

AC intervention, Panel 2: #EnvironmentRightNow: national parliaments and the right to a healthy and sustainable environment.

It is a great pleasure and privilege to be with you today and I thank you for inviting me to bring the youth perspective in regards to the right to a healthy and sustainable environment.

My name is Spyros Papadatos and I am a member of the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe. In case you are not aware of this body, we are the non-governmental partner in the co-management system of the Council of Europe and an advisory body to the Committee of Ministers in regards to youth issues. Apart from youth civil society representatives and experts in youth issues, we are also young people ourselves. Youth is a mindset, not a number. So today I ask you to put on the hat of youth worries and perspective of the world.

Now allow me to address this issue not only as a youth expert, but as a young person myself too.

One of the biggest mistakes we have been making in regards to the climate crisis is that we perceive it as a phenomenon not impacting us right now; Instead we treat it as just something that is happening far away from our realities, not affecting us immediately, but probably only in the next few decades. However, we are deceiving ourselves. Climate crisis is at our doorstep. Actually, not at our doorstep, it has entered our home, we can already feel it on our toes, touching us and burning us up slowly. In the very country that is hosting this conference, Greece (which also happens to be the country I am from), just a few days ago extremely severe weather conditions flooded and devastated the majority of the country. During the summer, floods occurred in Belgium, Germany and several other European countries, while at the same time wildfires were spreading in Turkey, Spain, Italy, Greece. A tornado occurred in Czech Republic. We saw record-breaking temperatures of 48,8 degrees in Italy. For many European countries, this summer was the warmest until now, and will probably be the coldest summer for the rest of our lives; the worst is yet to come. To put this into perspective, between 1998 and 2017, more than 166,000 people died due to heat, according to the World Health Organization. And this number will only continue to increase.

In less than 2 weeks, COP26 will take place in Glasgow, bringing together world leaders across the world, probably with representatives from the majority of the governments represented in this room. Young people will be there too. Civil society will be there too. Also several companies from the corporate sector will be there too, companies which consciously constitute the biggest polluters on the planet, yet they do very little to reverse this. On top of that, just a few hours ago, BBC news published an

article with alleged huge leaks of documents, maybe you were already informed about that. They allegedly reveal that a number of countries and organisations are arguing that the world does not need to reduce the use of fossil fuels as quickly as the current draft of the assessment report recommends. And we are here, at the end of 2021, several years after the approval of the Paris agreement, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Agenda 2030, still not able to achieve the maximum 1,5 Celsius increase we should achieve in order to effectively address the arguably biggest crisis humanity has ever faced.

And something that we still fail to fully comprehend and accept, is that the climate crisis is also a human rights crisis. In the CoE context, one of the first instances this was highlighted was during the Georgian presidency of the CM of the CoE. 'A healthy environment is a precondition for the preservation of life on our planet and, therefore, for the very enjoyment by every human being of his or her inherent rights and liberties under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights' the declaration says.

Let's also look at it side to side with the current COVID-19 crisis. If I asked you..... what is the biggest lesson that the pandemic crisis taught us in the last 2 years almost, what would you reply?....

Thinking in the crisis-management-context, I personally believe that COVID-19 taught us, among other things, that if there is political will from the member states and the governments, we can take meaningful action and contain adequately the crisis, if we do it with a united and pan-European approach, especially by showing intergenerational solidarity.

The only difference is that the COVID-19 pandemic came unexpectedly, the climate crisis has been known for many years now. Yet our responses to these two crises are disproportionate. Society as a whole and especially young people have repeatedly been demanding political action for the climate crisis. The institutions, such as the Council of Europe, have started responding to these demands to a certain extent and incorporating climate action to their work.

We, within the Joint Council on Youth of the CoE, have been committed to greening the CoE, starting from the youth sector and promoting youth participation in mechanisms to tackle the climate crisis, through a specific taskforce. However, and I am sure you know it better than me, the implementation of international policy is done at the local and national level. Otherwise, policies just stay as words and promises on the paper. There have been cases where young people actually filed lawsuits against countries, some of

which reached the European Court of Human Rights, demanding from governments to respect their commitments to tackle the climate crisis. You are arguably some of the most politically influential people around Europe. Our governments can and should step up and increase the political action at the national level to efficiently tackle the climate crisis and prevent it from becoming bigger and more out of control. All citizens should have the right to a healthy and sustainable environment, a right to a future and the need to legally secure this right is becoming more and more fundamental everyday. It is a topic that concerns us all, not only young people.

Now as a last message I would like to leave with you, is to use this space as an occasion to not only enhance our commitments to the international agreements on climate change but also to implement those policies into our local and national decision making levels. When it comes to mitigation of climate change, every action counts. Therefore, let me share with you three concrete recommendations for you to self reflect on:

1) The PACE is working on proposing a new protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, specifically working on the right to a healthy environment. As members of national parliaments, the feasibility of this proposal lies in your hands. Therefore, as European youth, we cannot stress enough the importance of this proposal being approved, as it will not only inspire national governments to take sufficient actions to protect lives, but also signal to the international community that Europe is taking this issue seriously.

2) We recommend that you implement sustainability within your internal working structures and practices. The Youth Department of the Council of Europe has created a sustainability checklist that aims to ensure that we practice what we preach. That way we can make sure that we are also environmentally conscious in regards to our working methods.

3) Young people should not only be considered for future plans, but also for today's actions. Therefore, we strongly advise you to create an empowering structure, similar to the CoE co-managed structure and acquire the consultation of young people in your local/national realities concerning any decision you are taking on the environment and climate crisis.

We are not only the COVID-19 pandemic generation, we should not stay in history just like that. More importantly, we are the climate generation and our generation is demanding political action now.

Thank you for your attention and time.