



Address by Michael Georg Link

**Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights (ODIHR)**

at the

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Working Session I

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to open the first working session of this year's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting on Democratic Institutions, with a specific focus on *Democracy at the national, regional and local levels, Citizenship and political rights and Democratic elections*.

Democracies in the OSCE region, in particular democratic institutions continue to be challenged at national, regional and local levels. At the 2010 OSCE Summit in Astana, the OSCE participating States agreed that respect for democracy "must be safeguarded and strengthened". Eurobarometer surveys show a decreasing level of trust in national Parliaments from 57 to 31% in the last five years (2007-2012). Trust in political parties in many participating States is below 15%. Transparency, openness and accountability of democratic institutions represent challenges that need to be urgently discussed.

Supporting participating States in implementing OSCE commitments on political pluralism and multi-party democracy constitutes an important part of ODIHR's work in upholding democratic principles. Together with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, ODIHR has developed the 2010 *Guidelines on Political Party Regulation*, which offer guidance for

developing and implementing legislation and regulations on political parties. Challenges faced by political parties were highlighted at an expert seminar on political parties organized by ODIHR in Warsaw in July 2014, which gathered Members of Parliaments, representatives of political parties, think tanks and academics from over 20 participating States.

Democratic institutions, such as parliaments and political parties, currently face significant challenges in relation to transparency, openness and accountability related to the meaningful and equal political participation in public life. Addressing the issue of representation is vital to uphold and promote democratic values as well as trust in political processes.

My office continues to emphasize that public accountability of parliaments, in particular, are cornerstone principles underlying many OSCE commitments. We continue to engage with participating States on the issue of Parliamentary Ethics through consultations and seminars. In this regard, the OSCE/ODIHR *Background Study: Professional and Ethical Standards for Parliamentarians* represents an important tool. On 18 and 19 March 2014 parliamentarians and experts from Azerbaijan,

Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom met to discuss professional and ethical standards for parliamentarians, as well as the benefits of and challenges in developing codes of conduct, at a workshop organized by ODIHR in Warsaw.

Parliaments also need to increasingly engage with civil society. This may well contribute to parliamentary openness, which was discussed at a Side Event organised by ODIHR just before this working session.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Public participation in political life is essential to upholding and promoting democratic values, as well as trust, in democratic institutions. This is true for all parts of society but in particular for under-represented groups such as youth, women and Roma. Youth often feel that their views are increasingly disregarded; thus, they are not equally heard and participate in public life.

In the Charter of Paris of 1990 participating States committed to “build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations”. ODIHR therefore encourages OSCE participating States to increase the openness and accountability of their

democratic institutions and to work toward greater political participation of women, youth and minorities and thus a more inclusive democratic society.

In particular, the conduct of democratic elections remains an essential component of viable and pluralistic democratic institutions. Participating States have also agreed on specific commitments directly related to the conduct of genuine and democratic elections.

To support the realization of these commitments, in 2014, ODIHR has already deployed election-related activities to numerous participating States, including Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine as well as an election support team to Afghanistan mandated by the Permanent Council.

This breadth of deployment demonstrates ODIHR's continuing capacity to manage observation activities in diverse and at times complex political and security environments.

Regrettably, OSCE budget constraints earlier this year meant that while operationally ready, ODIHR was unable to deploy further election-related

activities to Belgium, Georgia, Lithuania, Sweden and the United States. As well, further activities later this year are also under threat of cancellation due to insufficient budgetary means.

ODIHR's refined approach to election observation remains grounded in independence, impartiality, and professionalism and based on a long-term and needs-based methodology. This approach has been further enhanced this past year through the publication of a comprehensive review of electoral legislation and practices in OSCE participating States and will shortly include upcoming handbooks on observing campaign finance and participation of national minorities in elections.

Overall, ODIHR's methodology continues to provide a solid basis to comprehensively assess electoral processes, for which participating States have repeatedly noted their appreciation and support. It is also a model for other key international organizations engaged in election observation, especially in the framework of the 2005 Declaration of Principle for International Election Observation, endorsed under UN auspices, now by more than 47 organizations worldwide.

To address the continued shortfall in the numbers of seconded observers, ODIHR has established a separate extra-budgetary Election

Observation Sustainability Fund to bridge the gap between the numbers of requested and seconded observers by directly recruiting additional observers. This new fund supplements the secondment process, which remains the primary mechanism to recruit observers.

For ODIHR, an emphasis on follow-up activities is vital as our involvement extends after an election. The cycle of engagement with participating States strives for constructive post-electoral engagement and follow-up leading to an enhanced conduct of elections. This is done comprehensively among ODIHR's various thematic departments.

So far in 2014, a number of participating States have shown political will to engage in discussions on ODIHR's recommendations including Georgia, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine as well as the newest OSCE participating State, Mongolia. In some cases, collaboration with a range of domestic and international stakeholders during follow-up activities has promoted a co-ordinated approach to electoral improvement.

Beyond participating States leading follow-up, OSCE institutions, in particular, the Human Dimension Committee, serve an increasingly important role to institutionalize and exhibit examples of good practice.

It is worth noting the crucial role played by citizen observers, and the need for their organizations to be able to undertake election-related activities freely and without constraint – including having explicit legal provisions to conduct election observation, without fear of retribution.

With having conducted some 320 election-related activities, ODIHR is well-positioned and remains ready to support participating States in their efforts to bring electoral processes in line with OSCE commitments to further strengthen democratic frameworks.

I thank you for your attention.