

Mr President, dear european regions, dear european municipalities, dear youth delegates,

My name is Márcio Barcelos and I am from the european youth Forum. We are the platform for youth organisations in europe, which represents and brings the voice of young people through National youth councils and international youth organisations from all over Europe.

The youth forum has been working with the congress for some time, notably in the context of our European Youth Capital project, and we congratulate the congress for the motivation and interest towards youth and the importance of youth involvement, from the charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life to the presence of youth delegates in your sessions.

We also welcome your interest in discussing lowering the voting age to 16 years old and i am here to present our views on the topic, but also to listen to your questions and doubts and provide our perspective on them.

At a very basic level, the right to vote is a fundamental democratic right, and a key element to participating in modern democracy. Denying this right to citizens requires exceptional justification and I am sure we all agree on that. but who deserves this right then?

16-year-olds increasingly possess the maturity, knowledge and in many cases the obligation to make important decisions, as they already do regarding their education, living situation and career. As an example, after Austria lowered the voting age to 16 in 2007, research has consistently shown that under-18s are as willing and able to participate effectively as their older peers. They follow the same voting patterns and aren't unduly influenced by extremist parties or politicians.

Young people care about politics and their futures. Witness the incredible turnout and enthusiasm of the UK's first ever 16-year-old voters in last year's Scottish Independence referendum, or the active young people who drove the marriage equality campaign in Ireland.

Besides, when the argument is that young people are not prepared or don't have the proper information to vote, this reasoning loses any value if it comes from those same authorities who are responsible to provide young people with an effective education that prepares them to be autonomous and responsible citizens. This is why effective citizenship education (both in schools and the supporting the work done by youth NGOs, is an essential element of our discourse in this topic.

On another note, voting is habitual. together with citizenship education, studies show that a lower voting age makes it much easier to create a habit of voting while young people still live at home, boosting lifelong participation rates. If Europe wants to support a new generation of active citizens and combat declining turnout across the EU, then we need to target these citizens early.

Demographic changes in Europe have seen the number of 15-24 year olds falling

rapidly while the 65-90 demographic quickly expands. We need to bring 16- and-17-year olds into the fold to ensure that the interests of younger citizens remain represented in our political systems, or risk an unjust imbalance.

Rights must correspond to duties: in most EU states, young people can pay taxes or be convicted. As 16-year-olds are subject to these rules, they deserve a say in their formation.

In most European countries the legal voting age was first set at 21 – as our societies changed, so did our electoral laws. Research and first-hand experience across Europe have shown that we stand at a similar moment today, with recent generations of 16-year-olds possessing the knowledge, willingness and right and to participate politically.

So for us, lowering the voting age to 16 is a logical and fair step in our democracy, and that step is slowly being taken around Europe.

I understand this is not a consensual view in this room and it is my pleasure to discuss it with you so that we can work together in moving forward.

Thank you very much.