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Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Establishment of a “youth partner” status with the Parliamentary Assembly

Rapporteur: Mr Anastasios CHATZIVASILEIOU, Greece, Group of the European's People Party

Introductory memorandum

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1. Introduction

1. In the last decade, the importance of youth participation in all decision-making processes has been increasingly recognised. Within this wide context, youth participation in political processes, in particular parliamentary processes, has come to the forefront of discussions, highlighting a “disturbing dichotomy” between the potential, motivation, and interests of youth to contribute to politics, and the actual opportunities to do so.²

2. Today, it is widely acknowledged that young people make an essential contribution to the development and realisation of democracy and human rights, and to the functioning of democratic institutions, and that the sustainability of any democratic society relies on, *inter alia*, the creativity, dynamism, social commitment and competences of its young people.³ Young people voices must be heard. The growing disenchantment with traditional politics and political parties among the youth and its dwindling interest in formal political activity, including voting and party membership, are a real threat to the future of democracy.⁴ Therefore, actively engaging youth in political platforms and decision-making is also key to counter the dangers involved with youth alienation.

3. On 17 March 2022, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes. It called on member States to engage in open and structured dialogue with young people and youth civil society and to create the requisite conditions for the widest possible political participation by young people, as well as to promote and, as appropriate, introduce youth dialogue and/or co-management models into local, regional and national political frameworks.⁵

2. Background, procedure and approach

4. The Parliamentary Assembly, in its Resolution 2378 (2021) “Strengthening the role of young people in the prevention and resolution of conflicts”, noted that “the new era of youth participation requires mechanisms to ensure their continuous and meaningful involvement in making decisions, shaping policies, adopting strategies and implementing actions”. It resolved “to continue its reflection on promoting meaningful and structured ways of involving youth participants in its activities, most importantly by increasing dialogue and co-operation between the Assembly and the different youth forums that already exist within the Council of Europe”.

5. As a follow-up to Resolution 2378 (2021), the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media tabled a motion for a resolution stressing the stark under-representation of youth in all institutional political processes and policymaking, including in parliaments. The motion advocates more structured avenues of involving organised youth in a meaningful way in the Assembly’s activities. To this end, it proposes the setting up of a political partnership with organisations belonging to the Council of Europe Advisory Council of Youth (CCJ).⁶

6. The Bureau referred this motion to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy for report, and to the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media for opinion. On 28 September 2021, I was appointed Rapporteur.⁷

7. On 6 December 2021, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held a first exchange on this issue. Some members welcomed the efforts to revitalise the Assembly through participatory approaches, while others noted that the modalities of youth participation in the Assembly’s work should be carefully considered. Some members also stressed that establishing a youth partnership status along the lines of the existing partnership for democracy status - as suggested in the original motion - could set a dangerous precedent whereby other groups could expect a similar status.

8. On 1 July 2022, I attended as a speaker an informal exchange of views on “The participation of organisations representing youth, in particular the CCJ, in the development of soft law in the Council of Europe” held by the Committee of Ministers’ Rapporteur Group on Legal Co-operation (GR-J). One of the conclusions was that the participation of young people in policy-making processes can bring new ideas,

² The Annual [Report](#) of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Special Representative on Youth Engagement, July 2022.

³ See Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2022\)6](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes. See also [Report](#) of the High-Level Reflection Group of the Council of Europe.

⁴ See [Resolution](#) on “Youth participation in the democratic process” adopted in April 2010, where the Inter-parliamentary Union had called for greater inclusion of young people in political decision-making.

⁵ See footnote 2.

⁶ See Doc. [15262](#).

⁷ Ms Inka Hopsu (Finland, SOC) was appointed rapporteur for opinion.

perspectives and creativity to the resulting texts and contribute to making these policies more relevant, inclusive and sustainable. Young people - in addition to their participation in democratic processes - should be invited to contribute to the design and, later, the implementation of sectoral policies. One of the recommendations was to invite the steering committees and subordinate bodies of the intergovernmental structure to systematically assess opportunities for engaging the CCJ and the youth members of the Conference of INGOs in their processes of drafting policy instruments and legal standards and monitoring their implementation.⁸

9. On 10 October 2022, I had an online exchange of views with the members of the CCJ, who were very enthusiastic about any format that would allow a systematic involvement of youth in the Assembly's activities. They stressed that young people were ready to share their vision on all political issues, and not just youth-related issues.

10. For the reasons presented in the introduction and below, this memorandum is based on the premise that parliaments, and interparliamentary institutions, like the Assembly, have a responsibility to meaningfully involve youth in their work. Before making initial proposals to this end, it is worth presenting an overview of the situation of youth participation in parliamentary work.

3. Youth participation in parliaments: overview of the situation

3.1. Definitions

11. There are variations on the way the term "youth" is defined in different instruments. For example, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace, and Security defines "youth" as people aged 18-29 whereas pursuant to the Statutes of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), a young parliamentarian is one who is under the age of 45. At this stage, I will follow the definition used by the Council of Europe and the European Commission for the purposes of their youth policies, which define young people as aged between 18 and 30.⁹

12. For the purposes of this memorandum, the term "youth participation" should be understood as covering both "youth representation", which refers specifically to membership of young people as parliamentarians, and youth participation in general, which refers more broadly to the opportunities for young people (parliamentarians and otherwise) to engage in parliamentary work.

3.2. Underrepresentation of youth in parliaments

13. According to data collected by the IPU, while 49% of the global population is under 30, a mere 2.6% of the world's members of parliaments (MPs) belong to that age group. In the IPU's Europe region - which covers all Council of Europe member States, as well as Belarus and the Russian Federation - this percentage is 4.9% (for lower and unicameral chambers). Around 25% of the world's single and lower houses of parliament have no MPs aged under 30. This figure rises to 73% for the world's upper houses of parliament. Amongst the Council of Europe member States, Armenia, Norway, and San Marino have the highest under-30 representation, in terms of their lower and unicameral chambers, with over 10% of MPs aged under 30. For upper chambers, Belgium is in the lead with 10%.¹⁰

14. At the international level, the Parliamentary Assembly itself includes only 16 members aged under 30 (5 representatives and 11 substitutes) in its current composition (2.6%). This figure rises to 66 members, if the age-threshold is set at 35 and below (10.9%), which, although still low, is a more substantial figure. In the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for example, only 21 out of 323 parliamentarians are below the age of 35 (6.5%).¹¹

15. The fact that young people – who are a significant proportion of the population - are hardly represented in national parliaments and international assemblies raises questions about the representativeness of our democracies, as well as intergenerational justice. Yet, experience shows that meaningful participation of youth is not only fair with regards to young people: it is also beneficial for our societies in total.¹² Young people have a huge potential, as well as motivation and interest to contribute to

⁸ <https://rm.coe.int/conclusions-informal-exchange-gr-j-1-july-2022-2753-8478-2598-1-2778-6/1680a71b45>.

⁹ See, [glossary](#) on youth.

¹⁰ [Youth participation in national parliaments](#), IPU, April 2021. The data is current as of 14 September 2020.

¹¹ See footnote 1.

¹² Ibid.

politics. They hold the ideas, the understanding of the complexity of the digitised world, and the energy and the interests necessary for powerful participation and truthful change.¹³

16. There are several reasons for the stark underrepresentation of young people in parliaments, and politics in general. These include legislative barriers, prejudices, a lack of political will or opportunities, and the low rates of engagement by young people themselves due to a lack of trust in the political system and political institutions (the latter is less of an issue in Europe where the more established democracies tend to have higher rates of youth engagement). For example, in most countries, the minimum age for eligibility to run for parliamentary office is set higher than the age to vote. The world average eligibility age is 22.2 years, namely 4-6 years after obtaining the voting right for the lower house, and 27.9 years for the upper house. Moreover, politics are traditionally seen as the domain of older (and often male) citizens. Voters and party members associate youth with a lack of experience or being unqualified, thus prioritising the experience of older people over the outlook of youth (“Old is gold” syndrome). Youth that, nevertheless, succeed in accessing decision-making and leadership roles, are regularly confronted with suspicion, intimidation, dominant behaviour, and prejudice.¹⁴

17. In 2021, recognising the need to harness young people’s positive energy and innovativeness, the speakers of parliaments from all over the world committed to speeding up action to curb the chronic underrepresentation of young people in parliament and parliamentary processes and renewed their pledge to do their utmost to make politics genuinely open to young people and to facilitate their election into parliaments in greater numbers.¹⁵ Evidence suggest that measures to increase youth representation in parliaments include aligning the minimum age of eligibility to run for office with the minimum voting age, and introducing youth quotas, which can take different forms, including reserved seats, legislated quotas and party quotas.¹⁶

3.3. *Opportunities for youth to engage in international organisations, including their parliamentary bodies*

18. According to the 2022 Eurobarometer survey “Youth and democracy in the European year of Youth”, young people’s most common expectation for the 2022 European Year of Youth is for decision-makers to listen more to their demands and act on them, and to support their personal, social and professional development (72%). Moreover, around one in five of the surveyed young people are interested in opportunities to engage directly with national politicians (21%), activities organised by youth organisations, and engaging directly with representatives or European institutions, such as the European Parliament and the European Commission (both 19%).¹⁷

19. In recent years, several international organisations, including the UN, have initiated the participation of youth delegates in their work as a key priority of their agenda on youth. All national delegations are encouraged to involve youth delegates who would participate - for one year - in their country’s official delegation to the United Nations General Assembly and various functional Commissions of the Economic and Social Council. It is the responsibility of member States to establish a youth delegate programme at national level, and to decide who will represent the young people of their country at the United Nations. The roles of a youth delegate vary from country to country, but normally includes providing input to their delegation on issues related to youth and participation in their delegation’s work, such as through attending meetings and informal negotiations.

20. In the Council of Europe, it has already been widely recognised that young people have the right to have their voice heard and to make their own decisions on issues that will impact on them and their lives. Back in 1972, the Organisation introduced a ground-breaking co-management system, which gives an equal voice to both representatives of public authorities responsible for youth issues and young Europeans in decision making processes, involves young people in the formulation of policies and programmes, promotes their active participation and practices participative budgeting.¹⁸ Within this system, young Europeans are represented by the CCJ, made up of 30 representatives from a diversity of youth INGOs (13 members), national youth councils (7 members) and youth organisations and networks (10 members). The European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) brings together representatives of ministries or bodies responsible for youth matters from the 50 States Parties to the European Cultural Convention. All the members of the CDEJ

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. For a more detailed description of these barriers, see [Doc. 15294](#) and the IPU report on youth participation in parliaments mentioned in footnote 9.

¹⁵ [Declaration](#) adopted at the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, September 2021.

¹⁶ See footnote 1.

¹⁷ [Flash Eurobarometer 502 - Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth, Report.](#)

¹⁸ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management>.

and the CCJ come together in the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) which is the co-decision-making body that establishes the youth sector's priorities and objectives and makes proposals for the relevant budget.

21. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities operates a youth delegates scheme, whereby one youth delegate per member State participates in the Congress' sessions for a period of one year, undertakes projects and advises the Congress on various issues.¹⁹ Developed in the framework of the Congress' "Rejuvenating Politics" strategy, this scheme gives young people between the ages of 18 and 30, from a variety of backgrounds (youth activists, youth workers, students, young politicians etc.) a unique opportunity to sit in a European assembly alongside local and regional elected representatives, and to contribute, without voting rights, to debates during Congress sessions (and committee meetings) and to exchange views with the Congress members on the issues on the agenda.²⁰ They can make their voices heard, be part of a diverse group of young activists, build a network and have an impact by stimulating debate from a youth perspective.

22. In 2013, the IPU set up a Forum of Young Parliamentarians to boost the participation of young people in parliaments and to help ensure young MPs play a full part in the work of parliament. The Forum meets twice a year during the IPU Assemblies. Although it is a space for young MPs, others are free to attend as observers. The Forum is steered by a Board composed of 12 people - one man and one woman from each of the IPU's six geopolitical groups - who elect a president. In 2018, the IPU became the first international organisation to adopt statutory measures aimed at enhancing youth participation at its formal meetings. For example, parliamentary delegations who bring young MPs to IPU Assemblies receive extra votes and speaking time.²¹

23. At the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Special Representative on youth engagement²² initiated an informal network of young parliamentarians aimed at providing them with a platform for discussion, where the interests of youth both within the Assembly and beyond can be represented. The amount of enthusiasm which this initiative has received (since last December, three meetings of the network have been organised and several parliamentarians expressed their interest in hosting future meetings) reflects its importance and relevance to the OSCE PA. There are now discussions on the possibilities of integrating the young parliamentarians' network within the formal structure of the OSCE PA and enhancing engagement of the young parliamentarians in the work of the Assembly to represent the interests of young people. In this context, there is a proposal to invite a representative of the network to the OSCE PA Bureau meetings as an observer, as well as plans to facilitate discussions and co-operation between the network and General and Ad Hoc Committees of the Assembly.²³

4. Possible avenues to ensure meaningful involvement of youth in the Assembly's work

24. Currently, the Assembly has no formal or informal structure which allows the participation of youth in its work. Representatives of the CCJ can be allowed to attend committee meetings on an ad hoc basis and other youth representatives are sometimes invited to speak on specific topics.

25. With a view to ensuring meaningful involvement of youth in the Assembly's work, an appropriate format needs to be found. Based on examples presented above, the Assembly could envisage several possibilities.

- A "spokesperson on youth" could be appointed in each of the general Committees (with the exception of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights) from amongst their youngest members. The spokesperson could be responsible for raising the youth perspective in the discussions on the reports being prepared, in close cooperation with the CCJ the modalities of which would have to be carefully examined with a view to ensuring a meaningful youth participation. An informal setting bringing together the spokespersons on youth could also be set up with a view to facilitating information

¹⁹ Youth delegates are selected via an online application process by a selection panel which includes the Congress' Spokesperson on Youth, the youth trainers and two members of the CCJ. They represent a balanced group with regard to gender, cultural background, age and experience. In addition to the youth delegate, a substitute is always chosen from each member State.

²⁰ [Rejuvenating Politics](#).

²¹ See footnote 9.

²² The post of Special Representative on Youth Engagement - whose main mandate is to promote the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes - was established following an event held by the OSCE PA in May 2021 as part of the PA's Call for Action – Helsinki +50 Process. At this event, young parliamentarians, representatives of youth wings of political parties and leaders of the OSCE PA met to discuss ways to ensure a better presence of youth representatives in multilateral organisations. It was emphasised that without a strong youth movement there can be no vibrant civil society and with no strong civil society, democracy suffers.

²³ See footnote 1.

sharing amongst them and agreeing who would be taking the floor to present the youth perspective in the plenary debate. This model would have the advantage of enabling youth to have a say in the matters discussed, without an important change in the Assembly's existing functioning and structures and would also give visibility to its youngest members.

- Alternatively, the Assembly could set up a network of young parliamentarians like the IPU and the OSCE PA with terms of reference establishing the functioning of the network, including its aim, composition and working methods.

- Another alternative would be to establish a youth representatives' scheme like that of the Congress whereby a panel composed of Assembly and CCJ representatives would select one youth delegate per member State to participate in the Assembly's sessions for a given period (one or two years), bearing in mind that the role and rights granted to them and their participation in the work of the Committees will have to be carefully considered.

26. In addition, the number of young parliamentarians within the Assembly needs to be increased. In other words, the Assembly should aim for age balance in addition to the gender balance within the composition of national delegations, not necessarily by imposing a youth quota but as a recommendation aimed at encouraging them to take proactive measures to involve more young MPs in the work of the Assembly. The Assembly could also ask national parliaments to develop measures to increase the participation of young people in parliaments (including by aligning the minimum age of eligibility with the minimum voting age).

27. In her introductory memorandum presented to the Committee on 10 October 2022, the rapporteur on "A fourth Summit for a renewed, improved and reinforced Council of Europe", Ms Fiona O'Loughlin (Ireland, ALDE), pointed out that the fourth Summit should be an opportunity to reconnect with Europeans.²⁴ She identified the youth as the key target group to reconnect with people and proposed that the Summit ask a "youth perspective" to be mainstreamed throughout the work of the Council of Europe and their input to be taken into account. I support this proposal and agree that this would not only contribute to enhancing knowledge of the values underpinning the Council of Europe amongst the young generation, but it would also help the Organisation to develop a more inclusive, dynamic and forward-looking agenda.²⁵

28. As one of the statutory organs of the Council of Europe, the Assembly should also mainstream the youth perspective in its work and benefit from their potential for generating for new ideas. In [Resolution 2369 \(2021\)](#) "The Assembly's vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe", it had already expressed the view that specific emphasis should be placed on engaging in a meaningful way with young people and children. As far as children are concerned, it has already done so in its Resolution 2414 (2022) "The right to be heard – Child participation: a foundation for democratic societies".²⁶ It is high time it does so for the youth as well.

²⁴ See [AS/Pol \(2022\) 28rev](#), declassified on 10 October 2022.

²⁵ In the same vein, acknowledging the unique co-management system at the Council of Europe in the field of youth, the High-Level reflection Group recommended ensuring the inclusion of a "youth perspective" in the Organisation's intergovernmental and other deliberations by consulting European youth organisations when shaping public policies in any given field.

²⁶ In this Resolution, the Assembly undertook to put child participation in practice in its own work by consulting children in the preparation of the Assembly reports that concern them, for example through written consultations, participation in hearings, focus groups and parliamentary networks; giving children a voice in the debate of Assembly reports that concern them, for example by inviting a child representative to take the floor in the debate of the report in plenary or in the Standing Committee; and providing children with feedback on how their contributions were used and what impact they may have had.