ANA MARIA PĂTRU - OPENING SPEECH

Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

I am Ana Maria Pătru, President of the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the 13th European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies, organised by the Venice Commission in partnership with the Permanent Electoral Authority.

We are honoured by the presence of high representatives of Romanian Presidential Administration and Government. Please allow me to introduce their Excellences: Mrs. Elena Simina Tănăsescu, presidential counsellor, head of the Institutional and Constitutional Reform Department, and Mr. Ioan-Dragoş Tudorache, Minister and Head of Romanian Prime Minister Chancellery.

It also gives me great pleasure to greet Mr. Thomas Markert, director, Secretary of the Venice Commission.

As you know, the European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies is an annual event organised by the Venice Commission. The Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania is very proud to have been chosen to host this year Conference that gathers electoral officials and practitioners from all over the world, representing international organizations and electoral management bodies.

We are also honoured by the presence of representatives of several Romanian public institutions, national NGOs, universities and of the Diplomatic Body accredited to Bucharest.

This year Conference addresses the topic of *New Technologies in Elections: Public Trust and Challenges for Electoral Management Bodies.*

Improving the electoral process represents a permanent goal of any electoral management body. We all try to do that every day in different ways, from training the human resource to introducing and using new technologies.

Technology is changing the world and we need to take into account its role in our lives for the well-being of our citizens.

EMBs all around the globe show a growing interest in implementing technology in elections. We always learn about various ICT based solutions regarding voters' registration, authentication and eligibility verification, boundary delimitation, vote casting and counting.

Both election practitioners and voters from all over the world are interested and concerned in the same time by the introduction of ICT in elections, whether we are talking about a basic automatic tool or a more developed one.

Gaining the public trust in election related technologies is a challenge itself for the EMBs. There are different causes that make the public distrust these kinds of technologies, most of them being issues related to personal data protection, secrecy and freedom of the vote and security vulnerabilities of electronic systems.

In general, we are wired to fear what we don't understand. And even though we use technology on a daily basis, we have yet to see it next to the voting process.

This is why I believe trust is essential. We need to focus on helping voters to trust technology in the process of electing their leaders.

And, for example, I think one of the best ways to gain voters' trust in using new technology in elections is to facilitate them an actual interaction with that particular technology before it is used in the electoral process.

We also live in an era of scientific progress. What is new today is history tomorrow.

This is why we believe the biggest challenge for the EMBs that want to introduce ICT in elections is to proper assess the sustainability and the cost-effectiveness of the technology.

All that I have presented so far represents the actual experience that the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania went and is still going through.

Now, please allow me to point out some of our achievements regarding ICT.

We have successfully implemented the Electronic Electoral Register in the 2014 Euro parliamentary and Presidential elections. The Electoral Register is a nationwide database holding the identities of all Romanian citizens of voting age and their allocation to polling stations.

This year we upgraded the Electoral Register for out of country voting. Starting April 1st Romanian voters who legally reside abroad can register accordingly. All Romanians can access the webpage of the Electoral Register to check whether they are registered to vote.

The successful implementation of the Electoral Register opened up a new frontier and allowed us to implement the ICT system for monitoring the turnout and preventing the illegal voting.

This system will be used at the upcoming general local elections in June, this year.

The system was designed to ensure transparent and credible elections, by preventing illegal voting, speeding up the voting process, offering a real time turnout and a quick transmission of the results.

All these represent the outcome of 5 years of hard work and efforts to bring it under regulation and for this I want to thank all my colleagues.

Beside the ICT system that assures interconnectivity between the polling stations and the Electoral Register, there is also need for around 23.000 operators.

In order to ensure this number of operators, the Permanent Electoral Authority began a recruitment public campaign in the last months of 2015.

By now, more than 37.000 people applied to become polling station operators. Since January 2016, thousands of training and examination sessions have been conducted by the PEA staff. The IT devices which are going to be used on Election Day were handed over to the participants during these sessions. The feedback provided by the participants was encouraging: they trust the system, consider it is user friendly and appreciate the immediate response it gives.

The Permanent Electoral Authority is currently setting up an ICT system designed to monitor the specific activities regarding funding of the political parties electoral campaigns.

I have shared with you so far some of our practices, the efforts of a smart and committed team of wonderful people.

As an independent EMB, we are guided by the belief that it is our role to contribute to a strong, transparent and sustainable democracy in our country.

And in the last 4 years we have done our best to make visible and tangible steps in this direction. We have come a long way and still have a long way to go.

I am sure your practice and experiences regarding the implementation of new technologies in elections are rich. I can hardly wait to hear and learn more about them during these two days of the Conference.

In the end I want to welcome you all here, to Romania. It is a great privilege to have so many experts under one roof and I hope we will all make the best of our time together.

Thank you very much!