

## Notes for the GT-SOM meeting

24 February 2023

### Introduction

Good afternoon,

My name is Alice Bergholtz, I am the vice-chairperson of the Advisory Council on Youth. I was supposed to join you today with my colleague Pia Slogar, but unfortunately, she is unable to attend due to unforeseen health concerns.

Why am I here? Other than representing part of the co-management structure of the youth sector. Why am I here? Let me introduce myself a bit more extensively.

I grew up in the scouts. First by force, from my loving mother who enjoyed her time in the scouts so much she wanted her kids to get the same experience. This turned out to be a great gift, disguised in a lot of cold nights in tents, blistered feet, and many mosquito bites.

Soon enough I realized the scouts taught me what it means to be an active citizen no matter your age, that leadership can be valued-based, and that self-confidence can grow by seeking adventures and challenging yourself.

Soon I got to meet other people in the youth movement – many young people but also supporting adults. I learned about equal rights, about the procedures of democratic decision-making, the passionate interest of young people to take part in shaping how our societies are structured, and I learned about the obstacles that exist – obstacles that make participation much more limited for some people than others.

I found myself seeking spaces where young people are in direct contact with decision-makers. Where those who *don't* have a vote yet, try to convince those who *do* - to listen. I have lost count of the number of spaces I have involved myself in to do my best to represent the joint voice of young people: the local municipality, the school board, the EU, the UN. But you know what? After over 15 years, I can tell you almost no one really listens.

Even though I had been involved in the youth movement on a European level for many years, I knew almost nothing of the Council of Europe. I was told I might like it and decided to run for elections to the Advisory Council on Youth through the European Youth Forum. Right at the beginning of the pandemic, I started my role as a member of the Advisory Council.

In the co-management, I spoke passionately about the importance of meaningful youth participation, of modern democracy and of the consistent threat of the shrinking space for youth civil society – and I insisted the Council of Europe should launch a campaign to revitalize democracy in Europe. Can you imagine my shock when it actually happened?

The co-management system is often mentioned to be a ground-breaking practice of meaningful youth participation: and it truly is. Established in 1972, its track record has shown it to be sustainable, reality-based, and qualitative. I am one in a long line of young people who dedicate our volunteer time to this structure – something we would not do if we didn't believe in its effects, trust me.

I am here – maybe as a living example of successful citizen participation, and why youth participation is particularly important – but I am also here as an expert in the field. I – as well as the rest of the Advisory Council members - have gathered extensive experience in the field of youth. And many of us have chosen to work professionally for what we believe in.

The Advisory Council submitted a response to the open consultation, and it has been distributed in advance of this meeting. Did you read it? I can quiz you!  
Or maybe, just as well run through the main points once more.

### Staying relevant: co-management

The Democracy Here | Democracy Now campaign was launched right after Russia started the war against Ukraine. The Deputy Secretary General spoke at the launch, underlining the increased relevance of such an initiative – initiatives that come from the youth sector of the institution. Mr Berge phrased it in a great way, saying “we need to co-pilot our future” together with young people. I mention this because it

captures the uniqueness of the Council of Europe's approach in the youth field. Young people are not here as beneficiaries but as partners.

We have a saying in the youth sector: youthless policy is useless policy. This has to do with presence. For that, the Advisory Council on Youth plays a particular role in the Council of Europe structure. But I have to tell you, 30 young people in this institution are not enough. Remember that we are volunteers, and we want to stay that way.

Also looking at other sectors of the Council of Europe, young people are consistently underrepresented. For example, in the introductory memorandum of the Parliament Assembly's report on the potential establishment of a youth partner status, the rapporteur states that only 2,6 percent of the PACE's members are under 30 years old – of which most are substitutes I might add!

We are proposing that the Council of Europe takes its next big step for inclusive decision-making by introducing the co-management system into more sectors of the institution. Each relevant committee should consist of a civil society body composed of experts in the relevant field, who are given an equal mandate as the member states' representatives. We are arguing for increased civil society participation in general, where the main goal is to reach a more fair and inclusive process for discussions and decision-making. Automatically, this would result in an increase in young representatives in the institution, and it will be a concrete and effective method to live up to the core values of the Organization in a modern adaptation.

We also suggest to re-examine how young people can be further supported all over Europe, especially regarding social inclusion, participation in society, and independence. A convention on youth has previously been discussed, but it was judged that the Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter addressed the concerns, and that further efforts should be made to assist young people in accessing those rights. The Advisory Council notes that many barriers still exist for young people to transition into adulthood, and actively participate in social life. As a result, many of the recommendations developed by the Joint Council on Youth cover topics such as citizenship, participation, youth work, education, and access to rights. These showcase the continuous challenges many young people face before becoming fully and freely engaged in society. We therefore ask to launch a new feasibility study for a potential convention on youth.

## **Investing**

Commenting on the resources available: We have long heard that the Council of Europe's budget is small compared to that of the EU. In some sense it's not that relevant – they are two very different institutions and cover separate geographical areas and thematics. When we looked at the official figures, however, we were still shocked. The EU states its budget for 2022 was 170 billion euros. The Council of Europe budget was 479 million euros. That means, the Council of Europe's budget represents just 0,3 percent of the EU budget. 0,3 percent! And I even rounded up the number. Is that how little democracy, human rights and the rule of law are worth?

This institution will not function without resources. When we are speaking of increased visibility, of modernization, and being relevant and accessible for the citizens of Europe, that will not happen without the funds.

We know that the Council of Europe's work is crucial for safeguarding rights, responsibilities, and freedoms in Europe. Looking at the current threats to the core values of the institution, especially speaking from a youth perspective, we need this institution to run efficiently, strongly, and accessibly – more now than ever before.

The ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is devastating for the citizens affected. Young people are not only being robbed of their youth, but many of their lives. Speaking today, on the one-year mark of the start of this destructive war – we know that its effects will continue making their mark for much longer. We also know that the Council of Europe was able to directly respond with efforts for resilience, adapting the ways of working to suit a war context, and showcase peace-driven leadership in a discourse weighted down by a focus on military means.

The response to war is more peace. The Council of Europe needs to clearly claim the role of leading peacebuilding in Europe, and give strong support for the young people living through the reality of war. With what is achieved in the current context, imagine the effects increased investments could have.

So, for this summit, we ask the leaders of Europe: How much are democracy, human rights and the rule of law really worth?

## **Modernization**

Regarding modernization, we know that there is a lot of interest in evolving the Organization's ways of working, to make it fit its purpose, and to better respond to the challenges of today and the future. On this we say: finally!

The Council of Europe needs a boost in its outreach, because: How will the citizens of Europe know about their rights - as protected by the Council of Europe - if they do not know the Organisation exists? The society we live in is deeply interwoven with media use, and the media climate changes rapidly. This is not something that can be ignored. This is a resource! We see the efforts that have been made, hurried along by the limitations brought by the pandemic, to work increasingly with digital media to reach new audiences. This development needs to continue, pushing the institution yet further.

There are great conditions to stay on the front line by developing the work of the Organisation. Expertise from fields like Artificial Intelligence, Youth and Media already exists right here: use it!

And speaking about expertise in different fields, like the youth field, the Council of Europe is the clear frontrunner. Perspectives like gender, minorities, children, and many others are setting standards right here in these buildings. But we have noticed that many of us work in silos, and when we branch out too wide, our resources are stretched thin. The Advisory Council believes the institution would benefit by adopting an intersectional approach - which means to allow these perspectives to meet, exchange and work in cohesion. Creating these types of synergies, or mainstreaming, cannot equalize watering down the capacity of each field of expertise. The Council of Europe should encourage exchange, while simultaneously acknowledging and protecting unique competences. This will ensure the protection of the ground-breaking nature of the work of the institution, while safeguarding the value of the knowledge acquired together and will allow us to face current and future challenges with joint responses.

To summarize:

- Invest more in this organisation
- Allow more citizens to participate in the decision-making structures
- Take ownership: as the central institution for peacebuilding in Europe
- Prioritise accessible, modern, and citizen-friendly outreach
- Strengthen the support for young people who protect the core values of democracy, human right and the rule of law

## **Summit**

Finally, I take this opportunity to comment shortly on the summit itself. I want to reiterate the Advisory Council's sincere appreciation to the presidency of Iceland for stating from the very start, the importance of including a youth perspective in this summit.

This summit needs to stem from seeing to the needs of future generations. What type of Europe do we want to leave after us?

I have spoken of the continuous underrepresentation of young voices in this institution, the importance of investing in the core values, and given personal testimony of the experience of being lucky enough to be part of a strong European youth family from an early age.

For the summit itself, my final request is for the Council of Europe to show it takes youth participation seriously – at every level. As your Advisory Council on Youth, we ask to be allowed to participate in the summit as observers. This means to single out young people as a prioritized group and commit to the ongoing statements of young people's role in the future of the Council of Europe. Don't talk about us without us.

I end by repeating my first question, but I ask it now to you: why am I here? What does my participation here today represent? What potential effects can it have on the future of this institution?

Thank you for this invitation and for listening to my remarks, I look forward to the discussion.