

GRECO 101st Plenary Meeting

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Congress of Local and Regional Authorities*

Strengthening Good Governance : Consolidating Integrity and Accountability at the Sub-National Level

Strasbourg, 20 November 2025

Session Three: Partnering for Integrity – Civil Society and Youth in Local Governance

Speaking points for Jorge GRECH, Mayor of Zabbar (Malta)

- Good Afternoon, It is a pleasure to be here with you today to talk about one of the most important pillars of local democracy — youth participation and its importance to promote transparency and foster accountability. I Jorge Grech Mayor of Zabbar, a youth activist in my country since a very young age, with my involvement in different local and national NGOS, was a very natural step form me to run for the local hometown elections at the age of 23. With my strong involvement before, I new what was lacking and missing, what we wished to have and what we wanted to create. My start belongs to the Maltese Youth Agency whom had prepared us so well in the youths local council and the nation youth parliament platforms aside with the local ambassadors.
- Lets face it, running for elections costs alot of money especially marketing, but the key for a successful campaign had always been the direct communication with locals, charisma which cost nothing and a build up trust along the process.
- Now I ve been more than six years in the role of a mayor , I'm happy to share with you that this is my second mandate after I got re elected last year with a double amount of votes that I got the first time.

- Running for the first time, voters might get bored from other politicians and they switch and vote for you, running for the second time it's even worse. Why? It's a judgment of what you did along the whole mandate. So yeah sure, at least I think I did something good in 5 years mandate and people showed trust in us as youths in politics. We are not the future we are the present leaders.
- As a Mayor, I see every day that democracy begins locally — in our towns, in our neighborhoods, and in the simple, daily interactions we have with our communities. This is where trust in public institutions is built. And, as we hear today, it's also where trust can be lost.
- But if we want democracy to endure, it must be renewed with every generation. Integrity and transparency — the foundations of trust — cannot be taken for granted. They need to be nurtured, demonstrated, and passed on.
- In my own city of Żabbar in Malta, young people are not just watching from the sidelines. They are active partners in shaping our policies. With their ideas, their energy, and their strong sense of fairness, they are helping us strengthen good governance and promote a culture of integrity.
- A project that is very close to my heart is the Project of one of our main squares in my hometown where with the help of the President Emeritus of Malta Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, we introduced the consultation with our primary schools students, where they were given the opportunity to design and create the plans for the refurbishment of the square with our technical team and literally they feel so proud and part of it.
- This is why youth participation is so essential. And it becomes even more important when we speak about ensuring integrity

and preventing corruption. Young people challenge the status quo. They ask difficult questions. They insist on clear processes, and they expect transparency. That is a positive force — one that we should welcome and use to strengthen our institutions.

- Why? Because corruption affects young people directly and in specific ways: limiting their access to education, to jobs, and to opportunities to take part in decision-making. Involving them is not only fair in itself, but it increases that likelihood of good governance and decision-making for all of us.
- So, what can we do? Local and regional authorities must find meaningful ways to involve young people in decisions that affect them. And this involvement must be genuine. In Malta, we have seen that when young people are trusted with responsibility — for example through youth councils or student parliaments — they deliver creativity, vigilance, and integrity. They strengthen, rather than complicate, the democratic process. From experience many hot topics that we set on our agenda for discussion for the Youth Parliament, now they passed to the national parliament agenda and many of them were part of the present government reforms too.
- This is also reflected at European level. The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People, adopted by the Congress in October, reminds us that youth participation is not optional. It is a democratic right. And it is essential for transparent, accountable governance.
- The charter requires local and regional authorities to create formal participatory structure, such as youth councils to encourage open decision-making. Youth representation opens the system, with fresh perspectives and share decision making power with authorities in planning and evaluating youth policies.

It thereby enhances transparency, reducing discretion, and fostering a culture of accountability.

- Malta's National Youth Policy 2021-30 places participation as one of its central pillars of operation. The governing structure also emphasises that youth policy is cross-sectoral and interacts with multiple domains (education, employment, social inclusion ecc) . The youth advisory forum, considered as a committee of the cabinet and chaired by the Prime Minister also supports the message that Malta is moving toward inclusive, transparent, multi stakeholder governance.
- Malta was one of the first EU countries to introduce national voting at 16, not only on local elections. This is fully aligned with the Charter's principle that young people must have the rights, means, and opportunity to participate in decisions shaping their lives.
- At the recent Council of Europe youth ministers' conference held in Malta, the government reaffirmed that youth participation is essential to democratic renewal and pledged to turn these principles into concrete youth-focused policies and programmes.
- We see this clearly in the Congress's Rejuvenating Politics initiative and its Youth Delegates programme, which give young people from all 46 member states a real seat at the table. They are not just observers; they contribute actively, notably on issues of good governance and anti-corruption.
- And often, it is young people who innovate in monitoring, reporting, and activism against corruption. They use digital tools confidently. They analyse procurement, report nepotism, and mobilize their peers. Because of their persistence, we are seeing a cultural shift — a move away from passive acceptance

of corruption towards greater intolerance and higher demands for integrity.

- We have seen over the course of the last year with an anti-corruption movement across Balkan states, driven by youth, and in response to what they perceive as corruption and bad governance.
- So how do we support this kind of youth-led anti-corruption activism?
- First, we need strong protection for whistleblowers. A young employee or student should never be punished for reporting corruption. Ireland's model is a good example: it protects employees, trainees, volunteers, even anonymous reporters — and local authorities have a direct role in supporting them.
- Second, there should be adequate access to information — who received public contracts, how much projects cost, who owns companies, how university funds are spent, how political decisions are made. Ukraine shows what is possible when such access exists. The access to information law, combined with platforms like the Prozorro procurement system, have helped many young journalists uncover major corruption cases.
- Third, we must invest in training. Corruption can be complex, and young activists need the skills to identify and expose it — from analysing budgets to using freedom-of-information tools. Programmes like Slovakia's Stop Corruption Foundation and the Council of Europe's Rule of Law Youth Network show how effective this can be.

- Dear colleagues,
- It is wrong to say that young people are the future — we are here now, in the present, holding institutions to account. They are already demanding integrity. And they are already reshaping the culture of democracy.
- Our responsibility — as mayors, as local and regional leaders, as institutions — is to open doors for them, protect them, and give them the tools they need to participate fully and safely.
- If we do that, we will not only strengthen our anti-corruption efforts; we will strengthen our democracies from the bottom up.