

Dignitaries, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

Gathered by OSCE in this honourable European Human Rights Conference, we all are united in our understanding that democratic institutions established under the terms of political pluralism, a multiparty system and the guaranteed voting right to every elector, are of a key importance to the development of democracy in our societies. Conducting democratic, free and fair elections is a prerequisite for the overall democratic process.

On the other hand, Participating States should take all appropriate measures to ensure the right of citizens to political participation, without undue restrictions, violence, intimidation or fear of retribution. We all highlight the importance of enhancing the political participation of women, youths, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups to foster our democracies.

That is why, developing legislation aimed at achieving these goals is a key task and a commitment for us, the Participating States. It is taken over in the name of our citizens and for their prosperity.

In many Participating States of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and in the Council of Europe, including Bulgaria, the election-related legislation underwent significant and positive transformations over the past decades.

I'm going to give some examples from my country. I can say that today in Bulgaria, legal conditions and guarantees have been established:

- for encouraging political pluralism, transparency and accountability of political subjects, the exercise of voting rights of specific groups of the population;
- for the functioning of the independent, permanent Central Election Commission, which, together with the election commissions at lower levels is operating in full transparency;
- for the functioning of the Civil Council under the Central Election Commission, venue for experienced domestic observers. Its aim is to contribute for the transparency, democracy and fairness in elections in meaningful collaboration between governing bodies and civil society.

These examples emphasize the key role of the OSCE, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the European Commission for Democracy through Law, better known as the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for those positive legislative developments. The findings and conclusions, as well as the recommendations in the election observation reports and in their joint opinions on the amendments in the electoral legislation have been major drivers for legislative changes and democratization of the

electoral process in my country.

Another proof of the positive output, resulting from the partnership between state institutions within international organizations is also the interaction between the Election Management Bodies of the 25 states, affiliated with the Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO), which I have the honour to preside this year. ACEEEO exists to promote sound democratic processes and procedures among its members and others involved in the electoral process. Therefore, the example of ACEEEO shows how an international cooperation may provide knowledge and good examples for its member states.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we have to defend the values that unite us and the commitments we have already undertaken, and moreover, to fully ensure high quality when applying the existing regulations.

The quality of the election process is facing not only traditional challenges: organizational, accountability of campaign funding, et cetera. From now on, in our digital 21st century, we will face the conversion of social networks into mass communication channels with major influence on election campaigns; the hate speech and the online tools for its multiplication; the introduction of digital technologies in the voting and tabulation process and the associated risks and opportunities, as part of the key challenges. It is of ever higher importance the effective interaction between organizations such as the OSCE, in particular the ODIHR, and the authorities of the Participating States; the cross-sectoral interaction with civil society organizations; the use of social online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Google+, Vimeo, and more.

It is not by accident that the annual international conference of ACEEEO to be held on 9-10 November this year in Sofia, Bulgaria, is under the slogan "Conscious Voters in the Digital Age".

Partnership, regulation, monitoring are the three pillars for interaction of international organizations, the state administration, civil society organizations and the private communications businesses.

There are at least *three directions* that could be subject to deliberations and future decisions.

The first is how to ensure effective enforcement of the electoral law with regard to paid political advertising on social networks that parties, their candidates and third party campaigners publish. In our country, for example, social networks are still outside the focus of the electoral law, hence of the electoral administration. Considering the delicate nature of such regulation, it must strike a balance between

freedom of expression and law-regulated election campaign, with level-playing-ground for all participants in the electoral race.

The second important direction for future decisions is the restriction of hate speech, used by parties and candidates in the election campaign and the role of the election administration in this regard. Here, the crucial importance of the unconditional distinction between freedom of expression and the principle of political pluralism, on one hand, and deliberate hatred and discrimination against particular ethnic groups, races, religions or political views, on the other, should be emphasized.

The third important direction is remote electronic voting. These days we live online more, than ever before. Obviously, in the 21st century, it is not enough to vote by the traditional means. Promoting citizens' political participation already requires the introduction of alternative electronic means of voting. Remote electronic voting can contribute to the desired greater involvement of citizens, but also might face serious violations of the integrity of the electoral process. Prudent and comprehensive consideration and resolution of all problems and risks is necessary to guarantee citizens' rights, national security, transparency and fairness of the electoral process. The prospect is clear enough - in the digital future, a good practice will be to vote digitally in both elections and referenda.

The truth is that as societies and institutions we do not dispose of sufficient time to find solutions to these challenges. In the last few decades, our societies changed rapidly. Many countries were severely affected by crises and faced serious financial, economic, political and social problems. In parallel to national crises, we all are facing global threats such as climate change, security deteriorations and others. Looking for workable political decisions in turbulent times such as today is becoming more and more difficult due to the growing public dissatisfaction with the political process and the reluctance of large parts of society to take part in elections. That is why there is a clear and indisputable need to improve the democratic links between citizens and political institutions.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The way ahead I see in closer cooperation between us, in strengthening the OSCE's role, in particular that of ODIHR.

I would like to emphasize that Bulgaria fully shares the position advocated by the European Union, whereas EU has repeatedly acknowledged the crucial role of ODIHR in building up the public confidence in the governance processes and thus strengthening democratic societies and accountable institutions across the OSCE area, including through its electoral assistance and deployment of Election Observation Missions. The EU has reiterated its strong support for ODIHR's long-standing and well-established methodology which is globally recognized.

Today, I avail of the opportunity to express and reaffirm Bulgaria's support

for the OSCE, in particular for the ODIHR as a key institution for the OSCE, for its autonomy and financial security, for its significant contribution in the development of democratic institutions and civil society in the OSCE area.

Strengthening the role of the OSCE/ ODIHR in conjunction with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe in the ex-ante evaluation of proposed changes to the Participating States' electoral legislation, deeper pre-screening of OSCE/ ODIHR election observers, enhanced dialogue and partnership with national authorities during election observation and enhanced dialogue between the OSCE/ ODIHR and the authorities of the Participating States after the election at joint follow-up meetings will optimally contribute towards accelerating the democratic processes in the Participating States and tackling the challenges ahead.

I believe that all of the above, Ladies and Gentlemen, will strengthen the citizens' trust in democratic elections, democratic institutions and democratic procedures. For our common good.