WELCOMING ADDRESS BY MR. KUANDYK TURGANKULOV, CHAIRPERSON OF THE CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN, AT THE OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP SEMINAR ON THE CURRENT STATE AND PROSPECTS FOR THE APPLICATION OF ELECTRONIC VOTING IN OSCE PARTICIPATING STATES

Vienna, Hofburg, 16 and 17 September 2010

Distinguished seminar participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Our Head of State, Mr. Nursultan Nazarbayev, has called Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE a national strategic project. And for this reason, every activity that we carry out in this honourable role has great significance for our country.

Allow me first of all, on behalf of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, to express to you our appreciation for your participation in the work of this seminar, and to thank our partners in the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for their active participation in its planning.

Taking part in this forum are representatives of the central election commissions and other bodies of OSCE participating States and OSCE partner States, along with a number of international and non-governmental organizations.

Over the next two days, we shall thoroughly discuss issues connected with the current state and prospects for the application of electronic voting in the electoral process in OSCE participating States.

The choice of this topic is not accidental. The introduction of new technology solutions into the electoral process and the development of electronic voting systems are complicated, multifaceted and much-discussed issues.

For this reason, I urge you to actively share your experience in the practical application of various electronic voting systems and devices, in order to identify their advantages and shortcomings, elucidate the existing issues, and anticipate possible problems with the use of electronic voting.

The Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the OSCE/ODIHR have jointly prepared a compilation of international documents on electronic voting, as well as other literature, with which you can acquaint yourselves.

Translation by OSCE Language Services

We should also like to draw your attention to the Kazakh automated information system (AIS) "Sailau" and to invite all seminar participants to evaluate the functionality of this operating equipment by taking part in an informal opinion poll.

Within the framework of this unique exercise, you are requested, with the help of an electronic ballot, to answer the question: "Do you support the use of electronic voting systems?"

By answering this question in the affirmative, you are voting for the introduction and development of electronic voting systems. A negative answer will show that you prefer traditional ways of organizing the electoral process.

This poll will be conducted during the breaks in our joint work over the next two days. We will announce the results in an informal briefing at the conclusion of the seminar.

Distinguished colleagues,

Experts in the electoral process do not always interpret the expression "electronic voting" in the same way.

Kazakhstan is currently using an electronic voting system, which is linked to a single technology chain: voting, transmittal of votes, vote counting, vote tallying and obtaining the voting record.

With regard to the introduction of information technologies into the electoral process, analysis has shown that, at present, all States can be divided provisionally into three basic groups:

First, States that have fully or partially introduced and are using an electronic voting system;

Second, States that have experience in the introduction and use of electronic technologies but that, for one reason or another, have rejected them;

Third, States that do not use automation in the electoral process and that prefer traditional methods of organizing it.

The electronic voting systems that have been introduced and are being used today can also be divided provisionally into three basic groups:

–   Optical scan systems that use paper ballots;

–   Direct recording electronic voting systems;

–   Remote voting systems.

All three types have already been used more or less successfully over a fairly long period. However, as analysis has shown, the States using them have encountered a number of problems in guaranteeing the fundamental principles of democratic elections.

Doubts are frequently expressed that these systems can ensure sufficient transparency to satisfy observers of the voting procedure and the recording and processing of electronic ballots. Issues with regard to ensuring adequate security of the system, in particular, protecting it from external attempts at unauthorized access, also remain relevant.

Certain questions have also been raised about election organizers' level of knowledge in the sphere of information and communication technologies and their ability to work with electronic equipment.

On the basis of the foregoing, we can conclude that the full or even partial use of automation in electoral processes today is not the only possible way of developing electoral systems. The decision to use it depends on a whole range of economic, political and social considerations, as well as on the level of computer literacy among the population, the sophistication of the infrastructure, and other factors.

The Republic of Kazakhstan also has some experience in this area. At the beginning of 2004, the necessary legislative, organizational and technical issues were resolved, allowing us to begin using an electronic voting system in elections. In particular, it was used in the 2004 and 2007 parliamentary elections, as well as in the 2005 presidential elections.

I should like to point out, furthermore, that there were no cases in which elements of the electoral process broke down on account of software or hardware failures. The specialists ensuring the operation of the equipment, and the members of the election commissions, proved to be duly qualified.

At the same time, we cannot say that electronic voting in our country was unequivocally accepted by society and by all participants in the electoral process. For this reason, in the polling stations where the Sailau AIS equipment was installed, we gave citizens the right to choose their own voting method.

As shown by the previous elections, the voters in their majority preferred to avail themselves of traditional paper ballots. Thus, if a total of 7.2 per cent of the voters taking part in the elections in 2004 availed themselves of electronic voting facilities, 5.8 per cent did so in 2005 and only 2.2 per cent in 2007.

The technical shutdowns that disrupted the system's operation for short periods also created additional difficulties in popularizing the system. The problem of the system's lack of effectiveness for use during the period between elections, and the need for significant expenditures with regard to its content and modernization, also remain relevant.

All of these shortcomings in the operation of electronic voting systems have been acknowledged, especially by us, the election organizers. OSCE/ODIHR experts and observers, Commonwealth of Independent States observer missions, and non-governmental organizations at the country level, as well as the voters themselves, have paid attention to them.

In recent years, against the backdrop of the well-known negative trends in the economy, the issues of financially supporting the content and implementing the project on modernization of the existing electronic voting system have become more acute. Our

proposal that funds be allocated from the State budget for these purposes during 2011 and 2012 is being considered by the government. A final decision will be taken in the near future.

Distinguished seminar participants,

Today, experts from different countries have varying assessments of the possibility of further use of electronic voting systems. They emphasize that attention must be paid to the introduction of unified operational and technical standards, ensuring security and reliability, and respecting the rights of voters, observers and all participants in the electoral process.

We propose to discuss all these issues within the framework of our seminar, with a view to determining the immediate prospects for the application and development of electronic voting in OSCE participating States, identifying the most pressing challenges and elucidating the most topical issues, the resolution of which will contribute to unconditional respect for the principles and standards of democratic elections in the context of the introduction and use of electronic voting systems.

I should like to wish all of us a constructive and fruitful dialogue.

Thank you for your attention.