

Voting at 16: Is it No Longer a Choice, but a Right?

Side Event organised by
KNŽ (National Youth Council of Malta)

10 October 2025 | Auberge d'Aragon, Valletta
10:30 – 12:30



Presidency of Malta
Council of Europe
May - November 2025
Présidence de Malte
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai - Novembre 2025



Voting at 16: Is it No Longer a Choice, but a Right?

Background

Lowering the voting age to 16 has become one of the most discussed reforms in democratic participation across Europe. While some countries, including Malta and Austria, have already granted the right to vote at 16 across elections, others are beginning this journey. Belgium, for example, started this process in 2022 by granting 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in the European Parliament elections, marking an important step towards expanding youth enfranchisement.

For young people, the right to vote is more than a technical change: it is about recognition, trust, and inclusion in democratic life. With an ageing population and declining levels of political participation, lowering the voting age is increasingly seen not as a matter of choice, but as a matter of rights and necessity.

In Malta, where the voting age was lowered to 16 for general, European, and local elections, this reform has offered valuable lessons in how to engage young citizens effectively. This side event provides an opportunity to examine these lessons in dialogue with youth leaders and international guests.

Objectives

- Explore the democratic, social, and political implications of lowering the voting age to 16.
- Share experiences and insights from Malta, Austria, Belgium, and other European contexts.
- Engage youth participants directly in the debate on voting rights and responsibilities.
- Provide concrete messages and recommendations for policymakers at national and European levels.

Expected Outcomes

- Greater awareness of the rationale and impact of lowering the voting age to 16.
- Comparative insights on implementation, challenges, and successes from different countries.
- Youth-informed messages on the future of voting rights and democratic engagement.
- A call to action for policymakers to consider lowering the voting age as a democratic right rather than a political option.

Target Audience

- Ministers and delegates attending the 10th Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth.
- Maltese youth leaders and members of KNŽ.
- Young people, students, and first-time voters.
- Researchers, educators, and civil society actors interested in democratic participation.

Venue: Auberge d'Aragon, Valletta

Date: Friday, 10 October 2025

Time: 10:30 – 12:30



Presidency of Malta
Council of Europe
May - November 2025

Présidence de Malte
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai - Novembre 2025

PROGRAMME

10:30 – 10:40 Opening Remarks

- Welcome by KNŻ (National Youth Council of Malta)
- Why voting matters: Reflections from youth leaders

10:40 – 10:50 Background Briefing

- Overview of the voting age in Malta and Austria
- Insights from Belgium's process of lowering the voting age for the European Parliament elections and obligatory voting.

10:50 – 11:20 Panel Discussion

- Interactive exchange with speakers and international guests
- Comparative approaches: Experiences and lessons learned

11:20 – 11:40 Audience Q&A

- Open floor for questions, with priority for youth attendees
- Opportunities for country interventions

11:40 – 12:00 Breakout Groups

Guiding questions for discussion:

1. How does lowering the voting age strengthen democracy and youth participation?
2. What challenges remain in ensuring young people are fully prepared and supported as voters at 16?
3. What can policymakers and youth organisations do together to make "voting at 16" a lived right across Europe?

12:00 – 12:20 Closing Remarks

- Key messages and call to action

12:20 – 12:30 Informal Wrap-up

- Short reflections from participants
- Lead into the reception and lunch

12:30 Lunch





Presidency of Malta
Council of Europe
May - November 2025

Présidence de Malte
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai - Novembre 2025