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RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP EXPERT
SEMINAR ON ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES**

Vienna, 16 and 17 July 2009

Working Session II: Ensuring the integrity of elections

**The institution of international observation – helping to ensure the
electoral rights of citizens**

We are grateful to the Greek Chairmanship of the OSCE for supporting the initiative to organize a discussion among experts and professionals in the field of elections. One of the aims of our seminar is to increase the effectiveness of the international component in exercising and protecting the electoral rights and freedoms of citizens.

The OSCE has become an indispensable element in the whole modern-day system of elections from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Without exaggerating the role of the OSCE in national election procedures, I should like to mention a few problems concerning the international institution of observation, which we believe should at least be discussed.

The problem of the international standardization, universalization and systematization of electoral procedures (including electronic voting), and of monitoring those procedures and obtaining objective assessments, should have been dealt with a long time ago and is likely to result in public conflicts between the various international monitoring missions.

One has the impression that the world is changing and developing while the institution of international observation continues to live in the past.

Specialists and professionals still have many questions for the OSCE missions as regards the monitoring methods used and the cryptic procedures employed in the formation, work and evaluation reports of the missions. The Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (CEC) has some concerns regarding the de facto autonomy of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) from the OSCE participating States (it is not accountable to them and they have no control over it), the subjective nature of the assessments of national election procedures and the persistence of a policy of double standards depending on whether OSCE participating States lie to the west or to the east of Vienna.

In that connection, I should like to draw attention to the results of the sociological surveys carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2008 in States to the west of Vienna.

On average, around one third of the population of all the countries represented in the chart shown in Slide one gave the answer “no” to the question: “Are you satisfied with how democracy is ‘working’ in your country?” And in some States to the west of Vienna the percentage of respondents who were dissatisfied with how democracy was “working” amounted to more than half of the country’s adult population in 2008.

On the basis of the data obtained by that sociological study, one has to ask: is it not time to make the procedures for deciding whether to send observation missions to a particular country clear and transparent and to base that decision on objective research rather than political expediency?

A similar question constantly arises at other stages of the monitoring activities of the OSCE missions, such as the determination of the number of monitors for a particular country (for example, 50 monitors is considered normal for the United States of America, while 150 is considered low for Kyrgyzstan), the determination of the composition of a mission (European students who have never voted in their own country are included in missions, while PhD students from republics in the North Caucasus are rejected), and the non-transparent drafting and adoption of the missions’ conclusions (for example, the preliminary conclusion may differ considerably from the final report).

If we turn to absolute figures for the composition of missions, we are immediately reminded of the pithy saying by the Russian military leader Alexander Suvorov: “victory is gained not by number, but by skill”.

Slide two shows the number of observers involved in the organization of the presidential elections in the Russian Federation on 2 March 2008. Russian legislation guarantees the right to appoint around one million people as observers at the various election commissions (on average there are ten observers per commission). In fact, 214,000 observers were appointed. Media representatives may also be present at all commissions without exception. A total of 2,051 media representatives were accredited at the CEC alone. Look at how the figure for international observers (235) appears against that background.* This is why only professional work by international monitors will be able to carry out the function of assisting in the development of democracy in each specific sovereign State.

I should also like to mention the methods of work and elaboration of final assessments, which at times some interested politicians give paramount importance to in terms of the legitimization of electoral procedures. Today, the OSCE’s “gold standard” exists only in the method used for gathering information: an assessment mission is sent first, followed by the main mission consisting of long- and short-term observers. There are, however, no standards for evaluating the data gathered by the observers, for the objective analysis and accurate summary of that data or for obtaining an objective final assessment, or at any event the expert community is not aware of any such standards. I might mention that

* In an interview with the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* on 18 June 2007, the OSCE Secretary General, Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, remarked: “all have the obligation to invite observers, but how many or few the countries decide themselves”.

the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States have made progress in that regard by adopting a declaration on the principles of international observation last autumn.

It is perhaps because of the reasons I have just listed that of the various actors involved in the legitimization of election results the voters have the lowest level of confidence in the OSCE observers.

Slide three shows data obtained during a sociological survey conducted by the All-Russia Centre for the Study of Public Opinion in 2008. The respondents were asked: “Who would you believe in the event of conflicting assessments of election results?” (Each person could express a preference for only one organization). The CEC received the most votes – 28 per cent. We are of course concerned about this low score, but in comparison with the level of confidence in the OSCE (which at 4 per cent was on par with the statistical margin of error) one has to ask oneself the question: are we moving in the right direction, colleagues?

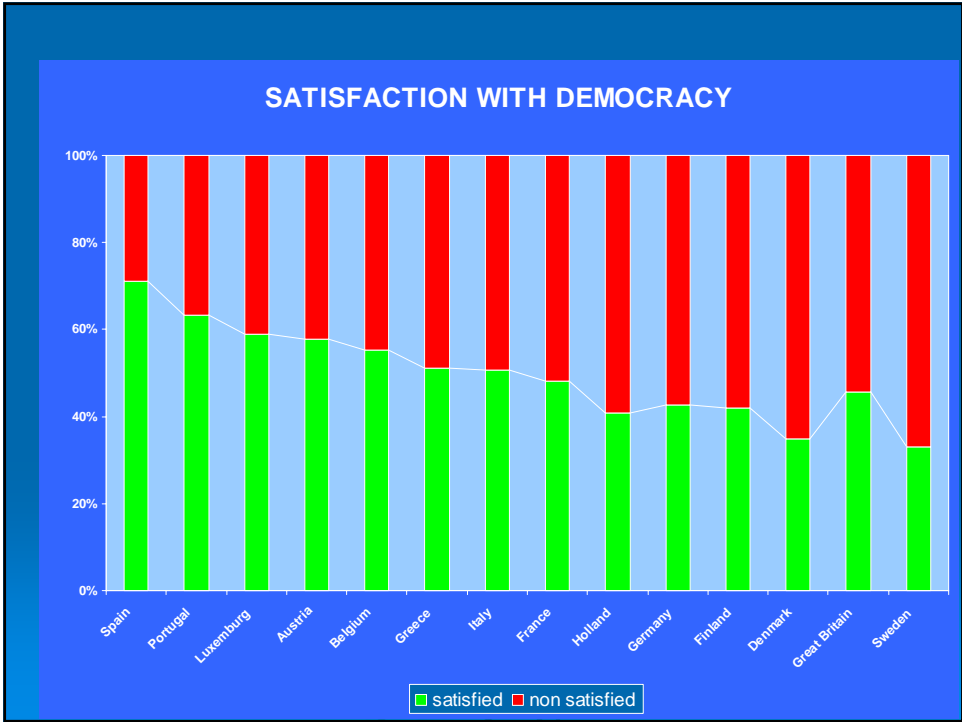
After all, in accordance with the OSCE Copenhagen commitments, it is the will of the people that is “the basis of the authority of the government” and the people themselves are the arbiter. And if our electorate delivers a “vote of no confidence” in the OSCE observers, this is a serious problem for the Organization’s election-related activities.

We hope that the OSCE will continue its work to develop standards for democratic procedures and, most importantly, international observation.

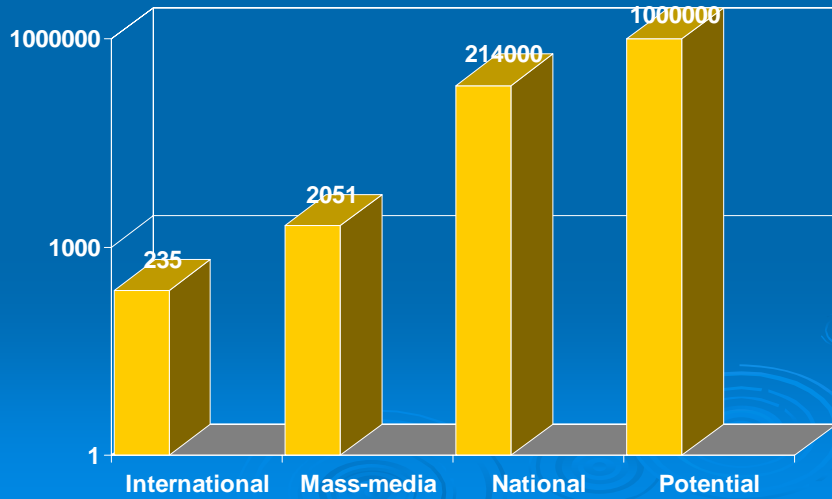
The participants in this seminar believe there is a need for further events of this kind. We hope that next year under Kazakhstan’s Chairmanship of the OSCE the Greek undertaking will be continued and a similar seminar on current issues concerning the development of national election systems will find a place in the OSCE’s programme of activities for 2010.

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Observers in Russia (March 2008)



Voter confidence (January 2008)

