



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 17: Democratic institutions, including:

*Democratic elections;
Democracy at the national, regional and local levels;
Citizenship and political rights.*

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador W. Robert Pearson
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Mr. Moderator,

All OSCE participating States have committed themselves to holding regular, free and fair elections. Elections can be a difficult process, and no country or system is perfect, including in my country. It is important to remember that the goal is not limited to ensuring they are only technically well run; this is possible under many authoritarian regimes. If sometimes messy, the real purpose of elections is build the foundation of a healthy democracy in accordance with the spirit as well as the letter of the OSCE commitments, before, during, and after Election Day, in order to permit the voice of the people to be heard. Those elections that disappoint are ones in which the leaders do not trust either their ability to explain their own decisions, or that of their people to decide for themselves.

Among the successes this year were the presidential elections of January and February and the May parliamentary elections in Serbia. Both of these elections took place during a difficult period for the country. Nevertheless, they were a success, and deemed to be in line with most of Serbia's OSCE commitments. This not only benefits Serbian civil society, but eases the path of European integration to the benefit of the country as a whole. However, we regret the decision of the Serbian Government to organize and conduct municipal elections in Kosovo in May in contravention to UNSCR 1244.

It is worth noting the broad confidence that exists in the electoral process in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We applaud the agreement reached by Bosnian leaders earlier this year that changed the electoral law to ensure that 1991 residents of Srebrenica would have the option to vote in Srebrenica municipality, and thousands did so in the October 5 municipal elections.

The early parliamentary elections the Republic of Macedonia held in June are more difficult to appraise. In most parts of the country, the elections were procedurally well administered. Disappointingly, however, in some parts, violence and intimidation disrupted the balloting and necessitated multiple re-runs. It is important that Macedonia implement ODIHR's recommendations and put safeguards in place to ensure that future elections are conducted in a manner fully consistent with OSCE commitments.

Unfortunately, there were also missed opportunities for fair and democratic elections. In Kyrgyzstan, the December 2007 parliamentary elections were marred by press censorship, dubious legal maneuverings during the campaign, and a vote count featuring irregularities. We call on the Government of Kyrgyzstan take steps to increase political pluralism and build institutions that are more reflective of democratic values.

Georgia and Armenia received varied assessments for the elections they held this year. Though the OSCE/ODIHR assessed that Georgian authorities made efforts to conduct the parliamentary elections according to international standards, they concluded that compliance of Georgia's parliamentary election process with OSCE commitments was "uneven and incomplete," and ODIHR's final report highlighted significant shortcomings in vote counting and tabulation, as well as in the handling of election complaints.

In Armenia's presidential election, the ODIHR concluded that "serious challenges" to some international commitments had "devalued the overall election process." In this connection, ODIHR also highlighted the vote count and complaints and appeals procedures, even though the outcome and eventual victor were never questioned. We encourage both countries to continue working with ODIHR and other experts to improve their election process well in advance of the next election.

We are also deeply concerned by the Russian presidential elections of March 2008, which closely resembled more a referendum on President Putin's hand-picked successor than genuine multi-party elections. Russian authorities succeeded in excluding from the ballot any viable opposition candidate, guaranteeing that, by Election Day, everyone knew who would emerge the winner. We also regret the unprecedented restrictions that the Russian Government placed on ODIHR's election monitoring for both the Duma and presidential elections, which prevented ODIHR from being able to conduct an objective and meaningful observation mission.

The United States is disappointed that the September 28 parliamentary elections in Belarus fell significantly short of Belarus' OSCE commitments, and that the Government of Belarus failed to uphold pledges for a transparent vote count. According to the preliminary report of the OSCE's election monitoring mission, the conduct of the parliamentary elections in Belarus did not meet OSCE commitments despite minor improvements. The vote count in particular was judged negatively at nearly one-half of the precincts where OSCE observers were present. Problems included election monitors being denied access to the vote count process, discrepancies between the number of voters observed and the number of votes recorded and outright falsification of votes.

Azerbaijan will hold a presidential election on October 15. We are disappointed that Baku did not act on all of the recommendations made by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the ODIHR, and that all main opposition candidates have announced their intention to boycott this election due to the absence of a level playing field.

Finally, we recall that the Government of Kazakhstan announced at the Madrid Ministerial that its Central Election Commission would prepare a package of recommendations, in consultation with ODIHR and other OSCE institutions, to reform its electoral law and liberalize registration requirements for political parties. The Government pledged to submit this legislation to its

Parliament by the end of 2008. The United States has followed Kazakhstan's reform process with great interest. We are ready to offer any technical assistance in this endeavor that Kazakh authorities may request, and look forward to the implementation of their Madrid commitments.

Mr. Moderator, in less than a month the United States will conduct elections. Six months ago, the United States issued invitations to the OSCE, ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to observe these elections, consistent with our OSCE commitments. In June, we hosted a Needs Assessment Mission, and look forward to the scrutiny that ODIHR and OSCE-PA observers will bring to our elections. Their recommendations will provide welcome input into our continuous efforts to improve our electoral process. There is no such thing as a perfect election, and no participating State should fear – or hinder – OSCE efforts to help make them better.