



Community
of Democracies



Summary Report

The Role of Youth in Democratic Resilience

Side-event held in the margins of the 73rd UNGA
organized by the CoD and hosted by Romania

This summary report was developed by the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies.

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Introduction

Resilience is commonly defined as the flexibility with which a social system recovers from crises. Since 2017, democracy's resilience in many countries has appeared fragile. The rise of populism and increased migration has often led to increased xenophobia and social polarization, both of which undermine inclusive development planning. Furthermore, corruption, state capture, backsliding, and inequality threaten not only the integrity of democratic institutions themselves, but also undermine young people's faith in the stability and viability of democratic governance.

There have been calls for better research into the role youth can play in improving decision-making processes related to these challenges. Young people are a crucial asset in states' development planning and must be involved in policy making aiming to improve accountability, inclusive representation, transparency, and political inclusion. Closing the gap, or 'disconnect', between youth and their government is crucial to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions. Indeed, in recent years, youth movements such as in Venezuela and Egypt have demonstrated that young people are key assets in promoting change.

It is important to highlight that on 24 September 2018 the United Nations (UN) launched the 2030 Strategy and Global Partnership Initiative for Youth. This initiative takes the cue from the Security Council's Resolution 2250 (2015) that urged Member States to increase the representation of youth in decision-making at all levels, and from the most recent Resolution 2419 (2018) which calls for increasing the role of youth in negotiating and implementing peace agreements.

The Strategy's action plan comprises five priorities, among which, the most relevant to the panel discussion organized by the Community is the fifth one: Peace and Resilience Building - support young people as catalysts for peace and security and humanitarian action.

“ON THE LONG TERM, PROVIDING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUTH IN POLITICS PLAYS AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN GENERATING STABILITY, PREDICTABILITY AND RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES” - SG THOMAS E. GARRETT



The Community of Democracies (CoD) held a panel discussion on "The Role of Youth in Democratic Resilience" in the margins of the 73rd United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York on September 25, 2018.

The side-event was an opportunity for Governing Council (GC) member states to have an open conversation about the challenges to youth engagement in democracies and possible concerted actions in response to these challenges. The event was hosted by Romania, Governing Council member of the Community of Democracies, and coordinated by the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD).

The side-event hosted high level representatives of the Community's Governing Council as well as young leaders from Syria, El Salvador and Romania as panel speakers.

The panel discussed the role that youth play in strengthening democracy, common challenges to youth's civic engagement as well as good practices for increasing youth political participation.

More specifically, the side-event addressed:

- The role of youth in protecting democratic systems and building democratic resilience.
- Ways to better engage with youth activists, leaders and organizations to improve the perception of the benefits of democratic systems.
- Good practices on how to enhance and promote the participation of youth in decision-making at the national, regional and international level.
- Reducing barriers to youth engagement, including poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education, with a view to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

HIGH-LEVEL ADDRESSES

- H.E. Mr. Audun HALVORSEN
State Secretary to Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ine Eriksen Søreide

- H.E. Mr. George ADESOLA OGUNTADE
Ambassador, High Commissioner of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the United Kingdom

- H.E. Mr. Yoshifumi OKAMURA
Ambassador, Special Envoy for UN Security Council Reform Affairs, Human Rights and International Peace and Stability, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan

- H.E. Mr. Milenko SKOKNIC
Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations

- H.E. Mr. Tudor ULIANOVSCHI
Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Republic of Moldova

- Mr. Mark GWOZDECKY
Assistant Deputy Minister, International Security and Political Affairs, Global Affairs, Canada

- Mr. James KARIUKI
Director of Multilateral Policy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, United Kingdom

- Mr. Andy RABENS
Special Advisor for Global Youth Issues, U.S. Department of State

- Mr. Darius STANIULIS
Director of the UN, International Organizations and Human Rights, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lithuania

Participants

WELCOMING REMARKS

- H.E. Mr. Teodor MELEŞCANU
Minister Foreign Affairs of Romania

OPENING REMARKS

- Mr. Thomas E. GARRETT
Secretary General
Community of Democracies

PANELISTS

- Mr. John T. WRIGHT
President and Founder of "Nuestro Tiempo"
(Political Party), Former Member of Parliament of El Salvador

- Ms. Rajaa ALTALLI
Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD), Syria

- Mr. Valentin FLOREA
Secretary-General of United Nations Youth Association of Romania (BISMUN)

Welcoming Remarks

by H.E. Mr. Teodor Meleşcanu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania

What a pleasure to be here and co-host an event dedicated to Youth in the heart of the global diplomacy laboratory! I am grateful to the Secretary General of the Community of Democracies who, so enthusiastically engaged in the preparation of this event, as well as to my colleagues and friends who found some time in their agenda during this extremely intense week of the UN General Assembly and joined us.

Dear friends, let me confess that every opportunity to speak about young people and their potential is very rewarding to me. Because young people are not just our future, they are primarily our present. I, myself, have found a fulfilling experience both in working with them – we have very many young diplomats in our ministry - and in passing on my experience to my young colleagues. Most of the time, I take energy from them and, inspired by them, I convince myself that impossible is often possible!

The world today is home to the largest generation of young people ever. We must therefore reset our focus on youth. Young people should be engaged in global conversations and decisions on issues that affect us all. We must empower them; increase their participation in society and their access to education, training and jobs. In this respect, I congratulate the Secretary General Garrett for placing Youth in the Community of Democracies' Strategic Plan adopted this year, as one of three key cross-cutting issues, alongside gender equality and development.

Romania has always supported the Youth dimension as an important pillar of democracy. The theme of Youth will be taken up during our mandate as the future Presidency of the Community of Democracies, due to start in September next year. We intend to place a special focus precisely on the youth agenda. In this perspective, I find the event today of particular importance, as we rely on the support of all stakeholders for a meaningful mandate. Democracy might not be fully accomplished everywhere. But the aspiration is always there! Democracy represents an ideal as much as the best governance system does. An ideal, that we have learned to fight for! Democracy is based on trust, on the common assumption that elected people and independent institutions are working together for the best interest of the community.

Today, on many palaces around the world, this trust is eroded by populism, fundamentalist and radical movements that find their breeding grounds especially among young people disillusioned with the current state of affairs. In recent years, we have lived a grim reality of increased radical violence and propaganda targeting exactly young people.

The major challenges for us remain:

- How can we inspire, build trust, and educate young people in the democratic spirit of working for the common good?
- How can we enable them to reject undemocratic and autocratic tendencies?
- How can we better benefit of their insights and ideas?

They should be allowed and encouraged to be curious, to learn to be tolerant, to avoid clichés, to understand that diversity is a treasure, to fight for their rights, while being aware and respectful of other people's rights. International attention to the link between peace and education has grown, especially at UN level. In the Romanian schooling system, civic education was introduced years ago and it worked.

Political discourse is another area where youth participation is critical, including in multilateral fora. Many of you have already been engaging with the United Nations at youth-focused events and through model U.N. conferences. This participation is essential to having your positions and views reflected in the work we do.

At this junction, I would suggest making a better use of the Agenda 2030, where the specific issues related to youth, such as unemployment, lack of political representation and of real opportunities to voice their concerns, are largely covered under different Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, we have the very first Resolution on youth, peace and security (UNSCR 2250), adopted by the UN Security Council in 2015, at our disposal. It emphasizes the importance of youth as agents of change in the preservation and promotion of peace and security. We have also welcomed the launching, just yesterday, of the UN Youth Strategy at the High-Level Event Youth2030, co-hosted by the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth and UNICEF Executive Director. The UN Youth Strategy seeks to guide the entire UN-System to empower young people to realize their full potential and stand up for their rights at global, regional and country-level.

The young people should be actors of democracy!

I am optimistic that today's debate will bring up hints for enhancing the resilience capacity of our democracies, as well as concrete solutions for better taking into account the specific problems of the young generation nowadays.

Opening Remarks

by Mr. Thomas E. Garrett, Secretary General of the Community of Democracies

We live in a world of unprecedented interconnectivity and young people are the main driving force behind the extraordinary progress of internet and communication technologies as well as its main beneficiaries. We should encourage the development of informal networks and platforms for sharing experiences as valuable tools for youth engagement, for social and political participation. It goes without saying that the Community of Democracies stands by the values of freedom of expression and association and encourages states to reject censorship online (as well as offline) as ultimately counter-productive.

The Community of Democracies understands the important role that youth play in strengthening democracy. They should be empowered, their participation in decision-making processes encouraged and their voices heard.

The Warsaw Declaration, the founding document of the Community of Democracies, defines the 19 essential principles for the effective establishment and consolidation of democracy; among these, the right of every person to take part in the conduct of public affairs, which highlights the importance of inclusive decision-making. Moreover, the Warsaw Declaration provides for "the right of every person to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, including to establish or join their own political parties, civic groups, trade unions or other organizations with the necessary legal guarantees to allow them to operate freely on a basis of equal treatment before the law."

On the long term, providing an enabling environment for youth in politics plays an essential role in generating stability, predictability and responsible conduct in democratic societies. It may also represent a solution to the apathy and disinterest of young people in elections and politics in general, motivated by a perception of marginalization in the decision-making process. This is a challenge faced by all our societies. We should do everything in our power to reverse this trend of disengagement, that poses a serious threat to the future of our democracies, by ensuring the effective participation of youth.

Therefore, we encourage member states of the CoD to take steps in this direction by opening up their political environments to the voices of the young generation. This could be done by associating youth to the undertakings of democratic parties, to elections-related activities or to other different types of meaningful political debate and interaction.

The importance of including young people in decision-making cannot be overstated. With almost half of the population under 30 years of age, according to an UNDP report, as the future leaders of society, ensuring young people's meaningful participation in policymaking is vital for ensuring resilient democracies. We are convinced that when given their democratic rights to express their opinions freely, youth are in the prime position to address fundamental challenges such as limitations to equal access to education and employment, discrimination, and unequal pay.

Nevertheless, according to the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2 out of 3 countries do not consult young people as a part of the process of preparing poverty reduction strategies or national development plans. The formation and founding of national youth parliaments and councils should be encouraged, such as the UK Youth Parliament, to increase dialogue and advocate issues for youth. There is also the valuable format of the International Model United Nations Association which brings together young people from all around the world in order to familiarize them with diplomatic negotiations.

Leading by example, the internship program at the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD), puts into practice their empowerment, giving youth the opportunity to work and have a voice at the forefront of democracy and human rights.

Civic education should also be mainstreamed and strengthened to empower youth, to support their effective participation and help them achieve their full potential so that they can fulfil their role as responsible citizens and future leaders. Education for peace is another essential tool for strengthening resilience, as we must ensure that education systems contribute to peaceful and sustainable societies especially in post-conflict environments.

It is especially important to engage with young people in countries transitioning to democracy, so dialogue can be opened, and best practices shared in assisting them during their transition.

Multi-stakeholder organizations and regional and global bodies should invest in youth and strengthen their involvement at the global, regional and national levels. Today we are very lucky to have with us three young people from very different geographical regions, with different backgrounds and fields of interest, and I am looking forward to hearing their experiences and opinions.

Highlights from Governing Council Member States High-Level Addresses

H.E Mr. Yoshifumi OKAMURA, Japan

“DEMOCRACY CANNOT BE ACHIEVED OVERNIGHT. EDUCATION AND CULTIVATION OF THE YOUTH CANNOT BE ACHIEVED OVERNIGHT, EITHER. THESE CAN ONLY BE IMPROVED FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT. JAPAN WILL CONTINUE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE ENHANCEMENT OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND CAPACITY-BUILDING OF YOUTH IN THE WORLD, IN COLLABORATION WITH PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES OF THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES.”

Mr. Mark GWOZDECKY, Canada

“IT IS HEARTENING TO KNOW THAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE A KEY ELEMENT OF HOW YOUTH SEE OUR FUTURE IN A DIGITAL WORLD. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE. TODAY'S YOUTH WANT TO ENSURE THAT HUMAN RIGHTS, FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, AND EQUALITY ARE FULLY RESPECTED IN OUR WORK TO REINFORCE DEMOCRACY, FOSTER INCLUSION AND STRENGTHEN THE RESILIENCE OF OUR SOCIETIES.”

Mr. James KARIUKI, United Kingdom

“TODAY'S DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA ALLOW YOUNG PEOPLE TO ACCESS INFORMATION ON A GLOBAL SCALE LIKE NEVER BEFORE. YOUTH DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION OF THE 21ST CENTURY OFTEN TAKES PLACE ON THESE PLATFORMS. IF WE WANT TO ENGAGE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE, WE MUST DO SO WITH THEM ON THEIR PLATFORMS AND START LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING.”

H.E Mr. Audun HALVORSEN, Norway

“IN VIEW OF THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES THAT EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES ARE FACING TODAY, THE SCHOOLS ARE WELL PLACED TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG POLITICAL AND CIVIC LEADERS TO REFLECT ON HOW DEMOCRACY SHOULD RESPOND TO THESE NEW REALITIES.”

Mr. Darius STANIULIS, Lithuania

“YOUNG CITIZENS MAKE UP A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE GLOBAL POPULATION THUS EVEN SMALL IMPROVEMENTS IN YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY WILL LEAD TO A GREAT DIFFERENCE IN SUSTAINABILITY AND INTEGRITY OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AND INSTITUTIONS. YET, WE STILL LACK POLICIES AND MECHANISMS THAT COULD BUILD DEEP AND SUBSTANTIAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INTO POLICYMAKING, CIVIC ACTIVITIES AND DECISION-MAKING. DEMOCRACY MUST GROW ALONGSIDE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE GROWING INTO ADULTS AND THIS IS HOW WE WILL DEVELOP RESPONSIBLE AND MATURE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES.”

Panel Discussion

on the Role of Youth in Democratic Resilience

Panelists of the side-event discussed the importance of the role of youth in safeguarding both democratic systems and ensuring democratic resilience. Since youth represents the future of democracies as the forthcoming generation of policy makers, they should be recognized as powerful and active agents of change in democratic systems. Key aspects of inclusive, representative, and sustainable democratic societies include youth empowerment and participation in leadership and decision-making processes at the regional, national and international level.

Additionally, the discussion on the role of youth in good governance was built around the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The speakers underlined, youth empowerment as an essential component to be included in the development, implementation and follow-up of national-level action plans. Such plans should be implemented at both national and regional levels, in order to favor major cooperation and sharing of good practices between countries.

In this regard, some positive examples of pro-youth governments' actions were shared. One example of efficient collaboration between the state and youth comes from Romania, specifically: the work of the United Nations Youth Association of Romania with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The association is a part of the Romanian MFA since its founding in 2009 and aims to ensure Romanian diplomatic activities take into consideration the participation of young people and to encourage youth to be closer to the diplomatic environment. One concrete example of this cooperation originates from the work the MFA and the association are pursuing concerning to Romania's campaign for a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 2020-2021. The Association is working on informing Romanian youth about Romania's policies and objectives regarding this event. In order to have a role in democratic resilience it is of utmost importance to be in continuous communication with the decision-makers, as well as with representatives of the institutions.

As Secretary General Garret stated, "We live in a world of unprecedented interconnectivity". The panelists stressed that we inhabit a world of unparalleled and extraordinary progress in the field of communication technologies, with young generations being its main beneficiaries and recipients. Digital technologies and social media play an important role in shaping young people's mindsets. Today, digital media is recognized as a fundamental tool to reach a broader audience, it can also become a double-edge blade if the audience is unable to discern between facts and non-facts, news and fake news. Indeed, a digital media strategy represents a key factor when managing public perception, but it might remain ineffective when calling for a transformative change. Engaging youth in a meaningful way and keeping it motivated proves to be difficult because the young generation desires gratification right away. However, some panelists regarded "human contact" as the most efficient way to spread messages to a younger audience.



To this end, the members of the panel discussed the need of creating global youth involvement platforms to facilitate an exchange between young people around the world. Going beyond traditional forms of advocacy and engagement, informal networks and online platforms are valuable tools that can increase youth's awareness and democratic participation. More in general, these initiatives should aim to strengthen civil society and democracy, while at the same time promoting values of freedom, justice and coexistence.

A related point, mentioned by the speakers, was the critical need of reducing barriers to youth engagement, including poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education. The discussion brought into focus access to education as one of the fundamental steps towards enhancing the creation of informed communities, with civic, political, democratic and peace education becoming milestones of future peaceful and sustainable societies. Youth cannot be involved in democratic resilience without being properly educated in the democratic experience. An educated young generation is an informed one and, thus, capable of identifying and countering actions that seek to undermine democracy. Education promotes the development of a highly questioning citizenry capable of discerning and rejecting those trends that might threaten democracy, such as: populism, fundamentalism, rise of radical ideologies and movements. Policymakers should work on reducing the risk of radicalization and countering extremist ideologies by developing strategies that incorporate capacity-building programs for young people.

There was a general sentiment that youth lacks trust in political institutions and integrity of elected politicians. It was discussed how challenging it can be to reach a younger audience. Young people tend to associate politics with corruption, self-interest and party interest, but most importantly they do not perceive politics as a mean of change and social transformation. This poses a challenge for policymakers to seek different and better ways to create synergies with youth activists, leaders and organizations, to improve the perception of democratic benefits.

Even though the discussion was concentrated on the inclusion of youth in civil and political matters, the panelists identified gender equality as a complementary element to consider. Recognition gender equality as an important element in the dialogue with youth stems from the value that the young generation give to it, since this is an issue in which young people are very invested in. When talking about youth, there is the need to recognize that a partnership between both young women and men is required to achieve gender equality. Women's movements and youth associations must come together to create groups of interest on various topics, allowing women and girls to embrace the Agenda for Sustainable Development. As a matter of fact it was emphasized that young girls' and women's education should be a priority and their participation in political processes should be incentivized.

As good practices on enhancing and promoting the participation of youth in decision-making processes were exchanged and recommendations shared, participants were united in their view that it is essential for youth organizations, civil society and institutional entities to cooperate closely. They agreed on the need to encourage stakeholders to take into consideration young people's perspective and consider them as equal partners in fostering democratic resilience. Undoubtedly, civil society cannot properly function unless the government provides it with the proper conditions to persist. Creating an enabling environment that does not marginalize youth but instead treats it as an active part of civil society and also a political agent, is a crucial element to be developed in the frame of the Sustainable Development Agenda. In this regard, a recommendation was made for the CoD's Member States to support peace and constitutional processes, while allowing youth to be an integral part of these processes.

Ultimately, the importance of coherent legal and normative frameworks, formal engagement mechanisms and the allocation of necessary funds, were highlighted as the most challenging aspects to consider when pursuing youth inclusion in decision-making processes. In particular, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security was regarded as one of the fundamental aspects of the legal framework as it acknowledges young people as agents of change among the peace and security discourse. Legal requirements, as well as actual government engagement practices, are needed to facilitate cooperation, collaboration, interaction and participation of youth in the civil and political life. Programs relating to youth engagement must be constantly developed and implemented at the institutional level. For example, Finland has announced that it will be the first country in the world to formulate a National Action Plan on the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250. This will be done in close cooperation with Finland's youth organizations from civil society. It was agreed that appropriate mechanisms to foster a dialogue between youth organizations and institutions should be put in place. These policies should be followed by a step-by-step involvement in decision-making processes that affect young people's future. These should be implemented by actively monitoring and evaluating such strategies.

The panel discussion highlighted that even in liberal democracies, governments could enhance their efforts to develop proper policies and mechanisms aimed to encourage substantial involvement of youth in democratic processes. It was noted that even though governments have been successful in the enhancement of youth inclusion, there is still a margin for improvement in terms of the elaboration and further implementation of legal mechanisms that can provide an enabling environment for youth involvement.

Community's Engagement with Youth

The CoD recognizes youth as a fundamental building block of civil society and therefore of democracy, essential to its functioning and sustainability.

Youth empowerment has been adopted as one of the three cross-cutting themes of the Community of Democracies' Strategic Plan for 2018-2023. The Strategic Plan reflects the commitment of the GC member states of the Community to strengthen their cooperation and effectively respond to complex challenges to democracy. In order to achieve this five-year plan, three cross-cutting themes, which will be mainstreamed into activities undertaken by the Community, were identified: gender equality, youth, democracy and development.

Among the Community's past activities related to youth, the Democracy and Security Dialogue report published in 2017, highlights the importance of youth empowerment as one of the central factors in preventing violent extremism and notes the importance of recognizing young people as active participants and contributors to society. "We must embrace youth as responsible citizens and prepare them to lead their societies in accordance with universal human rights values" – emphasize the authors. Moreover, the report also discovered that countries with less youth participation in governance and lacking youth empowerment programs have a high rate of civilians indoctrinated with extremist ideologies.

Facilitating a continued discussion on the findings of the Democracy & Security Dialogue final report, the Community of Democracies held a panel discussion on the role of youth in the peace and security dialogue, organized as a side event on the margins of the 37th Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2018. The event gathered experts and young leaders to discuss challenges and best practices for youth engagement in the peace and security dialogue, in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. Panelists also discussed the importance of implementing UN Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (2015) which urges states to increase young people's representation in democratic decision-making processes at all levels, and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict. The participants of the session also had the opportunity to participate in both a capacity building workshop and diplomatic skills training.





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