

Participate to transform: young people claim their place at the decision-makers' table

On 29 October, the chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe became a veritable testing ground for democracy in a session moderated by Belgian youth delegate Reinout Vermaercke. The unanimous adoption of the new European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life was more than just a vote: it was a watershed moment. The vote was followed by the presentation of over 40 projects led by outgoing youth delegates, showcasing a Europe in action where young people are no longer waiting to be invited — they are opening the door to power themselves.

Need to transform political culture

According to Alison Zerafa Civelli, Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government in Malta, the main obstacle is not young people's lack of interest, but rather their inability to access spaces where their voices carry real weight. She said that in Malta, for example, the age at which people could vote and run in local elections had been lowered to 16. "Engagement is about trust," she explained. By giving young people more responsibility, they become more involved in local affairs, bringing their creativity to election campaigns and breathing new life into the somewhat rigid world of politics. While some had feared the consequences of their inexperience, Malta has reaped the rewards of young people's inventiveness.

Véronique Bertholle (France, SOC/G/PD), deputy mayor of Strasbourg and the Congress's spokesperson on youth issues, said that political culture must be transformed. "As long as young people are seen merely as would-be citizens, nothing will change," she said. She called for genuine power-sharing and a reset of the institutional "hard drive". The current generation had grown up in a world shaken by crisis after crisis, whether in finance, health or the environment. Young people today were no longer looking on from the sidelines: they were the Katniss Everdeens of our time: clear-sighted, sometimes rebellious, but possessed of a keen sense of justice. Therefore, institutions at all levels of governance must offer them democratic rights that can be fully exercised, not just a fig leaf.

The new Charter, a blueprint for rebuilding governance

Nina Grmusa, chair of the Council of Europe's Advisory Council on Youth and Joint Council on Youth, set out her personal vision for the future, invoking the spirit of the Braga Conference (held in February 2025), which represents an important step in the revision of the Charter. The Charter was more than just a declaration of intent: it was a blueprint for rebuilding governance based on equity, responsibility and reciprocity. She urged local authorities to provide more consultative spaces, training programmes and mechanisms for democratic integration. After all, the new generation is already experiencing the effects of today's climate, housing, job security and mental health crises first-hand. Excluding them from the decision-making process would be like policymaking blindfolded. "Young people are not a target audience," she said. "They are the vanguard of our societies."

Mentoring, listening and sharing responsibility

The emotion in the chamber was palpable, with speakers responding to each other as if they were reflections of a shared heightened awareness. Sonja Ledl-Rossmann (EPP/CCE) urged elected representatives to "take a young person under their wing" in order to pass on responsibility, not instructions. Véronique Bertholle (France, L, SOC/G/PD) added that, rather than blaming young people for their supposed disengagement, we should offer them our time, trust and a listening ear. From Lisbon to Tbilisi, the same aspiration is being voiced: let us participate in order to effect change.

Forty-two projects involving thousands of young people

At the end of the session, the adoption of the Charter was marked by sharing tangible successes from the 42 projects that have been carried out by Congress youth delegates in their respective countries, demonstrating that democracy is not a legacy to be preserved, but an eternal work in progress. Francesca Giudice (Malta) and Michael Welch (Austria) presented these grassroots initiatives, which had involved more than 3 500 young people and reached thousands more via social media.

In Romania, Norway and Austria, youth delegates had visited schools to explain how town councils work and encourage local participation. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Emina had provided training on public speaking to young women, while in the UK, Eugene had led a workshop on local elections and two of the people coached had even since been elected as local councillors! Some young people had opted for a more creative approach: Catalin from Republic of Moldova invented a board game about democracy, and María from Spain combined sport and European values at a swimming club.

Others had carried out public research: with Paulius (Lithuania) looking at the impact of artificial intelligence on fundamental rights; Sarah (Luxembourg) investigating the housing crisis; and Lucija (Croatia) and Christos (Greece) exploring how to make municipalities more youth-friendly. Lastly, a number of delegates had turned to participatory media. Examples included podcasts in Sweden and Estonia, TikTok videos against corruption in Hungary and a second-hand market for sustainability in San Marino. While these projects are all different, they are connected by one idea: democracy is a living, building and learning process.

Despite the obstacles – modest budgets, access to information or patchy support and sometimes even resistance from institutions or from mindsets— one thing is clear: investing trust in young people spurs them to take on democratic responsibility.