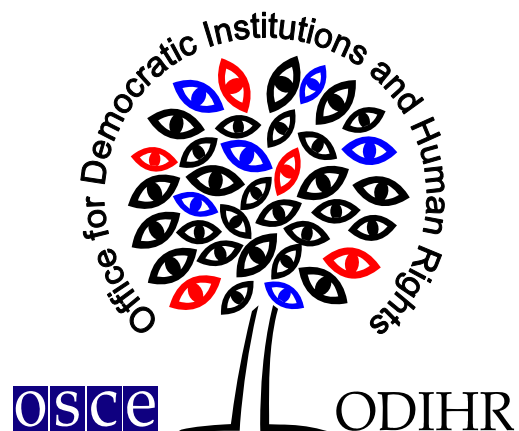


2011 HUMAN DIMENSION SEMINAR

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

18-20 May 2011

Novotel, Warsaw



Opening remarks by

Ambassador Janez Lenarčič

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

Check against delivery!

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me extend a very warm welcome to everyone here at the 2011 Human Dimension Seminar on the role of political parties in the political process. I believe it is only fitting that vital topics of pluralism and multiparty democracy are discussed as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of ODIHR.

I am delighted that we have a large number of participants here, including many distinguished members of parliaments and representatives of NGOs and political parties. I am confident that they will contribute with authority on questions relating to democratic institutions, effective representation, and women's participation in political life.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Lithuanian OSCE Chairmanship, and in particular the Chairman of the Permanent Council, Ambassador Renatas Norkus, for promoting this Seminar as an opportunity to evaluate to which extent our commitments on political pluralism and political parties are being implemented.

During these three days, we will have the opportunity to discuss important issues such as pluralism, multiparty democracy, the equal participation of women and men in political parties, and e-democracy. You all will be able to analyze the unique role that political parties play in democratic processes, recognizing that democracy goes beyond democratic elections and that political parties must form its foundation.

We all know that without strong and independent political parties, societies cannot ensure stability and good governance. Political parties should protect effective representation and participation through vibrant debate and competition. This requires a political environment in which political parties are developed and political awareness among citizens promoted.

It has been said that a primary criterion for democracy is equitable and open competition for votes between political parties without government harassment or restriction of opposition groups. And indeed, the vibrancy of political parties in modern democratic societies determines how effectively people are represented in government.

Yet we are holding this Seminar at a time when political parties throughout the OSCE region are facing serious obstacles, including the lack of adequate financing,

weak legitimacy among citizens, unequal access to media and other resources, and restrictions on their public activities. We often hear that “political parties have little capacity to effect change in society” – this criticism is still pervasive. All of us face the continued challenge that political parties are perceived as corrupt and dominated only by narrow interests. In many countries, there is a common view that all political parties are the same; they have vague platforms, or do not represent vulnerable groups.

*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The WG this afternoon will address the implementation of OSCE commitments related to political parties. Starting from the OSCE’s Copenhagen Document, the OSCE has set clear obligations to protect democracy. Among them is notably the recognition that there should be fair electoral competition among both candidates in elections and political parties. Respect for the role of political parties contributes substantially to the likelihood that governments will reflect the will of the people.

The WG tomorrow morning will deal with equal participation of women and men in political parties. Also here, we have a clear normative basis: OSCE Ministers have stressed the importance of gender equality in all aspects of the political process most comprehensively in *MC Decision No. 7/09 on Women’s Participation in Political and Public Life*. This WG should reflect on the progress that has been achieved thus far, the persistent challenges that hinder women’s access to decision-making in political parties, and measures political parties can adopt to promote women’s participation as leaders, decision-makers and candidates for public office.

The third WG will be devoted to the regulation of political parties in national legislation. Participants will focus on how OSCE commitments should be reflected in the regulatory and operating frameworks of political parties. Let me only add here that OSCE/ODIHR together with the Venice Commission recently developed *Guidelines on Political Party Regulation [hold up]* which we will present during this Seminar, and we invite all those present to carefully consider this document in their future activities.

In our fourth and final WG we will, for the first time in a Human Dimension Meeting, discuss the issue of participation in - and representation through - new technologies and e-tools. The average person is increasingly able to bring change

to all levels of government through increased online information sharing and networking tools; political parties are learning to adapt as well. This WG will reflect on the relationship between OSCE commitments and new tools of technology that can have a direct impact on democratic participation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Political parties and political pluralism are central to ODIHR's work in the field of democratic governance and elections. Our work has focused on assisting states in putting in place the elements of a multi-party democratic system, in particular through legislation. For instance, ODIHR's opinions on political party laws and related legislation have helped a number of participating States reform their legal framework.

Upon request from participating States and OSCE Field Operations, we have provided expertise on various issues related to political parties, including on party finances and the abuse of state resources. In a number of countries, our Office has worked with local think tanks to foster dialogue on reforming political party legislation and regulation. We have also carried out expert assessments of legislative systems and provided recommendations on improving the openness, transparency, and efficiency of democratic lawmaking.

My hope for this Seminar is twofold: first, that we will openly discuss the role of political parties for political pluralism and the challenges they sometimes face; and second, that this conversation will provide real momentum for implementing concrete steps to guarantee the promises of democracy that the OSCE participating States have made to their citizens and to each other.

Thank you.