



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS**

#### **Statement of Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes U.S. Delegation to the OSCE Implementation Meeting October 6, 2003**

Mr. Moderator, what I am about to say right now is not easy to say, but it needs to be said. Building democracy is proving to be more arduous than many expected a decade ago. While challenges remain, the Balkans have come a long way over the past two years, to become a region now dominated by reform-oriented governments that wish to join Euro-Atlantic institutions. In other parts of the OSCE region, however, our hopes were perhaps too high and we expected more and quicker progress from the end of communism than was realistically obtainable. However, we recognize that it is a process and continue to stand with our OSCE partners in making it a reality.

Among the recent successes that deserve mention are the October 2002, General Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These were the first elections administered by the Bosnian authorities since the Dayton Peace Agreement. Given the complexities of the Bosnian legal and constitutional framework and the lingering lack of public trust stemming from the conflict a decade ago, Bosnian officials have made clear progress in meeting international standards for democratic elections. The ODIHR report contained some recommendations for further improvement, especially regarding the timeliness of decision-making, and these will hopefully be implemented in future elections.

Still, in other OSCE States, especially in some states in Central Asia, there is tragically less freedom today than there was in the late 1980s. At that time, even in Turkmenistan, political movements arose before being crushed, and in Uzbekistan, a credible challenger was allowed to run for president in 1991. Today, contrary to OSCE Copenhagen commitments to hold free elections at reasonable intervals, and President Niyazov is president-for-life and President Karimov, after a highly criticized referendum, will be in office until 2007. Tajikistan this year held a referendum that will allow President Rakhmonov to remain in office for years to come. The one ray of hope in the region is President Akaev's repeated assurances that democratic elections will be held to replace him when he steps down at the end of his term in 2005.

This raises an important and disturbing question about one of the key principal pillars of democracy, which is free, transparent elections. Certain pundits have called for de-emphasizing elections as a yardstick for measuring democratic development; others have advised putting them off until the building blocks of popular sovereignty have emerged. Whatever position one takes, one cannot but conclude that elections in a number of OSCE States are not democratic. We continue to believe in the OSCE Copenhagen commitment that free elections are, and I quote here from the document, "among those elements of justice which are essential to the full expression of the inherent dignity and of the equal and unalienable rights of all human beings." No country can truly call itself a democracy, until the opportunity exists for rotation of power through democratic elections, which can clean out, like the cleansing tide of the ocean, corruption and entrenched interests.

Frequently over the past year, ODIHR has concluded that an election under observation “did not meet OSCE norms.” The host States, while seeking any acknowledgment of even nominal progress, conceded some shortcomings and pointed to the growing pains of democracy. Foreign capitals expressed regret at another lost opportunity, but pledged to continue working with governments headed by leaders returned to office by undemocratic elections. What we lack is earnest follow-up to address ODIHR’s often detailed recommendations to accelerate the progress and establish elections that would meet international standards and OSCE norms. In Belarus, we hope that the authorities will utilize for this purpose the recommendations resulting from the recent international workshop on International Standards for Democratic Elections and Election Law, sponsored by the OSCE Resident Mission in Minsk.

In other countries, while there has been some progress, elections continue to face serious problems. Twice this year, for example, Armenia held elections that did not meet OSCE standards, despite repeated assurances made to the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Next week, Azerbaijan will hold a presidential election, and OSCE and ODIHR representatives have already expressed concerns over the administrative preparations and the conduct of the electoral campaign to date, including the violent disruption of opposition rallies by the authorities. In Georgia, President Bush sent former Secretary of State James Baker to Tbilisi to help political forces reach agreement on a set of general guidelines to help govern the conduct of the elections and to resolve a stalemate over the composition of the Central Election Commission. Georgia has made significant progress on the commitments made in the “Baker Scorecard,” but still has much to accomplish before the November 2 elections. Concerns over campaign violence in the regions persist.

Despite the disappointments of the 1990s, many pinned their hopes on the next generation of post-communist leaders, assuming they would be better than their predecessors. But as the political elites in these countries consolidate themselves, it becomes more and more difficult to harbor expectations that the future will differ much from the past and present. That is a very discouraging thought. It is based in fact. Our hope is more optimistic, but one needs reasons on which to base such hopes...reasons to believe!

For this reason, it is essential that Azerbaijan’s presidential election meets OSCE norms, as officials in Baku have promised. Otherwise, both the international community and citizens throughout the former USSR will lose hope at the prospect of government by the people, for the people.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, we welcomed the ODIHR mission to observe balloting in Florida and the conclusion that officials in Florida responded to concerns expressed about the November 2000 elections and even the September 2002 primary elections in Florida, as well as substantial efforts made to improve the administration of elections by November 2002.

My delegation hopes the governments of other participating States will also prove responsive to public and international concerns regarding the quality of elections in their own countries, and act upon recommendations provided by ODIHR in their election reports.