

Built Before It Had a Name

Interview by Ronald Kok RBA

Tatjana Ulićević, PhD, spent more than 20 years in systematic equity and risk management at Optiver, ING Investment Management and Shell Asset Management Company (SAMCO). At SAMCO she co-designed and chaired the Capital Markets Meeting, a cross-asset forum that brought teams across capital markets into a single debate before "Total Portfolio Approach" became widely discussed. In this interview she reflects on what that experience taught her about culture, governance and judgment in the Total Portfolio Approach (TPA), which a growing number of Dutch pension funds are adopting as they move into the new pension system.

BEFORE TPA HAD A NAME, WHERE DID THIS START?

It didn't start with a boardroom blueprint or a TPA mandate. It started with a need to break down silos, so that teams across all capital markets shared their views instead of forming them in isolation. What was needed was a change in culture, not a new governance structure. The cross-asset meetings started in 2020; the formal view came in 2021, once there was demand for one. Even then, fixed income and equity didn't design something new: they formalised what was already happening in the meetings, in a shared dashboard capturing a short-term cross-asset view that became an input for client meetings. The structure followed the culture, not the other way round.

Most institutions approach TPA by redrawing the governance chart first, setting risk budgets, reference portfolios and formal mandates. We started with people and habits instead: a shared vocabulary, norms for debate, and a willingness to hear a view from another asset class before defending your own. Those habits are what a real total-portfolio discussion requires, and no framework can install them for you.

HOW WAS THE CAPITAL MARKETS MEETING BUILT, AND HOW DID IT COMPARE WITH FORMAL TPA MODELS?

I co-designed the forum with a colleague. It worked in two layers, and I chaired both. Every month, a small group of portfolio managers and analysts went through the shared dashboard, together with input from the individual asset-class teams, and turned it into one cross-asset investment view. That view was then taken to the broader Capital Markets Meeting with the wider front office, where it was challenged before it fed into client meetings and into the positioning of the books of the individual portfolio managers. The small group did the analytical work; the broad group tested it. That set-up ran for five years (2021-2025).



Tatjana Ulićević, PhD, has over 20 years of experience in quantitative finance, portfolio management and cross-asset governance. As Senior Equity Portfolio Manager at Shell Asset Management Company (SAMCO) from 2010 to 2026, she built and scaled systematic equity strategies to over EUR 1 billion in assets under management. Her work spanned portfolio risk allocation and the integration of an AI-driven signal and ESG data into live portfolios. Her current focus is the Total Portfolio Approach and investment governance. Views expressed are her own.

The dashboard tracked government bonds, credit and equities against economic data, fundamentals, valuations and credit spreads, with room left for qualitative judgment. Performance ran through a paper portfolio on a three-to-six-month horizon. Beyond the view itself, the process produced something less visible but just as valuable: a sharper read of each asset class's own macro drivers, because each had to be explained to, and questioned by, people looking at it from a different angle.

It's worth being explicit about scale. The institutions most associated with TPA, Australia's Future Fund and the New Zealand Superannuation Fund, are asset owners managing entire balance sheets. Our forum sat inside a dedicated pension fund asset manager, operating across asset classes within a larger organisation. That's a narrower mandate, but a useful place to test whether the cultural mechanism works at all. In the framework that Filbeck and Bok (2025) describe, it sat closest to the Top-Down TPA stage, though without the formal reference portfolio or top-of-house authority that stage typically implies. Risk wasn't pre-allocated. Every view had to be justified against what it cost the total portfolio, and sleeve limits weren't accepted as justification on their own. The forum was advisory, not fiduciary: it shaped positioning through argument, not authority. Without formal power, an idea only won by being better.

WHAT MADE THE FORUM WORK, AND WHY DID IT LAST?

Four things made the forum work, with one discipline underneath them. First, the dashboard. It gave everyone a common starting point rather than a set of answers to hide behind. Second, we worked hard to keep hierarchy outside the room. The best idea had to win regardless of who raised it, because left alone, status would have quietly shaped outcomes. Third, the people. Over five years the forum outlasted several personnel changes, because participants were chosen for cross-asset curiosity rather than seniority or book size. Deep specialists willing to think beyond their own asset class did best; generalists without depth struggled to anchor the debate, and specialists without breadth tended to defend their sleeve. Fourth, the language changed, from "my book" to "what does this add to the total portfolio."

AND THE DISCIPLINE UNDERNEATH?

The most dangerous moment in any forum isn't disagreement. It's immediate consensus. When every view aligns quickly and every signal points the same way, that feels like conviction. More often it's a warning. A single large directional bet, however well-reasoned, isn't total-portfolio thinking. It can look diversified on paper and rarely is once you trace it back to one view. Checking the whole before acting on the part is what "single portfolio culture" means in practice. It's a habit of mind, and it has to be defended every time the room feels too comfortable.

WHAT DID YOUR YEARS OF QUANTITATIVE EQUITY WORK TEACH YOU ABOUT TOTAL-PORTFOLIO THINKING?

Risk factors were the lens, not to label strategies but to see through them. Allocating capital strategy by strategy isn't enough. What matters is looking through each strategy to its underlying factor exposures, and understanding how those exposures aggregate across the whole: where concentration hides, where strategies silently offset each other, where apparent diversification isn't real. Once you stop asking "how much capital does this strategy deserve" and start asking "what factor exposures does the total portfolio need," you've already made the conceptual leap TPA asks for at the cross-asset level. The unit of analysis changes. The underlying logic does not. A total-portfolio lens isn't a refinement of good equity management; it's often a precondition for it.

Factor investing taught me a second, harder lesson. Factors rarely fail on their own. They fail when quantitative models turn from starting points into unquestioned rules. The best teams treat factors as tools: applied with judgment, tested against the environment, held to their limits. The weaker pattern is just as common: value, momentum and quality stop being inputs and become conclusions. The factor becomes the answer when it should have stayed a question. The same risk exists at the total-portfolio level. Models don't make decisions; people with judgment do, and that judgment needs a room.

HOW DO YOU DISTINGUISH COURAGE FROM OVERCONFIDENCE IN CROSS-ASSET DECISIONS? AND CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE?

Courage is holding a well-reasoned view under pressure while the evidence still supports it. Overconfidence is holding the same view once the evidence no longer does, and calling that conviction. From outside, the two look identical. The difference is entirely in how the decision-maker relates to the evidence.

Late 2021 and early 2022 were the real test. Market-implied inflation expectations had reached new highs while the ECB still expected inflation to fade. Our fixed income team flagged that breakevens were inconsistent with that guidance, and that nominal yields were too low for the backdrop. That's exactly the kind of cross-asset signal the forum existed to act on: a fixed income insight with direct implications for equity positioning, a conversation that doesn't happen in silos.

The fixed income team got it right on both counts, and both their own book and the paper portfolio reflected it. Equity didn't fully follow. We were late reducing equity exposure in the paper portfolio, even though several individual portfolio managers picked up the signal in their own books and tilted toward value. Part of the reason was structural: individual PMs could act the next day, while the collective view moved on a monthly cycle. But part of it was us holding on to the equity view after the evidence had turned. That is what overconfidence looks like from the inside. It rarely feels like arrogance; it feels like patience.

The forum could produce courage, but it couldn't protect us from overconfidence on its own. That still takes someone in the room willing to say the view has changed.

WHERE DO TPA AND TAA GENUINELY PART WAYS?

Less in the analysis than in what institutions are willing to act on. Many tactical asset allocation (TAA) implementations gravitate back to the policy portfolio and ask which tilts will outperform it, so the benchmark stays the centre of gravity. Genuine TPA anchors to the fund's objective instead and runs a real competition for capital: what is the best marginal use of the next unit, regardless of asset class? That's a real structural difference, but it only matters if the culture supports acting on it. Our forum sat between the two: structure set the rules of the game, and culture determined how far we could go within them.

WHAT SHOULD INSTITUTIONS ASK FIRST?

The first question isn't which governance structure to adopt. It's who needs to be in the room, and whether those people are genuinely willing to think together. Everything else depends on that. Before the risk budget is set, the forum needs a shared language to debate it honestly. Before the TPA label goes on, the culture needs to be able to act on what the process reveals. For institutions that can't yet make the full structural leap, including fiduciary managers and pension funds whose liability

constraints make whole-of-fund restructuring impractical, the fact that culture comes first is good news. Culture can take root inside a TAA structure, and the investment architecture can follow later. You don't need to win the structural argument to start building the cultural one.

WHY "BUILT BEFORE IT HAD A NAME", AND WHAT COMES NEXT?

Because that's how it happened for us, and I suspect for many others. The practices came first: cross-asset debate, shared language, checking the whole before acting on the part. The TPA label arrived later. Looking ahead, I expect more Dutch pension funds to adopt elements of TPA as they move into the new pension system and rethink their investment governance. The risk is that they adopt the label and the structure without the culture to act on it. That's where TPA will succeed or fail: not in the design, but in the room. The name matters less than the habits. Build those first.

Reference

— Filbeck, A. and Bok, J. (2025). From Vision to Execution: How Investors Are Operationalizing the Total Portfolio Approach. CAIA Association and Thinking Ahead Institute. <https://caia.org/reports/from-vision-to-execution-how-investors-are-operationalizing-the-total-portfolio-approach/>