

Opening of the Parliamentary conference on elections of times of crisis

Welcome address by Mr Tiny Kox

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Tuesday 9 May 2023, Bern

Dear President of the Swiss National Council,

Honorable guests and participants,

Dear colleagues,

It is great pleasure to open the parliamentary conference on Elections in times of crisis and welcome all the participants. It is also a great honor and pleasure for the Parliamentary Assembly to be **associated with the National Council of Switzerland**, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of its accession to the Council of Europe.

This conference couldn't be more timely: our continent has faced consecutive crisis, ranging from a pandemic to a war in the heart of Europe which have been **crash tests for our parliaments and democratic institutions**, striving to find the right balance between emergency situations and respect of our fundamental freedoms. The Parliamentary Assembly has prepared many reports on these difficult issues. **The presence of many and various stakeholders today**, whether politicians, experts or practitioners is very promising for our upcoming discussions.

Today's conference is taking place **under the auspices of the Council of Europe which has proven, over the years, its leading role in elections matters on the European continent and beyond**.

The contribution of members of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and regional authorities, the Venice Commission, the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe and Directorate General for Democracy of the Council of Europe, which is cooperating with many Election Management Bodies throughout Europe, is a **clear sign that our Organisation is fully engaged to promote**, at each and every stage of what we call the "Council of Europe Electoral Cycle", the **necessary conditions to ensure "free and fair elections"**.

It also shows our **joint determination to promote the cardinal principles of Europe's Electoral Heritage**, namely universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage which is the **precious asset of our Organisation to which all member states committed to abide**.

I am also glad to see that these efforts are **supported and shared by our partners in elections observation** – the Parliamentary Assembly of OSCE, ODIHR, the European Parliament- and numerous NGOs.

Dear participants,

We will have the chance to discuss here many **major issues which have impacted, positively or negatively, electoral processes in these last three years**; Our special thoughts are also with the Ukrainian people, who are struggling with the Russia's war of aggression and its consequences. I would like to pay **a special tribute to all those affected by the war who fought for their democratic rights and send our warm greeting and message of solidarity to the many Ukrainian politicians and experts present in this hall and online**. Please be sure of our support in helping the democratic institutions of your country, especially in view of post-conflict elections.

This conference is not only a moment to reflect about what we achieved so far in terms of standards and democratic practices. **It also looks at new challenges**. New technologies are promising – but also prone to allow interference in electoral processes, especially during electoral campaigns, through harmful content. We need to face this unpleasant reality: **hybrid wars are conducted to weaken our capacity to build inclusive and pluralistic societies and democratic institutions**.

The dramatic situation in Ukraine will also be in the heart of the discussions of the Heads of state and government of our 46 member States next week. **On the eve of the Reykjavik Summit, let me raise a few issues and questions** that we should try to address when dealing with current challenges:

- How **solid and resilient** are our institutions to ensure **proper and periodic conduct of electoral processes**, especially in times of crises and conflicts? How strong are they to respect freedom of expression and of the press, freedom of assembly and association in these times of crisis?
- **How well prepared are we to deal with cyber-attacks on elections** and take countermeasures and sometimes restrictions that respect the principle of necessity and proportionality?
- And **how could the Council of Europe and other international organisations best put their expertise and resources** at the disposal of the people of Ukraine to restore proper electoral processes in such complicated times?

Let me conclude by recalling that the Council of Europe **has a wide range of tools** that our member States can trigger to ensure and implement the best electoral standards and practices, ranging from the European Convention of Human Rights to the invaluable standards and guidelines established by the Venice Commission or the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime. **Our national parliaments bear an important responsibility in providing legal frameworks compatible with our core values and oversighting its implementation**.

I would like to **thank all panellists and all parliamentarians** for their participation in this conference and again our **Swiss colleagues for the outstanding co-operation and hospitality**. I am convinced that this conference will be a **milestone on the road to Reykjavik** and a push factor for our future activities in the field of elections.

I wish you all two fruitful days of discussions and exchanges.