

20th Jubilee conference of the ACEEEO
“Independence of the Electoral Management Bodies”
16 – 18 June 2011, Budapest

Madame President,
Honourable Presidents and Members of Election Commissions,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to address this distinguished gathering today. I very much appreciate the kind invitation to this event from ACEEEO Secretary General Dr. Zoltan Toth, and this opportunity to speak to you as election administrators, who serve as key players in furthering the conduct of elections that are consistent with democratic international standards.

I also take note that all countries of the 23 ACEEEO institutional members are also participating States of the OSCE, so a discussion of our organizations' respective roles in strengthening the independence of election administrations is, I feel, quite pertinent.

The countries represented in the ACEEEO have - as those 56 that form the OSCE - espoused certain common values. These are based on key documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Another key document relevant for the OSCE region is, of course, the 1990 Copenhagen Document.

In December, the OSCE participating States assembled at a Summit in Astana under the Chairmanship of Kazakhstan to reaffirm the relevance of and their commitment to the principles on which the OSCE is based, including those

relating to genuine democratic elections. The Heads of State or Government further reassured each other that they would implement their commitments fully and in good faith.

Already 21 years ago in the historic Copenhagen Document, the OSCE participating States gave special emphasis to the holding of democratic elections and 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 governments.”* Moreover, participating States agreed on a range of commitments specifying, in hitherto unprecedented detail, what is required for an election to be considered genuinely democratic.

In 1994, here in Budapest, an OSCE Summit tasked ODIHR to fulfil its election observation mandate before, during and after election day. Subsequently, ODIHR developed and described its methodology in detail in a handbook for election observers.

Since 1996, when the first edition of the handbook was issued, ODIHR has been updating it, in each new version taking into account developments and experiences gathered. The main purpose has been to refine and further enhance the methodological framework for impartial, objective and neutral election observation. We published the sixth edition of this handbook last year.

This methodological development has also been followed by other organizations and international bodies active in the field of election observation. Their efforts have led to the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers*, which was

commemorated at the United Nations in October 2005. Both ACEEEO and OSCE/ODIHR have endorsed this declaration.

Election observation, as we all know, is not an end in itself. It is only one of the instruments available in our common repertoire to effectively promote electoral integrity. The ODIHR election observation methodology is based on OSCE decisions which acknowledged that elections are a process rather than a one-day event. Election management bodies are an integral element of this process.

Our Office interacts regularly with election management bodies, often in the context of election observation activities or follow-up initiatives. We are partners with a common objective.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me take advantage of the presence of so many representatives of election management bodies here in Budapest to focus on a few issues that are regularly noted by OSCE/ODIHR in context of its election observation missions. They include:

1. Inconsistencies between legal electoral frameworks and OSCE commitments,
2. Non- or partial compliance with international standards, as contained in UN conventions such as the ICCPR and CEDAW during the electoral process,
3. Insufficient provisions and oversight to guarantee equal campaign opportunities for all candidates

4. Abuse of state resources by incumbents,
5. Media bias, particularly by state-controlled media, in favour of incumbents,
6. Lack of public trust in election management bodies due to a lack of independence, biased composition or irregularities, including concerns about the honest counting and reporting of results,
7. Insufficient regulation of electoral complaints procedures before, during and after elections,
8. Lack of sufficient will to rectify identified shortcomings.

Having mentioned these shortcomings, I would also like to applaud the growing number of participating States and their election management bodies that have taken steps to improve the conduct of elections and bring them closer in line with international commitments and standards.

ODIHR, for its part, is paying increased attention to following up on the recommendations included in our final reports, in line with the 1999 Istanbul Charter for European Security, where States committed to *“follow up promptly the ODIHR’s election assessments and recommendations”*. Election management bodies are key players in this regard. I would invite you all to take a proactive role in order to move implementation of these recommendations forward for positive change and improvement of the electoral process.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me assure you that ODIHR is ready to assist and support any of the 56 OSCE participating States and its election management bodies. ODIHR has been undertaking legal reviews of electoral legislation, to further harmonize electoral procedures with international and regional commitments. We have done this often together with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. Further, ODIHR continues to refine its methodology and regularly issues handbooks on various specialized topics relevant to election observations. Topics currently being examined include the observation of electronic voting and new voting technologies.

ODIHR has been engaged with certain OSCE participating States that are using new voting technologies, such as Belgium, Estonia, the United States or the Russian Federation. Interestingly, some OSCE states have decided to return to pen and paper after having used new voting technologies for decades. This is the case for instance in the Netherlands, Kazakhstan and some federal states of the U.S.

Further themes that are currently being addressed include voter registration, as well as updating guidelines on media monitoring, reviewing electoral legal frameworks and the participation of national minorities in elections. We appreciated the opportunity to cooperate with ACEEEO in drafting its *"Handbook on Voters Registration in Transitional Democracies"*, which was published in December 2010.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by thanking ACEEEO and its membership for their co-operation and support in the past two decades and congratulate them on their 20th anniversary. I should mention that also ODIHR is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year – same age makes ideal partners.

In addition, I would like to congratulate ACEEEO and its President and Secretary General for organizing this event on such a crucial and essential topic. I wish all participants the best in their respective field but especially, I wish the election management bodies here present fortitude and energy in the important endeavor of serving as guarantors of democratic elections.

Thank you for your kind attention.