



**PERMANENT DELEGATION
OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE**

**OPENING STATEMENT TO THE C-I-O SEMINAR ON
ELECTION RELATED ISSUES**

As delivered by Ambassador Guttorm Vik
Vienna, 21 July, 2008

Mr. Chairman,

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of any democracy, and the commitment to organise such elections is arguably the most important commitment that participating States have undertaken.

Election observation and advisory activities have been at the core of the OSCE since the beginning, and will remain so in the foreseeable future. It is safe to say that the OSCE has an impressive track record in this field and a vast experience to share, notably through ODIHR's internationally recognised methodology for election observation. However, this is also one of the most controversial fields of activity, not least because elections have led to political crises in a number of member countries in recent years. That is why we need today's gathering, which I very much thank the Chairmanship for organising.

Mr. Chairman,

The election observer mission is a tool which verifies the nuts and bolts of the electoral machinery. If the election outcome is disputed, the blame should not be on the observers. The observer mission is part of the solution, not the problem. A problem would arise if the observation becomes superficial or complacent. Trust is hard to gain, but easily lost. If the voters lose confidence in the observers, they are also likely to lose confidence in the elections as such. In that case, the OSCE will have failed in its mission.

There have been some cases of precipitated, unnuanced and uncoordinated assessments, which have blurred the message. The recipe for avoiding such unfortunate occurrences is to maintain close coordination and strict discipline between the various observer groups, and in particular those most closely related, notably

ODIHR, the Chairmanship and the various parliamentary delegations from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, and others.

Parliamentary observer delegations, which are important actors in election observation, can rarely arrive sufficiently in advance and stay behind long enough to cover the whole process. Accordingly, ODIHR, with its mandate to observe “before, during and after” the elections, as spelt out in the Budapest commitments, remains the most important actor in election observation. An adequate election observation mission in the OSCE region can hardly be carried out without ODIHR playing a central and coordinating role.

Mr Chairman,

As pointed out by introductory speaker Kimmo Kiljunen, even mature democracies have lessons to learn and reflect about from international election observation, and can benefit from expert and peer review and discussion, e.g. on the very topical issue of campaign financing.

Needless to say, hopefully, this does not mean that election observation should always take place according to the same fixed set of rules, regardless of the particular challenges facing each country. The Needs Assessment Missions of ODIHR have proved to be an excellent tool for determining how to use the limited resources available for election observation in the best possible way, and deserve our full confidence and cooperation.

Mr. Chairman,

In his last report to the Permanent Council, Director Strohal stated that there is no crisis in election observation. We could not agree more, and would like to point to the three most recent election observation missions, to Serbia, Georgia and the FYR of Macedonia. While the elections themselves in the two latter cases presented a somewhat mixed picture, all three elections observation missions were excellent examples of how useful this institution can be. We note with great satisfaction that all the countries concerned have declared their firm intention to follow up on any deficiencies identified.

We welcome the timely and very open invitation from the Belarusian Government to ODIHR to observe the 28 September parliamentary elections, which gives us reason to hope that ODIHR and its partners will be able to conduct a fully fledged election observation operation in Belarus.

Mr. Chairman,

Decision 19/06 taken by the participating States at the Brussels Ministerial Meeting concluded a long-running discussion on strengthening the effectiveness of the OSCE,

including ODIHR's election activities. We would like to praise ODIHR for having broadened the geographic scope of election observers, which has further strengthened the legitimacy of this instrument. We have provided financial support towards this effort, and we have also contributed to the training of election observers in Norway. We would encourage other participating states, and in particular those who complain about geographically unbalanced recruitment to observation missions, to follow suit, so that the recruitment of international elections observers can be further broadened.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, we have heard, and we will no doubt hear again, pleas about agreeing once and for all how election observation missions should be conducted, and to put them under the firm control of the Permanent Council. We must warn against both those ideas. A main strength of ODIHR's election observation system as we know it today is that it has been developed over some time and adapted to changing circumstances, taking into account experience gained and lessons learned on a continuous basis. The observation system must remain a living instrument, capable of facing up to new challenges, and of learning from experience how we best can live up to existing commitments. Therefore, we still need a strong and autonomous ODIHR, under its new and confidence-inspiring leadership, that can assess the requirements for each election observation, and then carry out the observation according to its generally highly held standards for objectivity and scientific methodology, without detailed prior approval from either the Permanent Council or the host government.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.