

Closing remarks

Ambassador Janez Lenarčič

Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights



Chairmanship Election Seminar

Vienna, 21-22 July 2008

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My staff and I have attentively followed the discussions of the seminar over the past two days. I am confident to say that we, together, representatives of participating States, parliamentarians, election administrators, experts, and domestic observers, have attained our prime objective: to foster a genuine and open dialogue on elections, in particular in the areas of implementation of OSCE election related commitments, observation methodology and follow up.

These lively debates have inspired some reflections that I would like to share with all of you in my closing remarks. Many times, I have heard the words transparency, accountability and trust. These three principles are interwoven: transparency and accountability contribute to confidence. These principles are, and should continue to be, at the core of the ODIHR election related activities. These are the essential conditions to enjoy the support of all OSCE participating States when fulfilling our election assistance mandate. Together, we will be stronger as an Organization that has inspired others in the field of election monitoring. We should all take great pride in the credibility and reputation that the OSCE has built throughout the years.

It is in this spirit that I wish to dispel some of the myths that appear to persist with regard to our activities, in order to

strengthen confidence in our work. Let me summarize what I consider to be the key ingredients to a successful election observation mission.

- First and foremost, collecting information;
- Second, verifying and analyzing facts and evidence;
- Third, drawing conclusions; and
- Fourth, faithful reporting and formulating constructive recommendations in an impartial, professional, non-politicized and non-obstructive manner.

We are, I must repeat, not in the business of harassing OSCE States, finger pointing, and judging elections with the sole objective to identify shortcomings. ODIHR is not an election police. The ultimate purpose, beyond instilling public confidence in the process, is to assist States in improving the conduct of their elections in line with the commitments they themselves freely entered into. To us, election observation mission is one of the means available in the OSCE toolbox to promote genuinely democratic elections.

Second: I will reiterate what I said at the opening of this seminar: the ODIHR does not strive to act ‘independently’. The ODIHR seeks to be impartial in the way it delivers its mandate given by the OSCE participating States. Impartial and objective, not independent.

Third, and probably most important: There is no future for election observation if it becomes politicized. There is no future for this activity if we are forced to depart from the facts and evidence collected by observers – this includes all observers, long and short-term observers, and OSCE PA parliamentarians. Political judgments should be left for others to make, not to observers.

Fourth: The ODIHR has been criticized for focusing its attention to CIS countries and South-eastern Europe, negating the fact that electoral problems may also exist elsewhere. There are no perfect elections anywhere in the OSCE region; I repeat there is no perfect election process that would not benefit from scrutiny. This is why the ODIHR has, in the last few years, followed electoral developments in a broader range of participating States. The ODIHR has assessed elections in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain and Turkey. We will strive to continue these efforts.

Let me also say that with unlimited human and financial resources, the ODIHR would be able to observe all elections in the OSCE area in a given year. You all know that this is simply unrealistic given the current financial trend within the OSCE. We must therefore use available resources responsibly. This means that we must carefully consider where the ODIHR election missions can have the maximum impact and added value before taking a decision.

Fifth – one of the myths most often heard: observers are solely drawn from Western countries. This may have been true in the 90s, but it has become an assertion no longer grounded in fact. In 2007, the average number of States represented in election observation missions was 43. Furthermore, the election experts recruited by the ODIHR came from only 16 OSCE States in 2000. This number has increased to 38 in 2007, clearly demonstrating the efforts ODIHR has made to achieve a better geographical composition of its observation missions. We will continue to diversify the composition of our core teams, in line with MC Decision 19/06 of December 2006.

Sixth – a grievance relating to a lack of transparency in the recruitment process for observers. Let me point out again that the ODIHR only recruits a small number of experts that form the core teams. Anyone, I repeat, anyone, can now directly apply for core team positions online in their personal capacity. I encourage all of you to go on the ODIHR website where you will find a link in order to apply for the forthcoming election observation mission.

Seventh – election observation missions are sometimes referred to as a “*black box*.” Let’s also dispel this misrepresentation. All ODIHR reports before, during and after an election – the interim reports, the statement of preliminary findings and conclusions, and the final report -- are posted on the ODIHR website in English and in the official language of the country concerned. The observation methodology and the work of long-term observers are publicly available. You have seen them outside this room for the

last two days. We have nothing to hide and we shall continue to operate with maximum transparency.

And finally, eighth. Some have made it a point to argue that “the financing of ODIHR election observation mission is problematic because it includes extra-budgetary funds”. Once and for all: it’s false. It’s untrue. The ODIHR’s election observation activities are exclusively funded through the unified budget agreed to in this hall here. This is a hard fact and this will remain so under my tenure.

*

Dear participants,

We have, over the past two days, discussed issues surrounding election observation in the OSCE region. Such discussions are welcome. But they should not obscure the fact that the ODIHR has a mandate to deliver: to assist States to bring their elections in line with commitments. This is what voters and the public throughout the OSCE region expect from us.

Ahead of us lie challenges: important elections will take place this autumn. In this context, I would like to thank the representative of one participating State for the assurances given that OSCE observers will be able to fully observe also the counting and tabulation process during the upcoming parliamentary elections. This will indeed further increase transparency of and confidence in the elections.

To conclude, it is my sincere wish to see all of us working together in partnership to raise to what I consider is the principal challenge: to maintain and further strengthen OSCE's credibility in the field of election observation by assessing elections in the OSCE region against agreed commitments in an impartial, objective, consistent and professional manner devoid of political agendas.

I would like to once again thank the Chairmanship for organizing the seminar and to thank all participants for their active participation and for sharing many valuable ideas with us. Thanks in particular to all States who continue to provide support for our Office, financial, political and in terms of their secondment of long- and short-term observers.

Thank you.