

Check against delivery!

Welcoming remarks
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Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on
Challenges of Election Technologies and Procedures
Vienna, 21-22 April 2005



Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to be able to welcome you to a meeting on an issue that is central to the Human Dimension and therefore central to the OSCE: democratic elections. The programme for this SHDM is rich and dense and could easily cover three entire conferences.

Our first session will be dedicated to discussions on new election technologies, in particular electronic voting. Tomorrow's morning session will discuss how to enhance the implementation of existing OSCE commitments including through the adoption of supplementary commitments, in follow up to last year's SHDM. The third session will provide an opportunity to discuss the importance of observation for the integrity of the electoral process; in this context, we also look at the findings and experiences accumulated since the international community has launched comprehensive efforts to conduct election observations. For us at the ODIHR it has been a full decade, and the Office has overall fielded in the range of 150 election observations.

To assist your deliberations, we have provided a large array of background documents. Outside the Conference room, you will find copies of all the final EOM reports ODIHR has issued during the last three years. When we include all of the needs assessment mission reports, interim reports, preliminary statements, final reports, and legal reviews, ODIHR has issued over 200 reports from the beginning of 2002 to the present.

We have also made available the latest edition of the Handbook for Election Observers which has just been completed. The Handbook is the most widely used publication of the OSCE – it is in its fifth edition and has been used by over 10.000 election observers of ours. We are grateful for the generous contributions by a number of participating States, which have allowed us to begin work on the French and Russian versions of this important publication and hope to be able to produce versions in the other OSCE languages if provided the necessary funding.

We have also again put out our compilation of Existing Commitments for Democratic Elections, which should be a useful reference document for Session II, as well as our well known Handbooks for Domestic Observers, for Monitoring Women's Participation and for assisting Minority Participation.

Of course all of this and more is available on-line on the ODIHR's website.

I am particularly glad that we are able to welcome so many of our partners who have worked together with us on our election activities.

I will start with numerous representatives of election administrations with whom we have worked closely for a number of years. In this context I take the opportunity to again welcome as a keynote speaker for our meeting Alexander Veshnyakov, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. I hope that this meeting provides an opportunity for a fruitful exchange between election professionals of experiences and good practices in overcoming new as well as old challenges in meeting electoral commitments.

I welcome representatives of participating States' Parliaments, of the OSCE PA, the PACE and other assemblies that have long been our partners, in particular during our election observations. It gives me great pleasure to welcome the Right Honourable Bruce George, President emeritus of the OSCE PA, who has been with us on a number of missions and embodies the principle that "passion matters". I hope that our meeting will highlight the key role Parliamentarians have to play, not only during observations, but also in ensuring the necessary legislative framework and that the ensuing recommendations receive the necessary attention and follow-up.

I welcome also the many representatives of civil society, in particular of domestic observer groups, key actors who undertake an essential civic duty in the attempt to ensure transparent and accountable election processes.

I am also glad to see many representatives of other international organizations, many of which we have worked with very closely and which have adopted our tried methodology in their own related activities.

The OSCE's Human Dimension events are unique in that they provide an opportunity for frank exchanges of views between all these participants. I hope that the name-plates-down system will allow for an open discussion between government representatives and NGOs. I am confident that the setting will allow for constructive proposals and should lead to concrete action.

The agenda covers a wide range of issues in a very limited timeframe. Let me therefore urge all participants to remain focused on the main issues under discussion.

To us at the ODIHR, the key question remains: how can the OSCE commitments in the field of democratic elections best be fulfilled?

Let me assure you that this is not merely a question of finding technical solutions and improvements. All too often we still notice efforts to engage in deliberate and pre-meditated attempts to unduly influence results, down to outright fraud. In such cases, modifying the legislative and administrative framework for elections is often not sufficient to guarantee elections in line with OSCE commitments. What is needed is genuine political commitment – genuine political will.

I take very seriously any concerns conveyed to me by participating States with regard to the ODIHR's election related activities. I am committed to clarifying facts of ODIHR election observation, and addressing any misunderstandings or misconceptions. I am concerned, however, about the possible motivation for some of the issues that have been raised. While the ODIHR welcomes a sincere discussion on its findings, it cannot welcome measures that only serve as a distraction from the real issue of effective follow-up to the ODIHR's recommendations.

The OSCE family, as represented here, therefore faces the need to address the most urgent election-related topic in the OSCE, and that is the implementation of OSCE commitments. These commitments, agreed on by all OSCE participating States, have existed for 15 years. During that time, OSCE States have reiterated their support several times to those commitments, calling for longer-term observation and follow-up to the recommendations deriving from the observations. The commitments serve as a basis for our observations, as they represent what all 55 participating States believe constitutes a democratic election.

During these 15 years, we also have seen considerable progress in democratic principle and practice taking root and strengthening in many parts of the region. However, the ODIHR is still observing a number of elections in which participating States are not meeting their commitments, or in which serious manipulation of the election process is attempted. This is the real election challenge in the OSCE region today and I hope that this meeting will provide an opportunity to address it.

I look forward to a stimulating exchange of views.