

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation: Background and Objectives

The National Association of Secretaries of State
2007 Winter Conference
Washington, D.C., February 9-12, 2007

Remarks by Ambassador Christian Strohal
Director
OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
Warsaw, Poland



Distinguished Secretaries of State,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

at the outset, allow me to thank you all, your President, the Honorable Deborah Markowitz, of Vermont, and your Executive Director, Ms. Leslie Reynolds, for the kind invitation and this wonderful opportunity to speak to you about the work of my Office - the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. But, more importantly, I would also like to thank you all, as well as the US Electoral Assistance Commission and its Chairman Mr. Paul DeGregorio, for all the efforts to further facilitate the commitment of the United States of America to international election observation, that is, the cooperation with our experts who were following last year's mid-term elections. This cooperation is not only very appreciated – it goes hand in hand with the strong overall support my Office receives from the United States in our work to promote democratic elections and institutions in all member States of the OSCE.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, as it is called, is a transatlantic security organization of 56 participating States. My Office – the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – commonly referred to as the ODIHR - is based in Warsaw, Poland, and is the main OSCE institution for promoting democratic processes and human rights. The United States of America has been a stalwart supporter of the ODIHR since its establishment in 1991, and many of our activities and reports serve to contribute to policy discussions here in Washington D.C.

The office implements a broad range of programmes that support democratic development, institution building, civil society support, effective rule of law, and the protection of human rights. This morning, it is the ODIHR's unique mandate for election observation that I will focus on, a mandate which has been granted by the respective Heads of State and Foreign Ministers of the OSCE States.

In 1990, they agreed on a set of criteria for democratic elections, and to provide for a standing invitation for election observation. They put these criteria squarely in a broad context of human rights, the rule of law, and security. Up to today, this 1990 document serves as a basis for our work.

All OSCE States are mutually accountable for the implementation of these commitments. Therefore, my Office has developed an election observation methodology which is widely recognized. This has permitted the ODIHR to report accurately during the last decade on the major trends of every election it has observed, far over 100 altogether in some 30 countries, having deployed over 30.000 observers in the process. All this has only become possible because OSCE States second talented individuals, many of them coming from among the ranks of election administrators. They contribute to a broad network of experts who devote time to assisting each other.

“The spread of democracy around the world has been one of the signal transformations of our times. Elections – observed by the international community, or assisted in other ways by it – are at the heart of this inspiring story.” This quote from the former Secretary-General of the

United Nations underscores the fact that we in this room are all partners in ensuring the integrity of the democratic election process, not just in the United States of America, but also within a broad international context.

Originally, the ODIHR was established to assist the democratic transition of the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Since then, major gains have been made in the conduct of elections in South-East Europe, Central Europe and the Baltic States. However, as we look further to the East, despite some significant cases of democratic breakthroughs, there is a concern that some OSCE countries risk becoming more accustomed to the language of democracy rather than its actual realization. Let me enumerate some trends which are worrying:

- candidates are being refused registration and/or are being de-registered;
- state administrative resources are misused by the incumbent;
- specific segments of the electorate are pressured to vote in a specific manner;
- state-controlled media is biased in favor of the incumbents;
- election administrations are working in an unaccountable and non-transparent manner;
- multiple forms of fraud conducted on election day;
- ineffective complaints and appeals procedures; and, finally,
- impunity characterized by the lack of sufficient political will to rectify those shortcomings.

Electoral challenges in longer standing democracies may not be as profound as the ones that I have just cited. But their experience serves as a compass to assist other countries. And this has been the reason why we have extended our attention to a broader range of countries, including the United States of America.

Within your federal framework of government, it is actually the individual states which effectively uphold the US government's commitment to invite international observers. While state legislation may not always reflect this, I would like to commend your 2005 Resolution recognizing the importance of OSCE observers, and welcoming their presence. This was a positive development, which enabled us to observe in most states. However, the concept of election observation as a right should be reflected in the election legislation of each state to meet the United States' OSCE commitment to election observation.

The ODIHR has observed elections in the United States in 2002, 2004, and most recently, the 2006 mid-term congressional elections. A first summary of our conclusions from the 2006 elections emphasized that the electoral environment in the United States is characterized by a high level of professionalism of election officials. The electoral reforms, initiated by the 2002 HAVA, appeared to be fully or largely implemented in most States. As you are all well aware, the introduction of new electronic voting systems has, however, sparked nationwide debate regarding their reliability and voter confidence. This debate is also reflected in the agenda of your meeting.

Our final report on this election will be issued shortly. We are looking forward to a follow-up dialogue to discuss our recommendations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The OSCE community is a community of shared values. These are not legally binding, but are political commitments that encapsulate the very essence of the American democratic experience, and the experience of other long-standing democracies. For the last decade and a half, the OSCE has been at the cutting edge of international efforts to ensure that the will of the people, expressed regularly through democratic elections, remains steadfast as the basis of governance. In this, the true value of election observation is fully recognized: it is an important contribution to the realization of universal civil and political rights.

I count on your continued support in this endeavour. May I end with an expression of hope: to see you often as OSCE/ODIHR election observers.

I thank you for your attention.