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Opening Remarks
by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and
Human Rights (ODIHR)

at the Human Dimension Seminar
on
*'Effective Participation and Representation
in Democratic Societies'*

Warsaw, 16-18 May 2007



Check against delivery!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to all of you to Warsaw, to the ODIHR, and to this Human Dimension Seminar. We have gathered here for the next three days to talk about democracy – or, as we call it in our title: *‘Effective Participation and Representation in Democratic Societies’*. The Seminars, as you know, have a particular place on the menu of OSCE Human Dimension events. They place a premium on taking a broader view on developments in the OSCE region, on freeing our minds and on brainstorming ideas for future action. This we will do, while at the same time staying practical and focused on the *acquis* of OSCE commitments. *“To build, consolidate, and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations”* – it is with these words that participating States circumscribed, in the 1990 Paris Charter for a New Europe, their common groundwork.

A brief word on the background to this event first. This 22nd Human Dimension Seminar follows up on a previous discussion on Democratic Governance that took place in this very room three years ago, as well as on a meeting on Effective Representation that took place last fall in Vienna. These meetings allowed us to develop our thinking on the subject, and permitted us at the ODIHR to further sharpen our programmatic work. Their results are among the various background materials prepared for you. On this basis now, we will address issues gravitating around people’s effective participation in the exercise of public power within the OSCE region, and I am excited that so many of you have chosen to join.

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Let me begin my short introduction with a quote from Nobel laureate Amartya Sen who underlined democracy's demands that transcend the ballot box: *„To ignore the centrality of public reasoning and effective representation in the idea of democracy not only distorts and diminishes the history of democratic ideas. It also detracts from the interactive process through which a democracy functions and on which success depends.“*

In order to identify the ingredients of what is arguably the success story of our time, that is, democratic and accountable government, it is essential to ask a number of interrelated questions: What is representation? Who chooses the representatives? Do they represent the common interest of their electors? Are citizens who do not vote in a given election, 'virtually' represented in representative bodies such as the legislature? What is the responsibility of elected representatives to their electors? Do the elected holders of public power, especially within the executive, have an inherent representative function in seeking the common interest on behalf of society as a whole?

In the light of those questions, and the silences we sometimes encounter, it is understandable why many people come to suppose that the problem of the connection between the will of the individual and the general will of society may not be entirely resolved by what Thomas Jefferson termed 'the glorious right of representation'.

It was also Thomas Jefferson who foresaw that, even under a republican constitution, it would be necessary to use law to control abuse of public power, abuse by representatives. This is one side of the debate about larger implications, and contradictions, of democracy, and it is naturally that part in which the notion of separation of powers is regularly invoked as an essential safeguard. Central to the idea of democracy is,

on the other hand, the desire and the claim of people to govern their affairs themselves. Their legitimate claim to participate provides a second check on how public power is exercised.

Experts on democracy often use adjectives ‘representative’ and ‘participatory’ when describing democratic governance in action. But as I have tried to emphasise, both terms should not be used interchangeably. Participation and representation are two sides of the same coin.

Hence the title of our Seminar.

Democracy, of course, is about process – debate, interaction, transparency, decision-making, evaluation, and accountability. The functioning of democracy depends on people, and on institutions. People’s representatives need a proper infrastructure and processes to carry out their functions. Parliaments are the bedrock of this infrastructure. I hope that this Seminar will provide a good opportunity to revisit the discussion started at the SHDM last fall on how to empower Parliaments to carry out their responsibilities.

Parties, on the other hand, remain indispensable vehicles for both participation and representation. They aggregate the views and ‘represent’ them on the political arena. But it cannot go unrecognized that in addition to the traditional political institutions, contemporary political life is characterised by a multitude of non-governmental organizations, media, the internet, all of which have a growing impact on the way citizens interact with their administrators.

The Seminar will focus on two further crucial elements of political participation and representation: on the effect and design of electoral systems, and the participation of underrepresented groups and national

minorities. The questions we aim to answer here is how to ensure that representation is effective and that participation contributes to the development of policies that incorporate OSCE values. We also need to take stock how the OSCE may assist in this process.

Overall, the discussions should also enable us to examine the role of the OSCE – governments, institutions, field missions, and in particular its capacity to take on a two-fold challenge. First, the challenge of what is sometimes called post-democracy – and I don't agree with this term – the challenges of the new and messy ways in which the governed interact with the governing. Second, those challenges related to a development, observable in some quarters of the OSCE region, in which democratisation risks getting stuck in an unfinished 'transition'. This risks, in turn, that transition is used as an excuse for the non-implementation, and sometimes blatant disregard of, OSCE commitments.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, I take this opportunity to extend my gratitude and appreciation to the Spanish OSCE Chairmanship for having chosen this topic and for tasking us to take a *vue d'ensemble* of today's trends in participation and representation throughout the OSCE region. To achieve this aim, we have gathered academics and activists, diplomats and politicians, governments and NGOs, to discuss for three days these issues, and to come up with recommendations for further action.

As in all Human Dimension meetings, it is in particular the contributions from civil society representatives that add energy and a sense of realism to our discussions. As this is a meeting on participation, I encourage the over 75 NGOs who have come to Warsaw, to actively

partake. You will assist us all in exploring ways in which old and new forms of participation and representation should converge to safeguard the OSCE's core values that represent the collective heritage of the struggle for democracy, human rights and pluralism within our region.

As a final point, let me mention that in the addition to the main Seminar, we have a number of side events, including those that highlight the work of the ODIHR on various aspects of governance issues. You are encouraged to attend them as some of them demonstrate how the ODIHR puts theory into concrete practice of assisting the participating States in advancing democratic governance and making representation and participation more effective.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are fortunate to have with us today Mr. Andreas Gross, a prominent Swiss parliamentarian with life-long interest and passion for issues related to the topic of the Seminar. Mr. Gross is the author of a report on the state of democracy in Europe, to be released by the Council of Europe in three weeks or so, which identifies challenges to democracy in the region. Our keynote speaker is well acquainted with our work since he has been closely cooperating with us over years.

And now allow me to welcome Secretary of State Janusz Stańczyk of Poland, our host country. It is a particular pleasure to have you back with us in one of our Human Dimension events, after last year's successful HDIM. I would like to invite you to take the floor.

Thank you.