

Keynote for ACEEEO Annual Session: **THEY VOTE FOR THE FIRST TIME, BUT NOT THE LAST – GENERAL TRENDS, THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS, INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, and dear colleagues,

Good morning. On behalf of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, it is a pleasure and an honor to participate in this roundtable discussion. I would like to express my appreciation to the ACEEEO, for their vision in bringing us together to talk broadly about youth political participation as part of this annual conference. And I sincerely apologize for my technical difficulties at the beginning of this session. Flexibility is the name of the game these days :)

The values of broad participation in decision-making and pluralistic democratic institutions lie at the very core of the OSCE commitments. Those values and those commitments are even more relevant today when we witness a certain backslide in democracy, exacerbated by the global pandemic. We start today with the understanding that democratic institutions, are made stronger when the voices of many, and especially young people, women, and other traditionally underrepresented groups are included. We know that truly representative democracies are more resilient and deliver better outcomes for citizens.

An honest conversation about how to reinvigorate democratic institutions **requires the energy, input, and representation of all young people, in particular, at the decision-making table, as they will most acutely face the consequences of our actions today.** Young people have always been – and remain today – a key group for the OSCE’s vision of comprehensive security. OSCE participating States have acknowledged through a preponderance of ministerial-level declarations and other documents that “youth are an important part of society” and have highlighted “the role that [youth] can play in supporting participating States in the implementation of commitments in all three dimensions”. To put it shortly – youth is both our future and our present.

It is well known at this point, that recent research shows that globally, youth satisfaction with democracy is declining – not only in absolute terms, but also relative to how older generations felt at the same stages in life. We are learning about the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on young people: having to study and graduate online, without the usual support networks, some are now entering a job market that has even fewer entry points. In response to today’s crisis, **institutions, like yours, have a unique opportunity to build more inclusive and responsive democracies,** to give young people the voice they deserve and make use of their energy, talents and out of the box solutions. To give them reason to believe in democracy again.

In ODIHR, **we believe, that if we want to strengthen our democracies, we must include young people.** Young men and women, young persons with disabilities, young people from underrepresented groups, including Roma and Sinti -- all of them. And we believe that the following must be prioritized to make it happen.

First – *Bringing young people’s voices to the big table.*

Governments, parliaments, international organizations, indeed all public institutions must become better at including young people meaningfully in their agendas. Young people are one of the largest constituencies in any society – we need to bring down institutional barriers to youth participation. Imagine how much stronger public bodies could be if they engaged this key constituency to inform policies with an eye towards future equity rather than short-term political gain. Some ACEEEO members are already working in this direction by lowering the age requirements for voting and standing for election, exploring youth quotas for elected bodies, and implementing other measures to bring down institutional barriers to youth participation. We need more such actions.

Second – *Investing in youth energy and vision.*

Many refer to the younger generation as “future leaders.” But young people are already leading work on issues that are important for their communities and societies. Countless young women and men have responded to the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They have worked as health workers and scientists, researchers and innovators. They run online (and offline) awareness campaigns and volunteer to help their communities. Young people have also taken to the streets, at levels not seen in recent memory, to demand change on critically important issues. These are not the actions of “future” leaders and citizens, they are actions of engaged citizens making meaningful contributions to their communities *today*. As such, these actions and initiatives should be invested in and brought to scale for the benefit of everyone in our societies. This will require courage and financial commitment from public bodies to fund youth-driven initiatives at meaningful levels.

Now I’d like to take a few more moments to reflect on the ACEEEO Youth Symposium from earlier in 2021, which many of you attended. At that meeting several colleagues made very interesting and relevant contributions. On behalf of ODIHR I shared the [Agenda for Youth and Democracy](#), which is organized around five postulates and includes concrete suggestions to a wide range of stakeholders, including public bodies at various levels.

Rather than re-hash each postulate here, I’d like to simply list them again, and challenge you to consider what it would look like in your institution if you were to adopt some practices addressing each one:

Postulate 1: The need for systematic change: an appeal to OSCE participating States

This postulate serves as an acknowledgement that young people are often marginalized by current institutional systems and seek to channel their voices through non-conventional ways. Likewise democratic institutions seem reluctant to fully understand and respond to the needs of a new generation, thus newly emerged groups and platforms are filling the gap that traditional actors are not able to fill. What would systemic change look like in your context?

Postulate 2: Ensure the independence of youth organizations

Often the functioning and effectiveness of youth organizations ultimately depends on access to public funds and a youth-favorable environment. ODIHR's analysis suggests that the bureaucratic operating methods of many institutions, as well as a perceived low return-on-investment propagate a cycle of either low or no financial support for youth activities. A lack of adequate resources diminishes the role youth organizations can play in resolving current social challenges and hinders their ability to be present at the decision-making table. This makes the case for sustainable funding to ensure the independent functioning of youth organizations. How does your institution engage with youth-led organizations?

Postulate 3: Reform Institutions: ensure decision-making bodies are inclusive of young people

This can be thought of as “youth mainstreaming” by another name. Here institutions can engage young people in helping design institutional policies and strategies. Does your institution invite young people to advise on/help design policies and programs?

Postulate 4: Uphold activism and creativity

Recent research suggests that youth engagement is increasingly channeled through non-conventional means. Young people are more likely to use digital tools to make their voices heard, including signing petitions and expressing opinions on social media. Does your institution capitalize on these resources, reaching young people where they are, in a way that is understandable to them?

Postulate 5: Invest in civic education and media literacy

It's well known in this crowd that civic education is the foundation for an activity and engaged citizenry. Within the context of this event we found that the young people who participated felt that NGOs and other international organizations in their countries were the best sources of civic education, rather than public institutions, including election administration bodies, and schools. This was a big surprise to as an advocate for both formal and non-formal civic education. ODIHR works in the direction cross-departmentally combining human rights and civic education by developing tools and guidelines for participating States to consider when strengthening these

programs. *Does your institution work with other organizations, creating partnerships to develop quality, practical education and information programs for younger constituents?*

To close, I'd like to highlight two forthcoming tools in support of youth political participation:

1. A forthcoming **Handbook on observing youth electoral participation** this handbook will build on ODIHR's election observation experience in this thematic area, and it will give guidance on existing OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards related to youth electoral participation, and it will explore avenues to support youth participation in all areas of the electoral cycle.
2. And finally a forthcoming, **Guidelines on Youth Political Participation** which will explore the topic through the lenses of national parliaments, political parties, and broader engagement in public life. The intention behind the publication is that it will offer OSCE participating States a holistic approach for conducting institutional assessments through a youth lens, and provide a comprehensive topical introduction to youth political participation in the OSCE region, and ultimately serve as a compliment to ODIHR's other body of work related to inclusive, participatory democracies.

On behalf of ODIHR colleagues, our hope is that these tools will contribute to the OSCE's repertoire of resources for OSCE participating States and ACEEEO members, and support your work in a practical way in enhancing civic and political participation of young people. I'll stop here and welcome further discussion with you!

Thank you.