

OSCE Chairmanship - OSCE/ODIHR Election Seminar

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Opening remarks by
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Check against delivery!

Excellencies,

Distinguished representatives of OSCE participating States,
of election administration bodies, and civil society,

Dear Colleagues,

It is both my pleasure and honour to address this audience today.

As many of you will know, ODIHR was initially founded in 1990 as the Office for Free Elections and during the same period, the family of OSCE participating States agreed upon a common set of commitments in electoral matters. These, they pledged themselves to uphold. This common commitment resulted in the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document, where the States declared that “the will of the people, freely and fairly expressed through periodic and genuine elections, is the basis of the authority and legitimacy of all governments”. They also declared that they would “respect the right of their citizens to take part in the governing of their country, either directly or through representatives freely chosen by them through fair electoral processes.”

This commitment echoes the language of previous declarations such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. But in many ways, the 1990 Copenhagen Document was also visionary. In it, the States agreed on how they would commonly understand principles such as genuine, free, or fair. They developed concrete language regarding what they consider such principles to mean.

The participating States also placed elections in the broader context of genuine political pluralism, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms such as the freedoms of assembly, association and expression, the rule of law and an independent judiciary, institutional checks and balances, an active civil society and free media.

As a community of States committed to the respect of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, the OSCE has emphasized the promotion of democratic elections as a key pillar of long-term security and stability. In Budapest in 1994, ODIHR has received a clear mandate from the OSCE participating States to observe elections.

Since then, observation has been enhanced and strengthened, also in line with Ministerial Council Decision 19/06, and a clear and credible methodology developed. This methodology has stood the test of time and has been used by other international organizations, such as the EU, as the basis for developing their own methodologies. To date, ODIHR has observed nearly 300 elections, an endeavour that we conduct in common with parliamentary partners from the OSCE PA and often with PACE, the EP and NATO PA.

ODIHR has conducted election observation activities in all 57 OSCE participating States (barring Holy See). These numbers, themselves, point to ODIHR's vast experience and institutional knowledge when it comes to electoral processes and election observation.

During these activities, we have observed progress in meeting OSCE commitments, but we have also noted that in many participating States, elections or certain aspects of the electoral process continue to not fully comply with OSCE commitments. The issues that ODIHR continues to observe include, among others, limitations on the right to

stand and the right to be elected; challenges to universal and equal suffrage due to limitations on the right to vote; limitations to a free campaign environment; lack of respect for fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression; misuse of administrative resources for undue advantage, lack of transparency and accountability in the counting and tabulation of votes and others. These shortcomings require further attention and improvement.

The respect of the above commitments would help to ensure the political pluralism recognized by OSCE participating States as one of the fundamental tenets of democratic government. Political pluralism enables voters to make choices among distinct alternatives, it provides for competition, discussion and consideration of different views and lively election campaigns. In some participating States, there is a lack of political pluralism which can lead to uncompetitive elections and a lack of choice for the electorate.

Generally, OSCE participating States invite ODIHR to observe their elections. Many also invite and ensure access for elections below the

national level, which has enabled ODIHR to observe a number of local elections, including this year. Some participating States, however, do not provide full access for observers, international and domestic. In some, this is not enshrined in law but access is still made possible, while in others observation is provided for in legislation but access is prevented in practice. All participating States have agreed on the importance of observers, international and domestic, as contributing to the integrity and transparency of an election process. This remains to be implemented fully.

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. Elections essentially belong to the voters, to the citizens of a country. They are the main stakeholders in the process of ensuring genuine and democratic elections. The more eyes are focused on the process, the more the voters will trust its results.

ODIHR remains committed to assisting participating States in meeting their shared commitments for genuine and democratic elections. The States, themselves, have recognized this need when they agreed “to follow up promptly the ODIHR’s election assessment and recommendations” at the 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul. The architecture is in place for States to meet their goal of conducting ‘good elections’.

In this spirit, ODIHR continues to engage with participating States in follow up to the recommendations made in ODIHR reports. This is with the intention that every State will take up this challenge to improve their democratic institutions, to improve their democratic practices. And to live up to the commitments that they made to each other more than two decades ago. These general standards remain as relevant today as they were then. The roadmap that OSCE participating States established in 1990 can guide our way forward. ODIHR remains committed to help States meet the challenges along this road.

I very much look forward to the discussion and exchange that we will have today and would also like to thank the moderators and speakers who have travelled to take part today in order to stimulate this important dialogue.

Thank you.