Building and protecting local democracy

Celebrating 20 years of the European Charter for Equality and presenting new insights from ODELL

1 December 2026 | 4-7 pm | 1 Square de Meeûs, Brussels (CEMR, 1st floor) | Register here

Twenty years after the launch of the **European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life**, local and regional governments remain at the forefront of advancing democratic participation, representation and equality. The Charter has become Europe's leading framework supporting local and regional authorities in embedding equality into leadership, decision-making and public policy. Signatories have demonstrated that equality is not merely a social objective but a democratic one, improving representation, strengthening legitimacy and supporting more inclusive governance.

At the same time, concerns about harassment, intimidation and attacks against elected representatives are increasingly recognised as threats to democratic participation itself. Through the **Observatory for the Defence of Democracy at the Local Level (ODELL)**, CEMR and its partners have begun to document these trends and their impacts on democratic engagement, representation and local governance. By generating evidence on the pressures faced by local elected representatives across Europe, ODELL contributes to broader efforts to strengthen democratic resilience and safeguard participation in public life.

The event will therefore explore **how equality, participation, representation and democratic resilience are interconnected challenges**. Drawing on twenty years of experience through the Charter and new evidence generated by ODELL, it will highlight the role of local and regional governments both in broadening democratic participation and in ensuring that those who serve their communities can do so safely and effectively.

Objectives

The event will:

- Celebrate the 20th anniversary of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life.
- Demonstrate the contribution of local governments to the EU policy on equality, inclusion and advancing local democracy.
- Present evidence from ODELL's annual report on challenges facing local elected representatives
- Examine the implications of harassment, intimidation, and online abuse for democratic resilience.

The session will be moderated by journalist **Júlia Manresa Nogueras**, author of the book 'Women in the Shadow of European Construction'.

The meeting will be held in English and in French.

DRAFT

Agenda

4 – 4:15 pm | Opening

Welcome and introduction: **Fabrizio Rossi**, CEMR Secretary General.

Opening remarks: political address by **Flo Clucas**, CEMR Standing Committee on Gender Equality Chair and Councillor of Cheltenham Council.

4.15 – 4.55 pm | The 20th anniversary of the Charter: Achievements, voices and future ambitions & New evidence on threats to democratic participation at the local level (ODELL Report)

Twenty years on, Charter signatories continue to demonstrate how local action can advance equality, participation and representation. This discussion provides an opportunity to reflect on achievements, lessons learned and priorities for the future, before turning to new evidence from ODELL on the challenges facing democratic participation and local political leadership.

Discussion with Charter signatories: Bonn / Frankfurt / Mannheim (TBC), La Rochelle / Aubagne (with consecutive interpretation), Ukrainian City; Exchanges with the audience

Presentation of the ODELL findings by **Matteo Valleto**, Bocconi University and co-author of the ODELL Report 2026.

4.55 – 5:55 pm | Political discussion: Advancing participation and safeguarding local democracy

The Charter and ODELL reflect complementary efforts to strengthen local democracy. Building on twenty years of progress in promoting equality and representation, this discussion will explore how local and regional governments can advance democratic participation while responding to emerging challenges affecting democratic engagement and local political leadership.

Panellists:

- Representative of the City of Bilbao / the Basque Government / EUDEL (TBC)
- **Marie-Hélène Boulanger**, Acting Director DG JUST, Directorate C, European Commission (TBC)
- **Alexandra Geese**, Member of Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM), European Parliament
- **Flo Clucas**, Councillor of Cheltenham Council and CEMR Standing Committee on Gender Equality Chair

5.55 – 6 pm | Concluding remarks

Christoph Schnaudigel, CEMR President and President of the County of Karlsruhe.

6 - 7 pm | Networking cocktail

More information:

Carol Thomas, Senior Policy Adviser on Governance, Gender Equality, Local Democracy
carol.thomas@ccre-cemr.org