



Remarks by

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to the

CiO Seminar on Election Related Issues

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Ambassadors, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have the opportunity to address this seminar and wish to commend the Finnish Chairmanship of the OSCE for convening this forum to discuss election-related matters. In my opinion, a meeting such as this is long overdue.

As most of you know, parliamentarians have played – and are playing – a leading role in election observation throughout the world. There are no better judges of elections than those who actually seek and win public office through the electoral process. And, of course, elections are the very foundation for democratic governance. The participating States of the OSCE declared, in the well-known Copenhagen document of 1990, “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 government.”

It is this Copenhagen document of 1990 that provides the basis and the mandate for election observation within the OSCE, and it is upon the standards called for in this document that OSCE parliamentarians evaluate, assess and judge the elections that they choose to observe. It is through the Copenhagen document that the participating States are required to invite observers to their national election proceedings. It is therefore only on the basis of the provisions of this document that OSCE observers should assess elections in the OSCE.

In practice, the OSCE works with other international parliamentary assemblies, international organizations, and appropriate private institutions in this field. These other entities, however, may also have other criteria, such as those promulgated by the Venice Commission for the Council of Europe, by which they make their own assessment of various electoral proceedings. Such parallel criteria are usually not in conflict with the Copenhagen Commitments, but in some cases, they may differ in substance or detail and may go further in their requirements than the Copenhagen document. The divergence in these requirements among various participating observer groups sometimes causes difficulty, or even disagreement, in the various reports and press statements issued after each election.

Within the OSCE, there have sometimes been disagreements between the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. In 1997, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office and the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly signed a Co-operation Agreement which provided the guidelines and divisions of labor between these two OSCE institutions. This Agreement worked well for a number of years during which the OSCE was established as the leading election observation mechanism in the OSCE area. In recent years, however, some well-known difficulties have arisen, causing the OSCE Ministerial Council in 2006 to call on the ODIHR to continue to work with the Parliamentary Assembly on election observation on the basis of the 1997 Agreement. Although problems have continued since that time, I am pleased to note that Ambassador Lenarčič, the new Director of the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, met in Copenhagen last week with me as well as with

the President of the Parliamentary Assembly to address these difficulties, and we have agreed that the 1997 Co-operation Agreement will be fully observed and that we will work closely together to ensure our successful cooperation.

This is a welcome step in the right direction. We continue to believe that the Co-operation Agreement is an important document which – if followed in both the letter and the spirit – will enhance the credibility and visibility of the OSCE in the important work of election observation.

The Parliamentary Assembly is particularly proud of the role that it has played in this area during the past 15 years. In fact, this month marks the 15th anniversary of our Annual Session in Helsinki, at which the Chairman-in-Office tasked the OSCE parliamentarians to take the lead in OSCE election observation. OSCE parliamentarians responded positively and enthusiastically to the Swedish Foreign Minister's request, recognizing that their unique experience and expertise as elected public officials is an invaluable asset for OSCE election observation activities. Beginning with the critical elections in Russia in December of 1993, at which the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly coordinated the monitoring activities of over 1,000 observers from parliaments, governments and private institutions, the Parliamentary Assembly has deployed several thousand elected politicians to more than 80 national elections. I am also pleased to note that, while we have worked closely with other interparliamentary institutions, our Assembly has deployed more than twice as many observers as all the other interparliamentary institutions combined.

Elected Members of Parliament provide unequalled credibility and visibility to election observation projects because of who they are and what they do. As elected officials, full practitioners in the process and dependent upon elections themselves, they are rightly presumed to know more about elections than anybody else. The fact that they have succeeded in being elected and hold public office gives them a certain standing to speak about elections, which obviously provides unequalled credibility in this field.

In addition, these elected officials provide unparalleled visibility to OSCE election assessments through the attention that the media pays to what they have to say. There is no identifiable OSCE media, no OSCE television station, no OSCE newspaper or wire service. Media attention in the OSCE comes from the national press, radio, and television of each participating State. Obviously, when reporting on an election in a foreign country, a reporter for a national television station or a national newspaper will seek out the opinion of an elected politician from their own country for a comment. That parliamentarian is a recognizable public figure and can speak to their national media representatives in their own language.

And, of course, the editors of national newspapers or the evening television news in any participating country are much more likely to run a story about an election observation mission if they have a quote or assessment from someone who is a recognized figure in their own country. This is understandable and predictable, and through the years it has provided and continues to provide credibility and visibility to OSCE election observation missions.

Along with the credibility and visibility that I have mentioned, I should also note that parliamentarians clearly provide an element of transparency and

accountability that should be required of each international election observer. As parliamentarians, they live in the public eye. They are well known, having been scrutinized by their electors, by the press, and by their political opponents. Virtually everything about them is a matter of public record. They are also publicly accountable for virtually everything they say and do. When they assess elections in a foreign country, they have to be prepared to defend their position, to explain it, and to be responsible for it. To the extent possible, this should be the case for every observer. A government or a parliament whose elections are being observed should be entitled to know who the observers are and what qualifies them to do such a job. They should also know to whom they are responsible, both before, during and after the time they are observers and, most importantly, the sources of their funding should be open and transparent to all.

The Parliamentary Assembly has frequently called for more transparency and accountability, not only in election observation but also in the OSCE itself. The Assembly has also spoken out against the use of double standards in election observation. In the 55 OSCE participating States that hold elections, there are no two systems that are identical. They are sometimes very similar, but other times remarkably different. Election observation missions must therefore be very careful not to criticize provisions of election laws in one participating State, when the same provisions are accepted in the election laws in other participating States. In addition, the election observation methodology of any organization or institution must have the flexibility to be applied equally to the elections in all OSCE participating States. If the methodology of an institution limits or restricts their ability or resources available to observe elections in some participating States but not in others, then that methodology is severely flawed and should either be changed or abandoned.

I am please to say that I believe that the Parliamentary Assembly has consistently lived up to the standards that I have mentioned throughout the 15 years in which we have engaged in this work. We are proud of this record and we look forward to leading election observation missions in the OSCE in the years ahead.

Thank you very much.