



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

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

As prepared for delivery by Amb. Michael Kozak, Head of Delegation  
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The participating States have declared that the will of the people, freely and fairly expressed through periodic and genuine elections, is the basis of the authority and legitimacy of all government. Media freedom and media pluralism are essential for free and fair elections. We commend the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for its expert, fact-based assessments of national-level elections throughout the OSCE region. In the interest of identifying areas for improvement, the United States will focus its statement on elections where respect for democratic principles fell short of OSCE commitments.

In **Azerbaijan**, the presidential elections called in April six months ahead of schedule lacked genuine competition. ODIHR observers noted that the elections took place within a restrictive political environment and a legal framework that curtail human rights and fundamental freedoms, including for members of the media. Other candidates refrained from directly challenging or criticizing the incumbent, and distinction was not made between his campaign and official activities. ODIHR's monitors also observed numerous serious irregularities on Election Day, such as ballot box stuffing.

**Turkmenistan's** parliamentary elections in March failed to present voters with meaningful political alternatives. The United States concurs with ODIHR's assessment that the election "lacked important prerequisites of a genuinely democratic electoral process." Exercise of the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association remained tightly restricted by the ruling party, which also enjoyed a monopoly over media coverage and the country's heavily censored Internet.

**Kyrgyzstan's** October presidential election was competitive and well-administered and it resulted in the first peaceful transition of power since independence. However, ODIHR noted cases of misuse of public resources, pressure on voters, and vote-buying. In recent months, however, the operating environment has largely improved for the media.

The United States fully subscribes to OSCE observers' conclusions that the **Russian** presidential elections in March "took place in an overly controlled legal and political environment marked by continued pressure on critical voices." Excessive restrictions on fundamental freedoms resulted in a lack of genuine competition and an uneven playing field. Prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny was not allowed to run, and his

supporters were subjected to intimidation and imprisonment. A restrictive legal and media environment denied voters the ability to consider genuine alternatives to the incumbent, Vladimir Putin.

The United States rejects as illegitimate Russia's repeated efforts to hold elections on Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, which Russia occupies.

Russia also continues to attempt to undermine democratic institutions and electoral processes in other participating States, including its malign efforts targeting the 2016 Presidential election in the United States.

The decision of **Moldova's** Supreme Court to uphold the invalidation of Chisinau's June mayoral elections represents a threat to democracy there. International observers found relatively minor irregularities that would not justify invalidation of the results, nor were there calls from elections participants to invalidate them. The Court's unusual and unwarranted decision thwarted the electoral will of the Moldovan people.

**Turkey's** June 24 presidential and parliamentary votes were held early. ODIHR's preliminary assessment found that, although voters had a genuine choice, the conditions for contestants in the election were not equal. The incumbent president and his party enjoyed a notable advantage, as reflected in the coverage of government-affiliated public and private media. The already restrictive legal framework compounded by the State of Emergency limited fundamental freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression, including for members of the media. Hastily adopted changes to election legislation were made without consultation and removed important safeguards for Election Day procedures.

We regret the inability of stakeholders in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** to reach agreement on electoral reform ahead of the general election in a few weeks. All parties should commit now to respecting the results of the elections and affirm their intent to form a government after the vote. Ethnic criteria for candidate registration constitute discriminatory, outdated, and inefficient restrictions, and we support efforts to eliminate them. Dervo Sejdic and Jakob Finci, as well as three other Bosnian citizens, have successfully challenged these discriminatory requirements before the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR). Overall, well over 300,000 Bosnians are not eligible to hold certain offices because of the restrictive criteria. Ignoring ECHR rulings or making ethnicity an even larger factor in Bosnian elections hinders, rather than advances, democratic development in the country.

On November 6, millions of Americans will exercise their right to vote in mid-term elections. They will elect all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 35 U.S. Senators, 36 state governors, as well as many state legislators, city mayors, and other officials. The United States has invited and welcomes an ODIHR mission to observe the election. We welcome OSCE observation of our elections as an opportunity to demonstrate the United States' respect for its international obligations and OSCE commitments.

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