

Working Session 3: Democratic institutions, including:

- **Democracy at the national, regional and local levels**
- **Democratic elections**

Rapporteur: Rev. Fredrik Hansen, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the OSCE

No. of statements: 42

Delegations: 11

Civil Society: 30

OSCE Institutions: -

International Organizations: 1

Media: -

Rights of Reply: 8

Working Session 3 concerned itself with *democratic institutions, including democracy at the national, regional and local levels, and democratic elections*. The annotated agenda and the discussion-questions focus on the enhancement of political pluralism and participation, the safeguarding of legislative bodies to strengthen the democratic balance of power, the role of think tanks and civil society in supporting democratic processes, and the assistance that OSCE (its institutions and field operations) could provide in promoting political pluralism and participation. Furthermore, the annotated agenda welcomed examples of established and evolving good electoral practices, as well as how to deal with challenges that participating States face in meeting their commitments related to the issues at hand.

Mrs. Ivilina Verginova Aleksieva-Robinson, Chair of the Central Election Commission, Republic of Bulgaria, stressed that free and fair elections are a central component of democracy. She presented a number of recent legislative developments in Bulgaria, noting in particular the independent Central Election Commission, continued engagement with ODIHR, Council of Europe and its Venice Commission, co-operation between government entities and civil society, and an increasing presence of both international and domestic observers at Bulgarian elections. Furthermore, she highlighted the work of the Association of European Electoral Officials (ACEEO) with Bulgaria currently holding the chairmanship and its focus on regional co-operation.

Touching on a number of challenges in the field of elections and electoral organization and administration, Mrs. Aleksieva-Robinson mentioned among these the accountability of campaign financing, the increase of online hate speech during campaigns, the importance of ensuring the freedom of expression during campaigns and ensuring a level playing-field during campaigns, the technical working and protection of electronic voting, the rapidly growing role of social media (Tweeter, Facebook) during campaigns and as a way of including young people in political life, as well as public dissatisfaction with the political process and the lack of interest among notable parts of the population. These and other challenges re-affirm the value of cooperation between participating States, ODIHR, and civil society.

Mr. Sergei Danilenko, Chief of Staff of Central Election Commission, Russian Federation, opened his remarks by affirming that free democratic elections form the foundation of any democratic state. Based on the working model of the Russian Central Election Commission,

he stressed the importance of making use of experience from previous elections to ensure continued improvements to future elections, in particular in advancing transparency and increasing the trust of citizens in the electoral process.

Expanding on a number of concrete developments promoted by the Central Election Commission, Mr. Danilenko spoke about ensuring the ability of voters to cast their ballot close to their residence (avoiding long journeys to participate in the election and promoting broader election participation), supporting municipalities in voter registration, also using the Internet, creating a single-voter list for the whole country, as well as making use of technological improvements and means to accelerate counting and thereby avoiding human error. Furthermore, he noted that the Central Election Commission has increased the number of election observers, and will continue to seek advancement in the administration of elections, and in this regard continue its co-operation with international entities, including ODIHR.

In the subsequent discussions, interventions from the floor underlined the importance of democratic elections, and that these be fair, credible and enable the broadest possible participation. Also, the positive role that election observation plays in assisting election commissions and governments in improving and safeguarding their elections was highlighted, as was the work ODIHR on election observation missions. A number of speakers presented good practices, as well as national and local measures that have advanced democratic elections.

However, both participating States and civil society noted that there remain significant implementation gaps in the OSCE region as regards democratic institutions, including democracy at the national, regional and local levels, and democratic elections. A number of concrete challenges to implementation of OSCE commitments were repeatedly touched upon: lack of freedom for opposition parties and groups, underrepresentation of women in politics and in electoral process, growth of intolerance and hate speech as part of political campaigns, various forms of election corruption and vote-buying, use of public authority and financial resources to impact election campaign, unclear role of police and armed forces, lack of freedom of expression and freedom of media, poor or flawed voter registration, difficulties for voters to cast their ballot freely and secretly, absence of independent appeals procedures on alleged irregularities and the lack of independent electoral commissions.

Recommendations made by participants during this session include (non-exhaustive list):

Recommendations to the OSCE participating States

- Take appropriate measures to ensure participation of women and under-represented groups;
- Engage with citizens in order to promote open debate and democratic citizenship awareness raising;
- Regularly engage in ODIHR's electoral follow-up activities and submit voluntary reports to the OSCE Permanent Council and Human Dimension Committee;
- Maintain dialogue with NGOs on these issues and support human rights defenders;
- Advance freedom of expression/freedom of the media in elections;
- Continue to work with ODIHR, implement its recommendations, as well as secure funding for and second observers to ODIHR;
- Follow-up and implement recommendations from ODIHR and HCNM;

- Abolish blasphemy laws to ensure freedom of expression;
- Increase contributions to election observations missions;

Recommendations to the OSCE/ODIHR:

- Enhance co-operation with participating States;
- Continue its work on promoting and protecting democracy and democratic institutions;
- Assist participating States in their election governance;
- Seek additional ways to promote civic space and civil society;
- Make use of new technology to advance civic space;
- Monitor implementation of joint opinions and guidelines of OSCE/ODIHR Venice Commission;
- Consider undertaking a general evaluation of election observation missions;
- Take all violations of human rights seriously.