

Intervention by Inkeri Aarnio-Lwoff

Round table on Political Parties and elections

Tashkent 29-30 September 2009

First of all thank you very much to the Organisers for inviting me to this event. This is an important and timely initiative for which I wish to congratulate the State Academy.

To start with I would like to say a few words on women and political participation. It is important to ensure that women have an equal opportunity to be represented in elected office. Many things affect women's political participation such the electoral system, cultural traditions, social and economic conditions etc. It seems that in Uzbekistan women's proportion in the Parliament is relatively high, with 17,5 % of women in the Parliament's Lower house. This corroborates very well the *average* European figure - not including the Nordic countries - which is 19.3%. A chapter apart are Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden that have reached a balanced gender representation with a minimum of 40% of each sex in parliament by 30 November 2008. Only seven more European states (and members of the Council of Europe) had reached the critical mass level of 30% of women's representation in parliament by the above date: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Spain and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

Electoral quotas are highly controversial in some countries and passionate discussion is generated about the pros and cons of its application. However, given the profound underrepresentation of women in many countries, they should be viewed as helpful in order to give the necessary quick push and incentive to women's better access in political life. In Uzbekistan a quota of 30% has been introduced in order to promote women's role in society. This is a laudable step.

Legal quotas being mandatory and providing for sanctions, if not fulfilled, have been preferred in some countries (France), whereas in many other countries the voluntary party quotas have been the solution.

Now I would like to highlight a bit how the Council of Europe help to raise European standards through the example of the Venice Commission of the CoE. Since its creation the Venice Commission has been active in the electoral field, in particular, through the adoption of opinions on draft electoral legislation.

The Commission co-operates closely with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR). Most opinions related to electoral legislation are drafted jointly by these two organisations.

Since 2002 the role of the Commission has been reaffirmed through the creation of the Council for Democratic elections. Moreover, its activities include seminars, training workshops and missions of assistance. In order to give electoral laws certain stability and to further construct the European electoral heritage, the Venice Commission and the Council for Democratic Elections developed the principles of the European heritage, in particular, by drafting the “Code of good practice in electoral matters”. This document defines not only the fundamental norms of the European heritage: universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage, as well as frequency of elections, but also framework conditions necessary for the organisation of proper elections, such as respect for human rights, particularly in the political field, organisation of elections by an impartial body and an effective system of appeal.

The Code is directed at electoral specialists (members of electoral commissions, University lecturers) as well as observers, politicians and, more generally, at all citizens who are electors. (Two copies of the Code in Russian were handed over to the State Academy).

It might be interesting for you to note that Kazakhstan and Kirgistan are observer members of the Venice Commission.

Last a few words about the role of political parties which was touched upon briefly yesterday. First it should be noted that no democracy exists without political parties. Parties can be seen as a body acting as an intermediary between voters (citizens) and public authorities. By structuring the political field they help voters in making their choice. Political parties should compete in the political arena, try to get their candidates elected, and play a role in forming the government. Parties can play an important role in recruiting and selecting the political elite. They can also play an integrative role in society by providing a collective identity to the voters, by articulating social interests and by enhancing the legitimacy of the political system.

At regular intervals the elections provide a formidable test to the political parties on how well they have succeeded in delivering to the voters their promises and their programmes announced at the previous elections. The great feature of democracy is that the electorate can through elections, if it so deems, alternate the power positions of the parties in the parliament. In recent general elections in Germany the ruling party kept its position and can thus continue to govern the country. The party which lost has to work hard, for its part, to convince the electorate by the next polls about its political superiority.