

The New York Times

Taking Up the Mantle of Democracy

Four young leaders explain how they became involved in the global democracy movement and what they have learned so far.

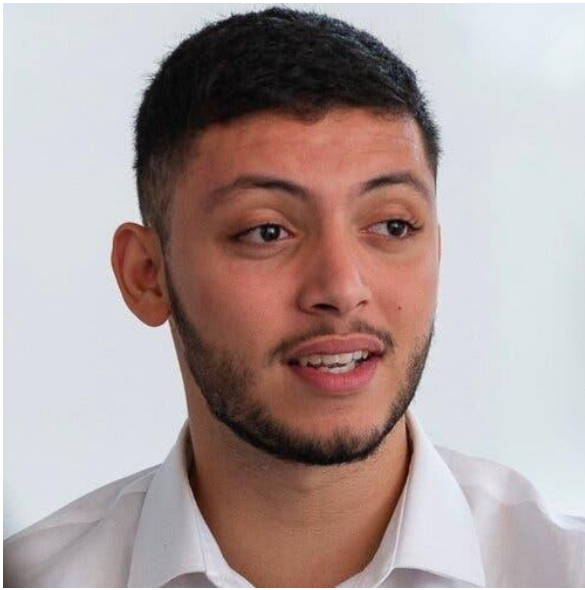
By Shivani Vora

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This article is from a special report on the [Athens Democracy Forum](#), which concluded last week in the Greek capital.

Four young leaders active in the democracy movement were asked about their experiences. Their answers have been edited and condensed.

Achraf Manar, 24



Paris; Organizer, Different Leaders

Different Leaders, an international group of more than 200 18- to 35-year-olds, has organized an annual International Day of Equal Opportunities since 2015. Held in 50 cities on Dec. 5, the anniversary of Nelson Mandela's death in 2013, it includes events and activities promoting equality and encouraging young people to get involved in the democracy movement.

Michele Castrezzati, 22



Trento, Italy; Fellow, International Youth Think Tank

Michele Castrezzati collaborated with Urban Strandberg, the think tank's co-founder, to start the Open Chair Democracy Talks, a global initiative in which think tank fellows sit on a chair on a public street across from an empty chair and invite passers-by to join them in a conversation about democracy. The encounters are published on the group's [website](#).

Victoria Portnaia, 19



Malmo, Sweden; Fellow, International Youth Think Tank

Born in Shostka, Ukraine, and raised in Russia, Victoria Portnaia lives in Sweden, where she is seeking asylum. Now a student at Malmo University studying peace and conflict, she conducted Open Chair interviews in Moscow before fleeing the country. Born in Shostka, Ukraine, and raised in Russia, Victoria Portnaia lives in Sweden, where she is seeking asylum. Now a student at Malmo University studying peace and conflict, she conducted Open Chair interviews in Moscow before fleeing the country.

Philippine Dutailly, 23



Montpellier, France; Presenter, Athens Democracy Forum 2021

Philippine Dutailly is an intern for the French Scientific Committee on Desertification, a research group addressing land denigration. As a youth fellow for the International Youth Think Tank, she has conducted Open Chair interviews and focused on promoting the perspectives of rural young people. Last year she presented her proposal on democracy to the Athens Democracy Forum.

What prompted you to get into this area of advocacy? Why not the climate or refugee crisis?

ACHRAF MANAR I grew up in a rural area of France called Auvergne but come from a poor family in Morocco. I visited my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins there every year and observed the inequalities they faced because they didn't have money. That motivated me to try to change it — not just for them, but for everyone who didn't have an equal chance in life.

MICHELE CASTREZZATI A healthy democracy is what allows issues such as climate change, gender inequality and other social injustices to come to the forefront. It's like a drummer in a band. Without the drummer, the others cannot perform at their best.

VICTORIA PORTNAIA My field of activity is just a question of survival: mainly my survival, survival of my family, my friends and classmates and other fellow citizens. In Russia, I struggled with corruption, prejudices at school because of my nationality and more. When I was 13, I started bombarding politicians and public institutions with letters that explained my plight and begged for fairness. At 18, I started to institutionalize my pro-democracy activity by joining different organizations to help millions of people to breathe freely, such as the youth think tank and the Sakharov Center in Moscow, which helps to protect human rights in Russia.

PHILIPPINE DUTAILLY The climate and refugee crisis, as well as the democracy crisis, all have common roots. You cannot tackle the climate crisis if you don't make decisions to help the climate as a common good. Collective decision making is the very principle of democracy. It's the same thing with the refugee crisis. How can we help refugees if we don't tackle the cause of what's making them flee?

How much of a role is there for young people to play in the democracy movement?

MANAR A major one. We can help build campaigns for people who are suffering and help them band together into one collective group to find ways to have their voices heard.

CASTREZZATI We can play a role, but young people tend to be more involved in social movements than in political parties. Marching in the streets or signing petitions is a way to influence power only indirectly. Thus, at the end of the day, we

don't have the impact we want because it's the political parties that make the actual decisions.

PORTNAIA We can be very significant. Young people are usually drivers of democratic protests, and they often take part in toppling authoritarian regimes. We are a generation that is less fearful than our parents and, in comparison to older individuals, the youth have fewer things to risk, such as a stable job or money. This gives us the freedom to push for democracy.

DUTAILLY Young people are citizens. As such, even before they are allowed to vote they have things to say, they have ideas. They have the right to express themselves, even more so as their ideas are less likely to be polluted by conformism.

Will they be taken seriously?

MANAR As youth, we lack money and connections and are volunteers. For these reasons, we can't always be as effective as we would like and often aren't taken seriously by politicians.

CASTREZZATI Any young person who gets involved in democracy is considered an outsider. The power lies in the hands of people who are older so, no, we aren't always taken seriously. As youth, we connect with the media and everyday people but not really with the political elite. They are the ones who ultimately matter.

PORTNAIA Yes, they are taken seriously since I sincerely believe that they pose a threat to authoritarian regimes' security.

DUTAILLY Probably not, at least at the beginning. But since we base our engagement on facts and figures, I believe that we cannot be ignored for long. Greta Thunberg [the young Swedish environmental activist] is representative of this. She was laughed at, but now she is giving speeches at the U.N. She is moving the lines.

How has your youth helped or hurt you?

MANAR My youth has helped me connect with fellow youth. They feel like they can relate to me no matter their situations. However, because I am young, politicians often disregard what I say.

CASTREZZATI My age has helped more than hurt me. I am lucky because I started traveling around the world at a young age, which broadened my perspective early on. My experiences made me open to all people and their stories. They've been key to running the Open Chair Democracy Talks, which entail really tuning into what people are saying. One time I was listening to a Syrian refugee who told me that he didn't know the meaning of freedom. It was vital that I had the open mind to hear his words.

PORTNAIA My age has helped me because I don't have anything to lose by fighting for democracy. This makes me that much more forceful about getting my voice heard. On the other hand, when I am interacting with older people about democracy, especially as I did in Russia, they're anti-democracy and look at me as a liberal and crazy Westerner. In Russia, the word "liberal" has a negative connotation.

DUTAILLY I've always thought of my age as a benefit because I learned about democracy as a young person and had the opportunity to represent my fellow high school students through the National Council [for High School Life, which aims to give French youth a voice] when I was just 14. My knowledge has only since grown.

What challenges have you encountered, or resistance have you met, along the way?

MANAR The lack of resources is a constant challenge, as have been disappointing encounters with politicians.

CASTREZZATI Most of what we do is try to convince older people in power to listen to us. Many of them struggle with changing their ways. This summer, for example, the Youth Think Tank spent time in a Goteborg suburb [in Sweden] known for its high crime rates and racial tensions. When we spoke to the city's politicians about what they could do to improve the situation, they were resistant to most of our proposals. One of our ideas was to use a school building to bring together different ethnic groups for social events such as international dinners, but they wouldn't hear of it. They told us that policies couldn't easily change and that they have a way of doing things that they wanted to stick with.

PORTNAIA The Russian authoritarian regime has been my biggest challenge because it's restrictive and doesn't allow for freedom of expression. The lack of other youth to join the democracy movement with me in Russia has also been a challenge because they fear the consequences, even if they agree with the cause. I know of

several people my age who are afraid of being kicked out of college if they express their democratic views. They consider that it's safer for them to keep quiet.

DUTAILLY Growing up in rural France, I was far from the center of power, which is Paris. The city is almost a four-hour drive from where I lived, so I had to convince my parents to let me travel alone there at a young age to fulfill my responsibilities with the National Council. Also, I've given a lot of time to the democratic movement, and it's been hard to balance that time with my school and social lives. They also need attention.

What part of the world are you most concerned about when it comes to democracy being threatened?

MANAR Europe and the United States. These are largely democratic areas, but far-right movements are rising sharply, and there are more and more politicians being elected to power who don't want or care about a healthy democracy.

CASTREZZATI Italy, where I'm from. The country is becoming more and more far right, and basic rights are being threatened.

PORTNAIA Russia for sure. If the current brutal dictatorship is not toppled, the country will never see democracy.

DUTAILLY Democracy is being threatened globally. However, if I have to choose one country, it's the United States. Racism, gender inequality and reproductive rights are increasingly being threatened there. The situation is a forecast of what could happen to other democracies around the world.