



Dear members of the Congress

It's a great honor for my municipality to be here with you during the 10th anniversary of the European Local Democracy Week, because it is a very important and intelligent initiative that put altogether sharing experiences, ideas and challenges concerning this endless job that is building a better democracy.

If there is no other reason this one is enough to celebrate the Council of Europe idea of stimulating every year an initiative to disseminate our universal democratic values at the local government level.

In our municipality, we pay special attention to the processes of participation and transparency because we believe that they are the basis for a healthy and effective democratic life.

We believe that in society everyone should have an active role, especially young people, so we have developed an unprecedented young participatory budget in our country four years ago because it allows participation of children and young people between the ages of 6 and 35.

This participatory budget has been very useful because it is a way of directly listening to the wishes of this special public, but also because it is a very powerful tool for nurturing citizenship and for example we hold annually around 150 public sessions with young people to publicize the project but also and specially to alert young people to the importance of active, critical and effective participation.

Every year we organize full public accountability weeks in all the parishes of the municipality where we present the facts and figures of the local government and receive strong feedback in ideas or critics from the community in a very healthy relation with everybody.

Back there in my municipality that belongs to the metro area of Porto, and has around 100 000 inhabitants, because of all these investment and activities around citizenship we were challenged by one of our partners (the university) to adhere to European Local Democracy Week, and in 2015 in the beginning of our mandate we decided to organize a seminar about the 30 years of the European Charter of Local Autonomy and it was very well received by the community.

In 2016, we challenged all the units that work within our projects of strengthening citizenship to organize a complete week pack of activities to celebrate local democracy, and we must say it was the better decision we made.

So in the second year we organized a complete week of activities with the first short course in local citizenship, the presentation of the youth participatory budget, a conference about transparency and its importance to gain trust in a better local government, a theater play about the everyday democratic challenges of a condominium administration, the presentation of our human library project that is a very simple way to fight against prejudice by inviting a person that represent a victim of prejudice to turn itself in a book and talk about that with students and elder people and a workshop about engagement and participatory democracy.

This year to mark the 10th anniversary of the European Local Democracy Week we organized a 11 days pack of activities that still run, with an international seminar about Participatory Budgets and Democracy with high level speakers of several countries and the Portuguese network of participatory municipalities, the third edition of the short course in local citizenship, two theater plays about democracy and civilizational questions and problems like the fight against prejudice, a workshop about methodologies concerning voting within participatory budgets, a short course of gestural language and an exhibition about democracy and the use of cartoons to help citizen understand the way local democracy works following the launch of the first Portuguese short guide of local citizenship with cartoons also, and the presentation of a new project of local budget accounting with the cooperation of a specialized university.

We cannot talk about other experiences of course but concerning ourselves we say that your simple but powerful initiative was very important for us because it brought added value for a lot of single initiatives we do the rest of the year within a project created in 2014 with the aim of investing in a more empowered and participative community.

We don't think there is a single "recipe" to engage the community in the European local democracy week events like a panacea because every community has its peculiarities even when we talk about democracy, and must respect it as long as the universal democratic values are the same, so what we think is that the best way to achieve more engagement of each community is to promote citizenship during the rest of the year, exploring all the opportunities to stimulate democratic participation but that of course depends always in some percentage of the will of the momentum politicians and if they truly believe in the process of empowerment of the people, because when you open that door you cannot close it again.

We believe that the best way to keep the different publics motivated to participate year after year in these celebrations is to innovate not only in the type of events we include but also in the type of audience we embrace, because more and more we have to manage high segmented communities and that is a great and difficult challenge starting with the language to communicate with youngsters for example, believe or not but they often don't understand the language of politicians or public administration!

We also believe that boldness and creativity are necessary here, for example, this year we included in the celebrations an activity aimed at a very specific public, the municipal employees who had the opportunity to participate in a course of Portuguese sign language specifically intended for public service.

Another of the formulas that we never tried to neglect is art. Year after year, we seek through art to integrate and retain the public, and that's why we present plays of theater.

And finally, we try to be true to ourselves by always presenting real examples of what we do throughout the year and which we "celebrate" on this date as examples of good citizenship practice. Because we know they reflect actions which the population knows and participate.

The date of the European Local Democracy Week for us has not been a very relevant factor, except for this year because of the date of the local elections (1 October) in the period immediately after the elections and therefore was a little bit more difficult. We think it could make sense for a change, perhaps for November or June simply to take more advantage of the school calendar but, in our point of view, the date is not the issue.

The European Local Democracy Week is an initiative with great potential and we must continue to do it because if it ends then we send the wrong message to the local governments and we must be careful in this dangerous and strange times of populism solutions, in a kind of “low cost” or “fast food” democratic options that are very sexy in the first times but as often happen with simplified answers for very complex questions it turns in something very different from vibrant and healthy democracies.

We believe in democracy but that’s not enough, we must care our common garden of democracy every single day with actions not only words, because the weeds of every kind are always around.

This is what we can share with other municipalities and the Congress.

Thanks for your attention!

José Manuel Ribeiro
Mayor of Valongo Municipality