

Vice Minister Evaldas Ignatavičius
Remarks on Role of Political Parties in the Political Process
HDS Meeting
Lithuanian OSCE Chairmanship opening remarks

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It is my honor and pleasure to be here today and on behalf of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office Minister Audronius Ažubalis extend warm greetings to distinguished speakers and participants of this seminar.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The central position of political parties in the democratic political process is something we tend to accept without a second thought. We also know that political parties in the OSCE area vary extensively from one another, and are organized within our state structures in a variety of different ways. Before I reflect on this very important topic of our meeting, let me first of all thank ODIHR's Director Janez Lenarcic and his excellent team for having prepared for us this well designed three day program. It will challenge us – to look at, and reflect on, our own political systems and consider how we are meeting our OSCE commitments. This is the first time we have devoted a Human Dimension Seminar to this type of self-examination.

OSCE does not define specifically how political parties should be organized. However, the participating States have committed themselves to allow the free development of political parties, and the free functioning of those political parties in an open, pluralistic political framework.

OSCE participating States recognize that political parties are an organic part of the systems of governance which are more or less unique to each of the individual participating States.

Our systems of governance, have been shaped by our individual histories and geography, by our culture, including social structures, family and religious and other group traditions.

Our political parties are not static in nature, but are dynamic, constantly evolving and changing, as are our societies.

That is part of the dynamic of living democratic political systems, and it is something worth looking closely at as we discuss, over the next days.

Twenty-one years ago, in the Paris Charter, we, OSCE participating States, committed to democracy as a cornerstone of our organization's security concept, by agreeing that it should be the "only system of government of our nations". On this cornerstone, the OSCE has built a detailed understanding of the structures that give democracy its essential character. Political parties are crucial to this understanding.

It would be difficult to describe a democracy without discussing the role of political parties. I would like to draw out a number of themes from these, in order to offer some questions for reflection and discussion.

A first point would be that just as democracy is inconceivable without political parties, political parties must be referred to in the plural. At Bonn in 1990, the participating States committed themselves to "multi-party democracy", and that same year, at Copenhagen, affirmed the "importance of pluralism with regard to political organizations".

At Copenhagen the participating States noted that the "will of the people, freely and fairly expressed" was the "basis" of legitimacy in government. For this, the States underlined "the free expression of the opinion of electors in the choice of their representatives", "a form of government that is representative" and "accountability to the electorate". All of these elements are difficult to envisage without an array of political parties for citizens to choose from.

We should ask ourselves: how can this essential element of democracy – pluralism – be guaranteed, strengthened and advanced? In particular, let us consider pluralism throughout the political process – assessing its contribution towards more democratic, legitimate, representative, transparent and effective governance.

All of the participating States have made commitments to certain individual and collective human rights which establish the political and social milieu in which our political parties operate.

These include the right of free association. Political parties are associations. It is a right to form such associations and participate in meetings and gatherings without interference.

We have committed to the right of free public expression, both personally and as groups. The right of free association includes the right to public gatherings, and rallies.

As part of our collective commitment to the functioning of political parties we have committed ourselves to equal and unhindered access to the media, including the Public Broadcaster, if it exists in our country.

Of course in democratic systems there must be fair competition for office, not to exclude the individual independent candidate in addition to the competing political parties. In this regard we need to reflect on the value of political parties to expand participation and representation in our societies.

Secondly, as OSCE states we have made special commitments at the 2009 Athens Ministerial Council to provide for equal representation in political parties for women and men. At Copenhagen, the participating States agreed that political parties are an important element in "the resolution of questions relating to national minorities".

What the key obstacles are to guaranteeing the full and equal representation of women and men in our political processes, and some of the means – legal and voluntary – that can be adopted to overcome these obstacles.

I spoke earlier of the dynamic qualities of political parties in the political process. The last working group, - IV – "E-democracy: increasing participation and representation" is the best example of this I can think of. Like many aspects of our society, democracy has the potential to be transformed by the astounding innovations in communications technology. All of us have felt the reach and speed of this transformation, and are seeing it seep into the way our political processes work. Certainly political leaders are learning that electronic communication is a revolutionary means of rapid and wide spread political communication and contact, but even the daily routines of interaction between citizens and their representatives are changing.

Let us think about how our organization – the OSCE – can facilitate the spread and understanding of technologies to simplify, broaden, and enhance citizen participation in democratic processes. At the same time, we should not let enthusiasm for the technological transformation cause us to forget about the basic principles of democracy. In other words, as we consider e-democracy, we should address how the OSCE commitments can be guaranteed and implemented online as well as offline.

This brings me to my next and a very important point. We, as OSCE states, have repeatedly made commitments to a number of key human rights and freedoms. With those rights come responsibilities as well.

Political parties, as part of the social culture of our societies, need rules and regulations to ensure their own legitimacy, and to guarantee “fair play” toward their own members, toward each other and the society and state within which they operate. But those rules cannot function as a form of authoritative suppression and control, whether inside party structures or in relationship to the political process and the society and the state.

For all of this to work, politicians and government officials must have fundamental respect for democracy. They cannot abuse their power in favour of their party's interests. We must likewise underline the importance of respecting the rights and the role of all parties – particularly those who are out of power.

Parties in opposition have a valuable role to play in the political process. Just as parties in power should never confuse themselves with the state, likewise political disagreement should not be confused with disloyalty to the state or a monopolistic claim to represent “the people.” It seems self-evident, but must be repeated: the role of the opposition is to oppose – thus, to criticize, contrast, question and offer alternatives. This is vital in giving democracy one of its “competitive advantages”, its flexibility and power of adaptation.

Those in power today should not forget that the opposition may eventually succeed them. By blocking an open, fair, balanced contest of ideas and policies, those in power impoverish their own society and state's capacity to react to the challenges of the future. They also build a climate in which it becomes more difficult for them to regain power in a democratic political process should they once lose power.

Thus, let us think about how to build greater respect for the legitimate role of the both the political majority and the political opposition in the political process.

Finding the balance between the liberties with which our political organizations have committed themselves to operate, and the laws, rules and regulations under which they function is one of the most complex and challenging balancing acts.

We, the OSCE, are unique in that we have agreed to work out that balance for our members and among ourselves by using the special tools we have agreed to develop and put to our disposal. Here I am speaking of the special OSCE institutions of ODIHR, the Representative of the Freedom of the Media, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Parliamentary Assembly and our regular consultative means in Vienna, at Ministerials and Summits.

Indeed, cooperation and sharing of expertise and information has been one of the key features of the OSCE's work in assisting its participating States to build democracy over the last 20 years. Building on this commitment, I call on all participants to consider how the work of the OSCE, its Field Operations and its Institutions can continue to evolve. What does the OSCE and in particular ODIHR can offer in this area? Which areas need further attention? What tools, resources and programmes are needed?

I am convinced that our organization – which is based on dialogue and consensus - is the perfect platform in which these issues should be considered. I wish all of you stimulating and productive discussions over the coming three days.