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GOOD GOVERNANCE: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE OSCE ROLE

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Statement to the 9th Meeting of the OSCE Economic Forum

by Peter Eicher, Deputy Director, OSCE/ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights)

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I'm pleased to be here today to contribute to the discussion of good governance. As the representative of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – the main Human Dimension institution of the OSCE – good governance is an issue very close to my heart. Human rights, democracy, rule of law and good governance are concepts so intertwined that they cannot really be separated. You might legitimately say, in fact, that everything we do at the ODIHR is connected with, and intended to promote, good governance. I'll elaborate on some of our activities in the coming minutes.

First, however, I'd like to mention that the organizers of this Forum have asked me to be provocative. I'll try to live up to their wish. My intention, therefore, is to try to raise a few big issues that might help spark useful discussions in the working sessions, and to provide some examples or best practices in the Human Dimension that I believe are relevant also to the OSCE's Economic Dimension in relation to good governance.

Let me start with some propositions for your consideration.

My first proposition is that you can't have good governance without democracy and respect for human rights. The OSCE has not adopted a definition of good governance. Still, I would maintain that many of the elements necessary for good governance are in fact related to human rights. For example, good governance requires public participation in decision making. It requires transparency and accountability to an electorate. It requires the rule of law, not only in the sense that laws are clear and predictable, but that laws are democratic and meet human rights standards, and that they are implemented openly and fairly. Democracy, for all its faults, is the only system of government that allows for truly good governance. Any system that does not respect the rights of its people, or does not allow participation by its people, or is not open to scrutiny by its people, or is not responsive to will of its people, cannot be a system of good governance.

Let just give you one striking example of the links between good governance, democracy and security: democracies do not go to war against each other. Ponder this for a minute. More than ten years ago the OSCE subscribed to the notion that democracy is a prerequisite to security. Now, I believe it is time to recognize that democracy is a prerequisite to good governance.

Let me take this a step further and suggest that beyond the general concepts of democracy and human rights, you can't have good governance unless you also have a healthy political opposition. A free and vocal opposition is a necessary balance against government excesses or bad practices. In some OSCE countries, there is no formal political opposition to the government or the opposition is extremely weak. Let me ask: is the absence of political opposition in a country a sign that governance there is so good that everyone fully and freely supports the government? Or could absence of opposition be a sign of poor governance? I have a very strong opinion on this; you'll have to decide for yourselves. I've worked in many parts of the world and have seen a clear pattern: where the political opposition is under pressure, the business community – including international investors – are also more likely to face unhealthy political pressure. Arbitrary actions on the political front are often a sign of similar arbitrariness on the economic front. This is bad for business, bad for investment and bad for growth.

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I'd like to extend this still further and suggest that media freedom and a vibrant NGO community are also prerequisites for good governance. A free and vigorous media can be as important a check on government excesses as a political opposition. I think it's clear to all of us how important transparency is in promoting good governance. I believe that in any country where you see newspapers or TV stations being shut down or harassed by the government, you can be certain that other problems with good governance also exist.

In conclusion, I'm encouraged that the OSCE is starting to take a more activist approach on the issue of good governance. There is much to be done. At the moment, the Organization is not structured to give adequate consideration or programmatic attention to this issue. The ODIHR, for example, is a small institution, our resources are already stretched, and under current circumstances we are certainly not in a position to take on the issue of good governance beyond our current activities in any significant way. The resources of the Economic and Environmental Coordinator are even smaller than those of the ODIHR. Still, if the OSCE can muster the necessary political determination, establish a clear mandate and provide the 9 required resources, then I'm sure there is a great deal the OSCE could contribute to the issue.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you good luck in your deliberations.