



Remarks by OSCE PA Vice-President
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OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Seminar

*“Election Observation and the Role of Technology in Electoral Processes:
OSCE Commitments, International Obligations and
Other Standards for Democratic Elections”*

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Dear ladies and gentlemen,
Honorable experts,

I would like to thank you for the invitation to this seminar. I am pleased to know that this type of seminar has become a tradition ODIHR has established recently and I see my presence here in my capacity as Vice President of the Parliamentary Assembly as a sign of good co-operation between our two institutions.

Since joining the Parliamentary Assembly in 2005 I've had the opportunity to contribute to election observation by being an observer in Belarus, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, the United Kingdom and Ukraine, by leading the PA delegation in Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia last year and most recently by serving as Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the short-term OSCE Election Observation Mission in Kyrgyzstan. It is my privilege to be actively engaged in this important part of OSCE work and I look forward to continuing our fruitful dialogue and cooperation also after this seminar.

We are all familiar with the background and the basic principles, decisions and commitments with respect to free and fair elections. The 1990 Copenhagen Document is a key OSCE document that outlines commitments on democratic elections that all OSCE countries have agreed to uphold and implement, enabling a consistent and fair application. Obligations of OSCE participating States extend also beyond the OSCE commitments, which include responsibilities under international law associated with UN and Council of Europe documents.

Democratic elections have become a condition of membership in certain international organizations and often serve even more broadly as a basis for the legitimization of governments within the international community. However, we must not feel overly secure. Having such a comprehensive range of international regulations will not necessarily avoid facing challenges that may undermine the principle that the will of people, expressed in periodic and general elections, indeed constitutes the basis for authority of the government.

How do we as the OSCE contribute to safeguarding against these challenges. The OSCE has developed a range of tools that contribute to making a better service to the people and the institutions of a given country. This can be through a field presence, by providing confidence-building expertise, or most importantly by conducting election observation. In the OSCE, election observation is a flagship enterprise and I feel it is our responsibility to cherish and protect it.

The Parliamentary Assembly has made extensive efforts to prove its non-biased approach to show that all countries, including so-called 'well-established democracies' are held accountable to (their) democratic commitments. For many years now, the Parliamentary Assembly worked to be present with election observation in all countries - East and West of Vienna. For example, EOMs we have done in the USA since 2004, or in the UK, or more recently in Germany. We also try, when feasible, do observation of elections in countries of the expanded OSCE family – in our Partners for Cooperation, for example in Algeria in 2004 or Tunisia in 2011.

For both the Parliamentary Assembly and ODIHR election observation has become an effective means for helping to enhance democratic practices in our countries. Election observation was created to support and assist in maintaining and developing democratic structures. But election observation is not a 'Holy Grail' that magically fixes all problems and complications. Good election observation will not necessarily lead to 'good' democracy. And we all need to acknowledge the existing challenges we face while conducting election observation in various countries.

It is a growing concern how to preserve the impartiality of election observation to ensure and (one more time) emphasize that free and fair elections are the cornerstone of a democracy. Observation is fundamentally a show of solidarity with the people of a country, and as representatives of the international community, we must emphasize that we need this form of cooperation between our countries to provide the peoples of the OSCE area with the highest democratic standards.

Attacks on credible observation should be of concern for all of us. Luckily, within the OSCE we are very well-served with the processes enshrined in the Copenhagen Document, great expertise of ODIHR, as well as political experience brought by OSCE parliamentarians. But we cannot be complacent, because there are regularly new attempts to influence our operations. We should always be ready to consider ways to improve our work and stay in line with all agreements and commitments collectively adopted.

Efforts at democracy will unavoidably fail if we do not have an informed society. Accountability, even though democratic elections, will be inadequate if our populations don't have information. The Internet and social media have revolutionized the flow of information, which is good in many ways. But information is also easily falsified and this misinformation can be abused. For this reason, we also need assess the media landscape and I welcome that this is raised in the election observation reports.

Another challenge today is how to deal with the crisis of democracy itself. Low turnout and the inability to form governments are signs of growing disbelief in the very system that was meant to give everyone a voice. Many of those present today know well that poor performance of electoral administration bodies, inaccuracies or discrepancies in election procedures do not contribute to strengthening public trust in the system either. In order to be valid, democracy and elections depend on the people's confidence in the electoral system. However, the complexity of the world has made decision-making more difficult. When things get too complicated people tend to look for easy answers. This in turn gives rise to populism and polarization, which in the long run does not benefit the democratic development of our societies. In face of this challenge, we have to think beyond what may be short-term political gain, and stay focused on the longer-term benefit of our societies.

Over the years we have changed our practices and procedures to better fit the specific challenges of today. In previous years, election fraud - ballot box stuffing, carousel voting, vote buying, and intimidation of voters - could be quite easily observed on the election site but luckily today such practices occur less often. Having read many election observation reports, I have noticed that the assessment of voting on election day have become more positive – a development that should by no means be downplayed. But as you all know, election fraud still exists in many countries, the methods have simply become more sophisticated.

The second session of this seminar will deal with an important emerging aspect – the role of technologies in electoral processes. There is a growing interest among all stakeholders to explore this topic. I personally look forward to better understanding potential advantages and difficulties that technologies bring to conducting elections. Let us reflect upon all these important subjects during our session today.

Thank you.