

**Working Session 4 (specifically selected topic):
Ensuring equal enjoyment of rights and equal participation in political and public life**

Rapporteur: Ms. Eglė Maier, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Lithuania to the OSCE

No. of statements: 27

Delegations: 11

Civil Society: 16

OSCE Institutions: -

International Organizations: -

Media: -

Rights of Reply: 9

In Working Session 4, a specifically selected topic of equal participation in political and public life was discussed.

The introducer, Dr. Dimitra Petrova, co-founder of Equal Rights Trust, emphasized the need of having a broad net of comprehensive equality rights established in the OSCE region, as currently there are huge differences between the developed legislation in different participating States. She noted the concerns related to discrimination on the basis of political opinion, pointing out that even though it is reflected in all instruments of the international human rights law, there have been no court cases. She stated the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and noted that in recent years there is regress observed in human rights area.

Dr. Petrova highlighted the relationship between the freedom of expression and equality and stressed that in the 21st century human rights are equally valid online as well as offline. Turning to the issue of collecting statistical data on discriminatory practices, she noted that shortcomings keep persisting among participating States in this area. Political participation of youth was also emphasized noting that both youth and children should be involved when taking decisions that concern them. She stated that the option of electronic voting should be ensured and noted that the whole notion of political participation is changing nowadays, becoming broader and richer.

In conclusion, Dr. Petrova posed a question for reflection: does the Internet help fostering political participation, or is it debilitating political sphere and makes more harm than good? She noted a huge degree of polarization on these issues and stressed that it is up to the user to decide which way the information and communication technologies are used; government bodies and democracy stakeholders have these tools in their hands.

A few delegations referred to the existing OSCE principles and commitments in the area of equal political participation, which were set out in the Helsinki Final Act, the 1989 Vienna Document and the 1991 Moscow Document. A vast majority of speakers noted that despite these existing commitments, many citizens continue to face

obstacles, such as discrimination, in exercising their right to participate in political and public life as well as of other human rights that enable it.

A number of delegations and civil society representatives emphasized the importance of protecting electoral rights and noted that democratic elections are crucial for democracy. It was stated that no voting system is perfect; therefore it is the responsibility of all individuals to protect these rights. One delegation pointed out to the electoral system flaws in some other participating States urging to consider measures to address these situations. One civil society organization highlighted electoral system flaws in one participating State pointing out that existing power structures tend to replicate themselves by leveraging administrative power to silence opposition, or by compromising the administration of elections through the composition of election commissions. Another civil society representative noted that the rate of Muslim voters remains dramatically lower than that of other groups, and suggested that religious organizations preaching against democracy should lose their status as religious entities.

Calls on ODIHR were made by one civil society organization to follow up on its recommendations from 2013 election observation mission in one participating State. The same civil society organization has also urged for the adoption of a strategy on political prisoners in participating States.

A number of participating States and civil society organizations expressed their concerns regarding ongoing harassment in some participating States towards their marginalized national minorities, opposition representatives, and environmental defenders through various legal and social exclusions. Several participants raised the issue of non-citizenship. The speakers drew attention to concrete cases and situations, calling to end the ongoing restrictive practices.

A few civil society representatives lamented that in some participating States there is a decline in participation in political and public life noting the detriment of stratified society where an elite ruling class controls the civic and political environment. It was stated that civil society should have the right to condemn dictators and others who impede equal access to public and political participation.

A number of participating States and civil society organizations also made points related to ongoing discrimination of marginalized groups, including women, youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and Roma and Sinti. It was stressed that these groups must be protected from discrimination in political and public life.

Equality of women and men was mentioned explicitly in a number of interventions expressing concern that women are often underrepresented in public bodies. A few participating States shared their experiences on strengthening women's political and economic participation, including by establishing a quota system in order to enhance women's political participation. A few civil society representatives commented that prevailing issues in the OSCE region include gender inequality, domestic violence, little access to quality education, and traditional early marriage; these factors contribute to lack of access to equal participation in political and public life for women.

One participating State raised a point of order protesting against an expression used by another participating State during its right of reply. Subsequently, the latter participating State responded by raising its own point of order stressing the unacceptability of such move.

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 of minorities, including Roma and Sinti, persons with disabilities and persons in vulnerable groups, including youth, to participate in political and public life;
- Support policies, initiatives and effective measures that promote non-discrimination, inclusiveness and equal access to opportunities, including access to education and training;
- Find proactive ways to enhance youth political participation and activism, including via new forms of online participation, the inclusion of youth perspective into the political debate and strengthen youth role in the promotion of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- Develop legislation in the area of equal rights, including on discrimination on the basis of political opinion;
- Ensure human rights on-line as well as off-line;
- Collect and publish relevant statistical data on discriminatory practices, as this is an important element for setting out the policy measures;
- Ensure the option of electronic voting;
- Re-categorize religious leaders or organizations preaching against democracy as political organizations;
- Highlight importance of environmental rights and stop harassing of environmental activists.

Recommendations to the OSCE executive structures:

- Follow up on OSCE/ODIHR recommendations from 2013 election observation mission in one participating State;
- Urge for the adoption of a strategy on political prisoners in participating States.