

**SPEECH OF MINISTER OF FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS  
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

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**AT THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CONFERENCE OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES**

**"ELECTION DISPUTE RESOLUTION"**

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*Bratislava Castle*

*Dear Minister,  
dear Chairman of Venice Commission,  
dear Chairman of State Commission for Elections and Political Party Funding Regulation, dear guests  
and friends,*

I am glad that I have the honour to welcome you in Bratislava.  
The year 2019 was a true "electoral" year for the Slovak Republic.

During the past seven months, we had municipal elections, two rounds of presidential elections, elections of the members of the European Parliament, and supplementary elections of the members of local government.

This is also why I would like to thank the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic and the State Commission for Elections and Political Party Funding Regulation for bringing to Bratislava such a renowned international event in this difficult year.

And it is truly symbolic that we meet in Slovakia to discuss the topic of the organisation of elections.

Slovak transformation from a totalitarian regime to a sovereign democratic country, *or, we could say:* from non-freedom to the freedom of choice, was neither simple nor straightforward.

Still, we can say that the change of the regime by Velvet Revolution, the peaceful breakup of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic and the subsequent 26 years of intensive cooperation between two befriended countries is a unique story.

Freedom, and equal and equitable elections as the foundations for the health of this new democracy have become a privilege that people have quickly embraced and will not allow to be deprived of.

Despite difficult beginnings of our autonomy early in the 1990s, the development which followed only confirmed the clear trend of democratic transformation.

Today, Slovakia is a successful country, a member of the European Union, Council of Europe, OSCE, or of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

However, it would be foolish to believe that the democracy acquired is a democracy granted forever. Quite the opposite. It is fragile and has many enemies and requires its achievements to be protected.

Because it is being attacked from all sides. And this is particularly true about the elections.

By distortion and populist rhetoric, but also through sophisticated methods making use of modern technology.

Disinformation, indifference to truth, disregard for expertise.

All of that allows extremism to flourish and shakes the foundations of democratic institutions.

These ailments of the present times weaken the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

This is why it is immensely important to have guards. To monitor, support and protect the principles by functional international institutions.

Institutions such as the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission which played a key role in harmonisation of the constitutional texts of the Central and Eastern Europe with the basic norms of modern democracies.

Institutions such as the EU, which is built on the values of freedom, democracy and rule of law.

Institutions such as the OSCE and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) which has been providing independent expert assessment of electoral processes for decades and offers well-trying recommendations to improve democratic framework and elections.

Even here can we see the symbolic of your meeting in our Capital City at the time when Slovakia chairs the OSCE.

Therefore, I wish to share with you 3 messages relating to the process and organisation of elections from the perspective of foreign policy and Slovak priorities at OSCE.

I. First of all, as the incumbent President of OSCE I would like to express my appreciation for the work of ODIHR.

The expertise, competence and, first of all, the autonomy and independence of ODIHR is beyond any doubt and has full support of our presidency.

People expect, and this expectation of theirs is perfectly legitimate, to be given warranties that their voice will not fade out.

Warranties that their vote will not get lost in the complexity of the process but translate into the results of the elections.

Therefore, it's no accident that one of the first roles of the OSCE was the monitoring of elections, identification of any irregularities and subsequent offer of assistance.

During all the years of ODIHR's work, this Office managed to develop exclusive know-how in the area of monitoring of the electoral process in its entirety from political party funding, mass media campaigns, registration of voters, voting, vote counting, as well as solution of any possible disputes. In 2018, ODIHR observed electoral processes in 16 countries, elaborated 54 reports, engaged in missions nearly 3,000 observers from 53 participating countries.

This work is invaluable.

For the credibility of the electoral process. For the citizen confidence in the state and its electoral bodies. For the vitality of democracy.

Bearing this in mind, Slovakia too had the opportunity to welcome the ODIHR's election assessment mission and its experts who immersed into observations and extensive contacts with state institutions, political parties, mass media and the civil society in order to assess the Slovak presidential election process.

But this is not just about ODIHR. Other institutions do a good job, too.

Therefore it is important to maximise their effect by way of mutual cooperation.

## II. And this is the point of my second message – the significance of inter-institutional cooperation in the electoral process

This includes the importance of sharing expertise, experience, human and material potential between each other

to ensure that international institutions bring maximum benefit to the member or participating countries as well as beyond their boundaries.

I can see a lot of positive examples here. I would particularly like to mention the cooperation between the Venice Commission and ODIHR within the Council for Democratic Elections and, last but not least, also between the members of parliamentary assemblies with the aim to support common European values and principles of the European electoral heritage.

After all, this two-day conference is the outcome of that cooperation.

Positive examples of cooperation also include the transfer of the ODIHR's methodology to the election observation missions of the European Union.

These are among the newer or younger ones, and so in order to avoid duplication they are deployed to the countries outside the OSCE, particularly to Africa, Asia and the countries of the Central and South America.

These missions have made full use of the know-how of the OSCE and ODIHR and are a good example that together we work better and more efficiently.

Nevertheless, even the best international standards or the best recommendations of the most renowned experts will turn out to be a mere scrap of paper if they are not implemented.

## III. And here we come to the third and final message that I have for you. It is important that we keep working, stay engaged and cultivate our democracy

The same holds true of laws and standards. They cannot remain only on paper, they need to be implemented and become a part of our everyday lives. This requires political will and often also courage.

Therefore I am glad that I can see here in Bratislava the experts in theory as well as in practical issues and dispute resolution.

Those who create standards as well as those who breath life into them, and review, interpret and oversee them.

Your work at international and local organisations and the new stimuli that you bring are necessary to overcome the challenges that modern democracies are facing nowadays.

And there really are plenty of them. We are living in an era in which our citizens are presented distorted, non-viable and dangerous alternative governance ideas.

Many try to rewrite the history, come up with false versions of events and lock themselves away from the outer world.

Instead of removing boundaries and obstacles of integration, they want to build barriers.

Their advocates do not care for individual freedom, human rights and the right to vote their representatives.

Therefore, the most pressing task of democratic leaders is to protect the achievements of 1989 that we have already been enjoying for 30 years now.

It is our duty to maintain and restore the confidence of citizens in the rule of law. In independent and functional institutions built upon free, fair and credible elections.

We have to have the highest expectations of those efforts.

And this is also why we work hard at the Ministry to discuss with the young the fundamental values on which our country and the Council of Europe have been built.

The importance of free elections and institutions, both national and international, for democratic systems.

Therefore we share our experiences from transformational processes and democratisation with partners wherever we see any sign of interest.

And this is also why we are deploying our diplomats to the ODIHR's observation missions. Both to gain experience and to spread our commitment to make the world a better place.

V The Council of Europe and OSCE have proved to be invaluable allies in this quest.

*Thank you for your attention and wish you a thought-provoking discussion and a successful conference.*