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Political Parties and OSCE Commitments

1. Political parties are the critical hub of a democracy. Where the democratic culture is weak, parties are also very often fragile. Within the OSCE there is a wide range of historical development with regard to party systems and in many cases the word “party” has negative connotations evoking memories of an authoritarian past. In western European democracies the party system often has roots going back to the nineteenth century and “families” of political groups have developed over time. In new democracies parties do not have these roots and are often dominated by personalities with weak party structures and frail links with constituents.
2. One of the main jobs of political parties is to assist in the election process and compete with each other. Often this involves of necessity confrontation even within coalition partners as the recent referendum on election system in the UK showed. However a sign of a mature democracy is the post-election phase and the acceptance by the losing side of the decision. This can only be possible if there is an understanding that the process was free and fair and the work of the OSCE in monitoring this is essential to fostering this climate of trust. In addition however the parties themselves have to learn not only how to win elections, but how to lose. Like governing, opposition is an art. There should be a kind of “opposition culture” or an effort to engage in a constructive dialogue to control and challenge government policy. However this is not always the case and opposition parties sink to dysfunctional and obstructive tactics undermining the trust in the profession of politics. Parties will only work in a constructive way in opposition if they feel that there are ways to influence government policy and a real chance to win in elections next time round. For all this to work there has to be a minimum consensus on constitutional norms and the rules of game. One way is to ensure that opposition parties are integrated eg in parliamentary work with committee chairmanships on committees concerned with public accounts. The problem of a strong executive versus legislative is common to many countries and the OSCE could review the state of play in the participating states on this.
3. Helpful also to create more trust would be a kind of fairness pact by parties during campaigning. Less negative campaigning, so-called “dirty tricks” and combative politics (also cited as one reason for fewer women candidates) would raise the level. Clearly in some political cultures there is a higher acceptance of such campaigning than in others but there have to be limits. In the UK section 106 of the Representation of the People’s Act makes it illegal for candidates to deliberately make false statements in an election campaign on their opponents with a view to influencing the outcome of the result. Last year an election court investigated such a case and deprived the member of parliament of his seat. This rarely happens but such stiff penalties could raise the level of democracy and enhance the fairness of elections.

4. Parties have a vital role in mobilising the electorate and engaging their interest in politics but very often are the reason why people switch off from politics. One reason is that voters feel it makes no difference whom they vote for and things stay the same and that politicians break their promises. A fairness pact would also lay down guidelines obliging parties to think what they promise in their election manifestos. Many points could simply be unrealistic. After all governments are not all-powerful and are constrained by membership eg in the EU or the globalised economy. Small countries too cannot take an ambitious stance on many policies. They cannot give hard and fast guarantees on many issues. Therefore parties should post on their websites the policies after an election when they are in government and how they have fulfilled them at regular intervals and if not why not. This could eg because a coalition was necessary. On the whole as the case in the UK shows, voters like the idea of consensus politics but not always the necessary compromise that comes with it viewing it as “betrayal”.
5. A code of conduct consisting of best practices from participating states could also help raise confidence in the party system. In cases of proved corruption resignation or expulsion should follow as a matter of course. For this party statutes should be transparent and clear outlining not only rights of party membership but also duties.
6. The inter-linkage between party and state in countries is a difficult one. Clearly there should be a separation from party membership and any kind of “referee” function. For example in the House of Commons the Speaker resigns party membership. But the problem goes a lot deeper in some new democracies and there is undue influence of government officials on government employees particular at election times. Whilst the OSCE can investigate such cases, there are difficulties in implementation. Employees are dependent for their jobs on such officials and where there is a climate of fear it will be a challenge to investigate such cases. Those giving evidence to an investigation are then left to face the music so to speak when the OSCE leaves.