

Working Session 1: Democratic institutions, including democracy at the national, regional and local levels and democratic elections

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No. of statements: 41

Delegations: 13

Civil Society: 26

OSCE Institutions: 1

International Organizations: 1

Media: -

Rights of Reply: 12

Working Session 1 focussed on '*democratic institutions, including democracy at the national, regional and local levels, and democratic elections*' and was introduced by Ms Svetlana Artikova, Deputy Chairperson of the Senate of the Oily Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Mr Maarten Halff, Head of Policy, United Nations Electoral Assistance Division. The annotated agenda highlighted the importance of political participation, political plurality and a multi-party system, as well as the need to have a clear system of checks and balances to ensure the effective performance of democratic functions in a transparent and accountable manner. The importance of the electoral process was a key theme of the discussion, and the session was intended to explore the challenges faced in the OSCE region in ensuring independent democratic institutions, diverse and representative parliaments, and a free campaign environment.

Ms Artikova focussed on the situation in Uzbekistan and on recent reforms designed to place the country on a path to modernity. The aim was towards a secular democratic state, based on the rule of law, with accountable government bodies. In ensuring the role of Government to serve the people is fulfilled, officials must engage with the population. Media have a key role to play in the process. Ms Artikova outlined significant recent developments in Uzbekistan, and highlighting the importance of developing a new relationship with neighbouring countries.

The assistance of ODIHR and the Venice Commission had been enlisted, in recognition of the need for external expertise to codify the Electoral Code. Any revised electoral law is required to be in place for at least one year before the holding of elections, next expected in Uzbekistan in December 2019. In closing, Ms Artikova stressed the vital importance of the nature of the relationship between the State and the citizen.

Mr Maarten Halff, of the UN Electoral Assistance Division detailed the role of the Division in providing support to Member States, and described how it acted as a system-wide focal point. Mr Halff gave an overview of lessons learned and stressed that the UN could provide assistance only at the request of Member States: in that context, the Division places an importance on the assessment of ODIHR.

Mr Halff underpinned the importance of trust throughout the electoral process, and that this was critical, not just in the operation of the technical aspects, but also with regard to intellectual commitment: for the process to be a trusted one, we would expect to see an emphasis on strong political leadership, and care taken to provide the political space for opposition voices. In order for a truly credible electoral process, the approach must be technically good, but crucially, must also provide an enabling environment.

Interventions from the floor expressed strong support for openness and transparency at governmental level, and the importance of the inclusion of civil society. Interventions took up the need for trust in the electoral process mentioned by the speakers, and the importance that the process be fair, credible, and transparent. Every effort to enable the broadest possible participation should be made. The role of

ODIHR was mentioned repeatedly, and the need for continued rigour was stressed, as was the effect that election monitoring plays in safeguarding the democratic process. The Council of Europe and the Venice Commission were referenced positively.

While several interventions referenced best practice and noted improvements, both participating States and civil society said that there continue to be areas where participating States fall short of their OSCE commitments, and where there is a restrictive political environment. This applied at national, regional and local levels, and also in respect of democratic elections. Interventions pointed to challenges in fulfilling OSCE commitments, and cited lack of opposition alternatives presented to the electorate, lack of freedom of the media, including attacks on journalists, and lack of inclusion of women, youth and minorities as particular obstacles. Interventions recalled reports where democratic practices are compromised in several OSCE participating States, and expressed concern about rise of populism in politics, the rise of extremism, increases in xenophobia, hate speech, and restrictions on free media and civil society. Issues surrounding safety of journalists and activists were raised as were concerns over electoral fraud. Speakers cited flawed voter registration, and a lack of independent appeals procedures on alleged irregularities.

Recommendations to the OSCE participating States

- Engage with citizens in order to promote an inclusive democratic process;
- Maintain dialogue with NGOs on these issues and support human rights defenders;
- Ensure that the election process engenders trust, both by being technically sound and by creating an enabling environment;
- Democratic institutions should take into account technological threats.
- To act to support the political participation of women and others currently underrepresented in political life;
- Actively engage with ODIHR's electoral follow-up activities;
- Advance freedom of expression/freedom of the media throughout the electoral process;
- Continue to work collaboratively with ODIHR, and participate in election observation missions
- Take into account, and implement recommendations from ODIHR and HCNM;
- To ensure that the electoral process is democratic, with a plurality of voices;
- Abolish limits on participation of national minorities who are stateless.

Recommendations to the OSCE/ODIHR:

- OSCE and ODIHR should continue to seek out opportunities for participation of civil society in democracy;
- ODIHR should take into account foreign actors' efforts to undermine democracy;
- Observation criteria should be applied equally and missions deployed consistently in all participating states;
- Enhance co-operation with participating States;
- Continue work on promoting and protecting democracy and democratic institutions;
- Continue to be vigilant in compilation of accurate statistics and engage with participating States on evaluation systems;
- Seek to support UN and other treaty bodies;
- Continue to support civil society, taking into account modern media uses;
- To consider how the executive structures can better support OSCE.