

Working Session 5 (specifically selected topic): Ensuring equal enjoyment of rights and equal participation in political and public life

Rapporteur: Ms. Nevena Jovanovic, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Serbia to the OSCE

No. of statements: 28

Delegations: 11

Civil Society: 17

OSCE Institutions: -

International Organizations: -

Media: -

Rights of Reply: 10

The session's moderator, Dr. Marcin Walecki, Head of Democratization Department of ODIHR opened the session by underlining that the OSCE human dimension commitments acknowledge the need for additional efforts to increase the participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities and Roma and Sinti in political and public life. He referred to the 2009 Athens and 2007 Madrid OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions calling on participating States to support and promote the participation of women and youth in democratic processes, as well as to the 1991 Moscow Document in which the OSCE participating States agreed to take steps to ensure the equal opportunity of persons with disabilities to participate fully in the life of their society and to promote the appropriate participation of such persons in decision-making in fields concerning them. Dr. Walecki also emphasized that demographic data revealed that under-represented groups in fact account for a large percentage of the global population.

The first introducer, Mr. Dastan Bekeshev, Member of Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic spoke about participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life. He paid a special attention to the enjoyment of electoral rights (both passive and active) for disabled persons. Mr. Bekeshev stressed that OSCE participating States should ensure that voting processes, materials and facilities are fully accessible to all persons with disabilities. He also emphasised the importance of ensuring voting secrecy for them, which is often not a case. Mr. Bekeshev underlined the importance of combating intolerance and discrimination towards persons with disabilities, stressing that persons with disabilities should be seen as active members of the society, included in all aspects of public and political life.

The second introducer, Ms. Henriett Dinok, Executive Director of Romaversitas Foundation noticed that many Roma and Sinti people, especially Roma girls and women are still facing significant challenges to their participation in political and public life. She emphasized that marginalization of Roma and Sinti people results in their absence from the decision making processes, particularly related to the topics of their special interest. She underlined that participation in political and public life is not possible without enhancing their skills and providing opportunities. Ms. Dinok also drew attention to the increasing number of hate crime incidents against Roma and Sinti people globally, as well as to multiple forms of discrimination that Roma women are facing with.

It was emphasized that equal participation in political and public life is an integral part of a cohesive and inclusive society. A number of participants flagged to the attention various barriers that exist to political participation for under-represented groups such as discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, nationality, ethnicity, disability, nationality, etc.

A special focus in discussion was put on different under-represented groups, such as women, youth, Roma and Sinti and persons with disabilities. It was underlined that inclusion of these groups in decision-making processes would allow them to more effectively participate in public life and to enjoy their rights. In this regard, education was pointed out as one of the main preconditions for ensuring the equal rights for all members of society and their full social inclusion. Discrimination, prejudices, economical problems as well as non-access to education were listed among the most pressing challenges the under-represented groups are facing.

A number of delegations expressed their concerns over the fact that the right to equal political participation is often subjected to exceptions.

Several delegations regretted that OSCE participating States were not able to agree on the proposed Ministerial Decision on Roma and Sinti Political Participation at last year's Ministerial Council in Hamburg.

Recommendations made by participants during this session include (non-exhaustive list):

Recommendations to the OSCE participating States:

- Ensure equal enjoyment of rights and equal participation of women, persons belonging to marginalized groups or minorities, persons with disabilities and persons in vulnerable situations, including young persons, to participate in political and public life, including through identifying and eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices;
- Support policies, initiatives and effective measures that promote non-discrimination, inclusiveness and equal access to opportunities, including access to education and training;
- Enhance the OSCE's focus on supporting implementation of UNSCR 1325 and its follow-on resolutions, including through tailored assistance to participating States in development and implementation of national action plans on women, peace and security;
- Continue to implement the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area as well as Ministerial Council Decisions 6/08 and 4/13, including by addressing practical obstacles to enhanced public and political participation of Roma and Sinti persons, paying particular attention to the effective and equal participation of Roma and Sinti women;
- Find proactive ways to enhance youth political participation and activism, including via new forms of on-line political participation, the inclusion of youth perspective into the political debate and a strengthened role of youth in the promotion of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms;

- Implement the 2009 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Women's Participation in Political and Public Life as well as the OSCE's 2004 Gender Action Plan;
- Implement the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 3/13 on Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief;
- Take into account election observation reports and implement the recommendations that they contain, concerning specifically election participation conditions which are important for young people, women and vulnerable groups;
- Evaluate the Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders with a view of better reflecting the political and public participation within the OSCE area.