Address by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič
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at the

OSCE Chairmanship Expert Seminar
on the 'Present State and Prospects of Application of Electronic Voting in the OSCE Participating States'

Neuer Saal, Hofburg, Vienna

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here with you all for the next two days at this Expert Seminar. I wish to thank the Kazakh chairmanship for organizing this expert seminar on the "present state and prospect for the application of electronic voting in OSCE participating States" and for its commitment to continue the dialogue on election-related issues.

Chairman Turgankulov has already staked out the main issues for today's and tomorrow's discussion, so before we start with our three working sessions, let me place this meeting in a wider context.

While electronic voting has attracted attention and debate throughout the past decade, it is actually some 140 years old. In 1869, Thomas Edison was awarded his first patent for the Electrographic Vote-Recorder. He presented it to U.S. congressmen, but they did not see the need for such a device to cast votes electronically, so Edison's invention never took off.

Currently, a limited number of OSCE pS are using new voting technologies on a large scale: Belgium, Estonia or the United States, for instance. Others have decided to pilot projects and are accumulating experience in using new voting technologies, such as Kazakhstan, Norway, Switzerland or the Russian Federation. Representatives of these countries are present and will share their experience today and tomorrow.

Interestingly, some OSCE states have decided to return to pen and paper after having used new voting technologies for many decades. This is the case for instance in the Netherlands and some federal states of the U.S., following problematic experiences. Representatives of these pS will have the opportunity to explain why and how they decided to return to the traditional way of voting. I hope theses cases will be examined in detail so as to understand the challenges that the use of new voting technologies can present.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The choice of voting technology is a sovereign choice for OSCE States to make. It is not for our Office to recommend any specific technology. However, new voting technologies provide a number of potential advantages. Let me name some:

- An enhanced enfranchisement of voters;
- the ability for out-of-country voters to vote from remote locations;
- easy access for voters with disabilities;
- facilitation of the counting and speedy publication of election results.

Nevertheless, such technologies also pose challenges to core democratic principles such as secrecy of the vote, transparency and confidence into an election process. Their use may influence perceptions about the security of the vote and as such may

have a negative impact on voter confidence. We all know that we can see, touch and feel paper, but we cannot do so with electronic bits and bytes.

Elections, as we know, are essentially about people and the free expression of their choice. The digitalization of the voting process, or parts of it, brings about the specific challenge of, first, ensuring that people's choices are reflected faithfully in the result and, second, ensuring that people trust that this is the case, in spite of the introduction of a digital 'intermediary' between voter and result.

In our view, it is important that a country sets clear objectives as to how its citizens can benefit from applying information and communication technologies to elections. Only because technology can be used in the different aspects of an election process – voting, counting, tabulation, voter registration – does not establish an imperative to do so. In other words, I believe a concrete need must exist and a decision in this direction should include political parties, IT specialists, academics and the wider civil society. This approach ensures support and trust in electoral reform.

To be clear, IT tools are not a panacea to solve existing problems in the elections field. Inaccurate voter registers, dishonest counting and tabulation of the vote, and mistrust in the process cannot be fixed by IT solutions on their own. If the fundament of an election is decaying and the walls crumbling, an upgrade in IT will not provide for comfortable living. In other words, where there already is lack of trust in the electoral process, its digitalisation will not improve the situation; on the contrary, it may further diminish voter confidence.

This all goes to say that electronic voting must operate in a manner compatible with the principles enshrined in OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, and offer the same guarantees for transparency, accountability and public confidence as traditional voting methods. Confidence is a term that I am certain will be raised many times today and tomorrow. The only answer to the mistrust in IT tools we have at times encountered is maximum transparency and inclusive stakeholder engagement. It is human that we only trust in something that we understand – if not, we have to make a higher investment in making it understood.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It goes without saying that the use of new voting technology has had an impact on the ability to observe the voting process compared with traditional methods of voting. ODIHR has in the past focused on developing a methodology to observe the use of new voting technology. These efforts have led to the publication of a discussion paper on this topic that will – following discussions here and elsewhere - be transformed into a handbook for election observers.

I should in this context also highlight the work of the Council of Europe in setting international standards: in this area, we collaborate closely. The work of the Council of Europe has now moved towards updating these standards and is approaching the issue of certification. I would invite CoE representatives present here to update us on the status of their activities in this area.

I also wish to thank pS for the creation of a new position in ODIHR – the senior adviser on new voting technology in the election department. Recent developments in this field have confirmed the usefulness of such an in-house resource and expertise. Our Office continues to stand ready to advise and assist states who may wish to introduce electronic voting in their electoral processes.

I trust that this seminar will provide an opportunity for an exchange of views and experience between states who have abandoned the use of new voting technologies and those who are intending to introduce new forms of voting. We have an opportunity to take stock, review past and current practices, share lessons and to scrutinise shortcomings that have been observed.

Thank you.