

**35th Session – Strasbourg, France, 6-8 November 2018**

## Statement by Rita JONUSAITE, Lithuania, Member of the Reflection Group on the ELDW and Policy Officer on Youth participation at the European Youth Forum

*Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi*

### **Debate on “European Local Democracy Week (ELDW): a new momentum”**

**Strasbourg, France, 6 November 2018**

Thank you Chair,

Dear members of the Congress,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be back in front of this assembly, to take part in this debate on the European Local Democracy Week.

This year as a member of the Reflection Group of the ELDW, I have been given an opportunity to contribute to a very important process: giving a new dimension to this pan-European initiative to further develop it in order to promote and foster democratic participation at local level.

It was not only an honour but as well a great learning experience to take part in the meetings of this Reflection Group and discuss key elements of the ELDW. To be entirely honest with you, neither the day I joined the first meeting, nor now I can call myself an expert on the topic but I can assure you that it contributed significantly to my understanding of role of the Congress and its members in promoting local democracy.

I would like to use an opportunity to thank the members of the Reflection Group for their commitment towards this very responsible task that we have been entrusted by the Congress and of course the Secretariat whose support made it all possible.

The work of the ELDW Reflection Group was constructive and I believe fruitful, but most importantly debates and exchanges that we had were open and encouraging to really speak up one's opinion. The proposed changes that are now put forward to the Congress are a result of some great discussions and reflections that we had.

As a young person and a young professional, I felt that my views and ideas are valued, that young people's opinion matters. And that is truly empowering.

I am convinced that these proposed changes will develop the broader outreach of the ELDW, especially to young people. Because I do think that the active participation and commitment of young citizens, including children, in local level democracy, is a key factor for anchoring democratic principles in our societies.

I share Mrs Doganoglu's and Mr Warmisham's point of view: the ELDW is a very useful Congress tool to actively promote youth participation and young people's empowerment in civic and public life. It helps, not only to raise young people's awareness on the rights and responsibilities of each individual in the democratic society, and the functioning of democratic institutions, but also to inform young people how to seize the opportunities and spaces available to make their voices heard.

As you may know, youth and children engagement has been a special focus of this year's edition, under the general theme "Citizen participation, consultation and commitment: for a thriving local democracy".

We can ask ourselves, from what activities involving young people can we draw inspiration?

Many interesting activities which were organised this year can be a real source of inspiration: for example, several cities, such as El Turro (Spain), Kutaisi (Georgia), Farkadona (Greece), Mioveni (Romania), convened Local Youth Councils, to have the debate and hear young people's opinion on topics such as budget, infrastructure, their needs in the city, etc. Their comments and suggestions, will be examined and integrated in decisions of the governing bodies, giving an opportunity for young people to be active and influential actors of the local governance.

Some cities rely on e-democracy tools, which is an indispensable way of including youth in local decision-making.

In Greece, the municipality of Farkadona created an "e-youth municipal platform", where young people can send their reports to create innovative solutions that will contribute to the development of their local community and the promotion of citizens' participation at local level.

Creating different platforms for dialogue, and bringing together local elected representatives together with young people are also good ways to foster young people's involvement in local decision-making processes.

As you know, I work at the European Youth Forum that is a platform of youth organisations, independent, democratic and youth-led, it represents 104 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations from across the Continent. And from my experience working as a Policy Officer on Participation I think that there is nothing more important in preserving democracy and democratic values than active citizens, notably young people's, participation.

Young people continue losing trust in democratic institutions being underrepresented and feeling that their voice is not really heard. They need more and different forms of participatory democracy and spaces where this happen.

The European Youth Forum is implementing European Youth Capital initiative that invites cities across Europe to rethink how they engage with and include young people in different conversations that impact their lives, be it questions on public transport and infrastructure, cultural and educational programmes, democratic policy-making, just to name a few, and thus to create better environment for young people and societies at large.

Through the European Youth Capital I witnessed that local and regional authorities, cities, are the place to comprehensively address young people's changing relationship with democratic life in Europe — considering participation systems that are in place and general culture of participation in society.

Local level is where deep and broad understanding of the barriers that young people face to be active citizens is cultivated, and where the means of political expression that young people use are put into practice. All because local and regional governments are closest to their citizens and can work hand in hand with young people to create really impactful mechanisms for youth participation.

As the President said, I was a Congress Youth Delegate in 2016, and it has been a great experience that positively contributed to the work I do today.

I had a chance to meet and have an exchange with a group of excited and motivated young people that are Congress Youth Delegates today, and I they are full of innovative and promising ideas that I am sure all of us eager to hear.

Thus, I really support the proposal in the draft resolution that the Congress Youth Delegates should be encouraged to participate in the ELDW. I believe the ELDW and local democracy at large would greatly benefit from that.

I really hope that this debate will be fruitful and I thank you for your attention.

*1028 words*