



ADVISORY COUNCIL ON YOUTH (CCJ)

How can the Council of Europe become a more strategic and political organisation fit to promote and protect to organisation's core values?

YOUTHLESS POLICY IS USELESS POLICY

The Council of Europe needs to go through a purpose-driven restructuring of its ways of working. There are clear and universally agreed values which are the foundation of the Organisation – there needs to be not only a recommitment by member states to these values, but also increased investment in them across Europe. To truly live up to the role of being the leading organisation on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the Council of Europe needs to increase its efforts to reach and stay relevant to the European population. Young people are a consistently underrepresented group in the Organisation's structure. There is wide concern for the effects of the lack of young people in decision-making processes. Young people are not present when discussing the decisions which affect their lives, and the lives of future generations of young people. This leads to a detachment from the vital work of the Council of Europe, and ultimately weakens the relevance and influence of the Institution. The Council of Europe has to stay connected to the public it serves in order to stay relevant in Europe today and in the future: this cannot be done without seeing young people as valued and equal partners in decision-making processes.

In the current setup of the Council of Europe, a youth perspective is only included when the bodies of the Organisation specifically invite it. **Youthless policy is useless policy.** To successfully tackle the challenges of Europe, there cannot be discussions taking place without including the citizens concerned by the decisions taken.

The Council of Europe set up a unique example of participatory governance with the co-management system in the youth sector – but we are not enough. The Advisory Council has an equal voice and mandate to the members of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ), through the co-managed decision-making structure. Co-management is consistently praised, in member states and beyond the borders of the Council of Europe. The structure has been recognised to be one of the most inclusive practices of participatory democracy in use. From the experience of the Advisory Council, we see the upcoming summit as an extraordinary opportunity to enhance the use of the co-management system, spreading it to more committees throughout the Organisation. Introducing co-management into more sectors of the Council of Europe will ensure fairer representation of the people of Europe in the Council's work, and will ultimately enable the Organisation to stay up to date, and responsive to the challenges Europe is facing. According to Committee of Ministers Recommendation (2006)14 on citizenship and participation of young people in public life: "supporting young people's participation is not restricted to asking their opinions but must include empowering them to be actively involved in a creative and productive manner; that youth participation is not limited to areas and issues which only concern youth", the Advisory Council on Youth sees immense value in including young citizens in more structures of the Organisation.

Establishing strong citizen participation in more sectors of the Council of Europe will be a concrete and effective method to live up to the core values of the Organisation, and be a progressive step for deliberative democracy.

What role can the Council of Europe play in ensuring accountability for Russia's aggression against Ukraine?

DEFINING LEADERSHIP FOR PEACEBUILDING

Young people have the right to live in peaceful societies. The Council of Europe needs to take ownership for leading Europe's joint response regarding the core values of the Institution. The Advisory Council on Youth wants to stress its deep concern for the continuing damaging effects war has on young people in war-stricken countries and in authoritarian regimes.

We repeatedly tell the story of how the Council of Europe was founded as a peace project, rising from the ruins of war, promising to protect Europe from the cruel consequences that follow global conflict. When the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine was initiated in 2022, many doubted the capacity of the Council of Europe, claiming it was not within its mission to work in war zones or with what could be considered as humanitarian efforts. This past year has shown us that it is simply not true. A concrete example is the Youth Department's Youth for Democracy in Ukraine project, which helps youth workers adapt to the specific challenges of ongoing war through, amongst others, mentorship and capacity-building. The work of the Council of Europe is more relevant than ever, supporting and protecting defenders of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, even though the war continues.

The response to military aggression is more peace. Though there has been valuable work on Youth, Peace and Security on a global level, there is still a distinct gap in the European context. Youth organisations and networks actively seek recognition of, and support to amplify their peacebuilding capacity in supporting our fellow young people living through the consequences of war. When war comes, young people are still there. Through the Council of Europe, young people are still supported through trainings, contacts and project funding. What works needs to be amplified – the Council of Europe needs to decisively take the **leadership role for resilience and peacebuilding in Europe**, and give strong support to young people in their peacebuilding efforts.

Peacebuilding should not only be about mitigation of conflicts but also prevention of them and should be done through human rights education with young people. Civic society actors, who are heavily impacted by armed conflicts, have to be allowed to engage in conflict transformation within the Council of Europe's framework. The Institution needs to continue to engage with young people of conflict-stricken regions through a cross-border approach and encourage intercultural learning and peacebuilding efforts by engaging young people in dialogue. It is not possible to make peace without truly engaging with others across the conflict divide.

How can the Council of Europe create a framework for efficient action on current and future challenges?

How much are democracy, human rights and the rule of law worth?

When seeing to current and future challenges, it becomes increasingly clear that young people are key stakeholders in a large variety of thematics. The Council of Europe structures its departments using a silo approach, where issues are divided, with the inherent risk of limitations in the impact of the work. This needs to change. The Organisation needs to adopt an increasingly intersectional approach to its work. Youth is a clear example of a population group which is affected by every single challenge Europe is facing. What unites young people is merely our age. We cover every position on the political spectrum, every minority is represented, we represent every level of inclusion/exclusion in society. Everything the Council of Europe works on affects young people. A far-reaching, intersectional approach needs to be adopted where human lives are valued in their totality, recognising the possible interconnectedness of multiple conditions for identity, background and perspective.

Young people also bring ideas, perspectives and solutions to our common challenges. The Advisory Council on Youth initiated the latest Council of Europe youth campaign Democracy Here | Democracy Now, as a response to numerous worrying trends of backsliding of democracy, shrinking space for civil society organisations, and new threats to human rights in digital spaces. Hundreds of young people and youth organisations joined the campaign and are still committed to the main call to revitalise democracy. These are the types of results a strong investment in youth brings – and it is only one of many examples of the unique responses the Council of Europe brings to tackle the challenges Europe is facing.

For 2022, the Council of Europe budget represented only 0,26 percent of the EU budget. Once again we ask: **How much are democracy, human rights and the rule of law worth?** This summit is the time to redress the balance between the leading European institutions. An increased budget to the Council of Europe will multiply the effects of the European response to the current challenges facing democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and allow the Institution to continue to deliver a pioneering, comprehensive European youth policy. An increased investment in the Council of Europe will strengthen the broad European joint response, through strong partnerships between member states and between leading European institutions. The leaders of Europe have to invest in democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

What should the role of the Council of Europe be in the evolving European multilateral architecture and global governance?

GROUND-BREAKING SUPPORT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Council of Europe needs to focus on its core business and see the capacities within that no other organisation has. The Council of Europe sets ground-breaking standards and implements innovative methods for meaningful youth participation. Those standards are only valuable if they are upheld and continuously recognised. With the soft-law practices of the institution, there needs to be an increased commitment to following up on the implementation and evaluation of the adopted standards. To ensure the quality of the Council of Europe's work, additional investment should be made in the review processes of policy implementation.

In a further perspective, the Council of Europe should re-examine the non-binding nature of its soft-law texts on youth. The potential drafting of a convention on youth has been discussed before in the Council of Europe, though at the time the need to protect young people's rights was deemed to be covered by the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter. Though the Advisory Council on Youth agrees on the importance of the Convention and the Charter, and the call for increased efforts to guarantee young people's access to rights, there are still considerable challenges faced only by young people. The Council of Europe should therefore reassess its position on a Convention on Youth, launch a new feasibility study covering particularly – but not limited to – young people's rights to social inclusion, participation and expression, and independence.

Young people need open government structures, and opportunities to influence decisions. The engagement of young people in the social, economic and political decisions affecting our communities is essential for the future of democratic institutions everywhere. Also, of the future of this one.

How can the Council of Europe become a more modern organisation with an adapted framework for better supporting member states and better responding to current and future challenges?

A FUTURE-ORIENTED, VALUED-DRIVEN INSTITUTION

From a youth perspective, the Council of Europe is the leading institution to connect, develop and support youth organisations – but only for the young people who know about the Institution's existence. The Organisation will lack recognition of its important work if the outreach is not accessible or easily understood by the European public. Information and material from the Council of Europe needs to be presented in a citizen-friendly, approachable, manner that is helpful in the everyday life of Europeans.

We often hear outbursts that the Council of Europe's communication strategy needs to enter the 21st century. The Advisory Council on Youth wants to see a dramatically more innovative approach to the modernisation of the Organisation's outreach – we urge the Council of Europe to start working beyond what is expected in today's context and adopt a **future-oriented approach**. In relation to digitalisation, society has developed at a rate where the communication environment five years ago is unrecognisable today. The Council of Europe needs to pick up the pace and raise the bar for what is expected from the Institution. How will the citizens of Europe know about their rights as protected by the Council of Europe if they do not know the Organisation exists? And if they do, how can they easily access information relevant to them as agreed by the member states? Expertise from fields like Artificial Intelligence, Youth and Media already exists within the Organisation, which could easily be put to use to adapt the working methods of the Institution itself.

Modernising the Council of Europe means that the Organisation must evolve, which requires investment. Ensuring that the Organisation works with up-to-date standards cannot be combined with "efficiency" drives. If we truly want to build an organisation that can respond to the challenges Europe is facing, in a citizen-accessible way, there needs to be a combination of re-commitment and restructuring. As youth civil society representatives, the working methods of the Institution are far more rigid than what we are used to. Many of the policies for practices of the Organisation can be reworked to make the Council of Europe a more inclusive, accessible, environment-friendly, and open, Organisation.