

Motion

# No More Empty Seats - Youth Claiming Their Place in Democracy Through Local and Regional Youth Councils

Signed by: Finnish National Youth Council and Youth Sector (FYCS)

Co-signed by: Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA), Estonian National Youth Council (ENL), National Youth Council of Latvia (LJP), National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCUkraine), Swiss National Youth Council (SAJV/CSAJ)

## Introduction

Young people are not only the leaders of the future, but also active participants in society today. Their perspectives and engagement play a crucial role in ensuring democratic, resilient and inclusive societies. Without young people's involvement, decision-makers fail to make decisions that reflect the needs and priorities of the next generations. Research consistently shows that youth participation strengthens democratic legitimacy, trust in institutions and long-term civic engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the role of the local youth councils have been significant in fostering inclusion, advocating for civic engagement and influencing politics at many levels, including grassroots, municipal, national and international levels. They are platforms in which youth have a chance to express their opinions, propose solutions and impact decision-making processes, ensuring that the policies have taken into account the views of young people. Importantly, they also offer opportunities to participate for those who do not yet have the right to vote, ensuring broader democratic inclusion.

In youth councils, young people gain a wide range of valuable skills including courage, leadership and understanding the structures and processes of politics. As a result of taking part in meetings of committees and working groups, they develop their negotiation skills and ability to make compromises in politics. Participating in these political processes not only supports young people's competencies and sense of belonging, but also enriches decision-making by bringing new perspectives into political discussions.

Youth councils also act as a bridge between young people and decision-makers by fostering dialogue and strengthening mutual understanding. Young people help decision-makers to identify the dimensions of societal, environmental and local issues. When youth councils are properly supported, they increase trust in institutions and

enhance civic engagement. Experiences from countries such as Finland demonstrate that when youth councils are formally recognised in legislation and embedded in governance structures, they can become an effective and stable part of democratic systems.<sup>2</sup>

1. OECD, 'Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit for All Generations?', 22 October 2020, [www.oecd.org/en/publications/governance-for-youth-trust-and-intergenerational-justice\\_c3e5cb8a-en.html#executive-summary](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/governance-for-youth-trust-and-intergenerational-justice_c3e5cb8a-en.html#executive-summary)

2. Suomen Nuorisovaltuustojen Liitto ry., 'Nuorisovaltuustoselvitys 2023', 2024, [nuva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Nuorisovaltuustoselvitys-2023.pdf](https://nuva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Nuorisovaltuustoselvitys-2023.pdf); Suomen Nuorisovaltuustojen Liitto ry., 'Nuorisovaltuustoselvitys 2022', 2022, [nuva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Nuorisovaltuustoselvitys-2022.pdf](https://nuva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Nuorisovaltuustoselvitys-2022.pdf)

## Our Vision for Meaningful Youth Participation

We envision a Europe where young people are recognised as political actors in their own right and have real, institutionalised opportunities to influence the decisions that shape their lives at the local and regional level. Young people are not only the future, but active contributors and decision-makers today. Without their perspectives, experiences, and engagement, democratic systems cannot fully represent the societies they serve or sustain their legitimacy over time. Ensuring meaningful youth participation is therefore not symbolic, but essential to the inclusiveness, credibility, and long-term resilience of democracy.

Too often, youth participation remains consultative, ad hoc, or symbolic, with young people being heard but not genuinely involved in shaping outcomes. This creates processes where decisions are made about young people without meaningfully including them, ultimately weakening both the quality and legitimacy of governance. This is particularly evident in decision-making processes involving youth councils. Too often, these structures remain confined to a consultative role, with limited influence on final decisions, thereby reducing youth participation to a largely symbolic exercise.

This calls into question the recognition of young people as political actors in their own right. While youth councils are expected to represent the perspectives of young people and contribute to public debate, their contributions are not systematically taken into account, nor are they consistently informed of how their input has been used or why it may have been disregarded. The absence of clear feedback and accountability mechanisms undermines the credibility of participatory processes, weakens trust in institutions, and risks discouraging sustained civic engagement among young people.

To move beyond symbolic participation, local and regional youth councils must be established as legally recognised and institutionally anchored bodies within governance structures. Participation

cannot depend on political goodwill alone: without legal frameworks, youth councils remain vulnerable to shifting priorities, inconsistent support and limited influence. The revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life clearly underlines that young people must have the right, means, space, structures and support to participate in and influence decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, meaningful participation requires adequate and sustainable resources. Across Europe, many youth councils operate with limited or unstable funding, lack administrative support, and rely heavily on voluntary engagement. This not only limits their impact but also risks overburdening young people and excluding those who cannot afford to participate without support. Ensuring stable financial and administrative resources is therefore essential to guarantee continuity, inclusiveness, and the capacity to engage effectively in policy-making processes.

Participation must also take place where decisions are actually made. Youth councils should have structured and guaranteed access to key political arenas, including municipal and regional councils, executive boards, and committees. Their role should go beyond consultation, enabling them to contribute to policy-making by submitting proposals, expressing positions, and having their input systematically considered within decision-making procedures.

Strengthening local and regional youth councils as legally mandated, well-resourced, and structurally integrated bodies is not only a matter of inclusion, but a democratic necessity. When young people are given meaningful opportunities to participate, levels of trust in institutions, political efficacy, and long-term civic engagement increase. This is the foundation for more representative, inclusive and resilient democracies across Europe.

3. Council of Europe, 2026, 'Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)3n of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life,' [search.coe.int/cm?i=09125948802ae9e6](https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09125948802ae9e6)

## Calls to Action

### The European Youth Forum:

- Urges that local and regional youth councils are mandated by legislation, while ensuring that young people are structurally included in shaping legal and constitutional frameworks for them, with their voices meaningfully taken into account.
- Demands guaranteed and stable funding, as well as adequate administrative support, to ensure the sustainable functioning of local and regional youth councils and to enable broad and inclusive youth engagement.
- Insists on safeguarding the independence and youth-led nature of local and regional youth councils. They must be composed, elected, and led by young people themselves, in order to guarantee genuine youth representation and influence.
- Calls for local and regional youth councils to hold an official mandate to participate in decision-making processes, including, but not limited to, access to municipal and regional councils, participation in committees, and a direct right of initiative.
- Calls for public authorities to establish clear and transparent feedback mechanisms, including providing formal and reasoned responses when recommendations and contributions from youth councils are not followed.
- Emphasises the importance of aligning youth participation structures with the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, ensuring that young people have the rights, means, space, structures, and support to participate effectively in public life.
- Advocates for strengthened cooperation and exchange of best practices between youth councils at local, regional, national, and international levels.



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