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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement at the Chairmanship's Expert Seminar on Electoral Management Bodies

As prepared for delivery by Gracia Hillman, Vice Chair
of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission
Vienna

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Thank you, Madam Moderator.

The United States joins others in thanking the Greek Chairmanship for organizing this useful and informative seminar on electoral management bodies.

Eighteen years ago in Copenhagen, all OSCE participating States recognized that pluralistic democracy and the rule of law are essential to ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. We committed to the ideals of democracy and political pluralism and stated our common determination to build democratic societies based on free elections and the rule of law.

Specifically, we committed to hold free elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot under conditions that ensure the free expression of the opinion of the electors. In defining what constitutes a free election, we committed to, among other things, universal suffrage; procedures that ensure votes are counted and reported honestly; the right of citizens to seek public office without discrimination; the right to freely establish political parties and other political organizations; political campaigning in a free and fair atmosphere; and unimpeded access to the media on a non-discriminatory basis for all political groupings. We also committed to domestic and international observation of our electoral processes.

We tasked the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights with organizing election observation missions and establishing the procedures for such observation – a task it has performed admirably.

There is no question that all elections in every country have some problems. The gauge of a free election is not necessarily how flawless the election procedure was, but how free and fair the election process was. Technical problems in a fair election are preferable to a mechanically perfect but fraudulent one. Ultimately, the integrity of the electoral process is judged by the electorate itself. It is right, and it is just that the electorate should demand excellence and inclusiveness in the conduct of elections. After all, elections are fundamentally about people.

The 2006 ODIHR Report on Common Responsibilities highlighted the challenges facing us all. The real electoral crisis in the OSCE region today is that the commitment to hold democratic elections is still not fully implemented in all participating States.

Election commissions and other election management bodies have an obligation to organize and administer elections in their States in compliance with national legislation. However, we must remember that our laws should be consistent with our OSCE and other international obligations.

Thank you, Madam Moderator.