Closing Remarks

by

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at the

OSCE Chairmanship Expert Seminar
on the 'Present State and Prospects of Application
of Electronic Voting in the OSCE Participating States'

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the chairmanship for fostering this dialogue over the issue of electronic voting and new technologies as well as all the participants for their active involvement.

During the seminar, participants were able to share their experience and practices, experience from States that have introduced electronic voting, but also from those who have decided to discontinue this practice. We have heard optimistic opinions regarding future developments, but we have also heard critical and skeptical voices. Current challenges were reviewed as were ways to address these challenges. As well, we have looked beyond the OSCE area, notably at the experience of the Americas, and beyond the present developments in this field by focusing on future trends.

The last two days have underlined the complexities related to the introduction of electronic voting that are raising new problems, new challenges. I have followed this debate very closely and I would like to share some thoughts drawn from the very interesting interactions.

Regardless of the e-voting systems chosen, they should all tend towards the same objectives: first, to ensure that elections are held in compliance with OSCE commitments; and second, to guarantee that elections continue to serve and belong to the voters for whom elections are held, whether or not they have technical knowledge.

The introduction of e-voting is not only a technical or technological matter. E-voting is at the confluence of legal, political, social and economic consideration. This means that there is not one solution for all countries; one size does not fit all. Each country needs to come up with their own approach in order to address the specific context their elections are held within. We should also remember that technology should be a tool to complement elections, rather than a self-fulfilling end in itself.

The development in this area is moving at a fast pace, and international organizations are addressing it by reviewing existing standards, updating their own methodology and by working on new handbooks.

Let me emphasize three areas that warrant further consideration and development to ensure a wide public acceptance of this practice: secrecy, transparency, public confidence and long-term sustainability.

First, the need for transparency. Some news ideas emerged from the discussion on how to improve the level of transparency electronic voting offers today.

Voter verified paper audit trail is one innovative way to enhance guarantees for democratic control of elections. Behind this complicated expression stands a simple idea that voters can verify their votes. This system also provides for a manual recount of a meaningful number of votes. In short, it allows for independent verification of elections and a detection of possible errors.

Another approach called for by experts is 'end to end verification'. Although little practical experience exists in this field, it allows voters to verify that their internet vote is cast as intended, recorded as cast, and finally counted as cast. Reversible vote is another method that allows voters to annul their previous vote for casting another internet vote or by casting a paper ballot. This guarantees that voters can express their choice freely without undue pressure or influence.

Transparency is also furthered by ensuring that all interested stakeholders are provided with access to key documents, such as audit reports, certification process, testing and source code in order to provide maximum information to the public.

More information is available to the public the bettear it is. There is never enough transparency. Enhanced transparency contributes to public confidence that is a fundamental element of a successful introduction of electronic voting.

At the same time that we stress the need for maximum transparency, this cannot come at the expense of the secrecy of the vote. This remains crucial and for a number of reasons.

The first reason is about democratic choice – the ability of a citizen to choose his or her elected representative must be done in full confidence that no advance pressure or later repercussion will accompany this choice. The same holds true for practices such as group or family voting, where other people may be seeking to unduly influence the choice that an individual voter is making. Without this key element of secrecy, one cannot say that votes have been cast freely. Like traditional voting methods, new e-voting technologies must take account of secrecy and ensure its protection.

Let me turn now to the crucial issue of trust and public confidence. Without this element, voters may have difficulty accepting e-voting as a legitimate means of processing their vote. As I said in my opening remarks, election is essentially about people and their choices and unless new technologies take account of the level of trust in new methods, they are unlikely to find a stable foothold.

Various elements can enhance that confidence and we have heard about a number of important measures in the past few days. Making systems observable is one way to instill that trust; observation is a crucial vehicle enabling voters to fully understand an electoral process. This means that systems have to be constructed in ways that are observable. Training on these new technologies both for election management bodies and for observers may also be helpful in this regard.

Review of systems by independent experts whose finding are made public is another means of enhancing this trust. As we've heard, opening systems to review by stakeholders that may be critical to such systems may be another way of furthering this confidence.

Last but not least, cost effectiveness and sustainability. Those are important issues that policy makers should pay more attention to. Introducing electronic voting is costly, especially during the initial phases. The initial investment is significant as it requires research, feasibility studies, development of prototypes, pilot projects, and so on. The cost of an e-vote is considerably higher than paper voting and costs continue to be high due to high-paced technological change and the need for frequent upgrade of current technology. This needs to be taken into account at the conceptual phase of such an e-voting project to ensure adequate funding in the long-term.

Let me again thank you for your participation in this event. I look forward to the further dialogue that I hope it will generate.

Thank you.