

37th Session – Strasbourg, France, 29-31 October 2019

## Speech by Aoife MOLLOY, youth delegate from Ireland

### Presentation of youth delegates' grass-roots projects

Strasbourg, France, 29 October 2019

Mr. President, honourable members of the Congress, and fellow Youth Delegates, I thank you for your attention. Thank you, Sofia, for introducing this topic to the hemicycle.

As youth delegates, taking what we learned during the 36th Congress session and implementing them in a real-world context made for lessons that were incredibly beneficial and insightful. Some of our delegates found that the institutional recognition by the Congress that they received was paramount to their success: the respect that the role of youth delegate created for us afforded us opportunity and opened more doors that would allow us to implement their projects the most effectively. Many of us welcomed being invited to certain political events and being given the chance to make connections with our local representatives. However, whether or not our opinions were actually heard is another issue altogether. Young people should not be tokenized. We are not here to fulfil a quota or to make any one organization look good in terms of inclusiveness. We are here to enact change.

Something that seemed to come up time and time again was the fact that young people really do want to be heard, but we need to make spaces for them to voice their opinions. In many cases, youth delegates felt so strongly about this issue that they wished to be the founders of these platforms -- Therefore, some projects focused on the implementation of a youth council within localities, or the formation of a framework for youth organizations, which strengthen both the individual groups and the network of youth organizations, as a whole.

Unfortunately, some of our delegates came across difficulties in terms of cooperation from Local Authorities. While some delegates found a lot of support from locally elected members – many of which were incredibly receptive – there was evidence of some institutional-level discrimination towards delegates as young people seeking to be involved in local politics. For example, it was noted that some youth delegates received no reply to formally submitted Freedom of Information requests, which, it is possible, might be due to a wider trend of public authorities taking FOIs from young people less seriously. It is absolutely necessary that if we, as youth delegates, are to spread awareness about the importance of local government in the democratic, all relevant information is forthcoming and accessible.

To continue on the theme of accessibility, many of us also found that there was a complete lack of public knowledge about the Council of Europe; and in this, we sought to educate our peers on the importance of the work of the Council, and how it is possible to influence this work. However, a barrier that some of us came across was a lack of resources in terms of translated documents. If there is no way for us to access particular information in our own language, it's incredibly difficult to explain about the Council's work and how impactful it is if we can't put it into accessible speech? This is a topic that the Council might consider looking at more closely, in order to allow us to further awareness about its work.

Social media is obviously something which forms a large part of the lives of many young people today – as well as being a primarily social resource, it also allows us to easily collaborate on political initiatives and is a valuable tool in gathering a variety of opinions. It is also something that can be used by public representatives, such as mayors and councillors, to connect with young people and inform them on issues that concern their localities. This was highlighted in particular by Csanád Kandikó, Hungarian Youth Delegate, who found that during the course of his two-day Youth Participation Congress, that social media is a resource which could be very valuable if we harness the power of it appropriately, as many young people are seeking to voice their opinions at grassroots level using this resource.

During the course of our projects, several of us found that it was much more beneficial to seek out youth groups in person and actively take a more educational approach, in order to create awareness around the Council of Europe and what work it does.

Some of the projects also took a more research-orientated approach, looking at the constitution of public representatives at grassroots level. One of the recurring examples was that, because of the nature of the income associated with local authority positions, in order to survive above the poverty line, it is necessary to rely on another job. The job that most suits this political lifestyle, of course, would be self-employment; and that in itself is inherently classist as it prevents representation from other layers of the social strata.

In considering the barriers that is one of the most important things to emphasize is the fact that politics starts at the local level. Many people have dreams of working at a national or even European heights; however, many of the politicians at these levels began by making contacts and serving their municipalities at the earliest stages of their careers. Countries are built on localities. They are built on the smallest towns and villages. And that is why we need to ensure that politics at the local level are not neglected, and that all social groups are included in the discourse around the creation of our policies.