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REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA
FEDERAL MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR



COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 19 May 2011

CDL-EL(2011)004syn
Or. Engl.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW
(VENICE COMMISSION)

in co-operation with
THE FEDERAL MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA

**8TH EUROPEAN CONFERENCE
OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES**

“ELECTIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD”

Hotel Wimberger, Vienna, Austria
12 - 13 May 2011

SYNOPSIS

The eighth European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies "Elections in a changing world" was organised by the Venice Commission in co-operation with the Federal Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Austria on 12-13 May 2011. The issues which were addressed during the conference included the recent elections in Member States, as well as a range of issues concerning the role of modern technology and social media in elections, the transparency of the electoral process and the latest developments in the field of electronic voting.

Around 80 participants from national electoral management bodies of the following countries attended the conference: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Moldova, Netherlands, Portugal, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Uzbekistan as well as members of the Venice Commission and representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and representatives of the Council of Europe's Directorates General of Democracy and Political Affairs and the Head of the Council of Europe Office in Vienna.

Also represented were the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; the United Nations; International IDEA, and the Inter-American Union of Electoral Organizations (UNIORE). Several international NGOs active in the electoral field also participated in the conference.

The conference was opened by Mr Mathias Vogl, Director General for Legal Affairs in the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Deputy Chair of the Federal Electoral Board, Austria, and Mr Gianni Buquicchio, President of the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe.

Reports on member states' recent elections were presented by Mr Mazahir Panahov, Chairman, Central Electoral Commission of Azerbaijan; Ms Irena Hadziabdic, President of the Central Electoral Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Mr Julio Cesar Zelner Goncalves, Brazilian Ambassador in Vienna; Mr Jussi Aaltonen, Ministerial Adviser, Ministry of Justice of Finland; Mr David Gurgenzidze, Central Election Commission of Georgia; Mr Akylbek Sariev, Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission of Kyrgyzstan; Mr Arnis Cimdars, Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission of Latvia; Mr Iurie Ciocan, Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission of Moldova; Mr Pavol Kacic, Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic and Mr Peter Wardle, Chief Executive, United Kingdom Electoral Commission.

The conference heard a presentation on the activities of UNIORE by Mr Manuel Gonzalez Oropeza, Electoral Justice, Federal Electoral Tribunal of Mexico, Substitute Member of the Venice Commission for Mexico.

The keynote speakers were Commissioner Donetta Davidson, Chair of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission; Prof. Dr Alfred Taudes, Vienna University of Economics and Business; Prof. Dr Ülle Madise, Legal Adviser to the President of the Republic of Estonia; Mr Nguyen Huu Dong, United Nations Development Programme in Mexico, and Mr Héctor Dávalos Martínez, Electoral Court of the Federal Judiciary of Mexico.

The conference would like to thank the moderators of the workshops : Ms Christiane Egert-Wiensch, Federal Statistical Office, Germany; Prof. Dr Herdis Thorgeirsdottir, member of the Venice Commission, Council of Europe; Ms Heleen Hormann, Electoral Council of the Netherlands ; Mr Peter Wardle, The Electoral Commission, United Kingdom; Mr Leonardo Valdés Zurita, Federal Electoral Institute, Mexico; Mr Robert Stein, Federal Ministry of the Interior, Austria; Mr Gregor Wenda, Federal Ministry of the Interior, Austria; Ms Arditia Driza Maurer, Federal Chancellery, Switzerland; Mr Robert Krimmer, OSCE/ODIHR.

The conference discussed such issues as the social media and the secrecy of the vote, the modern media influence on the electorate, the right to free vote and the impact of the digital age, the ways modern technology improve the election cycle, new approaches for organising smooth elections, the future of polling stations in the light of new voting channels, e-voting in the year 2011, how to tackle concerns and to maintain trust and possible steps to observe e-enabled elections.

The conference:

1. *Took note* of the information from participants about elections organised in their countries during 2010-11.
2. *Underlined* the continuing importance of work on international standards for the use of election technology such as the development of guidelines on the certification of e-voting systems and guidelines on transparency in e-enabled elections by the Council of Europe and of the technical assistance it provided to its Member States, and discussion papers by OSCE/ODIHR and other international observation missions on observation of e-enabled elections.
3. *Noted* that the principle of free and fair elections should be ensured.
4. *Was of opinion* that EMBs should support necessary measures to increase voter turnout. EMBs cannot directly influence political issues. However, with their experience they can assist the government in questions of “usability” and voting channels. The goal to ensure "usability" in the course of elections begins when dimensioning polling stations and ends with the implementation of postal voting or e-voting. Providing detailed, and easy-to-understand information to voters by EMBs is as important as instructing the members of the polling commissions, including the production of self-explanatory forms.
5. *Noted* that new technologies :
 - a. could improve the way in which EMBs manage the voting process, notably:
 - geographic information systems and digital mapping can support the process of determining electoral boundaries,

- technology offers significant efficiencies in maintaining and updating voter lists and other records (such as lists of staff and polling locations), and in streamlining the organisation of polling day and vote-counting. It is important that where votes are counted mechanically or electronically, the process remains fully transparent in order to maintain confidence and prevent electoral fraud.

b. have a role where voters themselves are directly involved; however, it is important for EMBs to ensure that the use of technology is explained, understood and accepted by voters (so that their trust in the process is not damaged). For example:

- social media can be used to support voter education and information; however, early publication of exit poll results and election results before the end of polling hours on election day could influence voters' decisions unduly and might endanger the conduct of free and secret elections. Social media do not create a new problem in this respect but increase the speed of messages being circulated among a broader audience;

- voters may be offered the chance to enroll on the voters' list online; and technology can be used to verify entries on the voters' list and to confirm voters' identities;

- EMBs can explore options to use technology in the voting process itself, including voting machines; digitally-readable ballot papers; and internet voting (which may offer particular benefits to out-of-country voters);

- when considering such options, EMBs should have regard to their legal, political and historical background;

- while making these considerations, EMBs should bear in mind the important principles of the Venice Commission in relation to e-voting and the relevant texts adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

6. *Was of opinion* that where considering how to use modern technology in the voting cycle, EMBs should have regard to:

a. control - overall control of the voting cycle, including the technology used, must remain with those legally responsible for elections,

b. cost - it is important to make a careful assessment of the true costs of the existing system and the proposed new system, in order to identify the true benefits,

c. community - if many voters choose to vote at home (by post or via the Internet), the voting process becomes somewhat less of a collective community activity.

7. *Recalled* the importance of equal access to the internet as a global public good and that its governance should be exercised in the common interest as an integral part of the freedom of expression and information, and underlined:

a. the need for public authorities to :

- raise awareness of the electorate, candidates, EMBs on the potential dangers of the use of social network sites ;

- protect “net neutrality”, the principle of equal access to information online in line with the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers’ Declaration adopted at its 1094 session on 29 September 2010, to promote the public service value of the internet, its openness, and integrity and adopt the necessary measures in accordance with the rights guaranteed by the ECHR and;

b. to provide accurate, neutral, exhaustive and timely information to the voters and media; this is the responsibility of EMBs.

The date and venue of the ninth European Conference of Election Management Bodies will be confirmed at a later stage.