

SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING
“ELECTORAL STANDARDS AND COMMITMENTS”
15-16 July 2004
HOFBURG, VIENNA

Opening address of Ambassador Christian Strohal,

Director of the OSCE Office
for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me be brief, as I have already spoken quite a bit today. I just want to stress a few essential issues and explain why I think this SHDM on electoral standards is so important for our Organization.

As you know, my Office originates from the Copenhagen commitments on democratic elections and the efforts to implement them. Ever since, work on elections standards and observing elections in participating States across our region has been an important area of the ODIHR's efforts – probably what we are most known for. It is a particular honour and responsibility to lead on electoral issues on behalf of this Organization, which in turn is most known for its commitments and practical work on democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

We have in recent years worked with partners in participating States and other international organizations to examine how the standards and commitments we use can be strengthened and updated to meet new challenges. I am very glad that we have many of these partners – many have become friends - here today and tomorrow. We have some of the world's leading elections experts with us today, and see this as a unique opportunity to carve out a few issues which, in this context, will take this Organization further in the coming years.

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The ODIHR experience has shown that the election process in a number of participating States can be further improved. The weaknesses identified boil down to a few core issues: ensuring a genuine electoral competition characterised by confidence and overall political pluralism including universal and equal suffrage, election administration performing its duties in a professional and impartial manner; and an independent judiciary.

Despite the detailed commitments and standards we have, some of the problem areas have in practice sometimes fallen through the cracks. As political will to implement commitments is sometimes less forthcoming than would be desirable, it is important to address issues which were not reflected in the Copenhagen set of rules to the degree they could have.

After having taken stock of existing commitments and standards, my Office has elaborated a number of issues in preparation for this meeting, which we have distributed in a discussion paper. Let me summarize the key elements.

Future challenges are evident as new issues related to, for instance,

- **referendums and “recall” elections,**
- **electronic voting and counting** technology,
- and the **development of election standards by other international organizations,** are emerging.

While these areas are complex and do not present a complete list of new challenges in the electoral field, the principal issues point toward the distinct **possibility for discussing additional commitments** concerning

- furthering **universal and equal suffrage,**
- acknowledging the need for **transparency in election related processes,**
- establishing **accountability** for electoral authorities and competitors,
- and - as an overarching issue - recognizing that maintaining **public confidence in electoral processes** is a prerequisite for the people to express their will, and in convincingly large numbers. It is equally important for the authority and legitimacy to govern in a credible and effective manner.

Elections cannot be assessed solely by examining the technical aspects of their conduct.

Broader considerations, such as confidence, political pluralism, media freedoms, and the rule of law, including legal mechanisms for the enforcement of civil and political rights, must be taken into account, if elections are to be understood within the context of the Copenhagen Document.

Universal and equal suffrage does not only mean the absence of formal legal barriers to elect and to being elected, it means active and effective political enfranchisement of the whole society. This refers in particular to the participation of women, ethnic minorities, as

well as the disabled. It also relates to important questions on the establishment of constituencies and the forfeiture of political rights.

Transparency of the election processes is fundamental to democratic elections. It provides a critical basis for establishing public confidence, including confidence of electoral competitors. It is also essential for the effective exercise of the rights to redress and effective remedies. When I say transparency, I mean not only the observation of elections, but also issues relating to campaign finance and expenditures, and timely access of all election stakeholders to all aspects of the election process.

The ODIHR election observation experience has revealed that the failure to establish an accountable and transparent administration of elections, free from government interference, is a critical issue that has impeded democratic elections in some OSCE participating States. As a result, this has had a negative impact on public confidence in election authorities administering an election process. Further, the ODIHR election observation experience has revealed that the **effective protection of electoral rights**, both passive and active, is another area of concern that should be addressed to enhance the accountability of election authorities.

In line with the Maastricht Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/03, we have therefore presented - in our discussion paper – these four fundamental pillars for democratic elections: **public confidence, universal and equal suffrage, transparency, and accountability.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I have already stated at the Permanent Council this morning, the ODIHR follows the ongoing **debate about the strengths and weaknesses** of this Organization very attentively, in particular in regard to human dimension issues. Statements have also been made on the Organization's and my Office's work on elections.

In this context, I want to stress that we continue to receive praise for the professionalism and diligence of our election observation reports and other documents we issue with regard to elections. This praise very often comes from precisely those countries they are addressed to. I am, for instance, particularly proud over the professional and constructive exchange we have had in the past with you, Mr Veshnyakov, as Chairman of the Russian Federation's Central

Election Commission. But we have also received very positive and constructive feedback from countries with long-standing democratic traditions, such as the United Kingdom.

While criticism is sometimes expressed – after all the ODIHR tends to deliver uncomfortable truths – I can guarantee that the ODIHR election observation adheres strictly to the election observation mandate, applies identical methodology, and assesses against the same common standards.

The ODIHR has been intensively involved in election observation in transition democracies throughout Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe – numerous examples testify to this effect. In recent years election assessments have been conducted also in longer established democracies.

The ODIHR does not “*deal mainly with monitoring and assessment of election results*”, as has recently been stated. As we have made clear on numerous occasions, the ODIHR monitors and assesses the election processes in OSCE participating States. Further, the election observation reports always avoid comments on the impact of observed election violations on the election outcome. It is left to others to draw their political conclusions from the facts we document.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us not be distracted by political debates, as important as they might be, in our work here today and tomorrow. We have the chance to benefit from the presence of eminent experts and build on huge amounts of practical and field experience. I am confident that we will approach our common goals in a constructive and cooperative spirit. I wish us fruitful and interesting discussions and expect this SHDM to be another major step towards the consolidation of democracy in our region.

Thank you.