

MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC LIFE

CONFERENCE

5-6 JUNE 2025
SOFIA, BULGARIA

REPORT



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EUROPEAN UNION



Report

Conference on Meaningful Youth Participation in Democratic Life

**5-6 June 2025
Sofia, Bulgaria**

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THE REPORT

This report aims to present the key messages and to outline the main outcomes of the international conference “Meaningful Youth Participation in Democratic Life” that was held on the 5th and 6th June 2025 in Sofia, Bulgaria. It also intends to enhance the event’s overall impact beyond the present participants. The report is also aimed at:

- summarize the main content related messages of the conference
- put in one place the best practises presented during the event
- create a bigger impact of the event, beyond the actual participants involved
- present the key moments during the conference
- give a feedback and evaluation, based on observation and participants’ opinions

INTRODUCTION OF THE CONFERENCE

The Meaningful Youth Participation in Democratic Life international conference took place in the period 5-6th June 2025 in Sofia, Bulgaria. More than 100 participants from 10 countries and organisations and institutions related to youth work gathered in one place to explore together, to shape up and share their vision of the open field where youth participation and democracy meet.

Organizational overview

Organizer

The conference is conducted by the Human Resource Development Centre (HRDC) which is the National Agency of Erasmus+/Youth and the European Solidarity Corps Program in Bulgaria. The event is organised in the framework of Europe Goes Local - a European cooperational platform for quality development in local youth work through advocacy, exchange of knowledge, peer learning and networking.

Venue

The event was held in Networking Premium Coworking Event Spaces (Gurko Theater) Sofia. To ensure accessibility for both Bulgarian and international participants, the event was conducted in Bulgarian and English, with professional simultaneous interpretation available during all sessions in the conference room.

Moderators

- Athanasios (Sakis) Krezios -

Athanasios (Sakis) Krezios began his youth-work journey in 1997, eagerly exploring EU mobility programmes. By 2004, after various trainings and leading his own youth projects, he launched a career as a youth trainer. Since then, he's teamed up with the Council of Europe, SALTO TC/RC, SALTO Youth Participation, National Agencies, and international youth organisations to design impactful learning experiences and author several publications and articles. In 2011, Sakis founded and became CEO of a company that brings together traditional and innovative sports and cultural activities and events—making them accessible to young people and beyond. In 2017, he co-founded and became a driving force behind the Greek Association for Youth Workers, fulfilling a vision he'd held since he first got involved. From 2020, he's worked with the European Youth Card Association, and since 2021 has coordinated its Youth Panel—an advisory body of eleven young Europeans that shapes policy and drives its own campaigns every two years. This great example of youth participation and influence in decision making is now being replicated across the continent. Across every role, Sakis champions diversity, collaboration, dialogue, and innovation—values he believes power genuine youth participation.

- Olga Kyriakidou -

Olga is an experienced trainer in the youth field, youth worker, and youth consultant based in Thessaloniki, Greece. As a founding member of "Kids in Action NGO" she has been organising, since 2003, activities for children and young people facing fewer opportunities or coming from disadvantaged environments. Since 2009 she has designed and delivered as a freelance NFL trainer, seminars and training courses for youth workers and educators, having as her goal to support professionals to improve competences to empower young people effectively. In 2015 she founded the Social Cooperative KIRKO aiming to give job opportunities to young artists. In 2017, founded with other passionate youth workers in Greece the Hellenic Youth Workers Association (HYWA). Serving as the President since 2021, she advocates for the recognition of youth work in Greece, while she actively participates in shaping youth policies and works towards developing a professional framework for youth workers at European Level from her role as Vice President of the Alliance of Youth Workers Associations (AYWA). Her passion for the recognition of Youth Work as a profession, combined with her ongoing engagement with young people, drives her to seek innovative training methods that address the evolving needs of youth.

Participants

The conference brought together over 100 participants from 10 different countries. Each of them came from a different background related to youth participation.

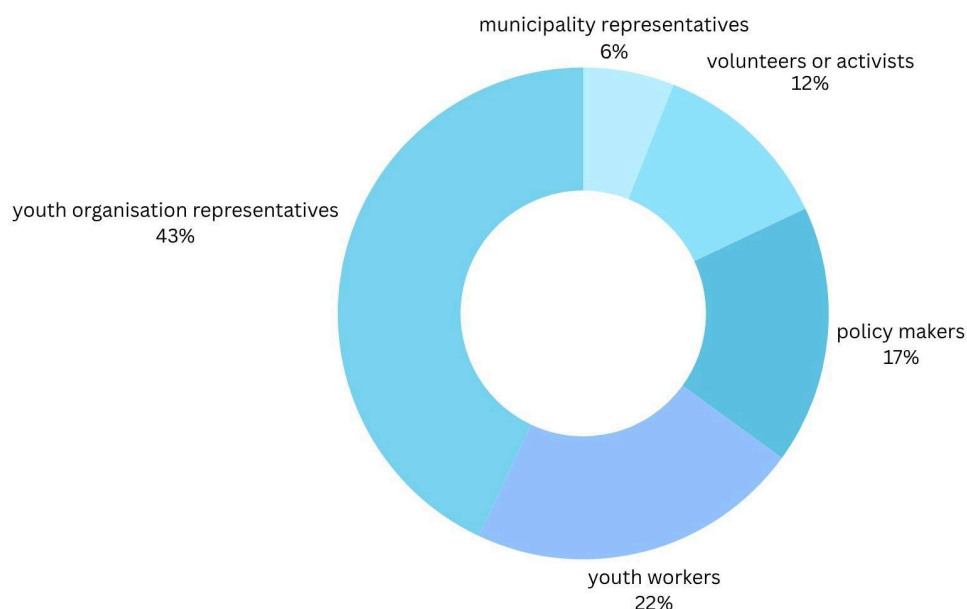
This diversity allowed the event's main topic to be explored from multiple perspectives, encouraging the exchange of views and the discussion of overlapping roles among participants. As a result, the outcomes of the conference gained depth and complexity.

The participants also had varied experience in the fields of youth work and youth policy. Among them were professionals conducting research on youth-related contexts at the international level.

The conference was also attended by deputy ministers from the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Bulgaria. There were representatives at policy-making and advocacy levels, working towards the recognition of youth work and its wider reach, both nationally and across Europe. Representatives from several Bulgarian municipalities contributed the perspective of local authorities and their cooperation with formal local youth groups.

Almost 50% of the participants were from youth organisations, including the representatives of the National Youth Forum, which brings together more than 30 youth organizations across Bulgaria. In addition, youth workers were present as well, along with representatives from the youth centers in Bulgaria, accompanied by their volunteers and members of local youth parliaments and councils.

The conference also welcomed frontline youth workers actively engaged with young people in their communities. Here is a scheme of the percentage distribution of the participants.



Objectives

The specific objectives of the conference were as follows:

- To explore the common understanding of meaningful youth participation in democratic life and examine methods, tools and approaches on how to enhance it in the context of local youth work policy;
- To provide an overview of the existing national and international practices in the field of youth participation and reflecting on how to strengthen and further develop them;
- To understand how Europe Goes Local (European Charter of Local Youth Work) tools can support reflection and further development of youth work practices;
- To stimulate knowledge-sharing and create favourable conditions for future collaborations;
- To examine how Erasmus+ (Youth Participation Projects) can contribute to the development of youth participation in local governance.

Key questions of the conference

- 🔑 What is meaningful youth participation?
- 🔑 How is youth participation applied in the different structures?
- 🔑 How to enhance meaningful youth participation?
- 🔑 How can Erasmus+ contribute to the development of youth participation in local governance?
- 🔑 How Europe Goes Local (European Charter of Local Youth Work) tools can support reflection and further development of youth work practices?
- 🔑 Which are the existing national and international practices in the field of youth participation?
- 🔑 How to strengthen and further develop them?

PROGRAMME FLOW

- DAY 1 -

Official opening of the conference

The conference was moderated by Athanasios Krezios and Olga Kyriakidou who first invited on the stage for the official opening:

Mrs. Tania Mihaylova - Deputy Minister Ministry of Education and Science

Mr. Peter Mladenov - Deputy-minister of youth and sport

Mr. Nikolay Spasov - Executive Director Human Resource Development Centre

The event was opened by Mrs. Tania Mihaylova who stated that it is important to give the young people the opportunity to talk but we also have to listen to them and to support them to participate actively in different initiatives. She assured that the Ministry of Education and Science works in close partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Human Resource Development Centre, local authorities and all stakeholders to develop a comprehensive approach to youth policies. The emphasis of their joint work is placed on the education, participation, career development and social engagement of young people. About the conference she shared *“Organizing such an event shows that we truly advocate the understanding that the future of democracy lies in the active participation of young people.”* Mrs. Mihaylova expressed her joy that Sofia is the host of such an event for meaningful discussions and workshops that will serve as a catalyst for the qualitative development of youth work.

The perspective of the Ministry of Youth and Sports was presented by the Deputy Minister Mr. Petar Mladenov. He stated that good examples, mechanisms and platforms such as Europe Goes Local and Erasmus are needed on how stable methodologies help build stable connections in the sector. *“Democracy thrives when young people are active, engaged and heard. ... We can only talk about quality youth work when there is intersectoral partnership. And when the municipalities themselves realize its importance, then we can already talk about a sustainable society.”* The Deputy Minister gave a few details about Bulgaria's participation in the fourth European Youth Work Convention. He

The participants were also welcomed by the host - on behalf of the National Agency - Mr. Nikolay Spasov. He expressed his joy that the conference brought together various representatives related to youth work and youth participation. He pointed out that Europe Goes Local is proof that when there is cooperation between local authorities, youth organizations and political leaders, the result is certain. Mr. Spasov emphasized that this conference is not a one-sided event, but a continuation of the efforts of the entire European youth society to make youth work a sustainable, strategic and impactful part of the development. He expressed his expectation that during these two days, existing strategies and plans will be discussed and ideas for new initiatives will emerge. The Minister wished all the process and experience during the event to be beneficial and inspiring. *"Your presence here today is an expression of commitment and shared responsibility for the future of young people, for which I thank you."*

To lay the groundwork for the fruitful and practical work of the participants, the moderators had prepared three introductory questions. To collect the answers, the Menti.com platform was used, in which each of the participants filled in their answers to the first 2 questions. The results of the first one were presented earlier in this report, namely what is the background from which each of the participants comes - what is the organization that they represent during the conference. The second question was related to the group's understanding of meaningful youth participation. Words such as **inclusion, democracy, solidarity, volunteering** and **awareness** stood out.



The third question gave participants the opportunity to share their personal motivations for supporting meaningful youth work. After discussion in smaller groups, several participants shared their answers publicly.

Daniel Dzhinsov, YSPDB - *"I have been participating in lot of conference and I have been hearing the young people are the future and less and less I see actions behind those words, so that is my motivation to continue doing that - to focus more and more to work on local level, because at local level we can see the change."*

Nikola Zhivkov, Youth Centre-Vratza - *"My main motivation is here - the young people from Youth Centre-Vratza that are volunteering and participating in this conference. Youths are the key, but with you - because you are the key as well."*

Federico Valotto, Italy - *"There are a lot of young people coming to my city like coming from nowhere - from small cities, rural areas... So my main motivation is to have a restitution for them to be able to go to university as I did, to learn English and so on."*

Simona Valkova, NGO from Plovdiv - *"When I was a student I had many opportunities to participate in and now I feel the need to pass this forward to young people because I assume how important it is to be involved."*

Local Youth Work and Ensuring the Youth Perspective

Participation of Young People in Light of the European Charter on Local Youth Work

The first session of the main program during the conference was aimed to present and to give good practices as examples of how Europe Goes Local (European Charter of Local Youth Work) tools can support reflection and further development of youth work practices. It was presented by Judith Balog - Strategic Coordinator of Europe Goes Local.

With a wonderful smooth transition from the previous session, Judith also gave her answer on what motivates her to support meaningful youth participation.

"... So it's important that they (the young people) shape their own present and their own future, they can make decisions about their own life and adults would not do that all the time for them but to support them in this process to get there and to take the steps that they would like to flourish in their life."

During her presentation she explained the concept of Europe Goes Local, why it was created, what is the development of the program and how it supports the mentioned processes.

- What is Europe Goes Local and how does it support these processes? -

Europe Goes Local is a strategic cooperation between Erasmus+ and national agencies but also more importantly the local partners. The project was created in 2016. In 2015 some decision makers started to think why not engage municipalities more in European programs and European cooperation in the youth field because municipalities were connecting between city programs but those were not really focusing on the youths engagement or youth work.

- Where are we now? -

At this moment the program is present in 25 program countries of Erasmus, Bulgaria is one of them. It is also present in two neighboring regions of the European Union, 4 European umbrella organisations, 600 stakeholders: municipalities, local NGOs, national and European umbrella organisations and developing in 2 regional SALTO Centres.

- What is meaningful youth participation and what is the role of youth work in it? -

Youth participation may not be only for rights and inclusion, but also about strategic investment into building a more sustainable future for generations to come. Youth work is the space where the young people can explore, articulate and develop their interests and talents, as well as their ideas for the future. They are, and must always be, the primary stakeholders of this space.

To support this Europe Goes Local provides exchanges and gathers good practices from there. It gathers what exists already and creates a European dialogue around this. In Europe, there is a lot of good practice, a lot is happening, and Europe also finds it important to bring that together into one umbrella, into one basket, where everyone can benefit from the examples of others.

Judith presented a video filmed during the Belgian youth presidency, where her team interviewed youth workers, policy makers, what do they think about youth participation.

The first example is from Germany and it's a platform called Cities of learning. During events under the platform the young people can understand what are the opportunities that they have in their city, and in the region and how they can develop their skills. Youngsters are also participating in the organisation of those events.

The second one comes from Italy. The main activity is related to gamification and the youngsters can build their ideal cities with legos. While they're building them, they express their needs, their dreams and desires, and after that, these outcomes are taken to the politicians.

The third example is from the Netherlands and it is called Local Collective. It's a network where all the local youth councils and initiatives are connected. So they can share knowledge and different types of training. The network also connects them with policymakers and decision makers.

Another good example presented is from the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency. They have developed the guide "Youth participation and youth information service". It is a tool with

information and training for the people who are working with young people, so they can facilitate youth participation.

The last good practice is from the European youth forum, the largest platform of the organisations in the world with more than 100 national youth councils, and international youth organisations. They have developed the “EU youth test” - a method for youth participation in the policymaking process.

- The European Charter on Local Youth Work -

After those good practices under Europe Goes Local Judith presented the tool related to the development of local youth work - The European Charter on Local Youth Work. You can find it [here](#). Europe Goes Local launched the tool in 2019 after consulting it with more than 200 stakeholders and local municipalities and NGOs. They wanted to create a tool for high quality youth work and youth participation.

The purpose of the Charter:

- The aim of the charter is to contribute to the quality development of local youth work;
- It provides a common European platform for the necessary dialogue on youth work;
- A free-to-use methodological tool, functioning as a check-list around which stakeholders can gather and discuss what measures that might be needed for the further development of youth work.

Themes of the Charter

- Core principals of youth work
- Youth work policy and practice
- Youth work organisation and practice
- Youth workers and their needs
- Quality development

The European Charter on Local Youth Work can be used as a manual from local municipalities and institutions managed by them and also local organisations. By the checklist implemented in the Charter they can inspect what is the quality level of the youth work they are delivering.

Guided by The European Charter on Local Youth Work they can go through

- ✓ creation of an enabling and trustful environment
- ✓ connection with broader youth policy on all levels
- ✓ cooperation between all relevant stakeholders
- ✓ transformation of aims and objectives into coherent strategies and plans
- ✓ clear and comprehensive system from planning, through documentation, evaluation and follow-up
- ✓ continuous competence development of youth workers

They can also explore the core principles of youth work and youth participation. It is a tool that is easily accessible - it is online, free to download and it is translated in all the languages of the countries of the project.

Panel discussion

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion under the main topic of Local Youth Work and Ensuring the Youth Perspective aiming to provide an overview of the existing national and international practices in the field of youth participation and reflecting on how to strengthen and further develop them.

Panelists:

Judit Balogh - Strategic Coordinator of Europe Goes Local

Peter Mladenov - Deputy-minister of youth and sport

Vladimir Yordanov - Deputy-Executive Director of HRDC - sector Youth

Nevena Mineva - Deputy-Mayor of Gabrovo

- Question to Mr. Petar Mladenov: What role does the national level play in supporting and strengthening local youth work infrastructures to ensure youth voices are heard and acted upon? -

Mr. Mladenov noted that the authorities on national level have to provide guidance on how the legal framework is set up so it can reflect from national to local level. He highlighted that in Bulgaria there is the legal framework with the National youth strategy, two National youth programs, The Youth Law, but what needs to be improved is to have more instruments and guidelines for local decisionmakers so they can implement them on their level. Europe Goes Local is one of the instruments and the Charter as well. Another instrument that he mentioned is the concept of National youth capital. It is also crucial to have local strategies because young people in different regions have different needs. He emphasised the important role of youth work as well. So there needs to be a holistic approach when we can talk about youth participation.

- Question to Mr. Vladimir Yordanov: From a funding and programme perspective, what mechanisms currently exist, or are needed, to ensure local youth work supports young people's democratic engagement? -

Mr. Yordanov presented the existing mechanisms supporting the participation of young people in democratic life and why each of them is important. They are implemented under the three key actions of Erasmus+ program.

Key Action 1 - mobility of individuals - include youth exchange and mobility with youth workers. On an international level this mobility encourages a dialogue between young people from different countries and with different opportunities and backgrounds. And it is the same on a national level. Key Action 2 supports cooperation partnerships between different organizations, which are developing approaches to democratic participation. Mr. Yordanov outlined that it is a priority for the National agency to foster discussions between youth organisations and local municipalities and to be part of these cooperation partnerships using the Key Action.

Key Action 3 is giving support for policy reform, which funds initiatives directly related to policy dialogue with young people. Mr. Yordanov emphasized the importance on a national level to have the voluntary law established, which will encourage more voluntary work with the young people.

Deputy-Executive Director also defined some of the mechanisms that the National agency finds as very tightly related to youth participation and will support their implementation:

- stronger integration of non-formal education;
- capacity building for local youth workers;
- more support for youth-led structures - youth councils on local and national level;
- better outreach for marginalized youth - for example Roma and ethnic Bulgarians, that are living in small areas, they have to be reached and to be encouraged for participation and one of the keys are the local municipalities, which can be supported by projects funded by the EU and the National agency;
- monitor the impact in long term
- cross-sectoral cooperation - government, the ministries, local municipalities, the national agency, NGOs involved in youth work, youth participation and the development of youth policies.

- Question to Mrs. Nevena Mineva: As a local policymaker, what are the challenges and opportunities you face in integrating young people's perspectives into municipal decision-making?-

Mrs Nevena Mineva outlined that the main challenge is that the young people are attracted from the bigger cities or other countries. One of the priorities of the Gabrovo Municipality is for young people to recognise the place as the one that they want to live in. To make them come back with more knowledge and broaden horizons.

She emphasised on the key roles of: first education, second, career development, third opportunities for development and work.

She also indicated a couple of the opportunities that the young people, living in Gabrovo, had in the last few years or those in which they can still participate.

- A program for career orientation implemented in 2017 - a successful model of career development was that the young people had the opportunity to visit different work places and to learn more about professions, companies and institutions;
- In the last months there was research in schools about nurses and how do the young people recognise this profession - an example of researching the need of the youngsters, related to local politics, because it is considered an establishment of a Medical University branch in the city;
- Youth Centre Gabrovo - a modern space created with a mission to support and inspire young people. It includes training rooms, a hotel area and an open stage;
- Gabrovo Innovation Camp - 3-days event where the youngsters are going through challenges alongside with professionalists in different areas. In each team there is a representative of the local authorities;
- Cultural program - Participants with various projects in the field of culture can apply for funding from the municipality.

- Question to Mrs. Judith Balog: From your experience with Europe Goes Local, what are some of the most effective strategies you've seen in embedding the youth perspective into local governance structures? -

For this question Mrs. Judith Balog emphasised the role of the young people on every level during the process of involving them. She referred to her presentation where she pointed out that youths are interested from learning to the end, evaluation, monitoring. They not only need their voices to be heard but also to follow what happened after that. Mrs. Balog elaborated on this with a few key points:

- the municipalities to have **stable structures of participation** - not necessarily to focus on a consultation process on one question, but to include in the consultation the framework and mechanism that is used for every kind of question while establishing new measures, changing some urban landscape, or introducing, for example, new educational programs in the municipality;
She pointed out that a good practice is when municipalities implement some kind of youth-friendly city label to make sure that the municipality, whatever it does, would consider the youth perspective. One of these examples is **the national concept for youth capitals**;
- **youth tests** for the youth friendliness on every level - urban development, education, opportunities for development and all of the aspects in the municipalities where the young people relate are supposed to be checked also from the youth perspective;
- **evaluation** of the new measures should be done together with the young people as well. Decision-makers stay credible, and ourselves as institutions stay credible if young people can look into what happened with their needs and their voices.

This can also foster international dialogue so local municipalities can check what it means to be a youth-proof municipality in another country.

- Question to Mr. Petar Mladenov: How do you see the link between national youth policy frameworks and the practical realities of youth participation at the local level? How can that link be improved? -

Mr. Peter Mladenov mentioned once more the good example and advantage of Bulgaria referring to the exciting national youth policy framework, but he also indicated the importance of what kind of instruments can be utilized more.

- European Union Dialogue mechanism - an instrument implemented alongside with the National Youth Forum and the youth organizations involved - they are going to different cities at the local level, doing consultations with different young people from various backgrounds. Then their needs and challenges are actually presented during European youth conferences by a democratic elected delegation of three people;
- Youth centers - there are eight international youth centers in the present moment in Bulgaria and there are 18 more that are in the making. The National Focus Center which was created to coordinate them also begins its work. Also there are other youth centers and youth spaces

that are functioning where the young people can meet the youth workers. And this is what is called the cross-sectoral approach, because the youth policy is happening everywhere in different sectors, so national institutions can be implemented.

- National Youth Program - the Deputy-Minister noted that more and more municipalities are applying for funding;

Mr. Mladenov also pointed out that the quality framework of providing youth services needs to be improved in Bulgaria. He expressed his intentions to continue working together with the sector aiming the development of meaningful mechanisms which ensure quality of youth work that is happening in different areas.

- Question to Mr. Vladimir Yordanov: How can programmes managed by HRDC help build the capacities of municipalities and youth workers to better facilitate meaningful youth participation?

-

Mr. Yordanov indicated the main practical tools of the National Agency to support municipalities and different stakeholders:

- Support through Key Action 1, capacity building through Erasmus+ - mobility of youth workers as training courses, job shadowing, study visits, etc.;
- Strategic partnership and integration through Erasmus, Key Action 2 - cooperation, supporting local youth strategies, civic education, and creation of different models and platforms that can support the local municipalities and the youth centres or the youth workers to work together;
- Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA) - the National Agency organizes events as seminars; training events; workshops; coaching; conferences, etc. and supports municipalities to participate aiming at implementing the Erasmus+ Programme;
- SALTO resource centers - toolkits, training modules and learning modules supporting local municipalities and youth workers.

- Question to Mrs. Nevena Mineva: Can you give us more examples of local initiatives or partnerships that have successfully promoted youth participation in taking decisions and making the difference in bringing about change? -

Mrs. Nevena Mineva presented a few more good examples of Gabrovo municipality which prove that they have taken a lot of measures so that the young people can be heard and can actively participate in taking the decisions in the municipality.

- Youth Parliament of Gabrovo - established in 2022; they have monthly meetings with the mayor of the municipality; currently they are looking for an opportunity to submit their proposals related to their needs and challenges directly to different commissions of the municipal council;
- Youth Centre - it has its own program for funding youth initiatives;

- “Rivers of the City - Gabrovo - Youth Cases against The Current” - the latest edition of the festival will be organised entirely from the youths;
- Consultative council of the mayor - it is planned that more young people will take part in it;
- “Priemi Me na Selo” - young people from the whole country are being guests in the homes of old people - they learn from each other and the youngsters can explore and understand more about and practise volunteering.

- Question to Mrs. Judith Balog: How can local municipalities move from symbolic participation to meaningful engagement of young people in shaping democratic processes and local policies? -

Mrs. Judith Balog pointed out two key components for the development of youth participation in municipalities. The first one is learning - to explore the good examples in the country and also those in the European context. A crucial part of this process is creating opportunities - identifying what are the learning needs and to cooperate to learn more. And the National agency can support that process. So the national level - represented by the ministries as well - is ready to create a framework, a platform, in which municipalities can connect and learn.

Another key component at the local level are the stakeholders. The municipalities should identify who are the experts, the institutions and the organisations that they would like to bring together to create their own local framework of meaningful youth participation. Because this is how they can explore the local needs. They should refer to family policy, social work, the schools as well, also to the young people who are harder to reach. And when all the stakeholders are at the table, including young people, then it will be easy to identify the needs, create action plans, strategies and some mechanisms that fit that actual municipality.

Mrs. Balog expressed her willingness to support these processes alongside the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the National Agency.

Sharing good practices

During the next panel, four good practices related to meaningful youth participation in four different municipalities in Europe were presented.

National Federation of Youth Associations

Fernando Vieira presented the initiative of the National Federation of Youth Associations - National Network of Youth-Friendly Municipalities

The National Federation of Youth Associations in Portugal was established 1996 to represent, promote and value youth associations. One of its main goals is to promote youth associations as an instrument for active participation of young people in local communities.

One of its tools is ENAJ - National Event of Youth Associations. It is a decisive tool in affirming the voice of youth associations, providing important guidance for the definition of Youth Public Policies in Portugal at local, regional and national level.

Another initiative of The National Federation of Youth Associations is The National Network of Youth-Friendly Municipalities. The initiative started in 2020 with 57 municipalities that were the founders of the network. Currently it is a network with 188 of 308 municipalities in the country which are committed to youth policies.

FNAJ coordinates the network, provides guidance and tools and ensures that youth voices are considered at local governance. The platform of The National Network of Youth-Friendly Municipalities is connecting and engaging youth associations and local authorities in the implementation of youth policies. The main goals of the network are to foster youth-friendly policies, to promote youth participation, to enhance cooperation and to encourage good practices.

As members of the Network, municipalities have access to active support in developing Municipal Youth Plans.

An important tool of the network is the Youth Friendly Municipality Label. The main concept of this initiative is an award with stars for the municipalities creating a positive competition between them in the context of youth participation. All the municipalities want to have the 5 stars so this influences them to have more work with the youngsters. It is a tool which unites different stakeholders - the Committee Members who are making the annual selection based on the criteria are FNAJ – National Federation of Youth Associations, IPDJ – Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, National Erasmus + Youth/Sport Agency and European Solidarity Corps and ANAM – National Association of Municipal Assemblies.

Another good practice that have been presented by Mr. Vireira was The Municipalities National Training Programme. It has delivered over 55 training courses across the country, aiming to empower young association leaders and youth workers. As a result, more than 800 young people and youth workers have received training, contributing to their professional development. The programme has significantly enhanced the quality of youth work at local, regional, and national levels.

In the end Mr. Vireira announced an international event held in June in Portugal where more than 100 municipalities are going to share good practices.

Municipality of Kordelio

Giannouchidou Sophia & Alexandros Ferraios presented West Side Students Festival as a good practise from the Municipality of Kordelio, Greece.

The Municipality of Kordelio is the youngest municipality in North Greece and there are 18 000 students studying there. But they needed a youth event. Why? This is a decision to work towards achieving these 6 goals: youth empowerment, students voice, participation, celebrating education, promoting creativity and lifelong learning. So this is how the idea of West Side Students Festival came.

This is an event that takes place every year, once a year, over a few days. Each of the annual editions has a specific theme within which the initiatives participating in the program take place. Various workshops are held during the festival. Competitions on topics such as different kinds of arts, expressive reading and others are also held. Through these competitions participants are encouraged to engage with the festival's theme and creatively share their thoughts and perspectives. In the program there are also special seminars included based on the annual theme of the festival. At the end of each festival a big concert takes place and in 2025 15 youth bands participated in it to show their talent.

The most important part of the whole initiative is that young people participate in each of the processes in its creation. They invented the name of the festival and they choose the main theme every year. They design the seminars, the open discussions and experiential workshops that promote knowledge, reflection, and youth engagement. They are creating the poster of the event. They are also discussing the whole process with the Deputy Mayor of Kordelio.

In the end of the presentation Mrs. Sophia illustrated the impact of the festival by showing a few videos of volunteers in the event who expressed emotionally their experience and benefits from their participation.

Youth Center – Vratsa

One of the great examples for youth participation initiative in Vratza is the Board game universe that the educational team from Youth Centre Vratsa and volunteers have created in the past 3 years. It was presented by Mr. Nikola Zhivkov - a youth worker in the Centre.

A whole community around board games has developed in Vratsa, centered around the "Board Game Night" initiative at the Youth Center Vratsa. The events bring together young people interested in games, communication, and strategy, creating a dynamic and inclusive social environment. The initiative has grown from informal gatherings into a structured and sustainable format - including beginner support, tournaments, and themed evenings.

The initiative became a permanent part of the Youth Center's program, aligned with its mission to promote non-formal education and social skill development. Volunteers, youth workers, and new young leaders joined the organizing team, contributing to the sustainability and expansion of the club. Collaborations with schools and other youth organizations also began during this period.

In 2022 the "Board Game Night" transformed into another level. "Board Game Jam" is an intensive two-day hackathon during which teams of 3 to 5 people invent, design and present their own board game - from idea to prototype. It transforms games into a tool for expression, collaboration, and learning. It offers the young people a unique and empowering way to explore the world, but also their skills - for communication, creativity, team work, presentation and critical thinking.

A whole gaming community was created during "Vratsa Game Night" with 100 participants. So they organized it once again one year later, this time with 140 participants, but also with more than 20

volunteers involved. There were three similar events that proved that a good idea and great team can overwhelm borders. They gathered more people in the community in the events “Board Games for Kids”, “Board Games for Deaf Youngsters” and “English Board Game Night”.

The team of volunteers who created one of the games during the last event participated in the conference so they joined Mr. Zhivkov on the stage and shared briefly about their experience in the Youth Centre and during this activity and also what does youth participation mean for them.

Youth Centre Plovdiv

Last in this panel of sharing good practices were the youth workers from Youth Centre Plovdiv Eda Hairula and Mihaela Zemyarska. They presented a few of the activities and initiatives that the centre conducts and hosts related to meaningful youth participation.

The main mission of Youth Centre Plovdiv is set to improve the well-being of young people aged 15-29 years through the provision of programmes and activities based on the non-formal educational methodology and aimed at their personal and professional development.

- An example of the applied training programs of the centre include „Youth in Action” part one and two. The first training programme was aimed at equipping young people with the necessary competences to jointly tackle identified community problems. The full range of training was also implemented by the "Youth Centre Plovdiv" team in three editions of the "Young Intern" program and in the “Skills of the New Age”. As a result of these programs the Center provides paid traineeship programs, which is another good opportunity for young people to get to know youth work and see how it really functions, what its specifics are and what its challenges are.
- Another opportunity which the center provides is financial support for small scale projects in the form of the youth led initiatives. The process includes development of an idea by a group of young people, preparing an application, evaluation by the center and provision of support. About 50 initiatives have been implemented – both in the form of a one-time event and a long –term action.
- The center provides the young people and youth organizations with the possibility to use the facilities for implementing their ideas. An example for this is the meetings of Plovdiv Students Parliament which are held in the center. The team also supports the young people in the preparations and implementation of their meetings. This is an example of the youth center being identified by the young people as a place where they can work together and collaborate.
- “Youth Center Plovdiv” is also the meeting point of the Youth Council of Plovdiv Municipality. This is a structure established and led by the young people, with the mission to: "Improving the well-being, protecting fundamental rights and supporting the development of youth from the municipality of Plovdiv". The Council is taking an active role in the preparatory process of the annual action plan for the implementation of the municipal strategy for youth.

In the action plan are also integrated the activities of the youth center, thus the young people have a say in the planned activities of “Youth Center Plovdiv”.

Networking

The next panel of the conference was a networking session during which the participants had to separate each other in 6 different groups and to explain their local context of youth participation. After that they had the opportunity to ask questions of the four presenters of good practices.

The representatives of the Youth Center Vratsa and their volunteers demonstrated the game that the team had developed and the conference participants could test it directly. Mr. Zhivkov also presented the handbook “PARTICIPATORY ARTS methods and tools”, which they created with their partners from Timis County Youth Foundation from Romania.

Youth Centre Plovdiv presented the manuals from both of the programs that they emphasised on as part of their presentation and also answered questions about both the Youth Parliament and the Advisory Council to the Plovdiv Municipality. Mrs. Hairula and Mrs. Zemyarska also talked about the international youth exchanges they have implemented in the last few years.

The representative from Kordelio answered questions about the overall organization of the festival and how the youths participated in all processes, what were the exact mechanisms for inclusion, etc. Mrs. Sophia also elaborated on financing of the project and the initiatives that take place within it.

The representative from National Federation of Youth Association answered questions related to the motivation of the municipalities to participate in the competition for Youth Friendly Municipality Label. Mr. Vieira also clarified what are the costs for each municipality to participate and how many youth workers were trained during The Municipalities National Training Programme.

In general, the participants in the conference showed a lot of interest towards each of the representatives and asked questions on several levels regarding the presented good practices. One of them was the financing of all initiatives. Another was precisely related to the mechanisms for not only including young people in these activities but for their meaningful participation. Another main question was what was the motivation for the participation in these initiatives, both on the side of the young people and also on the side of the organizers, who in this case were volunteers, youth workers, representatives of non-governmental organizations and municipalities.

Some quotes captured during the session of Networking.

“Exchanging ideas is crucial.”

“Now I would like to go more local instead of continuing doing so many Erasmus exchanges.”

“We would like to inspire the young to have initiatives and businesses.”

“If you want to do something for the young, did you go to ask them? Go! Ask them what they need!”

“We are talking about meaningful participation and long-term activities, but those in power are new every 4 years. If you are lucky because in Bulgaria that's not always the case.”

“We need to make sure that we are inclusive. We need to make sure that we encourage young people to volunteer.”

- DAY 2 -

Fostering the European Dimension in Local Youth Work Policy

The opening session of the second and last day of the conference began with the keynote speaker Claudius Siebel - Policy Issues Coordinator, JUGEND für Europa - German National Agency for the EU-Programmes Erasmus+ Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps, Chairman of the Advisory Board of Europe Goes Local.

He emphasized on the reason why the European dimension is needed in local Youth Work policy. The wellbeing of young people in European countries is not enough to be influenced only by the National Youth Work policy but also by the European one.

He stated that the young people must understand Europe and must experience it in their own way. Another aspect of the same prism is that it's not a very good point of observing Europe as a top-down process because if the people want Europe to answer their needs they must understand that it is a bottom-up process. So the policy makers must be very careful how they implement the local Youth Work policy. Because a crucial part in it is the implementation of the needs of the young people who are not engaged very much in the European processes. This is why youth work has a key part as well. And this is the first pillar. The second one is active citizenship with youth workers and professionals - they must be qualified. The third possibility for European dimensions is to initiate and develop more and more European cooperation and networking. And also the 4th pillar is to initiate and promote European peer learning processes.

How can the young people develop the learning environment of Europe:

- Mobility experiences for young people;
- Active citizenship education through projects and processes where they learn about Europe, how to participate and co-shape the European reality;
- Promote the European mobility of professionals and their qualifications for Europe-related work;
- Initiate and develop European cooperation and networking;
- Initiate and promote European peer learning processes;
- Incorporate experiences and insights from European debates into national, regional and local professional practice (and vice versa)

A key message that Mr. Siebel delivered was that European international youth work is effective. In Germany there is a lot of research about the effectiveness and the results of youth work. One of the most relevant studies is a long term one on the aspects of international youth exchanges. The researchers asked participants of youth exchanges 10 years after their participation. Some of the results are very positive effects on

- self related characteristics and competences;

- openness, flexibility, composure;
- self knowledge and self-image.

As a member of the European Strategy Group of RAY Mr. Claudius Siebel has a lot of evidence about more assets and positive effects. The team members that participated in this exchange are better able to ask for objections to strengthen international dimensions in the world. More than half of them strongly agree that the project in the field contributes to strengthening active citizenship; political effect; confidence; catalysts for democracy. More than half of them are more engaged in civil society than before, having taken part in politics. 42% of them are more participating in democratic processes than before the projects. And 34% say that they are more participating in elections than before.

Mr. Siebel also presented the **RAY PART (2019-2021)** additional research project exploring **how European youth projects** contribute to the development of participation and citizenship competence and practice. There are three dimensions of the project:

- The project as participation and citizenship practice - directly supporting people with fewer opportunities; implementing actions against climate change; political campaign for human rights etc.; practical participation and citizenship being inherent to the project and its activities;
- The project as a means for understanding participation and citizenship - communicate explicitly the concepts of “active citizenship” and “participation in civil society and democratic life” in a language, phrasing and terminology that is comprehensible and close to the reality of participants
- The project as non-formal and informal learning space

Another inspiring practice that he presented was **EuropaLokal** - a project with a 3 years of duration of The National Agency with 5 municipalities. It aims for sustainable anchoring of Europe and European topics in local youth work policy - a long term strategy for local youth work at local level.

A key aspect of the program was that there was a very good coordination of bringing active and interested local organisations together, mentoring of European partners, application of projects, managing of funding, lobby work etc. It was also a systematic training and qualification of trainers and youth workers conducted.

The key results of the whole long term process of the project with five municipalities are published in a book and it is reported as a successful process.

The next project that Mr. Claudius Siebel highlighted is **Youth Participation International**.

The project was piloted in Kelkheim and the aim is to establish a sustainable youth participation structure with the European dimension. Before the project in the city there is no youth Parliament or youth forum. What is planned to be done are a series of workshops with young people and discussing what they need to sustainably participate and what makes a participation attractive?

And the last good practice that Mr. Siebel presented was DiscoverEU which aims at offering young people aged 18 years old a travel experience that will foster their sense of belonging to the European Union, allow them to explore the diversity of Europe, its cultural heritage and history, connect with people from all over the continent and ultimately discover themselves. It is also a low threshold forward for bringing marginalized young people, for making it possible for them to travel to Europe.

So Mr. Siebel pointed out a good example for the city of Brown shrine city of 50,000 inhabitants. And they are very successful with using the DiscoverEU. They are sending 25 people on a regular basis for marginalized backgrounds in three different groups, accompanied by European volunteers working in the local use centers to Italy and Spain. And these youngsters have never left their household.

Dimensions of Quality in Youth Work

Youth Partnership: Youth Participation and Youth Work

The next panel, dedicated to Dimensions of Quality in Youth Work, was started by Laszlo Milutinovits - Senior Project Officer, Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth.

Mr. Milutinovits started by sharing that he was excited about his participation, because he was part of the trainers who trained the first teams of youth workers and roma mediators in the youth centers in Vratsa, Dobrich, Plovdiv and Stara Zagora 10 years ago and he is glad that the dedication and enthusiasm continue to maintain the quality of youth work.

He presented the joint activities of the European Union and the Council of Europe, outlining the differences between the two institutions, but also emphasizing that they have had a very good partnership for 25 years. In 2020 the Council of Europe and the European Commission decided to enhance their cooperation on youth work, assigning a stronger role to the youth partnership in supporting the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda.

And what they do is mostly working on youth development, activities, youth development, youth research and youth policy, developments and a lot of research, gathering, producing knowledge, and presenting it in publications online and offline.

Mr. Laszlo Milutinovits presented the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life - a political document with clear guidelines and very practical advice and tips. The Charter says that participation of young people is about having the right, the means, the space, and opportunity. And then - the support to take an active part in and influence decisions in policymaking and also in all matters that concern young people.

The Council of Europe also published a manual - "Have Your Say", which gives educational tools to help understanding how to deal with youth participation. It includes a description of the RMSOS model (right means, space, opportunity, and support that is needed for effective use participation), and other models like the level of youth participation and some other concepts that can help the

work with The Charter. Mr. Milutinovits briefly noted the long process of revision the document which is happening now, in relation to all of the rapidly changing world today and the rapidly changing context of young people's lives.

He also presented 4 other tools by the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe youth sectors

- ABOUT TIME! - A reference manual for youth policy from a European perspective - focuses on participation, information, volunteering, social inclusion, access to rights, youth work, mobility and digitalisation
- T-kit 15: Participatory youth policy - complements the manual and provides educational support for building youth sector capacity for participatory policy making
- Insight: short thematic publications to support youth sector engagement with specific topics
 - this edition examines the key concepts and aims of youth political participation, types of democratic environments and various mechanisms of participation within the context of shrinking space for civil society, rapid digitalisation, advancement of populist ideologies, increased inequalities, a rise of global youth movements and a health pandemic
- Different poster that can be printed or presented for useful graphic information as "Efficient and Meaningful Youth Policy Core Principals and Values"

Mr. Laszlo Milutinovits also shared a bit about his experience during the 4th European Youth Work Convention that took part the previous week. He mentioned a couple of the topics that were discussed such as Youth work core, youth work environment, youth work systems, professional youth work, youth centres and other structures related.

The main outcome after the Convention is building a new roadmap for implementation of the European strategy for youth work policy development and recognition of quality youth work. With the roadmap new guidelines for local youth work are expected as well.

Meaningful Youth Participation in Democratic Life

The second presentation during this panel was given by Dr. Liliya Elenkova - Vice-Chair of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) of the Council of Europe. She presented the Standards for quality youth policy.

In the beginning she summarised that the young people have 3 socialisation pillars - family, school/university and leisure time. So they have to decide if they can increase their potential and to spend their leisure time in a meaningful way. She gave an example that if the young people want to participate in the school youth council they don't do it during their classes but in their leisure time.

Dr. Elenkova noted that she wrote a report about the independence of national youth councils after a research and what we can observe is that in the youth strategies there is a focus much more on sectoral policies but not the main priorities of the youth policy.

What she outlined is that we usually need a specific strategy in our municipality to keep the identity of the municipality but it should be connected to the national one and also to the European one.

Dr. Elenkova also elaborated that we want to support the youth strategy with the youth program because the youth program is an instrument. The program is needed because the young people need to have access to the public money to conduct activities.

She shared her perception that when people from a municipality, even depending on the democracy, support some groups financially they think that they should become dependent. So we need to find a way to distribute money in a transparent, objective way, and then not to expect someone after that to do what we want them to do, but actually what the policy requires. A capacity is also needed because a youth organization can't sell services to young people. So they need basic support for administration, pay the rent, etc.

Dr. Elenkova emphasised on two dilemmas about the youth policy. The first one is that policy makers consider the young people as objects and don't ask for their needs and challenges. The second one is that the policy makers think that the policy should be problem-oriented, which means that they have to find the solution of youths' problems, but not to actually support them to find the solution of their problems.

Strong and unique priorities and clear standards in local youth policy will create a healthy market for young people and their organization, as well as for youth workers, and overall, this will lead to a more predictable and also sustainable future.

She described the story of the 2017 capital of youth which was the city of Varna. In 1999, Bulgarian parliament decided to adopt a declaration, and with this declaration, it encouraged municipalities across Bulgaria to follow the principles of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. Until 2005, a couple of municipalities did so, and among them was Varna and Varna became a European capital in 2017.

So the people from the municipality developed a very functional structure within the municipality, with a separate department, budget and plan. But the budget increased from around 10,000 to 1 million euro. Nowadays another municipality in Bulgaria did the same. Pernik is one of the shortlisted municipalities for a youth capital. So it's a long process, and some people follow the principles, and develop a structure, and it's actually a common effort and they use the document. The charter now will be a little bit different, but actually what it can be done is to use all its versions.

Dr. Elenkova emphasised on the role of reading and gaining a lot of knowledge so the participants and the young people can know their opportunities and what is already written and discovered and they can use it in a meaningful way.

Panel discussion

The last panel during the main program of the conference was a panel discussion with Mr. Claudius Siebel, Mr. Laszlo Milutinovits and Dr. Liliya Elenkova. Questions were asked from the audience - both directly and into a Padlet app anonymously.

Q: Not visible connection between youth workers and youth centers and their relationship with municipalities and policy representatives. Where are the decision makers, where are the policy makers that engage with us and promote meaningful youth participation?

A: Ministry of Youth and Sports created a national working group on the local youth policy is actually to start to address and also what they did at the beginning of this year. They review the real situation across the country with the municipalities when it comes to new strategies, youthology, to any castle over what we mentioned in the requirements.

Q: What are they doing in Germany with regards to research that has moved things forward?

A: From Germany this research helps the field. It is one of the countries with so far the biggest funding resources of international use. And in this regard, it definitely helps. Also they are facing the constant struggle to convince the municipalities to spend and dedicate more resources and money for international use because in the youth law, it still says each municipality has to provide an adequate amount of user offers.

Q: If it's possible to have the publication, how can we do it?

A: There is a section about us in my presentation and there is a contact form on our website that you can just fill in and then we get an e-mail and we can send you a package.

Q: I would like to learn what we have to do to guarantee that your participation stays a process in a relationship. Because we usually tend to understand it until the point of actually sending a letter or doing a protest or something like that and not proceeding until we read some consensus or not read some consensus or something like that. How do you see the three of you in the European framework of youth policy - as a new area of youth policy, as a horizontal principle or as some kind of evolution of your participation in your mainstreaming?

A: The Council of Europe partnership with the Commission here in the last couple of years is starting to talk more about this whole new mainstreaming. There are two different terms - New space treating used by the European Commission. And new youth perspective is a term that is used by the Council of Europe and they are also parallel into the process in the Commission. They are also working on this and actually as you said, I would say that it's kind of a horizontal approach and the main idea is to somehow make sure that the use perspective or the perspective of young people is considered in decision making processes of all other branches of policy making.

Q. How to make new policy more sustainable on local and national level? How to make policy makers have to have successors in their places who understand new policy. How to make it most sustainable so you don't start from scratch every time that someone changes?

A: This are a \$1 million question which cannot be answered. And I have to say it's, it's business work. It's business work to convince, yeah, to convince regularly the new decision making is on local and

for example that just we see that this participation is important. However, what I see is I see, I don't see. And in this regard, it's more optimistic.

A:I see quite a development on the youth level with all the documents in recent years and there's more advanced, but there's a bit more awareness about the specialty of use participation and also strategic use policy planning.

The Method of the Chinese drop. You just put the drop off, the drop off, the drop off the drop, and then you just break the stone. And then you are really persistent. So if you believe in what you do, this will not stop you like real life, you know, if the youth policy and this is like real life, No, no one can't stop you.

Final insights of the participants

"We still don't know how to evaluate youth work in the long term."

"The people in the youth sector have 20-30 years of experience and they are burnt out. They just don't change, there are not enough new people to take their place and this is related to participation on every level."

"We need participation on every level."

"Now I want to go more local than on European level."

"We can consider cooperation for the next event."

Closure of the conference

The final speech to close the event was given to Mr. Vladimir Yordanov. He expressed his gratitude for having the opportunity in that day and a half to talk about topics that are either not discussed very much, or when they are being discussed, there are no clear paths for what happens after the talks. Mr. Yordanov emphasised the importance of talk not only about the presence of the national agency in the various processes or the European Commission or the European Council. He said that it was a key point to talk about how they cooperate with the various institutions and organizations in these processes - when there is a need to discuss things, to talk, to sit at the same table and do whatever they can as a national agency to help.

"But we will try to have more meetings with interested people, countries, municipalities, etc. So this is something that I personally hope for and would work with colleagues to make happen."

CLOSURE

Summary of the conference program

The Conference for Meaningful Youth Participation was an event that, in itself, brought a great deal of meaning - to the participants, the moderators, and the organizers alike. Despite the short time frame of only two days, held in a beautiful hall blending the spirit of the past and present, many important discussions took place.

The theme of the conference brought together representatives from various organizations and institutions involved in youth work - all of whom are working on a daily basis with the extent to which meaningful youth participation in decision-making truly exists. Everyone present recognized the reality that solving the issue of youth participation requires action and effort on multiple levels. Some of these approaches were successfully presented during the different panels of the event.

However, no meaningful youth work or youth participation can exist as an end in itself. It must be researched and standardized in order to ensure quality and relevance in local, national, and international contexts. That is why each of these levels was examined through the framework of Europe Goes Local - a European cooperation platform for quality development in local youth work through advocacy, knowledge exchange, peer learning, and networking.

The conference program was structured in such a way that the central issue - and possible solutions - could be explored by all participants.

The keynote speaker, Claudius Siebel, emphasized the importance of not viewing Europe's work in this field as a top-down process, stating that if we want Europe to respond to our needs, we must understand it as a bottom-up process.

In the beginning the framework of Europe Goes Local was presented, which is a strategic cooperation between Erasmus+ and national agencies but also more importantly the local partners. One of the aims of the program is a more sustainable future for generations to come. And this sustainability is right the opposite of the chaos that is possible to happen in a local context if for example the municipality, the local youth organisations and local youth councils work in a-synchronous manner. The European Charter on Local Youth Work can be used as a manual from local municipalities and institutions managed by them and also local organisations.

There is also a tool developed which can be used as a manual from local municipalities and institutions managed by them and also local organisations - The European Charter on Local Youth Work.

After clarifying both the essence and the exceptional importance of *meaningful youth participation*, the participants began the process of examining the local context in Bulgaria. This was done through presentations of existing programs aimed at improving the quality of youth work, shared by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the National Agency, and one of the most active municipalities in the field in Bulgaria — Gabrovo.

Already during the presentation of the opportunities they offer for organizations and for young people themselves, it became clear how essential strong communication is between different levels of governance in the country. It also highlighted the need for a clear framework in which each stakeholder can operate and develop — both personally and in terms of their initiatives — while also contributing to the broader local context and supporting partners.

In addition to the institutions, good practices were also presented by representatives from the Municipality of Kordelio, Greece, the *National Federation of Youth Associations* from Portugal, as well as the youth centers in Plovdiv and Vratsa, along with youth volunteers. Each of these examples illustrated once again that every stakeholder involved in youth work at different levels needs a well-developed local context and strong support structures.

In fact, Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, or other European instruments can play a crucial role in strengthening the connection between national and local levels.

After that, we climbed an imaginary ladder to look at the processes from one level higher. Because the wellbeing of young people in European countries it's not enough to be influenced only by the National Youth Work policy but also by the European one. Mr. Claudius Siebel outlined the main elements needed for development of a local Youth Work policy. Youth work has a key part of the implementation of the needs of the young people. For this the youth workers and professionals in the field must be qualified. He also emphasised on the fact that it should be initiated and developed more European cooperation and networking and European peer learning processes.

In his role as a member of the European Strategy Group of RAY Mr. Claudius Siebel illustrated some results as evidence about the importance of youth work and how it supports the development of young people. He has also outlined a few very successful programs in Germany related to youth participation and the importance of the common understanding and including it from the local authorities. He declared that political support and political anchoring are extremely important.

He emphasised on the fact that In Germany there is a strong framework because youth work is part of the law. There is also very good financial support for international youth activities. But despite this they also have to always fight with the municipalities for more youth services. And in this context research and evidence from the field help in lobbying. That is why he outlined the great importance of doing analyses and presenting real data.

Just for a short example he presented the summarized result of one of the many researches in Germany about the effectiveness and the results of youth work. One of the most relevant studies is a long term one on the aspects of international youth exchanges. The researchers asked participants of youth exchange 10 years after their participation about the effects and some of the results are very positive effects on the self related characteristics and competences; positive effects on openness, flexibility, composure; positive effects on self knowledge and self-image.

Guidelines and milestones on the long road toward the regulation of youth work in Bulgaria were presented by the Senior Project Officer of the Partnership between the European Commission and

the Council of Europe in the field of youth - Lazlo Milutinovits, as well as by Dr. Liliya Elenkova - a youth work expert, Doctor of Political Science, and one of the founders of the National Youth Forum.

Mr. Lazlo Milutinovits gave the context related to the Council of Europe's European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life and presented some of the tools developed to support youth sector engagement with specific topics.

Dr. Liliya Elenkova outlined the essence and the main priorities and pillars of youth policy. She also emphasised on the mandatory requirements for an effective, modern and European-oriented youth policy which is also important to frame a fruitful environment for meaningful youth participation.

Outcomes and evaluation

Over its two days, the conference "Meaningful Youth Participation in Democratic Life" achieved very positive outcomes, as confirmed by participants' feedback. The nature of the event - a conference - naturally leans toward a more static interaction between presenters and audience, and some feedback reflected this. However, to create a more balanced and engaging environment, several interactive sessions were included in the program.

These sessions gave participants the opportunity to connect with peers to discuss problems, explore possible solutions and challenges, and find inspiration through direct conversations with experienced experts in youth work and youth policy.

Two discussions were also held, one of which open for live questions allowed participants to speak directly, asking questions to the panelists. Representatives of municipalities and institutions had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with members of Europe Goes Local, discussing potential partnerships and support mechanisms.

Because of this space for genuine communication, such emerged as the most valued and sought-after element in the participants' feedback.

A key part of the conference was the presentation of over 30 good practices from local, national, and international initiatives connected to meaningful youth participation. Each presenter clearly outlined the essence of their initiative, and in the following panels, interested participants were able to ask questions about implementation, structure, and impact.

- Hearing the young people -

In some of the panels and the discussions it was emphasised that meaningful youth participation actually includes and very much depends on hearing them. Some of the questions that were discussed and answered during the whole event were:

How do we hear them? Did we ask them what they want and need, did we meet them, what instruments did we use to collect their voice? Were they objects or subjects?

How well did we include them in that activity? Were they only participants, did they choose the activity, in how many processes did they participate?

Do the municipalities listen? How often? How can the municipalities understand if they did their best to listen? How can we assure that a lot of municipalities will be included in that GREAT HEARING PROCESS? What did exactly the young people say? And what did we do with their voice?

Thoughts for the future - after the conference

Some of the events that were mentioned during the conference and that are planned to happen or being worked on are:

- Roadmap for youth work - from the national working group. This will be a tool that will help improve the status, as well as the recognition and development of youth work and youth workers in Bulgaria.
- Manual for local youth policy and a concept for a youth capital by the national group on local youth policy at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, on which results are expected by the end of the year
- Mr. Vladimir Yordanov from The National Agency outlined the role of the agency to foster discussions between the different stakeholders, municipalities, certain ministries, and youth organizations that can create the agenda for the future of youth work.

APPENDICES

Programme of the conference

TIME	Thursday 05/06	Friday 06/06
09.30	Arrivals	Key Note Speech by Claudius Siebel – Chairman of the Advisory Board of Europe Goes Local
10.00-11.30		Panel Discussion Dimensions of Quality in Youth Work
11.30-12.00		Comfort Break
12.00-13.00	Registrations and lunch	Evaluation & Closure
13.00 -14.00		Lunch
14.00-14.20	Official Opening of the Conference	Departures
14.20 -16.00	Panel Discussion Local Youth Work and Ensuring the Youth Perspective	
16.00-16.30	Comfort Break	
16.30-18.00	Sharing Good Practices	
18.00-19.00	Networking	
19.00	Dinner	

Useful links

[Human Resouce Development Centre](#)

[Europe Goes Local](#)

[European Charter on Local Youth Work](#)

[4th European Youth Work Convnetion](#)

[National Federation of Youth Associations](#)

[Westside Students Festival](#)

[Youth Centre - Vratsa](#)

[Youth Centre Plovdiv](#)

[The RAY Network](#)

- ["A SURGE OF FEELING CONNECTED TO EUROPE"](#)
- [RAY PART \(2019-2021\)](#)

[Have Your Say](#)

[About Time!](#)

[T-kit 15: Participatory youth policy](#)

[Insights](#)