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23rd IOPD Conference**Valongo, Portugal – 17-19 October 2024****Speaking notes for Konstantinos Koukas****Congress Thematic Spokesperson on the European Local Democracy Week***(Approximately 1070 words – 10 mn)*

First of all, I want to express my gratitude to the Mayor of Valongo Mr Jose Manuel Ribeiro and the team of the Conference for inviting me to the 23rd Conference of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy. As a municipal councillor and former mayor of Mykonos in Greece and as a spokesperson for the European Local Democracy Week, it is of special importance for me to be part of this event.

Why is participatory democracy so crucially important in current times? I believe we can all agree that the rise of populist movements faced by our societies poses a real threat to the very foundation of democracy. These movements thrive on the growing belief that traditional democratic mechanisms such as elections, political parties, and representative institutions, are failing to address citizens' needs. Worse, they claim the whole system is rigged against ordinary citizens, corrupted from the inside out. Populism also creates divisions within society by pushing exclusionary narratives that blame and exclude minorities. It erodes our sense of belonging by turning people against one another. By trampling on key democratic values and the principle of inclusivity, populist leaders fuel a dangerous level of distrust in our institutions and communities. Once that distrust takes root, populist leaders step forward, claiming to be the only champions of the "common citizens" and offering easy answers to complex issues. It is a dangerous path. We must stay vigilant, but more importantly, we must take action.

So, how can we strengthen our democracies to stand up to the dangers of populism? There are many answers to this question, but one is essential. It lies in building participatory communities, where citizens are not just spectators, but active participants in the democratic processes. Participatory democracy goes beyond just casting a vote: it creates a continuous and interactive dynamic where citizens have a direct voice in the decisions that affect their lives. It does not just encourage participation but institutionalises it. If participation is a permanent part of governance, we can ensure that citizens' voices are heard, and their input is valued.

Thus, participatory democracy is a powerful antidote to populism. It gives citizens a sense of ownership in the political process, addressing the frustrations that populist leaders exploit. When people are actively involved in shaping public policies, they are less likely to feel disconnected or disenfranchised, and more likely to trust democratic institutions. Participatory communities also foster pluralism by creating spaces for dialogue between different groups and ensuring diverse voices are included in the policymaking process. This is where the link between participatory democracy and democratic resilience becomes clear. By institutionalising mechanisms of participation, we do not only empower citizens but also build a more robust, pluralistic democracy that is better equipped to withstand the threats posed by disinformation, fake news, distrust and populist trends.

When we discuss participatory democracy, we are talking about many practical ways to get citizens more actively involved in decision-making. These can include initiatives such as:

- *Participatory budgeting*, where community members help determine how public funds are allocated.
- *Citizens' assemblies*, which give people a space to express their concerns, deliberate on solutions, and make recommendations.
- *Digital e-democracy platforms*, that make participation accessible to everyone through their electronic devices.
- *Collaborative workshops*, where residents work alongside policymakers to co-create solutions for specific challenges.
- *Youth councils*, which amplify young voices in the governance process.

Only to mention some of them

One initiative that I am especially familiar with - and one that encompasses all these practical implementations of participatory democracy- is the European Local Democracy Week. Organised by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the European Local Democracy Week plays a vital role in promoting events organised by cities and regions with their citizens. It encourages local authorities to implement participatory mechanisms which give citizens the chance to engage with their local governments.

Events and activities can take place throughout the year, with a flagship event during the week of October 15th. Every year, the Congress awards the title of "Partner of the European Local Democracy Week" to recognise local authorities and associations which have organised the most effective activities to sustain local democracy and citizen participation throughout the year.

The city of Valongo has been for many years an active and innovative partner of the European Week. Its engagement has been acknowledged through the awarding of several titles as a "Partner of the European Local Democracy Week." Every year, the municipality organises a wide range of

activities. Beyond that, in 2024, Valongo has set up children's councils, offered learning opportunities on local citizenship through courses and exhibitions, organised a community clean-up along the river, and held public sessions to present the Municipal Youth Plan. These are just a few examples of the impactful actions that have been implemented here. I would like to express my gratitude to Valongo and its Mayor for their active involvement in the European Week of Local Democracy.

This conference offers a great opportunity for anyone to learn more about others' experiences and best practices. And this is exactly also the purpose of the ELDW: to serve as platform for sharing best practices, to learn from each other's successes and challenges, to help taking creative initiatives as well as to give visibility to cities and regions' initiatives aimed at promoting the participation of their citizens.

Coming back to the central theme of this conference - how can participatory democracy help us counter populist threats and build democratic resilience -, let me highlight that populism thrives on division, exclusion, and a growing distrust in our democratic institutions, when participatory democracy, by contrast, offers a path toward inclusive governance.

By building participatory communities at the local level, we can create a more resilient democracy. After all, it is at the local level where citizens feel the most direct effects of political decisions. Fostering a culture of participation lays a strong foundation for democratic resilience that can extend to national and international levels. Together, we can build a democracy that can withstand the challenges of populism and upholding pluralism and inclusion. We can demonstrate that democracy is not just a system of government but a set of values that must be actively defended and promoted.

I encourage each of you to take the lessons learned from this conference back to your communities and continue the essential work of building democratic resilience through participation. Let's ensure that democracy remains a system of government that prioritises the interests of citizens, safeguards their rights, and creates a future where every voice is heard.

I thank you for your attention.