

Closing Remarks
by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
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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,

I want to begin by thanking everyone for their interest and participation in this seminar. As one participant noted, it featured a genuine discussion which goes far beyond the reading out of prepared statements. This is one of the luxuries the OSCE community affords itself at the annual Human Dimension Seminars. I would particularly like to thank those governmental delegates who eschewed the usual formalities and set the tone by speaking in their personal capacity. As another participant said: “By talking about democracy, we promote it.”

The opening plenary really set the tone for the rest of the Seminar and confirmed the productive interaction between academics and practitioners, between diplomats and politicians and between government officials and NGOs. Overall, we touched upon three issues affiliated with concepts of participation and representation. Doing so, we built on the thought-provoking keynote speech of Mr. Gross. First, we discussed trends of participation and representation; secondly, we concentrated on normative issues such as laws and regulations; third, we looked at how participatory mechanisms are being built.

The discussions at this Seminar give reasons for cautious optimism. While participants at the Human Dimension Seminar on a similar topic three years ago noted an increasing popular cynicism in established as well as in the new democracies – directed at democratic structures in general and political parties in particular --, one of the main findings of

this Seminar is that, despite the obituaries, popular will to participate in politics is very much alive.

Socio-historical, cultural, economical and technological factors may, however, condition the impact of participation and representation in democratic societies. For a Seminar with a broad topic such as this one, it is not surprising that experts and participants touched upon practically all aspects of participatory life. Let me just take out the most salient features:

- political parties are still in a situation of flux throughout the OSCE region, many facing a learning curve, others dealing with populist challenges which undermine their operation;
- the issue of women participation has appeared prominently throughout all sessions. Their equal participation was not merely held to be an end unto itself, but as one of the main guarantors of a vibrant and effective democracy;
- new forms of participation, especially by the younger generation - internet fora and blogs -- need to be encouraged so they benefit the ultimate objective of strengthening democratic practices;
- Electoral systems are crucial for raising voter confidence in leadership, in particular in relation to voter turn-out. They also they bring elements of diversity and competitiveness into the political arena.

Overall, the discussions demonstrated that OSCE's participating States have quite some way to go in putting into practice its commitments when it comes to political participation and representation. But what became

particularly evident in the proceedings was that challenges to effective participation and representation are not only limited in the new or restored democracies. A number of concrete recommendations have come out of these discussions. Let me highlight four of them.

- First, support and assist initiatives towards political parties and facilitate both international cooperation between political parties and an interaction among parties at the national levels;
- Second, encourage local level democracy initiatives and particularly those that focus on minority participation;
- Third, promote best practices in legal regulation of the right to association and peaceful assembly;
- Fourth, support initiatives in the field of gender equality, including monitoring the implementation of various international commitments and the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality.

In all these fields, there is also a case for a strengthened role for OSCE structures and institutions. As far as the ODIHR is concerned, and building on the strong partnerships we have built with committed NGOs and experts in the field of democracy, we are engaging in these domains and is seeking to expand and deepen its assistance and advisory programmes in all these areas.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Seminar also provided the venue for four side-events that focused on issues central to the broad topic of the Seminar. The French Delegation chose this event to launch their "*Guide de la liberté associative dans le monde*". Second, the ODIHR's Gender Expert Panel not only highlighted their activities at their own side-event but also actively contributed to all working sessions. And finally, my Office presented its work in the area of legislative support to participating States and how it supports the implementation of the OSCE's Roma and Sinti Action Plan.

Finally, a word of thanks to the stimulating contributions of the introducers and moderators who have provided the expert input, insightfulness, answers as well as even more questions to feed the debate. I will also use this opportunity to thank the rapporteurs who have gone into much greater detail regarding each session that I am able to do here. As I said in my opening remarks, I am particularly grateful to the Spanish Chairmanship for their involvement in the Seminar. But let me also sincerely thank my staff who have worked hard to make this event a success, as well as the interpreters, for their contribution in showing us the way through the Tower of Babel.

Thank you and have a safe trip back home.