

Opening Remarks  
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International Election Observation: Why It Matters  
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### Introduction

- Distinguished Commissioners, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a real pleasure to join you today and to share with you some insights from our elections work at the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).
- At the outset, let me express my great appreciation for the invitation to address you today. It is an honour to be here. We deeply value our relationship with the Helsinki Commission, on elections and on many other human rights issues across the OSCE region.
- And it is a pleasure to join good colleagues, good friends, from the OAS and NDI. It is always important to bring different voices together as we, as a likeminded community, continue to grapple with challenges to electoral integrity and democratic institutions across the globe.

### Context – Election Observation

- By means of a very brief introduction, and as many will be aware in this room, ODIHR is a part of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – the OSCE – which is the world's largest regional security organization.
- Our Organization began its life in 1975, at the height of the Cold War, and brings together 57 participating States, stretching from Central Asia, through all of Europe and to North America, including the United States.
- As part of our efforts to promote long-term and sustainable security, we place a special focus on promoting democracy and human rights. And this includes the observation of elections among our states. In fact, all OSCE members have explicitly committed themselves to invite election observers from other OSCE states.
- Our observation work is a signature activity of the OSCE. In fact, it is worth recalling that our Office, ODIHR, was first established as the Office for Free Elections. And, since 1996, we have now observed over 360 elections in 56 of our 57 States. We deploy at least 16 missions – and publish some 60 reports – every year.
- This provides unparalleled scope and depth on the state of elections across Eurasia, as well as valuable indicators of the broader state of democracy and human rights, and any early warnings of possible conflict.

### Methodology

- Our observation is independent, comprehensive and long-term. We assess the conduct of elections against international law – OSCE commitments and other standards. And this is an important point, because such standards provide a clear and objective basis to make our assessments – in whichever country we may deploy to. And, importantly, it is a basis that all states have voluntarily agreed to. We are not making our assessments based on what we – as experts or individuals – believe is right for a country, but it is fully grounded on the standards

that the state has signed up to. As an international organization, this gives us a clear mandate for our work and it also provides accountability to our states.

- We are the only international organization to conduct such comprehensive observation throughout the full OSCE region. But, in many of these elections, we partner with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly – and other parliamentary bodies – for election day observation, where we enjoy outstanding co-operation, benefitting from the valuable insights and profile of parliamentarians.
- This year we have already observed elections in 8 countries, countries with varying political and electoral systems, including Moldova, Slovakia, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Spain, Lithuania, Estonia and Kazakhstan. We have missions on the ground in Albania, Greece and, once again, Ukraine. And more are on the horizon, including Belarus, Poland, Uzbekistan, Canada, and Romania, among others.

### Follow-up

- But our job does not stop with a report on the conduct of an election. As important as it is to have a definitive conclusion on the quality of an election, our work goes much further. Indeed, the true value of observation can only be realised through the provision of clear recommendations for improvements to legislation and practice, and subsequent support to States to help them follow-up on these recommendations.
- And this is recognised by our States who, in the 1999 Charter for European Security, committed themselves “to follow-up promptly ODIHR’s election assessments and recommendations”. In many ways, this is the other side of the coin to election observation. And we are increasingly active in this area, for instance, by providing in-country technical expertise or by reviewing proposed amendments to legislation, always upon the request of the host country.
- To give you a flavour of this work, last year we made more than 25 in-country visits across the OSCE region, including presentations at the Austrian parliament, capacity building for election officials in Uzbekistan, and a review of the implementation of our recommendations in Romania, to name just a few.
- And this week, we have been discussing our findings and recommendation on last year’s mid-term elections, here in the US, with a range of high-level representatives from federal and state authorities, as well as civil society. This has been important, because not only does this carry intrinsic value for identifying measures to ensure the continued improvement of elections in the US, but it also sends a powerful signal throughout the OSCE region that all States recognize the value of continued improvement of their electoral processes – particularly countries that may not have such a longstanding history of genuine elections. Reciprocity is an incredible powerful tool within the OSCE context.

### Trends and Recommendations

- In terms of trends, the conduct of elections across the OSCE region reveals a mixed picture. This is not surprising considering the diversity of our membership, but broad trends are discernible. Positively, there has been greater attention to issues of inclusion, especially the participation of women and persons with disabilities, heightened awareness of the opportunities and challenges in using new technologies, and a significant increase in the number of states following up on ODIHR’s recommendations to strengthen their electoral laws and practice. And it is here that I hope we are seeing the emergence of a new norm – a norm where it is expected that states follow-up on electoral recommendations and report on their implementation – much in the same that it is now expected that all states invite election observers. Such a shift in practice would help underline the premise that democracy is always a work in progress, that all

countries – irrespective of their traditions – recognise the need to continuously invest in and improve their electoral systems.

- In contrast, on the negative side, we see that longstanding challenges remain in many parts of the OSCE region, including concerns about the impartiality of election management bodies and guarantees for fair election campaigns, as well as with the emerging issues of cybersecurity and disinformation during campaigns. There is an underlying concern that genuine political pluralism is being curtailed. That there is a closing space for critical voices. We have seen this in many ways: restrictive rules on how to register as a party or as a candidate, harassment of civil society actors and journalists, limits on internet access and repeal of net-neutrality laws, and a normalization of hate speech that can exclude vulnerable groups from democratic processes. It is clear that more needs to be done to provide an open and tolerant society, where diversity of views are permitted in electoral processes and where this is recognized as a strength of democracy and not a threat to stability.
- A final trend I would draw attention to is the increased number of early or unanticipated elections or referenda. Across the OSCE, we see an average of seven early elections every year. If we take the Western Balkans as an example, since 2008, we have observed 24 parliamentary elections in the region, of which more than half (13) have been early elections. In effect, this reduces the period between elections from some 4 years to around 1 year and 9 months. At this time, we have also seen de facto parliamentary boycotts, an almost constant speculation about early elections, and, in some cases, a refusal by parties to acknowledge electoral results. This has at least two impacts, (1) it considerably reduces the window of opportunity to engage in meaningful reform (electoral or otherwise) and (2) it means any efforts are being undertaken against a backdrop of pre-electoral positioning, making genuine consensus building even more challenging.

### Institutional Support

- The challenges that we face, though, are not only in what we observe, but also in how we are supported institutionally. ODIHR's electoral work has long-benefited from the strong political and financial commitment of the United States to our mandate and methodology. However, across the region, we do face institutional challenges.
- I have outlined already the increasing demands placed on ODIHR's services, yet at the same time our resources are diminishing. ODIHR's relatively modest electoral budget has remained, essentially, the same for several years.
- At the same time, we have also seen the number of observers seconded by our pS to our missions steadily decline. These secondments are essential to ensure we are able to provide a comprehensive analysis of an election. And such secondments also reaffirm the value that our States place in an open, peer-to-peer review of each other's practice in living up to their shared OSCE commitments.
- The demand for our work has never been as great as it is right now, yet this has not been matched by resources. If we are to respond to the challenges faced – and the requests of our participating States – we need to find ways to enhance the resources at our disposal. And we appeal to the US, and all our participating States, to support these efforts.

### Closing Remarks

- I will stop here, but in closing, I would like to thank you once more for the kind invitation to address you here today; I look forward to our discussions and our continued co-operation in our elections work.

*Check against delivery*