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Debate: Quality of democratic participation at regional level

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Statement of Gloria VITALY, President of the Youth Regional Network of the Assembly of European Regions (AER), Norway

Debate on "E-Democracy", my experience on direct democracy and the opportunities and the challenges raised by the use of e-tools for democracy and citizen's engagement.

Dear all!

It's a big honor and pleasure to be here today and to see so many youngsters who are eager to take part at this debate.

My name is Gloria Vitaly and I am 20 years old. I am here today as the president of the Youth Regional Network to represent the youth and to show our engagement. There are already good examples for estimate engage youngsters, we are been taken more seriously in politics and organizations, but we still have a long way to go. It is our task as the future generation to form our society they way we want to, as well as affect it. And we most not forget that we, youth are also the present generation. We must take actions now!

I will short tell you about which organization I represent.

Youth Regional Network is a youth organization beneath Assembly of European Regions. Our goal is to involve and promote the rights and the role of young people in Europe. We are all together 48 regions who takes part in the Youth Regional Network where the age limit is all from 15 years and up to 30. With a wide age limit we are able to work upon youth and their rights, as well as we are able to be more creative and inspired by each other. The organization has two annually meetings, the Spring Plenary meeting and the Autumn Plenary meeting, as well as the Summer Academy with all the AER members where we come together and share ideas and knowledge.

3. E-democrarcy

I have been asked to talk about e-Democracy through the eyes of youth. I would like to start with a quote from a speech given by Hillary Clinton. In her speech from 2010, she addressed issues like internet freedom and how new technologies shape our democratic process.

"The freedom to connect – the idea that governments should not prevent people from connecting to the internet, to websites, or to each other. The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate. Once you're on the internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society." I fully agree with Hilary Clinton in her view of the opportunities, the internet is opening up. E-democracy presents in many ways this ideal:

E-democracy is about promoting democracy through information and communications technology. And e-democracy presumes that we are eligible to participate equally in political processes.

The development of e-democracy has many advantages. E-democracy can in some ways be beneficial to strengthen our democracy by opening up a new space for political debates and development of policies, and especially for youth who experience some obstacles like difficulties understanding the political debate and long distances.

With these new technologies and the opening for different forums for debate, the language changes as well. It is easier for youth to understand and engage in discussions online which are not that formal or not uses a difficult language.

We see great possibilities in the power-balance. Now, youth can suddenly be heard and make a difference worldwide or local with different use of new technology. In a way, it increases the possibility of youth to be heard.

We, the youth, are usually more positive towards the future and changes, and I must admit that I believe that we can revitalize and strengthen our democracies through the internet. But that does not mean that we should not interfere in the process of internet development. We need to keep a steady hand on the wheel or else it can turn to a bumpy road, which does not increase our democracy, but rather reduce the debate and make it more polarized.

In many of the debates online, we can see a tendency that more extreme views are taking more space. And we as youth, and especially young women and girls, are experiencing these so-called 'trolls'. These trolls are not interested in a public debate, but rather use the internet to pour out their hate for women, LGBT-persons, immigrants, or maybe another characteristic that the person does not approve.

We, the youth, need support. When we meet these trolls, we need you to act and take our part. We need you to make us feel supported and safe, so we do not feel afraid expressing our opinions online. It is your "responsibility" forward the knowledge to us, we are looking up to you, and we need you by our side.

If a man or woman shout hateful or degenerating words to a young girl or boy in the street, you might act upon it and ask the person to leave or moderate him- or herself. Let us do that online as well. Let us not leave the people who express themselves online alone.

First of all a reflection on democracy. We often say that we measure democracy on the way we treat our weakest. If the society poorly and inefficiently include the weak, the level of democracy is low. It is therefor important to act now!

4. What ask for

So to sum up,

We ask you to take into account our full citizen rights, and that we are not only heard, but taken into account in decision-making. We want you to take us into the democratic processes so we can be engaged.

We also ask you to continue making it easy for us to join the political debate by using what youth know the best, the digital platform. Talk to us, involve us in processes and ask us to join.

As an elected representative and spokesperson of young people, I ask you to give us the position in the political process which is allocated to us by the means of the voting right. In many cases we can see that people from the age 15-30, does not have the political voice they should have on all levels, by the way which is 1/3 of the whole population. Our political opinions and views also have to be taken into account seriously and properly. Some places in Europe youth have become their own minority group, not all youth have an opportunity to join the political floor. In that case it is our priority to involve the youth to show them that engagement is the way to make a difference in our society. The youth will gain more knowledge, help the society and it is we who are the future leaders. To do that, we need support. We need help to grow and gain experience.

We ask you to support us when we speak online or on the street. Cheer us forward, even though you not necessarily agree with us. But help us feel safe so we will continue to express our views and engage in our democracy.

The involvement of youth in politics and the organizational life is essential to achieve and bring forward solid and up-to-date policies. And it is the only way we assure the sustainability for our democracies.

Thank you!