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ON ELECTION OBSERVATION  
AND CENTRAL ELECTORAL COMMISSIONS**

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**THE ROLE OF ELECTION OBSERVATION  
IN NATIONAL ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

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1. It is my pleasure to be here today and to address you on the topic of the role of election observation in national electoral processes. As you know, the OSCE/ODIHR is particularly mandated by the OSCE participating States to observe elections in the 57 countries that comprise the organization and has been doing so since the early 1990s. To date, ODIHR has observed more than 260 electoral processes across all but one of the OSCE participating States and published more than 50 reports per year, on average, regarding these processes. These include Needs Assessment Mission reports, Interim reports, preliminary statements (together with our parliamentary partners), and final reports, including concrete recommendations on how a particular electoral process can be improved as well as legal reviews in co-operation with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

2. The mandate of the ODIHR to observe elections is enshrined in the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document, specifically paragraph 8, which sets out that “The participating States consider that the presence of observers, both foreign and domestic, can enhance the electoral process for States in which elections are taking place. They therefore invite observers from any other OSCE participating States and any appropriate private institutions and organizations who may wish to do so to observe the course of their national election proceedings, to the extent permitted by law. They will also endeavour to facilitate similar access for election proceedings held below the national level. Such observers will undertake not to interfere in the electoral proceedings.” This paragraph thus contains a commitment to invite observers to national elections as well as to elections below the national level. At the same time it contains the core of our understanding of election observation: non-interference.

3. As well, in 1994 in Budapest, the organization decided that “the ODIHR will play an enhanced role in election monitoring, before, during and after elections. In this context, the ODIHR should assess the conditions for the free and independent functioning of the media. The participating States request that co-ordination between the various organizations monitoring elections be improved, and task the ODIHR to consult all relevant organizations in order to develop a framework for co-ordination in this field. In order to enhance election monitoring preparations and procedures, the ODIHR will also devise a handbook for election monitors and set up a rolling calendar for upcoming elections.”

4. Thus, from the perspective of the 57 OSCE participating States, ODIHR is particularly mandated to observe elections in this area and paragraph 8 noted above is generally considered a standing invitation to observe these electoral processes. At the same time, in order to facilitate accreditation, ODIHR will often receive a formal invitation to observe an election as an administrative expression of this obligation to invite observers from the organization. There have been a very few occasions where the issue of an invitation has become an issue, but this has really been the exception to an otherwise smooth process.

5. The reading of paragraph 8 also opens the door to national citizen observation and this is something that ODIHR has encouraged as civil society involvement in national processes can often build confidence. As part of its mandate, ODIHR also regularly meets with citizen observation organizations, as with other international observation efforts during the course of any election observation activity to share views and exchange of expertise with these various groups.

6. At the same time, the principle of non-interference is a key principle, listed both in the OSCE documents and also elaborated in ODIHR’s methodology for election observation. All ODIHR observers are briefed clearly that they are under no circumstances to interfere, participate, or assist in the work of electoral commissions. Their role is purely to observe and report and this is made clear in all communications, not least in the ODIHR Election Observer Code of Conduct that all observers who come on an ODIHR mission are required to sign and to abide by.

7. The 1994 Budapest also makes clear ODIHR's role before, during and after election day. On this basis, as part of its standard methodology, ODIHR will deploy a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) some 4-6 months prior to an election being held to assess the pre-election environment. This NAM meets with key electoral stakeholders, both official bodies, as well as electoral contestants, media and civil society representatives. On the basis of this assessment, the NAM recommends what type of election activity would bring greatest value to a particular electoral process. There are four types of activities within the ODIHR's methodological toolkit (Election Assessment Missions, Limited Election Observation Missions, Election Observation Missions, and Election Expert Teams).

8. Each format seeks to maximize the benefits, tailored to the specific circumstances of an electoral process in terms of whether election day issues are contentious or otherwise problematic, whether there are more systematic or specialized issues that need to be examined, and whether there is a regional component to the issues at hand. Given the particular circumstances, an appropriate format of mission will be recommended.

9. On the basis of its mandate, ODIHR has always insisted that observers, both international as well as citizen groups be given full access to all elements of an electoral process, be this the registration of candidates/parties, the establishment of the voter lists, the meeting of electoral commissions at all levels, the adjudication of electoral complaints and of course, all stages of the electoral process on election day – from opening, through voting, to closing and tabulation and the establishment of preliminary and final results. This type of access increases transparency and accountability of a process, could serve to build confidence in an electoral process, and allows ODIHR to fully fulfil its mandate before its 57 participating States to observe before, during and after election day. As a result, ODIHR has insisted that electoral commissions respect these rights both in the law and in practice and often comments on this element in its various reports.

10. In addition to the obligation contained in paragraph 8 of the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document to refrain from interference, observers are to conduct their work independently, impartially and professionally. This has been particularly mandated to the OSCE/ODIHR via OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 19/06. At the same time, ODIHR is an endorser of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observers and the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers. This Declaration is now endorsed by nearly 50 international organizations worldwide, under the auspices of the United Nations, and serves as an important tool for dialogue among like-minded organizations promoting the principles of independence, impartiality and professionalism in election observation.

11. This ODIHR seeks to ensure through its public and transparent methodology, through its various methodological publications, through regular trainings of long- and short-term observers from within its extra-budgetary Diversification Fund, to providing expertise to participating States that conduct their own training of observers and through innovative platforms like our relatively new e-learning tool.

12. Training is an important element of ensuring professionalism of election observers, but it has generally been considered that training should be undertaken in the manner considered suitable by those organizations that undertake to observe elections. Training of observers by electoral commissions could contribute to professionalism. However, such trainings should be offered on a discretionary basis rather than making them mandatory in order to receive accreditation.

13. Of course, the role of election observation is not merely to assess elections, but also to give forward looking recommendations on how electoral processes can be improved. This is a feature of all ODIHR final reports, which often contain recommendations directed at electoral

management bodies. In order to promote follow-up to ODIHR recommendations, which is another commitment that OSCE participating States have undertaken (in Istanbul 1999, as well as in other OSCE documents), ODIHR presents its final report *in situ* as a regular practice, explaining its recommendations to all key electoral stakeholders. ODIHR also stands ready to provide expertise in the subsequent electoral cycle, based on explicit requests from States, with the aim of improving electoral legislation and practice prior to the next election taking place and the next possible ODIHR observation.

14. I trust that this information has been of interest and I look forward to questions on any of the particular issues raised. I also look forward to a lively discussion of these and other issues of election observation and its role in national election processes.