

## Thematic debate: Environment: What responsibility do local authorities have?

### Speech by Liana LIU IOANNIDES, youth delegate (CYPRUS)

Dear Congress members,  
Honourable mayors,

My name is Liana Liu Ioannides and I am the Youth Delegate from Cyprus. Having the honor to speak after the mayors of two major cities, I would like to contribute to this discussion, on behalf of all youth delegates, on how to include and amplify the voices of youth in our shared effort to build a sustainable Europe. To quote the words of the Council of Europe's honourable Commissioner for Human Rights, during yesterday's plenary session, "youth are the driving force of environmental action". Particularly we would like to offer specific recommendations on the additional protocol proposed by the Congress for addition to the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

While we were exchanging views on the environment as youth delegates, there was a recurring question: what are the most pressing environmental issues? In a continent as diverse as Europe, with local authorities themselves diverse in both issues faced and methodologies, our environmental response must also be varied and reflect local needs. In order for this to happen, environmental decision-making must decentralize, to give local authorities the legitimacy and means to be able to effectively take their role as local guarantors of democracy.

At the same time, however, as youth delegates we recognize the difficulties created by the lack of harmonisation that is often apparent not only regionally, but also nationally within each member state. An example of this is waste management, one of the largest environmental issues local authorities tackle.

Just in the EU, 55% of all waste is disposed of in land-fills and water bodies.

In discussions among the youth delegates group, we discussed the cross-border, shared frustration of the lack of harmonisation of the recycle-bins colours in the municipalities of our countries. This small but costly example illustrates the importance that accompanies the responsibility of local authorities, not only to be decision-makers but also harmonizers. Decentralisation of decision-making has to be accompanied by an increased commitment of the Congress, for harmonisation. In this aspect youth's direct involvement in decision-making is crucial, as youth are remarkably able to drive environmental action across local, national and regional levels, overcoming extraordinary barriers. How? I would like to shortly share an illustrative story coming from my beloved city, Nicosia: the last divided capital of Europe.

A few months ago, the youth-initiated Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) Cyprus saw a hundred Cypriot youth from both communities coming together to draft a policy-recommendation paper addressing to local authorities a series of innovative policy recommendations.

LCOY Cyprus demonstrates a key fact: that the environment has the potential to unite us.

Yesterday's plenary session demonstrated the challenge that local authorities face: tackling a plethora of urgent and burning matters all at once. The environment should not be seen as a low-level policy to be traded or negotiated, but rather as the common ground at the forefront of all of our most pressing and urgent issues, from conflict to economy and social integration. The environment is the common ground on which we can build strong roots for a diverse, peaceful and pluralistic Europe. The need for more harmonisation and coordination, that comes with the necessary decentralisation of environmental decision-making, can be more effectively met by incorporating the ideas, determination and momentum that youth bring to the table.

Unfortunately, however, the efforts of youth are often not acknowledged nor considered in decision-making. An example of this is LCOY Cyprus, which was acknowledged by the Secretary-General of the United Nations himself, yet received no financial or political support from local authorities across both sides of the divide.

LCOY Cyprus is just one example of one youth-led initiative from one small island-state of the Council of Europe.

I want us all to take a moment to reflect on this reality: how unfortunate it is that the individual and collective environmental efforts of millions of youth, overcoming barriers such as conflict, discrimination of all forms and economic barriers, are not acknowledged in the decision-making tables which define our future prospects.

Let us take a moment to realize the degree of potential we do not succeed to harness, by not considering the voices of youth.

Let us take a moment to realize the ways in which this lost potential breaks youth's trust towards authorities and democratic processes; a trust that local authorities are working hard to build over decades.

Let us take a moment to realize how this lost potential affects our generation's prospects for a livable future.

The Council of Europe is an international protagonist in the safeguarding of human rights, including the right to the environment. One of the topics concerning today's debate is the addition of a new protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, that legally acknowledges the right of local authorities to participate in environmental decision-making.

Through the addition of a new protocol, the Congress rightly seeks to decentralise environmental decision-making, legitimising the right and responsibility of local authorities to be leaders of the environmental efforts.

As youth delegates we believe that this by itself is not enough.

To truly make this right a right of the people, and not just the right of decision-makers, as youth delegates we call for the protocol to make it compulsory -and not optional- for local authorities to acknowledge youth, financially and politically support youth-initiated environmental efforts

and meaningfully include youth in decision-making, such as through public consultations and youth councils, which have been remarkably successful when implemented.

Acknowledgement, support and inclusion should not solely depend on the political will of decision-makers. The fact that, in this thematic debate the voices and perspectives of youth delegates is given the same space to be listened to as that of the mayors of two major cities, is a sign of commitment which gives us hope and determination, that local authorities will formally recognize their responsibility in including youth voices in local environmental decision-making. The right of young people to be acknowledged, heard and included in decision-making processes, has to be protected.

Dear decision-makers, we urge you. It is in your hands to structurally change the status quo. Instead of youth struggling to find a way to have a voice towards local authorities, let us youth and local authorities fight united, for effective and intersectional environmental action.