

Learning the Future: Futures Literacy as a Skill for the Next Generation

Sanna Ketonen-Oksi, 8th of May 2026

Your Excellencies, distinguished representatives, respected professors, dear all,

It is a pleasure to be here with you today.

Entering diplomacy at the moment is unlike most others in recent history. Human societies are living through a period of profound global reordering. Long-standing power relations are shifting. Old certainties are eroding. New geopolitical, social, and technological configurations are struggling—often painfully—to emerge.

This turbulence expresses itself in overlapping crises: persistent wars and regional instabilities, the erosion of democratic norms, widening inequalities, and escalating violations of human rights. Disinformation spreads faster than trust can be rebuilt. Institutions designed for a more predictable world increasingly struggle to provide stability or direction.

This not only as an abstract description of “the global situation,” but the everyday context in which diplomacy now takes place.

We are living in a historical moment where the old is no longer functioning, and the new has not yet fully taken shape. And in such moments, the challenge is not only to respond to constant change or disruption. The deeper challenge is this: **how do we actively shape emerging futures—rather than merely react to them?**

For years, we have relied heavily on the language of **resilience**. Traditional resilience frameworks emphasise recovery, coping, and adaptation. They ask: *How do we bounce back? How do we withstand shocks?*

These questions matter. But they are no longer sufficient.

In a world marked by cascading socio-ecological crises, rising social anxiety, and deep polarisation, “bouncing back” to what existed before is often neither possible nor desirable. Risk mitigation and survival strategies offer limited guidance when uncertainty itself becomes a permanent condition.

What is increasingly missing are skills that support proactive, imaginative, and hopeful engagement with the unknown. Skills that help us navigate uncertainty without becoming paralysed by it in the first place. Skills that allow us to question inherited assumptions. Skills that restore a sense of agency—both individual and collective.

This is where Futures Literacy comes in.

Futures Literacy has become recognised as a crucial 21st-century skill, sitting alongside digital or media literacy.

The term Futures Literacy was coined around 2007-2011, by Riel Miller, at UNESCO. He then held a series of talks with pioneering researchers in the field. He also wrote articles where he proposed the core concept of "using the future" in the present, shifting focus from prediction to anticipation. In 2012, UNESCO launched Futures Literacy Laboratories (FLLs), led by Miller, to teach people to identify how their expectations of tomorrow shape their actions today. Over 100+ labs were held worldwide by 2020 since when the work has been largely adopted globally. The legacy is also reflected in the form of UNESCO chairs in Futures Literacy, being the ambassadors of Futures Literacy around the world.

The core idea is surprisingly simple, yet profoundly disruptive:

The future does not exist as a single destination waiting for us.

Multiple futures are always possible.

Futures Literacy helps individuals and institutions become aware of how they use the future in their thinking and decision-making—often unconsciously.

When we surface those hidden assumptions, something important happens: New options become visible. Alternative trajectories can be imagined. Agency increases.

And this matters deeply for diplomacy.

I want to make 3 points here. The first is about ... How to access Futures Literacy?

As said, at its heart, Futures Literacy is a capability—the capability to use the future consciously and reflexively. All of us already use the future, every day. We anticipate. We worry. We plan. We fear. We hope.

But we rarely stop to ask: *What kind of future am I assuming here? Who benefits from this imagined future? And most importantly: What alternatives am I excluding without noticing?*

Futures Literacy builds on the insight that the future is not neutral. The futures we imagine shape the decisions we make in the present. By learning to work with multiple futures—possible, plausible, desirable, and even uncomfortable ones—we create space for intentional change.

This can include transformative shifts in:

- worldviews,
- belief systems,
- professional identities,

- and institutional practices.

For diplomats, this is crucial. Because diplomacy is not only about managing what exists—it is also about negotiating what might become possible.

My point number 2 is to explain ... Why Futures Literacy matters for Europe?

Europe today is marked by uncertainty, complexity, and deep interdependence—internally and globally. Decisions made in one domain quickly ripple across others: security, climate, migration, technology, democracy.

In such conditions, linear thinking breaks down. And this is where Futures Literacy offers concrete tools for navigating disruption:

- It helps organisations avoid tunnel vision.
- It reduces overreliance on dominant narratives.
- It strengthens collective sense-making under uncertainty.

Importantly, Futures Literacy is not only a cognitive skill. It is also a wellbeing skill.

When people feel that the future is closed, predetermined, or permanently threatening, anxiety rises and polarisation deepens. When multiple futures become visible again, space for dialogue and cooperation re-opens.

For young diplomats, and for all of us, this can be empowering. You are often expected to operate within established frameworks, while sensing that those frameworks are no longer sufficient.

Futures Literacy does not ask you to abandon institutions—but it gives you tools to work creatively at their edges.

And my 3 point: It is essential to rethink our assumptions about the future — values, power, and responsibility

I invite us all to slow down—and to look critically not only at *how* we imagine the future, but *from which values* we do so.

In diplomacy, decisions are rarely neutral. And increasingly, **not** making a decision is also a decision—sometimes one with even more severe and long-lasting consequences.

In times of uncertainty, there is a temptation to postpone, to dilute responsibility, or to hide behind procedure. But uncertainty does not absolve responsibility. On the contrary, it amplifies it. This is where critical thinking about the future becomes inseparable from European principles and values: human dignity, equality, the rule of law, and respect for international law.

Yet one of the most corrosive forces undermining trust in Europe today is the perception—and in many cases the reality—of double standards. Especially when it comes to international law and human rights, selective application weakens not only credibility, but the very normative foundations on which European cooperation rests.

From a Futures Literacy perspective, this matters deeply.

Because when values are applied inconsistently, the futures we implicitly construct become fragmented:

- futures where some lives are protected, and others are made negotiable;
- futures where legality depends on power;
- futures where silence is rewarded more than integrity.

These are not abstract futures. They are futures actively being shaped by today's choices—and non-choices. True critical futures thinking therefore requires ethical courage: the willingness to ask not only *what works*, but *what is right*, and *for whom*.

One reason certain voices stand out today is precisely because they refuse to trade integrity for access or dignity for influence. Figures such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese remind us what it looks like when someone remains grounded in ethical and legal principles, even while being marginalised, silenced, or bullied for doing so.

What distinguishes such voices is not heroism, but consistency. In her case, the refusal to accept that human worth is conditional. A commitment to the wellbeing of all humans, regardless of background, nationality, or political convenience. And perhaps most strikingly: a visible freedom from fear—because integrity, once compromised, is very difficult to reclaim.

For young diplomats, this is not a call to moral purity or personal sacrifice. It is a reminder that professional excellence and ethical grounding are not opposites. On the contrary, in an era of uncertainty, integrity becomes a source of strategic clarity. Futures Literacy helps by making power visible—by revealing how dominant assumptions about “realism,” “security,” or “inevitability” quietly shape what is considered possible, acceptable, or sayable.

What becomes important here is to bridge Futures Literacy with European governance and decision-making

At its best, Futures Literacy functions as a meta-capability—one that improves decision quality, learning, and collaboration under uncertainty. It enables individuals and institutions to engage constructively with:

- plural and competing futures,
- long-term trade-offs,
- ethical tensions,

- and systemic complexity.

In this sense, Futures Literacy aligns closely with the European Commission's Better Regulation agenda, which explicitly calls for foresight to anticipate future policy challenges and ensure that legislation remains fit for purpose. While foresight tools are increasingly present in impact assessments and evaluations, their use across EU institutions remains uneven and often procedural.

Futures Literacy goes a step further. It does not only ask *what future scenarios we produce*, but how decision-makers learn, reflect, and change through engaging with them.

Practically, this means a shift:

- from prediction to capability—building durable cognitive, social, and organisational skills rather than one-off reports;
- from a single “expected” future to genuine plurality, including ethics, participation, and power awareness;
- from siloed expertise to interdisciplinarity, connecting futures thinking with education, social sciences, psychology, and governance;
- from isolated projects to shared ecosystems of learning and open knowledge.

Crucially, Futures Literacy supports open, transparent, and participatory futures thinking, aligning with Europe's commitments to open science, inclusive policymaking, and democratic engagement. For diplomacy, this matters profoundly. Because the legitimacy of European action in the world depends not only on strategic interests, but on the perceived coherence between what Europe says, what it does, and what futures it enables—or forecloses—for others.

Finally, here is my closing reflection:

You are entering diplomacy at a time when the future is often framed as a threat—something to manage, contain, or survive.

Futures Literacy offers a different stance. Not control. Not certainty. But conscious engagement. – It strengthens your ability to recognise when decisions are being shaped by fear rather than values, by habit rather than reflection, or by power rather than principle.

In moments when the old no longer works and the new has not yet arrived, Futures Literacy helps keep open something essential: the space for dignity, integrity, and humane choices.

The future is not something to wait for. It is something to learn with—and to take responsibility for.

Thank you.

