

The Bureau of the Congress

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28 November 2024

Rejuvenating Politics initiative: 10 years on²



Action required: for decision

Bureau members are invited to:

- take note of the information concerning the development of the Rejuvenating Politics initiative since 2014;
- take note of the information concerning the operation of the youth delegates programme in 2024, including the involvement of youth delegates in the activities of their national delegation;
- take a position on the request received from the delegation of Morocco, in its capacity as a Partner for Local Democracy, for a youth delegate from Morocco to be included in the programme in 2025;
- take a position on the proposal formulated by some youth delegates from the 2024 cohort to extend the mandate of youth delegates beyond one year in future.

¹ This document is classified as confidential until it has been examined by the Bureau of the Congress.

² Word Cloud automatically generated from 2024 youth delegates' one-word summary of their experience in October 2024.

1. Introduction

1. The Reykjavík Declaration adopted during the Fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government in May 2023 emphasised the importance of integrating youth perspectives in the work of the Council of Europe as a whole.
2. The Congress has played a leading role in this field for a number of years already, celebrating in October 2024 the 10th anniversary of the launch of its Rejuvenating Politics initiative, the core of which is its youth delegates programme. During this session, the Congress adopted Resolution 502 (2024) “The integration of youth perspectives in local and regional democratic life”, in which it reaffirmed its commitment to this initiative as a crucial means of promoting the participation of young people in local and regional democratic life, engaging young citizens directly in the work of the Council of Europe, and integrating youth perspectives at all levels of decision-making.
3. At its meeting of 14 and 17 October 2024, the Bureau held a discussion on the practical functioning of the youth delegates programme in 2024, including as regards the involvement of youth delegates in the activities of the national delegation of their country and the length of their mandate.
4. The present document takes stock of the situation 10 years after the launch of the Rejuvenating Politics initiative and invites the Bureau to take several decisions concerning the future orientations and operation of the programme.

2. Background

5. The Congress has a long history of fostering youth participation in local and regional life.
6. In 1992, the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, forerunner to the Congress, realised that valuable and meaningful youth participation required a commitment from local and regional authorities. This commitment led to the adoption of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Municipal and Regional Life, which was the fruit of discussions between young people and local and regional elected representatives. In 2003, a revised Charter was adopted to reflect changes in society and enhance youth participation at local and regional levels.
7. In 2012, the Congress’s report entitled “Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement” explored the reasons for young people’s waning interest in democratic and civic participation. Understanding from the report’s conclusions that young people were not disengaging, but rather that they were engaging differently in a society in which they felt marginalised from the political process, in 2014 the Congress devoted a large part of its two sessions to the theme “Empowering youth: a shared responsibility for cities and regions”.
8. In October 2014, building on its commitment to promoting active youth participation and aiming to address the gap between young people and political institutions, the Congress launched its Rejuvenating Politics initiative, with the youth delegates programme at its core. Young people from 34 European countries were thus invited to attend the 27th session of the Congress, and had the opportunity to bring a youth perspective to the work of the Congress by taking the floor for the first time during plenary debates. This exercise was repeated the following year, with young people again being invited to participate in the Congress’s sessions.
9. Since then, the involvement of youth delegates in the work of the Congress has expanded. Thus, as of 2016, youth delegates were invited to participate in both sessions held during the calendar year and to run a grassroots project in their home country between the sessions.
10. The first invitations to youth delegates to attend Congress activities held outside the sessions, such as committee meetings or election observation activities in their country, were extended in 2017. Since then, their involvement has continually increased, with youth delegates now systematically being selected to attend committee meetings not only during the sessions but also between sessions and invited to attend Congress co-operation and election observation activities in their country.
11. The number of invitations received for youth delegates to participate in activities organised by other sectors of the Council of Europe (World Forum for Democracy, abolition of the death penalty, ...) as well as by external partners such as the Association of European Regions has also significantly increased over the years.

12. In 2024, an exceptionally high total of 50 opportunities were offered to youth delegates to participate in 15 events held outside Congress sessions by the Congress or other Council of Europe or external partners, between 14 May and 6 December 2024. These 50 opportunities were taken up by 30 different youth delegates (some having applied and been selected to participate in more than one event, others never having applied to take part in such activities).

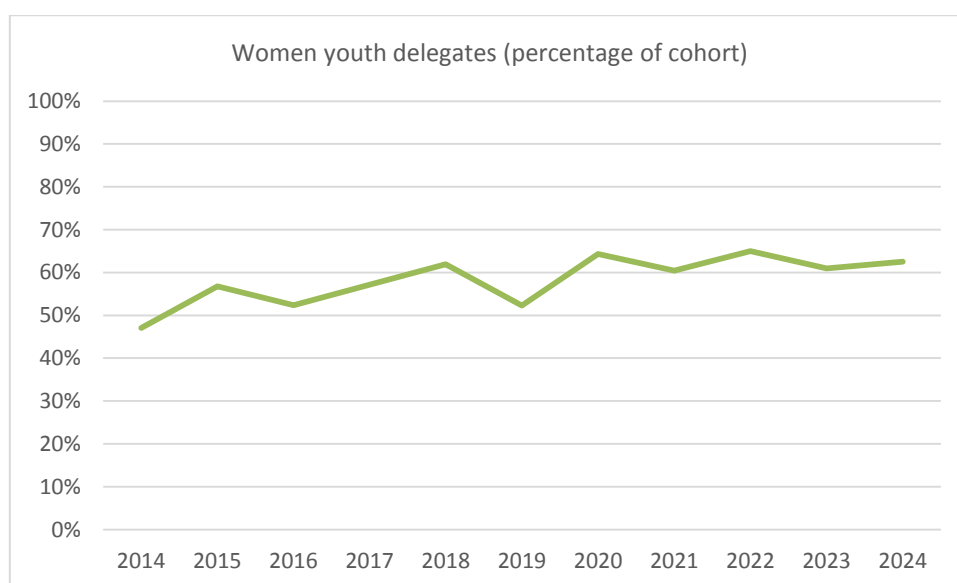
3. Facts and figures

13. Since 2014, 419 young people have served as Congress youth delegates, with an average of 40.7 youth delegates per year. (Note that in the context of the pandemic, during which the Congress was obliged to adopt online working methods, youth delegates from the 2020 cohort were exceptionally invited to participate again in 2021; 29 of them took up this offer.)

14. 23 member States (half of the member States of the Council of Europe) have had a youth delegate each year (11 youth delegates in total) and a further 11 States have had a youth delegate in 10 of the 11 cohorts to date. Of the remaining 12 member States, 4 (Azerbaijan, Czechia, Finland, Slovak Republic) have had 9 youth delegates, 1 State (Andorra) has had 8, 2 States (Denmark and Sweden) have had a youth delegate in 7 of the 11 cohorts, Malta has had 6, Luxembourg and San Marino 5, and Liechtenstein 1. Only Monaco has never had a youth delegate.³

15. As the above data show, it has proved more difficult to find youth delegates from the smaller member States. Perhaps more surprisingly, States where there is a strong tradition of promoting youth participation – such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden – are also amongst those in respect of which it has not been possible to appoint a youth delegate each year.

16. Of the total 419 youth delegates to date, there have been 242 women (57.8%) and 176 men (42%), with one youth delegate identifying as other (0.2%). The gender balance has varied considerably between intakes, with the highest proportion of women in 2022 (65%) and the lowest (47%) in 2014, the only year when women were in the minority. Every cohort of youth delegates has included a minimum of at least 35% of the underrepresented gender (men).



17. Youth delegates must be aged between 18 and 30 years. The median age at the closing date for applications of the youth delegates selected in the 2024 intake was 22 years, 6 months and 4 days. Thus, half of the youth delegates in this intake were younger than 22½ years old when selected. The eldest was aged 29 years and 10 months; the youngest turned 18 just after the March 2024 session.

18. For privacy reasons, no data is collected on the national, ethnic or religious background of youth delegates, making it difficult to assess the diversity of each cohort in these respects. To the extent that can be determined from the information provided by them, in 2024, four (9.8%) of the 41 youth delegates who

³ A youth delegate from the Russian Federation also participated in the work of Congress each year from 2014 to 2022.

participated in the programme belonged to an ethnic or religious minority in their country or had a migration background.

4. Aims and objectives of the youth delegates programme ten years on

19. By inviting young people from every member State to take part in its Rejuvenating Politics initiative, the Congress aims to give young people an opportunity to express their opinions directly to local and regional elected representatives, to ensure youth perspectives are heard, and to promote young people's ongoing participation in democratic processes both at international level and at home.

20. The specific objectives of the youth delegates programme, as described in each year's call for applications, are to:

- involve young people directly in all aspects of the Congress's work;
- bring youth perspectives to all thematic debates within the Congress;
- promote co-operation between members of the Congress and youth delegates;
- make young people aware of the Congress's work and the tools it has developed to support youth participation;
- discuss with young people and raise the awareness of Congress members regarding how local and regional youth participation can be boosted;
- motivate and empower youth delegates to multiply the information and experience acquired during the sessions on their return home, in particular through the development and implementation of their own projects at local and regional levels;
- share information about existing models of youth-led structures;
- inspire young people to spread the word about the Congress's work;
- show national delegations the importance of officially including more young people among their members.

5. Call for applications and selection procedure

5.1. Dissemination of the call for applications

21. The call for applications is published in November each year on the Congress website and relayed on its social media sites (Twitter/X, Facebook, LinkedIn), including the Facebook group of former youth delegates. A letter is sent to the head of each national delegation reminding them of the importance of the programme and inviting them to relay the call actively via the relevant associations and networks of local and regional authorities in their State. Starting with the call published for 2024 candidates in November 2023, a similar letter has also been sent to the permanent representatives of member States in Strasbourg, inviting them to relay the call in their member State via the government department or agency responsible for youth, with the aim of ensuring inter alia that national, regional and local youth councils that may exist in the State also receive and circulate the call. Likewise, partner organisations such as the Assembly of European Regions and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions are invited to disseminate the call. In addition, the Congress secretariat directly contacts key youth networks, notably the European Youth Forum (a network of youth associations in Council of Europe member States) and alumni youth delegates. In November 2024, as a first step towards promoting greater diversity amongst youth delegates, the call for 2025 candidates was also forwarded to Roma and LGBTI youth activist networks having member associations at grassroots level in a high number of Council of Europe member States.

22. Where very few or no applications have been received from a member State before the closing date, the permanent representation of the State is again contacted and invited to make additional efforts to promote the call. A short extension of the deadline in these cases, with the aim of ensuring that a youth delegate is appointed in respect of the greatest possible number of States each year.

23. It is impossible for the secretariat to measure the extent to which the call is circulated in practice and target audiences effectively reached in each of the 46 member States, but the number of applications received may provide some indication. The notable increase in candidacies for the 2024 cohort may for example have been thanks in part to the decision taken to circulate the call also via permanent representations.

24. Apart from the member States with the smallest populations, mentioned above, the number of applications received appears to bear little relation to the size of the population of each State or to whether or not the State is a member of the European Union. By way of example, for the 2024 cohort, with a record number of more than 430 applications received, there were 33 candidates from Georgia, a country with a total

population of roughly 3.7 million, and 24 from Armenia, with around 2.8 million inhabitants, but only 2 candidates from Belgium, with a population of approximately 11.7 million people. The highest numbers of candidacies were received from States facing very different political and geopolitical situations, namely Ukraine (40) and Italy (36). Only 9 candidacies were received from France and 14 from Germany, compared with 25 from Spain and 26 from Portugal.

25. There is no obvious single explanation for these variations; Bureau members may wish to reflect on additional steps that national delegations could be invited to take to broaden the dissemination of the call for applications in their country.

5.2. Selection of youth delegates

26. As part of their application, candidates are asked to reply to a series of questions relating to young people's democratic participation at local and regional level and to submit a short (no more than 30-second) video in answer to one further question. Applications are reviewed by a panel according to an agreed marking grid and the highest-ranked candidates from each country are selected.

27. In 2024, several theoretical questions were asked (focusing for example on why youth participation at local and regional levels is important), with the aim of assessing the applicants' analytical capacities as well as their interest in local and regional democracy. However, both the vocabulary used and the similarities that could be identified between the answers given to these questions tended to indicate that many candidates had relied on artificial intelligence-based tools (ChatGPT and similar) to assist them in preparing at least some parts of their application. While young people should not be criticised for using the tools available to them, this reality made the candidates' real motivations and the relative merits of their applications more difficult to assess.

28. To mitigate this dynamic in the 2025 call and (it is hoped) make it easier to identify candidates who are personally committed to promoting young people's democratic participation at local and regional level also in their home State, more practical questions (such as the key actions that the candidate would take if they were a youth councillor in their city or region, and why) have been asked this time.

6. Achievement of the aims of the youth delegates programme

6.1. Integration of youth perspectives and involvement of youth delegates

29. The aim of including youth delegates in the work of the Congress and hearing youth perspectives appears to be well achieved overall. Youth delegates are highly active during the sessions. During the 46th session, 37% of the Congress members present spoke during the plenary sittings, with half of them speaking more than once and some (notably rapporteurs) taking the floor in plenary 4, 5 or even 7 times. Not counting the presentations and replies of the rapporteurs, Congress members spoke for three-quarters of the time allocated for debates. Youth delegates spoke for the remaining one-quarter of this time. 26 different youth delegates out of 41 (63%) took the floor during the plenary sittings, of whom 7 spoke more than once.

30. At the 47th session in October 2024, a youth delegate was for the first time invited to chair a plenary debate, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Rejuvenating Politics initiative. This innovation was well received by both youth delegates and Congress members.

31. Youth delegates are similarly active in Chamber sessions and committee meetings, making the most of the opportunities available to them to take the floor and express their views as individuals (when they register on the list of speakers in Congress Connect) or on behalf of the group (when they are included among the invited speakers listed on the agenda).

32. In their own evaluations of the youth delegates programme, the 2024 cohort gave an overwhelmingly positive assessment of the integration of youth perspectives in Congress debates and of the opportunities given to them to take an active part in sessions and committee meetings, with almost all of them evaluating these aspects of the programme as excellent (74%) or very good (25%).

33. It should nonetheless be borne in mind that at the stage of plenary and Chamber debates, it is in general too late for youth delegates to influence the contents of texts that have been submitted for adoption. This makes it all the more important to ensure their effective participation in committees, where the elements they put forward can be taken on board in the drafting of reports.

34. When it comes to shaping the Congress agenda for future activities, youth delegates have the same rights as members to make proposals under Rule 27, but (like Congress members) they have not tended to make extensive use of these rights. In practice, proposals for future Congress activities tend to originate in the committees. Youth delegates have from time to time been at the origin of proposals submitted to the Bureau by committees for future work, most recently as regards the work of the Social Inclusion Committee on a forthcoming report on social housing, which was initiated following suggestions made by three youth delegates from the 2023 cohort.

35. As regards the involvement of youth delegates in the activities of their national delegation, the situation varies widely. All delegations are informed of the name and contact details of the youth delegate in respect of their country after they are selected. Some delegations invite the youth delegate to all their delegation meetings and activities; others make little or no contact with the youth delegate throughout the year, including during the sessions. These discrepancies were reflected in the 2024 youth delegates' evaluation of this aspect of the programme, with 74% of them giving it an excellent or very good rating, but 10% rating this part of their experience as only fair or poor.

36. Integration in the national delegation should form a key part of each youth delegate's experience. To ensure that this aspect of the programme works better in future, it may be helpful to share good practices.

37. Action proposed:

- ***The secretariat will pursue its efforts to collect good practices of national delegations in their relations with youth delegates and to disseminate them to all national delegations to take into account in their work with future cohorts.***

6.2. Youth delegates as multipliers

38. Youth delegates are also expected to serve as multipliers for the promotion of young people's democratic participation at local and regional level and to increase the visibility of the Congress itself.

39. The tools provided for achieving this aim are the development and implementation by youth delegates of their own grassroots projects between the March and October sessions and the possibility for them to use and share the information and experience gained during the sessions on their return home.

40. As noted in Resolution 502 (2024), the grassroots projects provide an opportunity for each youth delegate to design and implement a project aimed at promoting the participation of young people in public life in their community through awareness-raising, educational or other activities, and, through both successes achieved and challenges faced, to develop their skills as active citizens.

41. The debates held annually during the October session, during which the highlights of the year's grassroots projects are presented in plenary, illustrate the wide range of strategies adopted by youth delegates to promote young people's participation in public life at local level and continue to generate great interest among members.

42. According to their own assessments, youth delegates in the 2016-2023 contingents developed 274 projects in 343 municipalities in Council of Europe member States, reaching approximately 950 000 people either directly or indirectly.

43. Youth delegates in 2024 nonetheless expressed some frustration at the fact that the short time-frame available between the March and October sessions does not enable them to follow up on the projects or to assess their impact in the longer term in promoting young people's democratic participation at local and regional level. This aspect is examined further in the next section.

7. Other questions

7.1. Duration of the term of youth delegates

44. The record number of applications received in 2024 lengthened the time taken for the selection process, with the 2024 contingent of youth delegates being notified later than usual of the success of their applications. After their participation in their first session in March 2024, some youth delegates expressed the view that they had not been able to prepare sufficiently for the session.

45. Following this session, several youth delegates initiated a proposal to extend the mandate of youth delegates beyond the current duration of just under one year. They suggested that youth delegates' mandate could be lengthened to 18 months (three sessions) or even two years (four sessions), with youth delegates in their second year not participating in sessions but serving as mentors to the new intake while developing and running their grassroots project. The proposal also highlighted the opportunities that a longer mandate might offer for better preparing and evaluating their projects.

46. Feedback provided by the full cohort of youth delegates in the evaluation carried out after the 47th session in October 2024 showed that, as has been the case with all previous cohorts, the steep learning curve experienced during their first session had flattened. Youth delegates found their second session easier to follow and felt comfortable in their role. None expressed the view that they would have gained more from the experience by participating in additional sessions, but some expressed the wish that they might have had more time for their projects.

47. It should be borne in mind that the success of the youth delegates programme depends to a large extent on the amount of support provided to youth delegates for the entire duration of their mandate. They are accompanied throughout their term by two trainers, who prepare them for their participation in sessions, mentor them in the development and implementation of their projects and manage the selection process for their participation in other events. Managing the financial and logistical aspects of the programme and the more than 40 youth delegates involved in it each year also requires the full-time work of one staff member in the Table Office and accounts for at least 20% of the workload of the head of Table Office (considerably more at certain periods of the year).

48. In addition, a small number of youth delegates drop out of the programme each year, mostly to take up new educational or professional activities. This number could be expected to increase if the length of youth delegates' mandate were extended.

49. Lengthening the term of office of youth delegates would require a strategic choice to be made. New intakes could be delayed in order to keep the number of youth delegates constant; however, this would automatically reduce the number of persons who could benefit from the programme, running counter to the aim of promoting young people's participation in democratic processes. Engaging new youth delegates at the beginning of each year while allowing the previous cohort to continue for a further period would on the other hand require considerable additional resources, which might better be used to support other Congress objectives.

50. This view is shared by the trainers and the president of the European Youth Forum.

51. For the above reasons, it is not proposed to extend the mandate of youth delegates in future. However, a number of actions have been identified that could be taken to improve the operation of the programme in future.

52. Actions proposed or already taken:

- *To ensure that the selection procedure can be carried out in good time and that successful candidates and their national delegations can be notified further in advance of their first session, the closing date for applications for the 2025 cohort has been set earlier (31 December 2024).*
- *An additional preparation meeting may be organised with the trainers in advance of the March session to enable youth delegates to start designing their grassroots projects earlier in the year.*
- *The secretariat will revise the letter of credentials provided to youth delegates to assist them in their contacts with local and regional authorities as they prepare their grassroots projects and will also examine whether additional resources could be made available to support these projects.*
- *The Bureau could reflect on further steps that could be taken to enable the impact of the youth delegates' projects to be more thoroughly evaluated in future.*

7.2. Guidelines for youth delegates and national delegations

53. During the 47th session, a Bureau member witnessed a Congress member pressuring a youth delegate from their country not to express certain views in the plenary sitting – behaviour that is not in conformity with the Code of conduct of Congress members. Alerted to this situation, the Secretary General of the Congress was able to meet with the youth delegate and, separately, with the head of delegation concerned.

54. Although it was possible to address this case immediately and in a satisfactory manner, it also brought to light the fact that similar situations had arisen in the past without the Congress management being informed. This highlighted the need both to provide clearer information to youth delegates about the lines of action open to them should they be confronted with unacceptable behaviour from any quarters and to examine whether the Code of conduct of Congress members is still fit for purpose. This second aspect will form the subject of a separate discussion in the Bureau.

55. Action proposed:

- ***The secretariat will revise and clarify the guidelines provided to future youth delegates.***

7.3. Request from the Moroccan (Partner for Local Democracy) delegation to include a Moroccan youth delegate in future cohorts

56. Morocco is one of two countries that have Partner for Local Democracy status with the Congress under Rule 73 of the Congress Rules and Procedures. This status is reserved to non-member States of the Council of Europe in neighbouring States (defined as the southern coast of the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia).

57. Partners for Local Democracy appoint a delegation to the Congress consisting of representatives and substitutes holding a local or regional electoral mandate in their country in accordance with Article 5 of the Congress Charter.

58. The members of this delegation may sit in all sessions of the Congress, its chambers and committees but do not have the right to vote. They may speak subject to the consent of the president of the Congress or the relevant chamber or of the committee chair. Their travel and subsistence expenses are not charged to the ordinary budget of the Congress.

59. Following the 47th session of the Congress in October 2024, the Moroccan delegation requested that a youth delegate from Morocco be able to participate in future cohorts.

60. Such an appointment, if made, would have to follow the same conditions as for members of the Partner for Local Democracy delegation. In particular, the youth delegate's right to speak would be subject to the consent of the President and their travel and subsistence expenses could not be covered by the ordinary budget of the Congress.

61. Action proposed:

- ***The Bureau to decide whether to allow the appointment of a youth delegate from a State having Partner for Local Democracy status with the Congress, subject to the conditions mentioned above.***