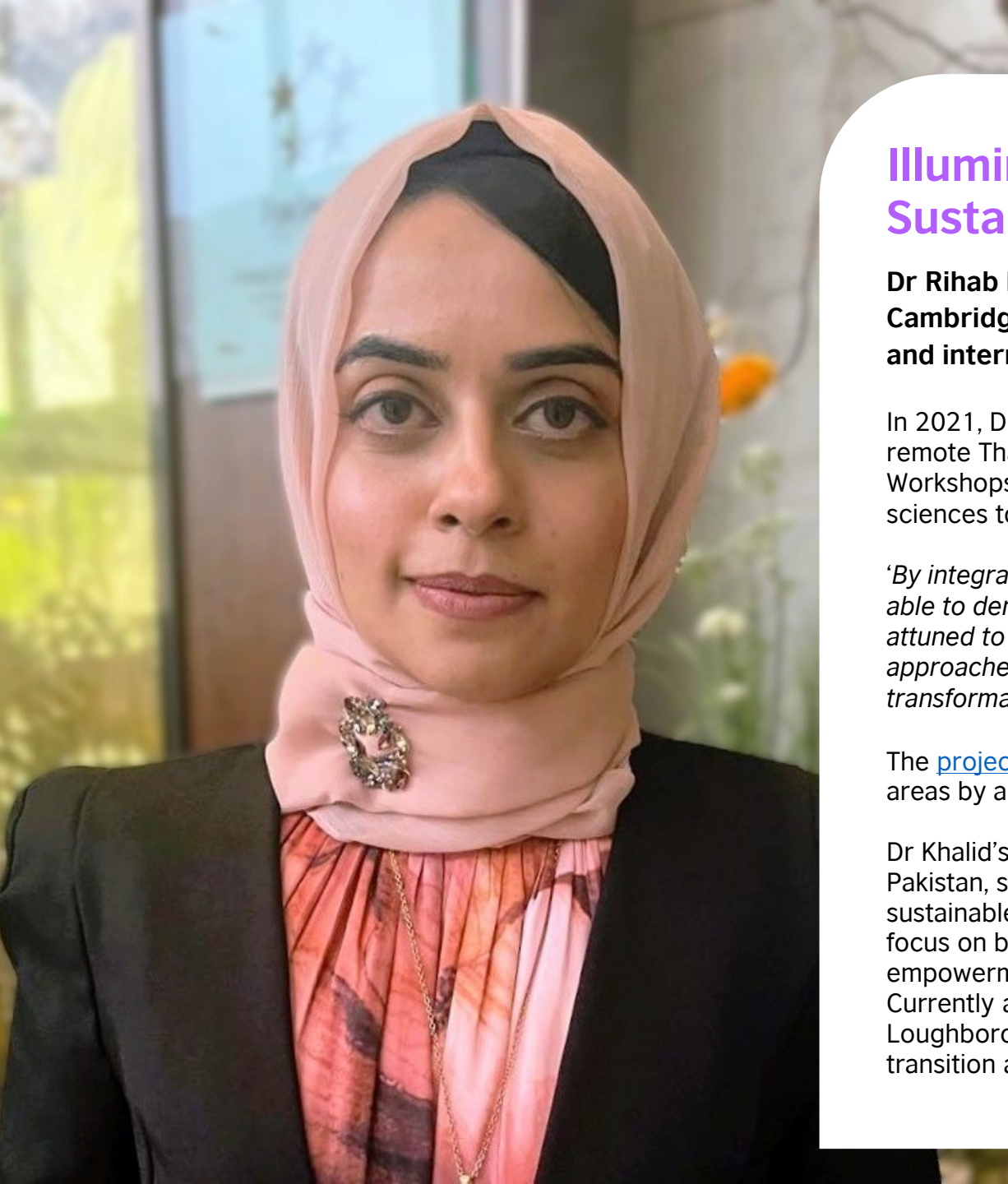




Human Stories

90th anniversary edition

British Council Europe: celebrating our community.
Working together to shape a better world.



Illuminating Change: Dr Rihab Khalid's Journey to Sustainable Energy Solutions

Dr Rihab Khalid, former Isaac Newton Trust Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, is pioneering sustainable energy solutions through cross-disciplinary and international collaboration.

In 2021, Dr Khalid and her team designed a solar energy system for Helario village in Pakistan's remote Tharparkar district. Funded by the British Council's Researcher Links Climate Challenge Workshops Grant, the project united experts from engineering, environmental and social sciences to create off-grid energy solutions.

'By integrating different disciplinary expertise, and working closely with the community, we were able to demonstrate that sustainable energy solutions must be both technically robust and deeply attuned to local socio-cultural dynamics. Only through such place-based and co-designed approaches can we ensure energy transitions that are equitable, inclusive, and truly transformative', says Dr Khalid.

The [project's success](#) in Helario demonstrated how solar energy can catalyse change in remote areas by aligning technology with community needs.

Dr Khalid's [research](#) also examines the resilience of MicroHydro Power projects in northern Pakistan, studying the intersection of technology, community engagement, and policy for sustainable solutions. She highlights that decentralised renewable energy projects must also focus on broader socio-economic impacts like poverty alleviation, education, and women's empowerment.

Currently a Research Associate with the Modern Energy Cooking Services programme at Loughborough University, Dr Khalid is exploring socio-spatial justice in the clean cooking transition across Africa and Asia, inspiring researchers and communities worldwide.

Stephen Kinnock: Building Bridges, Shaping Democracy

Stephen Kinnock, now a UK Government Minister and Member of Parliament, spent 12 transformative years with the British Council. His journey began in 1996 in Brussels, where he worked on securing EU-funded business development projects during a pivotal period of Central and Eastern Europe's post-communist transition.

'I realised that the British Council had this public-spirited mission, but was also a highly commercial, innovative and cutting-edge organisation. And I was very, very interested in that mixture of skills and a mixture of output that it was delivering', Stephen reflects.

This focus on building bridges and fostering trust became the cornerstone of his work. In 2005, Stephen became Director of the St Petersburg office, leading cultural programmes and English language initiatives during politically tense times. However, as diplomatic relations soured in 2008 and the British Council offices in Russia closed, Stephen was struck by how fragile democracy and freedoms can be, solidifying his resolve to enter politics one day.

After a year as Country Director in Sierra Leone, Stephen left the British Council in 2009, and he transitioned to politics in 2015. Now, as a Member of Parliament and Minister of State for Care in the new Labour government, Stephen reflects on the British Council's enduring impact: *'No other organisation in the world has the ability to bring together all these different aspects of what happens in Britain, take it out to the world, and then also listen to what's happening out there and bring it back. The British Council is a bridge between the UK and the rest of the world, and I cannot think of a time when it has been more important.'*

This story is based on an [interview with Stephen](#) for our 90th-anniversary project exploring the British Council experiences of individuals from around the world. Discover the full collection at [Oral Histories: The British Council in Action](#)





Janet Ilieva: The Invisible Bond of Trust

Janet Ilieva's journey with the British Council began in her school years in Bulgaria, where English opened a window into UK life and culture. At the time, the British Council had no office in the country, but its selected teachers and university library resources became a lifeline for students like Janet.

'The British Council Resource Centres were one of those few places where you could actually find the textbooks in English and find out what Economics was all about,' she recalls. Later, while working on an education project in Manchester to attract international students to the UK, Janet realised she was fulfilling her childhood dream of experiencing the world.

'My experience with the British Council was a dream come true. It wasn't just about connecting with the world but actively building the bridge between the UK and other countries,' she says.

Today, as an external consultant for transnational education projects, Janet reflects on the values that have kept her tied to the organisation for nearly three decades.

'It's people that make up the British Council, their dedication, their commitment, their genuine interest in others and bringing people together from all across the world. It's quite a unique chance to be able to be involved in that, to be part of that.'

For Janet, the British Council remains a beacon for building connections and promoting multicultural fluency, a mission she believes is more important than ever.

This story is based on an [interview with Janet](#) for our 90th-anniversary project exploring the British Council experiences of individuals from around the world. Discover the full collection at [Oral Histories: The British Council in Action](#).

Volodymyr Sheiko: A Journey of Cultural Connection

Volodymyr Sheiko, now General Director of the [Ukrainian Institute](#), spent 12 impactful years at the British Council. His career spanned roles as a translator, marketing manager, and arts director during critical moments in Ukraine's history, including the Revolution of Dignity and the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine.

'The British Council invested in partnerships between institutions and organisations from both countries. And I think that is a model that I replicated in the Ukrainian Institute when I joined in 2018,' Volodymyr shares.

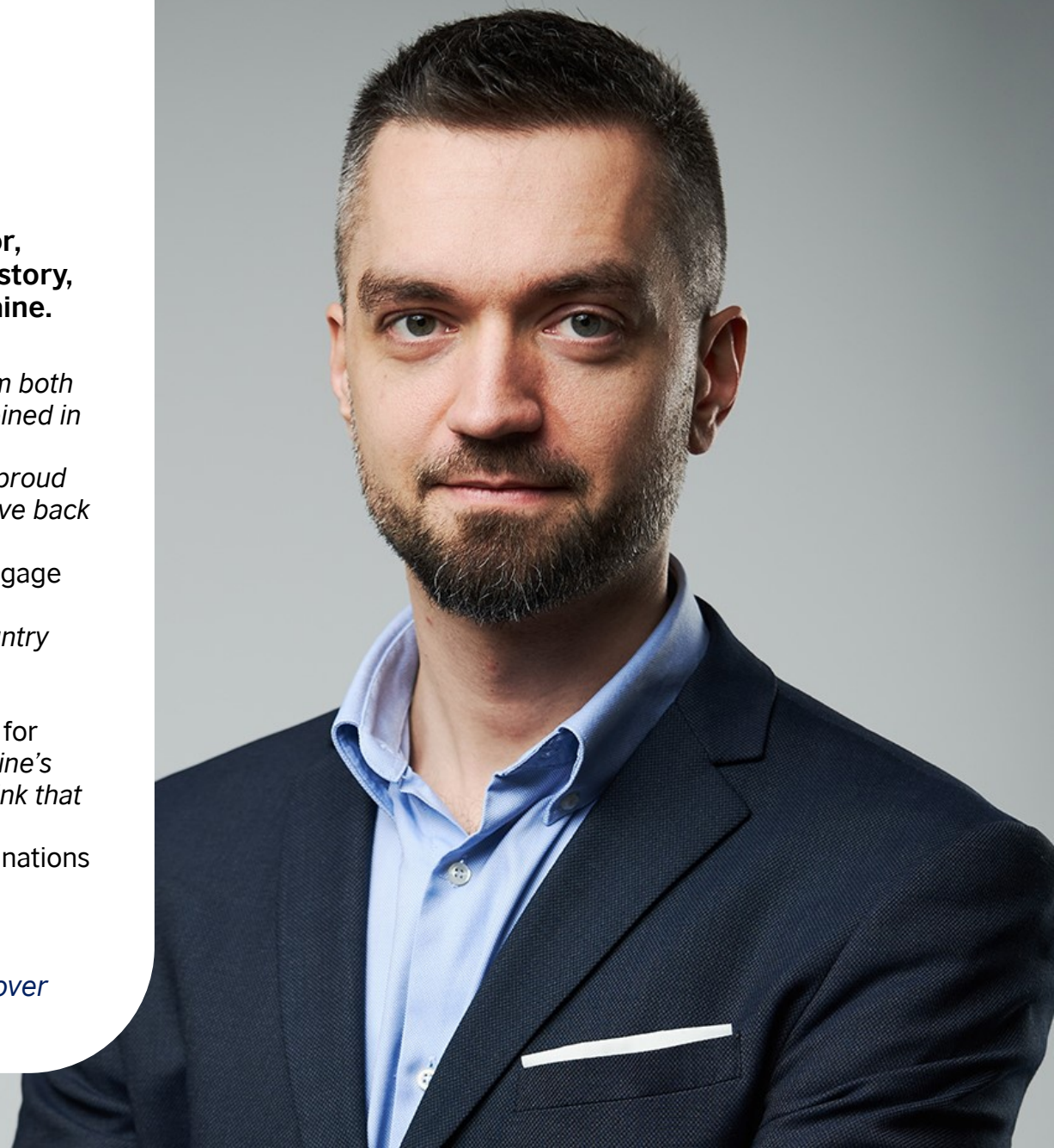
One of his highlights at the British Council was modernising marketing strategies. 'I'm proud of this shift to digital communications and targeted advertising. That was really innovative back then.'

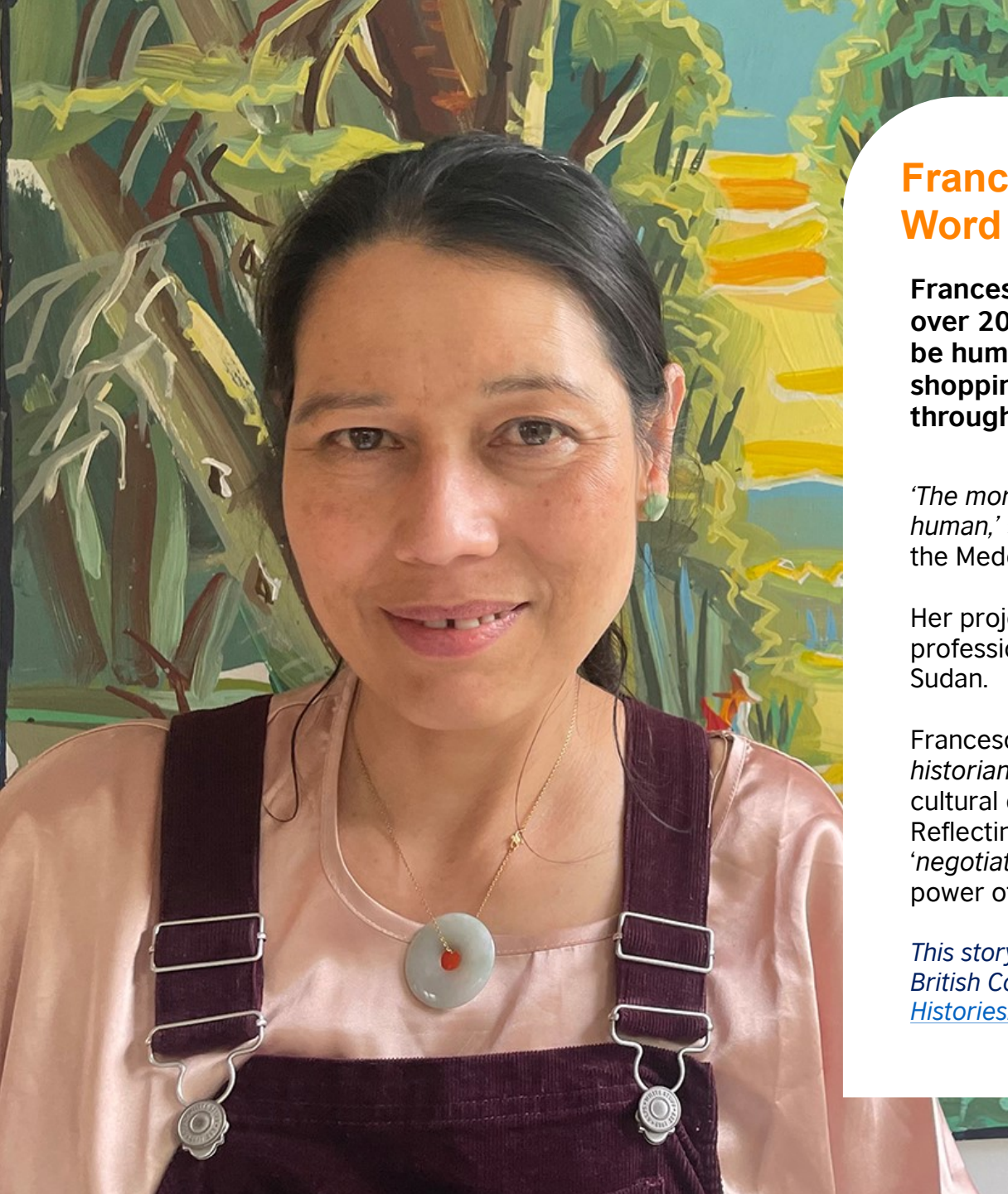
As Director Arts in the Ukraine, Volodymyr adapted UK-focused cultural projects to engage Ukrainian audiences, deepening his personal connection with the UK. 'I think it's still a passionate love affair [...] I don't think I have a stronger cultural affinity to any other country anywhere in the world than I do with the UK.'

Now leading Ukraine's public cultural institution, Volodymyr credits the British Council for shaping his approach to fostering sustainable cultural relations. 'In the context of Ukraine's reconstruction and rebuilding, the British Council is absolutely instrumental [...] and I think that perception will endure.'

Volodymyr's journey highlights the enduring power of cultural collaboration in uniting nations and creating lasting impact.

This story is based on an [interview with Volodymyr](#) for our 90th-anniversary project exploring the British Council experiences of individuals from around the world. Discover the full collection at [Oral Histories: The British Council in Action](#).





Francesca Beard: Connecting Cultures Through Spoken Word

Francesca Beard, a performance poet and collaborator with the British Council for over 20 years, has worked in 23 countries, using poetry to explore what it means to be human. From workshops in Colombian prisons to performances in a Bangkok shopping mall, Francesca's work bridges cultures, encouraging understanding through shared stories.

'The more different stories we share, the more we understand each other and what it is to be human,' says Francesca, reflecting on her global experiences, including her performance at the Medellín International Poetry Festival for Peace in Colombia.

Her projects, supported by the British Council, focus on creating lasting connections between professionals and communities, such as her work with Femrite in Uganda and Makaan Arts in Sudan.

Francesca's international work has also led her to explore the role of artists as *'alternative historians'* in shaping political and cultural narratives. She highlights the importance of cross-cultural dialogue and how art can challenge assumptions and connect people across borders. Reflecting on her work, Francesca argues that the British Council has been instrumental in *'negotiating with grace'* the legacies of empire and colonialism while showcasing the enduring power of cross-cultural relationships.

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