

## Chamber of Local Authorities

**44<sup>th</sup> SESSION**

**Strasbourg, 22 March 2023**

CPL(2023)44-03

13 March 2023

### **Introduction to the debate on:**

## **Strong democracies through youth engagement at local level**

Discussion document prepared by the Secretariat

## **Strong democracies through youth engagement at local level**

This debate is based on the finding that in Europe today, all studies show that young people are among those that have been most affected by the crises which have recently swept the continent: the Covid-19 pandemic and successive lockdowns have unquestionably hampered their development and the equal opportunities to which they could have aspired; the war in Ukraine has forced many of them to leave their cities and regions and move to other countries; and the earthquake in Turkey in February 2023 claimed over 45 000 lives and made over a million people homeless. Young people have enormous potential for political and democratic engagement. Getting them involved is especially important in a context in which Europe has been experiencing democratic backsliding and increasingly radicalised public discourse. The aim of the debate will be to explore why youth engagement at local level is so key to strengthening and promoting democracy in Europe, and to investigate ways of stepping up the consultation, participation and empowerment of young people as political players.

The Congress has contributed substantially to the specific standards on youth participation drawn up at the Council of Europe, which include, for example, the [Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#) and the [Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority](#). In the light of these instruments, the Congress regularly welcomes measures to increase the involvement of young people in decision making at local and regional level. The Congress continues to contribute to this through [a large number of youth activities](#), including thematic reports on the future of youth in rural areas, youth work at local and regional levels, and the social rights of young people, along with follow up to recommendations in the form of promotion material.

From drawing up to promoting standards, or through its role in facilitating youth involvement, youth participation has been one of the Congress's priorities for many years now, as witnessed by its "Rejuvenate Politics" programme, which systematically involves young delegates from the member states in the Congress's statutory work, thus making it easier for them to access the Council of Europe's other activities.

Experience has often shown that in a number of political spheres, the perspective of young people can yield quite innovative ideas which may result in more targeted policies. As a result, strong democracies in which the right to participation and free expression at all levels of governance and for all age brackets are guaranteed in law and in practice provide the perfect arena for young people to participate in political life. Local governance in particular is an ideal setting for youth engagement, because local communities are where young people can grow, express themselves and experiment most easily. Youth engagement and participation in local affairs already takes place through formal and informal arrangements throughout the member states – in the context of city youth or neighbourhood councils or in the movements through which young people mobilise as activists on their own initiative, as in the area of climate change.

However, youth engagement is not only achieved through their consultation or the expression of their opinions on a case-by-case basis, but also through the development of their abilities and the granting of new rights. For instance, in 2015, the Congress expressed its support for [the right to vote from the age of 16 at local level](#), as practised already in a number of European countries. In [countries in which young people have the right to vote from the age of 16](#), they are generally more interested in learning about the issues at stake earlier and tend to become more informed and active citizens.

Alongside these developments, we also note that young people are increasingly disengaged from politics and more concerned about making a place for themselves in society. Many young people drop out of school, have difficulty in accessing formal training paths or find themselves in insecure jobs, not to mention encountering problems linked to mental health and crime. Some young people also express a form of resentment and suspicion vis-à-vis elected leaders and the traditional media, while also being exposed to misinformation campaigns.

Enhancing young people's capacities to be interested and politically active citizens is primarily a matter therefore of strengthening their economic and social situation and then of training them in democratic citizenship from the earliest possible age, as also promoted by the Council of Europe through its programmes over the years on [education for democratic citizenship and human rights education](#).

More and more often, the involvement of young people as active citizens and future politicians is supported by training programmes on human rights and anti-discrimination measures, which mobilise young people as trainers and experts. They often take up activities at their own initiative for social or humanitarian causes. This is especially significant in the current context where, for example, the Ukrainian people have been benefiting from [the involvement of young people in the humanitarian response](#) to the war.

Through this debate in the Chamber of Local Authorities, the Congress seeks to provoke a discussion on the benefits and the means of getting young people more involved in politics through the functions of political players, acting as elected representatives or as active participants in local political life.

Can this engagement help to entrench democratic principles and awareness of human rights in our societies? What more can we do to get future generations to take a responsible approach so as to consolidate our democracies? How can we help them to better anticipate the challenges of the future?

The Chamber session on Wednesday 22 March from 9.30 am to 12.30 pm will be attended by Mr Hugo BIOLLEY, France's youngest mayor, elected in 2020 at the age of 18, Ms Kerry HOPPE, a campaigner for the right to vote at 16 in Bavaria, and one of the youth delegates of the Congress's 2023 programme.

All will share their experience and help to fuel the debate between the Chamber members on future measures and activities to involve young people more directly in local public life.