

United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 12

Democratic elections and election observation:

Sharing best practices

As prepared for delivery by Gavin Weise, U.S. Delegation
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In 1990, the participating States pledged to hold free elections at reasonable intervals and in a manner that would be considered fair. While these commitments are clear and straightforward, it was anticipated that for emerging democracies implementing them fully would take practice and experience over multiple election cycles. To assist participating States in fulfilling their commitments, ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly have provided their invaluable expertise, including through their elections observation efforts.

Twenty-three years later, observation of elections both by the OSCE and other international observers and by independent domestic observers, continues to prove its value. Often it is weaknesses in political, rather than technical capacities of participating states that continue to adversely affect electoral processes. Last year, the OSCE concluded that shortcomings in presidential elections in Armenia and Bulgaria were caused not by inexperience but by a lack of political will on the part of state institutions, leading to low levels of public trust in the electoral process. Most recently, the filtering of candidates and the use of a wide range of technical means, including control of mass media and politically-motivated trials of candidates, limited voters' choices in Russia's local and regional elections.

In Ukraine, during last year's parliamentary election campaign, international observers cited the lack of a level playing field due in part to abuse of government resources to favor ruling party candidates, a lack of campaign and political party financing regulation, and lack of balanced media coverage.

During Georgia's 2012 parliamentary election campaign, abuses of government resources reportedly favored ruling party candidates while the selective application of campaign finance laws penalized opposition parties.

There is already concern about the environment in which the upcoming Azerbaijani and Tajikistani presidential elections will take place, and the United States takes this opportunity to call on those governments to ensure a level playing

field and respect for the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression leading up to, during and following the elections.

The United States regrets that some participating States continue to call into question and seek to weaken the OSCE's independent election observation efforts, implying that they impose double standards and other biases. Such positions disregard the strong monitoring capability that the OSCE has developed to assist participating States in implementing our commitments to hold free and fair elections.

OSCE expertise, of course, goes well beyond simply monitoring the election process. The OSCE provides considerable assistance through the recommendations it submits to a country after elections, as well as legislative analysis and technical training. In fact, the OSCE's election monitoring findings and recommendations have served as an excellent guide for designing and enacting post-election reforms. The OSCE's methodology has been frequently emulated because it addresses the conditions before an election, and events on Election Day and beyond.

Over the years, ODIHR has developed the capacity for effective long-term observation infrastructure and short-term observation methodology. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly contributes a political leadership to raise the profile of the results and make them more accessible. It is vital that both ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly maintain an active and open working relationship, including the earliest possible coordination when drafting preliminary findings. Additionally, participating States must be consistent in acknowledging the complementary roles that both ODIHR and the OSCE PA play in the success of election observation missions.

Participating States that want less focus on election observation should demonstrate their ability to conduct free and fair elections, and build the necessary confidence among their voters and the international community. We encourage the OSCE to remain focused on the challenges that persist in some participating States, on the slow pace of progress, and on the causes that compromise elections. The United States strongly supports OSCE election observation. We encourage all participating States to issue early invitations to ODIHR Election Observation Missions and provide them with the necessary access and support. We welcome and encourage OSCE observation of elections in the United States. We also believe that follow-up to the recommendations made by the observer mission is very important. After all, the OSCE can assist by monitoring elections, but the

ultimate responsibility for holding free and fair elections belongs to the participating States. The United States continues to work to address issues raised by the OSCE, including discussing with state election authorities how to provide better access to OSCE observers. The United States will continue to discuss such issues within the OSCE. Various aspects of elections and in particular voting rights continue to be the subject of headlines, editorials, court cases and robust public discourse within the United States; this as legitimate activity that strengthens our democracy. We urge all other OSCE States to do the same.

Thank you.