She subsequently joined the Ministry of Finance, where she was appointed Deputy Director of the International Finance Department. Since 1993, she has worked for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). In 2004, she became a member of Petrom’s board of directors, representing the EBRD until 2006, when she was appointed CEO. Since 2015, she has also been a member of the supervisory boards of ING Group, Contour Global and Unicredit.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

Wanting to become an ambassador, I studied international economic relations in Bucharest. I began my career in a chemical export company, where I was able to work with countries in Africa and the Middle East. The Romanian revolution of 1989 was a major turning point. Before that, it would have been unthinkable for me to become General Director to the Minister of Finance at only 34 years of age. But thanks to my command of several foreign languages and my expertise in foreign trade, this opportunity arose. My European career began at that precise moment - I was part of the negotiating team for Romania's accession to the European Union. This exciting period symbolised the opening up of a new world. I then joined the EBRD, before being approached by one of my clients, Petrom. After serving as the EBRD's representative on their board of directors, the company offered me the position of Chief Executive Officer eighteen months later. After twelve years in this position, personal challenges forced me to take a break from my career. During this period, I continued my professional involvement as a non-executive member of ING Amsterdam and Contour Global, and more recently Unicredit. I am a member of the board of directors of the Academy of Economic Studies, chair of [Teach for Romania](#) and co-founder of the [Future of Leadership Institute](#).

How does the Union influence your work?

I feel very fortunate to live in Europe, a continent that plays a major role in promoting peace. Romania's accession to the European Union has helped it to develop. Personally, I would not have had such a wide range of opportunities without the European Union. When I was CEO of Petrom, or in my role at ING, my job involved assimilating and applying all the European standards and regulations adopted in the energy sector. It was therefore essential to deal with these European legal texts, to interpret and implement them. Decisions made in Brussels are often perceived as

the work of bureaucrats who are out of touch with the realities on the ground.

“The important thing is that these rules can be adapted gradually and concretely to the reality on the ground.”

However, having worked in several different environments, I have always had to deal with this ambivalence: I served the spirit of the regulation, but I also ran a company that had to deal with its implementation.

What do you think of European regulations in the banking and energy sectors?

Personally, I firmly believe in regulations, as they are essential to the balance of our social ecosystems. We simply cannot do without them without risking destructive consequences, as their primary purpose is to protect the majority of citizens. For me, their main purpose is to ensure our survival and prosperity. In finance, major regulatory waves always follow major crises, once we have identified what went wrong. The important thing is that these rules can be adapted gradually and concretely to the reality on the ground.

Have you faced any obstacles in your career? What are your thoughts on gender equality in Romania?

I do not consider there to be any major difficulties regarding gender equality in Romania. Under the communist regime, women were strongly encouraged to pursue higher education and enter the labour market. Admittedly, they rarely held the highest positions, but granting the same fundamental rights to men and women did not pose any structural problems. However, the situation has changed since the 1989 revolution. Men have become more confident in taking on positions of responsibility, while women have sometimes shown less confidence in

themselves and their abilities. Nevertheless, Romania has one of the smallest gender pay gaps in Europe (5.8%). The main challenge we face is the under-representation of women in public institutions and in the political sphere.

“Have confidence in yourself! (...) Dare to say ‘yes’!”

In my career, accepting the position of Chief Executive Officer of Petrom was a huge challenge. The oil and gas sector is traditionally very technical and predominantly male. I was neither an engineer nor a man. However, my self-confidence convinced me that this challenge was worth it, believing that the company would be able to adapt.

What advice would you give to young women?

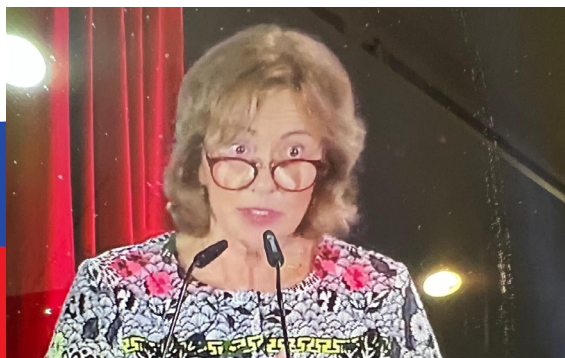
Have confidence in yourself! Women in Europe now have a wide range of opportunities to

flourish. However, this fulfilment requires hard work, study and constant development of your skills. Act out of a desire to leave your mark and make a meaningful contribution. Dare to say ‘yes’. No one meets all the criteria for a job. Furthermore, do not try to imitate the male model. It is a privilege to be a woman. As such, I never wore trousers during my time as CEO in order to highlight my difference, which was my strength and added value. Finally, I systematically refrain from participating in initiatives exclusively dedicated to women, as they do not reflect the reality of society.

Is there a European woman who has inspired you with her life’s work, and why?

While Margaret Thatcher was a role model for me for many years until her death, my current inspiration is Christine Lagarde. She is a major influence in the banking sector, which is essential to societal prosperity. She is one of the few public figures who actively and publicly champions two causes that I strongly believe in: sustainable finance and gender equality.

Slovakia



Olga Algayerivá

Diplomat, Representative to the Council of Europe

“I am a strong supporter of the Union.”

Olga Algayerivá has been the Permanent Representative of the Slovak Republic to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg since April 2025. Previously, she was Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2017-2023), Permanent Representative of Slovakia to International Organisations in Vienna (2012-2017), and Chair of the Millennium Development Goals in Slovakia (2010-2012). Before being appointed State Secretary for Foreign Affairs (2006-2010), she was Export Director at [Zentiva](#) (2004-2006).

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

After training in economics in Bratislava, business management in London and diplomacy in Malta, I began my career in international trade. At the time, in what was then Czechoslovakia, this sector was controlled by a state monopoly: companies had to go through one of 32 government trading companies. I joined one of them. In 1989, following the change of regime, Slovakia's largest pharmaceutical manufacturer asked me to set up its export department, which they were now allowed to do till then. Starting from scratch, I led this mission until 2006, when the company was operating in 73 markets worldwide. This success was a major milestone in my career.

“Keen to remain independent, I never joined a political party.”

My transition to diplomacy happened by chance. Thanks to my international background and my command of six languages, the Minister of Foreign Affairs appointed me Secretary of State in 2006, then Deputy Minister for Development Cooperation, a field close to economic diplomacy that particularly interested me. Hesitant to leave a private sector that I was passionate about, I accepted the challenge however. Despite needing time to adapt to the codes of the civil service, I quickly found my place in our young Republic, where everything was yet to be built. Keen to remain independent, I never joined a political party. At the end of 2010, I founded an NGO devoted to children's rights in Georgia. But in 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered me the position of Ambassador to International Organisations in Vienna. Accredited to about twenty institutions, my work there included preparing for the Slovak Presidency of the OSCE. In 2017, I was appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General to head the UNECE for six years. I am currently Ambassador to the Council of Europe.

What influence has the European Union had on your career?

It has always had a significant influence on me, particularly during my time as Secretary of State and Ambassador to the OSCE. I am a strong supporter of the Union. In 2006, I led negotiations in the Slovak Parliament for the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon. I then oversaw my country's accession to the eurozone and the Schengen area, which were complex, major undertakings. I also founded Slovakia's first development cooperation agency.

How do you feel about European sentiment in Slovakia?

We are going through a challenging period, marked by successive crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Slovaks elected the current government in the hope that it would be better than the previous one, but I do not believe it is anti-European.

“The Council of Europe is a kind of antechamber for accession to the Union.”

Although approaches may differ, there has never been any expression of a desire to leave the European Union. I firmly believe that Slovaks want to continue their future within Europe.

What are the main challenges for the European Union and the Council of Europe?

The Council of Europe is a kind of antechamber for European Union membership, where all candidate countries are represented. Until they have achieved tangible results in terms of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, they cannot finalise the accession process, and we help them to prepare as much as possible. However, the Council has 46 members, including Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. For its part, the European Union faces major challenges, both economic and geopolitical, that are exacerbated by the war

in Ukraine and the uncertainties of the Euro-Atlantic partnership. Initially designed as a project for peace and economic cooperation, the European Union finds itself up against security issues and is rolling out programmes to acquire defence equipment for this purpose.

“If the European Union is strong, so is the Council.”

The key challenge is to safeguard peaceful economic cooperation wherever possible. The Council of Europe and the European Union are working together on key issues such as migration, artificial intelligence and digital technologies: if the European Union is strong, so is the Council.

Are there any remaining obstacles preventing women in Slovakia from achieving equality?

The problem is not specific to Slovakia; it can be found throughout Europe. There is still a 20% pay gap between women and men, which is unacceptable. In Strasbourg at the Council of Europe, we have achieved parity among the ambassadors of the 46 member states, but Slovak diplomacy is still far from achieving this goal.

What advice would you give to young women?

It is often more challenging for a woman to be acknowledged as an equal to men; we have to do more. You have to study, know your subjects inside out, work hard and show that you are brilliant, and at the same time stay charming.

“There is still a 20% pay gap between women and men, which is unacceptable.”

But the most important thing is always to remain true to yourself and to maintain your integrity.

Is there a European woman who inspires you through her commitment, and why?

Outside Europe, Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, provided me with invaluable support during my six years at the UN. On the European front, Angela Merkel impressed me with her leadership and strength of character. Finally, as a former athlete, I remain deeply inspired by figures such as tennis champion Martina Navrátilová and paralympic athlete Sara Barrio.

Slovenia



Tatjana Bobnar

*Former Director General of the National Police and
Former Minister of the Interior*

**“These situations (...) revealed the difficulty (...) for some people
in accepting a woman in a position of high responsibility.”**

Tatjana Bobnar, a graduate in criminology and criminal law, began her career as a criminal investigator in the juvenile delinquency department, before going on to head up that department and subsequently the operational support department. She then became deputy director of the criminal investigation department, before joining the Police Training Centre. In 2018, she was appointed Director General of the National Police, then Minister of the Interior in 2022. She is now an advisor to the President of the Republic on security.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

With a degree in criminal law and criminology, I turned to the police force, recognising this institution as the legitimate authority when it came to protecting victims, helping the public and working for the common good. I started as a detective in the criminal police, then took charge of a team specialising in juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, violence against women and child abuse. I then headed the operational support service before being appointed deputy director of the Ljubljana police force and subsequently, deputy director of the criminal police. The first woman to be appointed Director General of the Slovenian Police, I was appointed Minister of the Interior in June 2022. I am now an advisor to the President of the Republic. My work focuses on developing new police legislation, particularly on respect for the individual and human dignity.

“First woman appointed chief of police.”

During my career, I have also led projects aimed at strengthening ethics and integrity within the police force, which led to the creation of the Ethics and Integrity Committee in 2011. As well as this, I have always placed the principle of gender equality at the heart of my concerns. In 2008, as equal opportunities coordinator, I initiated the creation of an advisory body dedicated to integrating gender equality principles within the Ministry of the Interior, the police and the inspectorate.

Have you faced any hurdles in your career?

When I first started out as a detective, I did not experience any sexism or unequal treatment based on my gender. On the contrary, the team welcomed me with respect and dignity. However, challenges arose when it came to accessing the highest positions. As Chief Superintendent of Police, I sometimes faced derogatory remarks or comments about my

appearance, something my male counterparts never had to deal with.

“It is the duty of those amongst us who hold positions of influence to be the voice of those who do not have one.”

These situations, which were sometimes difficult, revealed the persistent difficulty some people had in accepting a woman in a position of high responsibility. I made the fight against intolerance a priority, openly addressing key issues such as discrimination and equality between men and women. In the face of stereotypes, I chose to respond with increased confidence in my work, constructive dialogue and setting an example.

Are there still obstacles for women in your country and in your field? And for women in general within the EU?

Slovenia stands out for its high rank in gender equality indices. National legislation, particularly that on social equality, not only guarantees equal rights for women and men, but also aims to ensure equal representation and social power in all areas of public and private life. Despite these significant advances, challenges remain. It is vital to continue working towards women's economic independence, work-life balance and the sharing of responsibilities for childcare and elderly care. Efforts must also be maintained to eliminate gender stereotypes, ensure balanced representation in positions of responsibility and combat violence against women. Slovenia has reached a historic milestone, with women simultaneously holding the positions of President of the Republic, Speaker of the Assembly and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The European Union must be the driving force behind the promotion of equality. Violence against women remains a persistent and widespread reality. It is the duty of those of

us in positions of influence to be the voice of those who have none. The world cannot afford to ignore the potential represented by half of its population. The President of the Republic has often emphasised that equality between men and women is an absolute prerequisite for a strong Union.

“The world cannot afford to ignore the potential represented by half of its population.”

Finally, I give my unwavering support to the European citizens’ initiative [‘My Voice, My Choice’](#) for safe and accessible abortion.

How does the Union influence your work?

My professional commitment is based on an unwavering adherence to the values of the European Union as set out in the Treaties: respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and equality. On a professional level, I would like to emphasise the importance of the opportunities offered by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training ([CEPOL](#)). I have benefited from numerous courses and seminars focused on police leadership. These experiences have been decisive, providing me with valuable knowledge, broadening my perspective and facilitating the creation of essential professional links at European level. In addition, close and regular cooperation is maintained with agencies such as Europol.

What advice would you give to young women?

Follow your dreams with courage and determination. It is essential that your partner supports you in this endeavour, especially when it comes to balancing your professional life and family responsibilities.

“Determination and professionalism can break down long-established barriers.”

I support the [‘Fathers and Employers in Action’](#) project, which raises awareness among fathers, employers and the general public about equal parenting. The project contributes to the recognition of the importance of the father’s equal role in raising children and family life. As the first female Chief Executive of the police in my country, I hope I have shown that determination and professionalism can break down long-established barriers.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

The President of the Republic of Slovenia, Natasha Pirc Musar, because she embodies the values of freedom, integrity, peace, respect for human rights, the rule of law and justice.

Spain



Dolors Montserrat

Member of the European Parliament

**“I will retire from politics on the day that the rule of law
is no longer under threat.”**

Dolors Montserrat has a degree in law and has worked as a lawyer specialising in town planning, property and the environment. She became involved in politics in 2003, initially as a local councillor in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia. In 2008, she was elected to the Congress of Deputies for Catalonia. In 2016, she was appointed Minister for Health, Social Services and Equality. In 2019, she was elected to the European Parliament, where she chaired the Petitions Committee until 2024. Since 2023, she has also been Secretary General of the European People's Party.

Tell us about your career path. Why did you choose this direction?

I come from a small Catalan village, and my father was one of the founders of the Partido Popular (PP). In Catalonia, the nationalists didn't respect the opinions of the other parties. That's why, as a lawyer, I felt the need to get involved in politics. People feared that freedoms would be curtailed. After losing our only municipal seat in 1999, a meeting was organised in 2003 to nominate a candidate. No one dared to stand for fear of nationalist reprisals. So I decided to take the plunge.

"I realised what an immense privilege it is to live on this continent."

My commitment is clear: I will retire from politics the day the rule of law is no longer threatened here. The nationalists try to intimidate us and scare us out of politics. My family and I have already been the target of attacks and insults. I started out in my home town, then eight years later I was elected to Parliament as Deputy Speaker. In 2016, I became Minister for Health, Social Services and Equality, and spokesperson for my party. In 2019, I was elected to the European Parliament. In Spain, I am identified as the one who stands up against nationalist movements that violate the rule of law and the Constitution. I chose the Partido Popular because it defends true freedom and equality. The first women to hold key positions (President of the Senate (1999), President of Congress (2000), President of a Community (Madrid), Vice-President of the European Commission (1999), Mayor of a major city such as Valencia) all came from this party.

What decision are you most proud of as Minister for Health and Equality?

I am particularly proud to have been the instigator of the first State pact to combat violence against women. This pact was

unanimously signed by all Spanish political parties and institutions. I have also worked to ensure access to an essential treatment: a particularly costly drug to slow the progression of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Patients' families are always grateful to me, which is a great source of personal satisfaction.

As a member of the European Parliament, you chaired the Petitions Committee. What was the most important decision you took then?

In 2022, I had to deal with the tragic sinking of a Spanish trawler off the Canadian coast, resulting in the death of almost the entire crew. Only the captain, his nephew and a young Senegalese man survived by making it to the lifeboats. The investigation by the Spanish Supreme Court revealed that the captain had been negligent in not sounding the alarm in time, believing that he could control the storm, which prevented the other sailors from escaping and thereby surviving.

"I am a fervent advocate of the European ideal."

The case was referred to the Petitions Committee because the Spanish government refused to authorise the recovery of the black box from the wreck. So we got the ball rolling and France intervened, under European legislation which stipulates that, in the event of a fishing accident, Member States must assist a country that does not have the necessary resources to recover the black box, which confirmed the captain's negligence. This case illustrates the essential role of this committee: solving complex problems and providing practical assistance.

What was the moment that sparked your European awareness or commitment?

My commitment to Europe is rooted in my Erasmus experience in Italy during my studies. It was a real eye-opener, giving me

a real sense of what the European Union represents and what it has to offer. I realised what an immense privilege it is to live on this continent, where the possibility of settling and working freely in all the Member States is an extraordinary reality. Since then, I have been a fervent defender of the European ideal.

What advice would you give to young women?

Don't worry, you're not the first to take this step. It is imperative to give greater visibility to women, especially those whose exceptional achievements are not sufficiently recognised. The media must play an active role in showcasing all career paths, not just the male ones. My principle is to stay true to yourself: listen to yourself, let your values guide you, and act in accordance with what you feel is best for you.

Is there a European woman who inspires you with her commitment, and why?

I greatly admire Loyola de Palacio. She was a figure of courage and her commitment to defending her convictions was unwavering.

“The media must play an active role in presenting all career paths, without limiting themselves to male figures.”

She always followed her principles and values. I consider her to be one of the most courageous politicians Spain and Europe have ever known.

Sweden



Carola Lemne

Physicist and anaesthetist

**“The private sector [is essential] for a strong
and sustainable public sector.”**

Carola Lemne is a physicist and anaesthetist. She conducted clinical trials at an American pharmaceutical laboratory before being appointed director of Danderyd University Hospital. She then became president of Praktiska tjänst, Sweden’s largest private healthcare company. At the same time, she continued her research into clinical hypertension, which led to her appointment as associate professor at the Karolinska Institute. She also served as CEO of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise for five years. Finally, she has served on the boards of several companies, including Getinge and Investor AB, and continues to serve on the boards of the Heart and Lung Foundation, Deriva, Aria and Samhall.

In your opinion, what obstacles do women have to overcome to succeed in your field? Do you have any recommendations for young women who would like to pursue a career in this field?

Personally, being a woman has never been an obstacle, quite the contrary. I've even found it to be an asset. I remember my years at Pharmacia, a large American company, where I was often the only woman at business dinners, which gave me the opportunity to sit at the CEO's table, something I might not have had otherwise.

If I had to give one piece of advice, it would be not to let yourself be defined by your gender. I think the best approach is not to expect to be confronted with obstacles related to being a woman. If you don't put up mental barriers, you have a much better chance of overcoming them. It's by adopting this mindset that I've probably cleared the hurdles without even realising it.

“Being a woman has never been an obstacle, quite the contrary. I’ve even found it to be an asset.”

We're often told how important it is to learn to say 'no', but I've learned that having the courage to say 'yes', even when you're afraid, is the key to moving forward. I have often taken on new responsibilities that seemed intimidating, telling myself that if others believed in me, I should believe in myself too. It is by stepping outside my comfort zone that I have grown the most.

What does the EU mean to you?

In the referendum on EU membership, I obviously voted 'yes'. However, I am also very aware of the weaknesses of the system. I believe that the European Union is not yet living up to its

full potential, particularly due to persistent barriers within the internal market, where each Member State often retains its own system. Although I believe in a more integrated Union, I do not think that it should become a "United States of Europe". Finally, I think that the long-term impact of the conflict in Ukraine will be very interesting to witness, and it could well redefine our collective future by strengthening our need for solidarity.

If you could improve something within the EU, what would be the main change you would implement?

I'd simplify things! There are far too many regulations. The Draghi report is very interesting, and I agree with most of what it says.

As a teacher, what do you think of the younger generation, particularly young women?

Contrary to what many people think, I am very optimistic because of my experience with Young Entrepreneurs. In Sweden, the Junior Achievements programme is very popular.

“You must learn to say yes.”

It provides approximately 35% of sixth form students in Sweden with the opportunity to run their own business. I am constantly impressed by the talent and ingenuity of the young people I meet at events. They approach challenges with a 'nothing is impossible' mindset. It is truly inspiring to see what they are capable of accomplishing. In fact, girls who participate in this programme are eight times more likely to run their own companies than those who do not.

Do you think you are a role model for some of them?

I've always enjoyed being a mentor and sharing my experience to help young people not to make the same mistakes I did. But I also learn a lot from them by discovering what it means to build a career as a young woman today.

*How does the EU influence your life? Your industry?
Sweden in general?*

In my field, science, the EU imposes a lot of regulations on medicines, how they are developed, etc. Most of the time, these regulations are beneficial, but sometimes they are far too complex. For example, the approval of a medicine in the European system means that it is recognised throughout the entire territory.

“I’ve always felt European.”

Perceptions of the EU have changed considerably in Sweden. After being very supportive of membership, Swedes have become more sceptical, often critical of decisions made in Brussels. However, the war in Ukraine has reminded us of the benefits of solidarity and highlighted the opportunities we can seize by acting together. Today, there is more talk of positive actions and successful collaborations. Swedish public opinion has become one of the most pro-European, and even the most critical parties are adjusting their position.


What are the main challenges young women have to face in your country?

The main challenge, which is universal, is balancing an ambitious professional career with family life. Everything happens during a crucial period of 10 to 15 years when decisions must be made that will impact the rest of one’s life.

Although the presence of women on boards of directors has increased, reaching nearly 33 per cent, their access to the highest leadership positions remains a challenge. The positions of chair of the board or chief executive officer are still very rarely held by women.

Is there a European woman who inspires you in terms of her commitment, and why?

Well, Cecilia Wallström springs to mind. She is a Swedish politician who served as European Commissioner for Trade during Trump’s first term. I think she is a fantastic woman, who is extremely pragmatic and humble and she has done a great deal of good work.



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