



**Declaration of Principles and Code of Conduct
for International Election Observation
United Nations, New York
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**Comments by Ambassador Christian Strohal
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I am very glad to be here today at this commemoration of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the accompanying Code of Conduct. I would also like to thank our three hosts for this opportunity and their involvement in this process. The commemoration of these documents is occurring in a year which already holds a special significance for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

This year the OSCE is celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, but this is also the 15th anniversary of another landmark OSCE Document which has served as the primary document setting forth OSCE commitments to support, protect and promote democratic governance and human rights, including those that are necessary for achieving democratic elections – the 1990 Copenhagen Document.

As a community of countries committed to democracy, the OSCE has placed great emphasis on promoting democratic elections as a key pillar of security and lasting stability. All OSCE participating States have committed themselves to invite observers, both international and domestic, and specifically the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, to their elections.

This is recognition of the fact that election observation can play an important role in enhancing overall confidence in an electoral process, and the integrity of its conduct. I am pleased that the Declaration of Principles also offers due recognition to the contribution of domestic election observers, as a distinct but complementary activity to our own efforts as international election observers.

The Copenhagen Document is significant as the first political agreement among sovereign states to institutionalize election observation. This is an excellent document

which has served the organization well. As a testimony to this fact, the OSCE participating States are currently discussing the possibility of adopting additional commitments to supplement the existing ones, with a focus on principles that are not expressly stated in the Copenhagen Document, such as transparency, accountability and public confidence.

As many of you will know, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe was originally established in 1991 as the Office for Free Elections, in order to observe how OSCE participating States were meeting their election related commitments, and to assist participating States in their objective to conduct genuine elections in line with OSCE commitments.

A decade and a half later, the ODIHR has observed over 150 elections, and its structured and consistent methodology for long-term election observation is very much consistent with the Declaration of Principles. It has enabled it to provide OSCE participating States with objective findings of the entire electoral process and with recommendations for improvement.

The ODIHR cooperates closely and constructively with parliamentary observers who often join, for election day, in forming the International Election Observation Mission (IOEM) in our region, from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, as well as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament.

The ODIHR facilitates implementation of its recommendations through consistent follow-up activities to which the OSCE participating States have specifically committed themselves at the Istanbul Summit in 1999.

One key element of ODIHR's ongoing follow-up assistance activities are reviews of electoral legislation, often in cooperation with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. But we put the experience of observation at the service of a whole range of activities supporting democratic institutions and democratic processes. However, effective follow-up also requires effective cooperation from the respective state. New precedents are being set within the OSCE whereby some participating States have begun to send a clear signal of their interest and intent to follow-up on ODIHR recommendations.

The key factors that have enabled the ODIHR to carry out its activities, to the benefit of OSCE participating States, is the fact that a clear mandate for election observation was entrusted to the ODIHR, and it has been granted the commensurate operational autonomy necessary to deliver upon this politically sensitive mandate.

In recognition of the value of this activity, the ODIHR has consistently received core budgetary funding to enable it to carry out an intensive annual agenda of observation and assessment missions, in addition to receiving the secondment of thousands of long and short-term observers each year from participating States.

Election observation has proven to be a valuable service provided by and among OSCE participating States, just as it has proven to be a valuable service as undertaken in many parts of the world by organisations present here today.

An anniversary year such as this provides the opportunity for the OSCE and its Institutions to reflect and take stock of accomplishments achieved and challenges ahead. In terms of elections, while overall the ODIHR can note general improvements in the conduct of elections in a number of participating States, in others distinct concerns remain. These include limitation of competition and failure to establish a level playing field through misuse of state administrative resources by incumbents, biased media coverage, election administration that does not enjoy broad confidence, and inadequate complaints and appeals procedures.

In addition to the above substantial challenges, I could also mention the sometimes apparent lack of political will to rectify identified shortcomings, the emergence of election observation efforts that do not appear to be conducted as set out in the Declaration of Principles, and attempts to blame election observation for obvious failures of the incumbents during election periods.

Added to the above are electoral challenges that emerge in longer-standing democracies, including the introduction of new voting technologies, and one can see that organizations that engage in election observation have much work ahead, which is increasing rather than decreasing.

All OSCE participating States, both longer established democracies and newer and emerging democracies, have made the same commitment to invite observers to follow their respective election processes. From time to time, OSCE participating States, including longer established democracies, need to be reminded of this commitment.

Given the accomplishments that have been gained by international election observation in promoting democratic electoral processes, and the challenges that lie ahead, the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the accompanying Code of Conduct are a significant achievement, and reflect best practice for the conduct of an election observation.

This is an inspiration for my Office, which has striven to undertake responsible and credible election observation for over a decade. I am convinced that these documents will serve as an inspiration to all organizations that undertake this most important of undertakings in support of meaningful, democratic election processes.

I look forward to continue to cooperate with you as partners in the global election observation community.

Thank you.