

THE FIRST 15 YEARS

of the Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO)

Summarizing the last 15 years it also intends to show the professional and organizational events of the Association from the early beginning – 1991 – till the present days of 2006.

The first five years – establishment 1991-1995

With the collapse of communism and socialism, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe suffered from a lack of knowledge of administration. One of the greatest threats to the newly established democracies of the region was the lack of permanent election structures. The Association was created to combat the above mentioned threats by strengthening the democratic election institutions. The purpose of ACEEEO was to raise the consciousness of decision makers in all of the countries of the region with regard to the critical need to institutionalize the election process.

In the years 1989 to 1990 the multi-party elections became institutionalized in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of the democratization process. In the countries within this region the one-party elections ceased to exist at different rates and the elections themselves have gained real content. The administrators concerned with the preparatory activities and the performance of the elections, as their mission in life, were all witnesses of this historical process. As a consequence of the above mentioned facts, elections administrators gathered in Budapest, Hungary in a Symposium of the Central European Electoral Systems, organized by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Hungarian National Election Office at the end of July of 1991. The participants discussed their experiences gathered in connection with the political and legal issues of the first democratic elections, as well as the necessity of those technical and technological conditions, which are essential for the holding of free elections. This historical meeting led to the establishment of the Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO) in 1991.

Participants of the conference - directed by their resolve for the future institutionalisation of the co-operation of countries within the region in the interest of free, fair and democratic elections - founded ACEEEO as a non-governmental and non-profit organisation that is independent of political parties and governments. The founding protocol was signed by election officials from Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia, and in the next 5 years, elections experts from Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine joined their circle. The protocol declaring the foundation of ACEEEO was assured of the support of the "Free Elections" Bureau in Warsaw of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as well as IFES.

The Founding Fathers of the ACEEEO determined the Association's mission as follows: providing a non-partisan forum, independent of national governments, for the exchange of information among election officials and experts throughout the region covered by the Association to discuss and act upon ways to promote open and transparent elections with the objective of supporting good governance and democracy. One of the main agreements was to hold a yearly conference about theoretical and practical issues relating to elections, providing opportunity to discuss and exchange experiences and methods.

According to the constitution of the Association, members of the Association gathered in Hungary two years later, in 1992 and in 1993. The main topic of the 1992 meeting was to discuss election laws of different countries and to collect these laws in English and in Russian. In the same year the ACEEEO Documentation Centre was established and furnished in Budapest, Hungary. At the conference of 1993, members agreed to lay down conditions regarding the fair organisation of elections and proposed to the member countries to create non-governmental organizations, foundations and civic associations beside the official election bodies in their countries, for the support of elections and also to monitor the fairness of them. This year the Secretariat enlarged the collection of the Documentation Centre. At the same time the ACEEEO started negotiations with the Association for Electoral Administrators (AEA) of the United Kingdom and built up a fruitful cooperation with the Association. As a consequence, in 1994, the Association observed the European Parliamentary elections in Great Britain.

Three years after the first Symposium, the Association held its first Annual Conference in Ukraine, in 1994. Apart from discussing their own election processes the election officials touched on the issues and problems that surfaced at the meeting. The Kiev meeting underscored that a major threat to democracy is the ad-hoc nature of election administration in many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. To promote stability in the electoral process, the Association set itself a new aim that is to encourage the creation of permanent election bodies throughout the region and ensure that governmental institutions are aware of the advantages of the supportive roles these bodies can play in the overall development of the region's electoral systems.

The first electronic newsletter entitled "Free Elections" was issued this year. 1995 was important in the life of the Association, because one of the main projects, the participation in election observation mission, got started. The annual conference in Hungary, was opened by the President of Hungary where the first exhibition was held with the title "Using technical devices and computers at elections". This conference focused on election technology. Since then, every year the ACEEEO organizes the Exhibition of the Suppliers of Election Equipment and Services.

To sum it up, the first five years was about establishing the ACEEEO and proving the necessity of such an organization. During these years the ACEEEO established its Documentation Centre, gathered election officials from the region and consolidated its existence. All this was supported by the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES).

The second five years - building relations and recruiting new members from the region 1996-2000

After consolidating its place, the Association started to strengthen its relations, seeking for international partners, co-operations and commenced to embody theory in practice. By 1997 the ACEEEO's traditional working method was to hold yearly conferences in the capitals of its member countries. In September 1997 representatives from 21 Central and Eastern European countries gathered in the Russian Federation, to participate in a training

conference promoting “Transparency in Elections”. The conference was focused on election administration, civic involvement and international election support. The international conference also examined issues such as, role of transparency, the inclusion of voters in the election process and the experiences of international election observation. The significance of the topic was amply illustrated by the fact that experts from ACEEEO-member countries were present for supervising at the local government elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end of 1997. From the point of view of the current activities and future developments of the ACEEEO, the Moscow conference was an exceptional event, where decisions were made with regard to organizational issues and concerning modification of the Charter of the Association.

This year a new perspective was opened in the inter-regional co-operation of electoral experts by the participation of the ACEEEO at the founding conference of the Association of Election Experts of Asian Countries.

The next annual conference was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in November 1998. Three main achievements were realized within the frame of this conference. The first was the adoption of the new Charter by the General Assembly. The main reason was to institute a graduated membership structure, specify membership fees, and establish clear rules for participation. Secondly, Belarus indicated the intention to join the Association. The General Assembly accepted the application, and from 1998 the ACEEEO had 15 member states. At the same time a new tradition was introduced; the General Assembly established an honorary membership. Besides the above mentioned achievements, significant issues of international election law were scheduled on the agenda, such as promoting access for voters with special needs, secure production and transportation of ballot papers and legal guarantees against election frauds.

Next year the Association organized its annual meeting in Bratislava, Slovakia (1999), where the General Assembly defined four strategic trends determining the activities of the next 5 years. These trends were as follows: to increase citizen engagement in the electoral process; to encourage the sharing of electoral experience in the region; to promote uniform democratic development across Europe and finally to enhance the institutional capacity of the ACEEEO.

One of our outstanding goals of this year was to contribute to the democratisation process of the Balkan region. For the sake of this goal experts of the Association took part in the foundation of the Association of Election Officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina (AEOBiH) in 1999 and supported the initial activities of the Association as advisors. It was a great pleasure to see that the new Association became an institutional member of the ACEEEO in the same year. Besides AEOBiH, Georgia and Armenia applied for ACEEEO membership, which was granted by the General Assembly during the Bratislava conference. The other great project of the Association was the creation of a multilingual election dictionary, first in 5 languages and since then it has been a collection of election related words and expressions in 11 languages.

At the turn of the 21st century, the four strategic aims, defined at the 1999 conference, determined the work and activity of the Association in 2000 as well. In 2000 we recruited polling supervisors for three elections, had been organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and United Nations (UN) – twice in Bosnia and Herzegovina and once in Kosovo.

Among the three missions – considering their importance, complexity, and political influence - the Kosovo Elections proved to be the far most outstanding one, since it was organized for the first time, the most prepared supervisor team of ACEEEO was delegated to Kosovo. Besides mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo, the ACEEEO sent observers to Croatia, the Russian Federation, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. The ACEEEO, as the only NGO, could play a role in a consortium that was organized by the Council of Europe, and was set up for the Kosovo Elections observation. The ACEEEO could send representatives overseas as well, because two of our representatives were invited by the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) as observers for the Presidential Elections of the United States.

This year we went further on deepening our relations with the OSCE department responsible for elections. The aim of these steps was to promote the relations and to discuss the possibility of our participation in the international observer missions in Kosovo.

In order to gain acknowledgement of our Association in Western Europe and to build up co-operation with international organizations, the ACEEEO started negotiations with the Council of Europe. The Political Chief Director of the Council of Europe initiated that the Association should tender for consultative NGO status.

Hungarian election experts, representing the ACEEEO, participated in an election-technique experience exchange both at IFES (based in Washington) and the Election Committee of New York, in 2000. At the same time the representatives of ACEEEO continued conversations with the Election Department of the UN in order to obtain information concerning UN experiences in elections, and on how the Association could take part in the activities of the world organization.

In the year 2000 the Association held its annual conference in Warsaw, in the presence of 26 country representatives, with 180 participants, and 15 exhibitors. During the conference an election history exhibition was displayed, which met with a great success. The main topic of the conference was the interconnection of information technology and elections. Main events of the conference were: Macedonia and Turkey were admitted as institutional members, modification of the charter was accepted, and the idea of establishing a South-European subgroup within the framework of ACEEEO came to life. On the basis of an agreement with the Central Registration, Data Processing and Election Office of the Ministry of Interior, Hungary the ACEEEO prepared a program with the intention of collecting international experience relating to campaign financing. Experts analyzed codification and legal practice of several countries in detail. Its importance had lain in that it functioned as a base for submitting a proposal for modernization of the present Hungarian regulation.

In 2000 we renewed the website of the Association and participated in the so-called Essex project. It was about to construct an election database of the Central and Eastern European region. Due to the vivid and rapidly altering practice of the elections in the region, the creation of an election database became essential, including election laws and results of elections.

From the activities of 2000, we can come to the conclusion that after almost 10 years of its establishment, the ACEEEO started to flourish and act as a regional, professional association, in co-operation with international organizations. During these years it could successfully build up close relations with its member states and world-wide organizations devoted to elections.

The third five years - stabilization 2001-2006

The last chapter in the history of the ACEEEO is about the last five years, when the Association continued its projects and missions, and expanded its activities and relations. 2001 was a very important year in the history of the Association, because it was the year of the 10th anniversary of the ACEEEO.

During this year representatives of the ACEEEO kept on participating in observation missions, such as in Montenegro and Belarus. The Belarus mission was the first mission organized and implemented by the Association. In virtue of the invitation of the Belarus Central Election Commission, the ACEEEO – as the only international organisation – started the first phase of the long-term observational mission. During the long-term observation, this mission followed with attention the whole election procedure. In the last phase of the observational mission – in parallel with other international organisations – 61 short-term observers, from 11 countries, represented the Association. On the election day, teams of two visited 240 polling stations on the whole area of the Republic of Belarus. The professional content of the ACEEEO summary report harmonised with the report of the observers of the OSCE-ODIHR, the European Council and the European Union. The European organisations appraised positively the first independent observation mission of the ACEEEO.

Owing to the professional acknowledgement, the Council of Europe, granted consultative status to the ACEEEO. It was considered a great achievement and with this status, the ACEEEO gained international acknowledgement. At the same time, the Association received the UN/NGO regional network membership in November 2001 as well.

The jubilee annual conference of the ACEEEO was held in Brijuni, Croatia in 2001. During this conference, members celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Association. President of the Republic of Croatia opened the Conference. The main topic was the financing of the election campaigns. The conference gave recommendations concerning the regulation of campaign financing for the members. For the ten-year-anniversary, a CD was prepared, in order to present the activity and the history of the Association.

In 2001, after the jubilee year of the ACEEEO, participation in election observation missions, as one of the main projects of the Association, was increased, because the ACEEEO sent representatives to the following countries: Ukraine, Hungary, Latvia, and Yugoslavia. As the title of this part indicates, the ACEEEO was open to establish relations with international organizations. Besides strengthening the relationship and co-operation with the Council of Europe, especially with the Venice Commission, the Secretariat participated in meetings with the representatives of the European Parliament, European Commission, and European Policy Centre in order to discuss the possible collaboration. As a result of continuous co-operation and the expertise, the Council for Democratic Elections of the Venice Commission decided, to grant the ACEEEO observer status. With this decision we were authorized to attend the meetings of the Venice Commission and work with them cooperatively. Moreover a co-operation agreement was signed between the OSCE-ODIHR and the ACEEEO strengthening our co-operative relationship in 2002.

One of the most important projects of this year was introduced at the Moscow conference, where the Convention on Election Standards, Electoral Rights and Freedoms was presented. The topic of remodelling of the existing European electoral standards in a format unified international document seemed to be in full correspondence to the political spirit. The fact that Mr Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, opened the conference shows the importance of this event. In the Moscow conference the Association admitted the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Azerbaijan as new members of the ACEEEO.

Regarding the main projects of the ACEEEO, 2002 was a very successful year from a professional point of view. The Convention was prepared and adopted; the multilingual

election dictionary was enlarged, the ACEEEO developed the Firstvoter.eu project. The project's aim was to create a web-based informative forum for the widening of knowledge among the youths of Europe about the importance of electoral participation in the form of voting. The project is scheduled in three steps. As the first step toward the realization of the project the Secretariat of the Association organized a preparatory meeting in Budapest for the team leaders appointed by the ACEEEO. At the preparatory meeting Albania, Hungary, Lithuania, and Sweden were represented. During the preparatory meeting the participating team leaders agreed on the continuation of the project through an international youth exchange program (step 2), which took place in 2003.

Moreover, the Association contributed in two important international projects. One of them was the Money and Politics project, in co-operation with the IFES, which was developed to test the Political Finance Disclosure Database in Hungary and in Lithuania. The goal of the project was to develop the transparency of political process by giving free access to the campaign and financing information. The second project was the Electoral Process Information Collection (EPIC) project developed by the International IDEA and designed to introduce electoral systems all over the world and make them available easily through the internet. By presenting information about electoral systems, electoral management, legislative framework, voter registration, voter education and other related topics in a wide range of countries, users are able to compare, and identify common practice within electoral administration. According to the signed cooperation agreement on the EPIC (Elections Process Information Collection) Project between the International IDEA and the ACEEEO, the ACEEEO Secretariat collected all the information needed for the project from its member states and completed the EPIC project.

2003 was the year of missions, because the ACEEEO observed the elections in the following countries: Estonia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Serbia and Montenegro (three times), the Russian Federation. This year was significant in the respect of co-operation with the Council of Europe. The ACEEEO sent representatives to the Multidisciplinary Ad Hoc Group of Specialists on legal, operational and technical standards for e-enabled voting, to the Council for Democratic Elections of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission) and to the Group of Specialists on core technical standards for e-enabled voting. This year the Committee of Ministers (Council of Europe) proclaimed that the

consultative status granted in 2001, changed to participatory status with the Council of Europe from 2003.

The ACEEEO devoted its working program in 2003 to the theme “Media and Elections”. The reasons were twofold. First, the utmost importance of the role of media in a better functioning democratic processes compels us to reconsider the link between media and elections on the global level in the course of events that shaped so dramatically the history of the 20th century. Second, and, with regard to the scope of activities of ACEEEO, most importantly, the democratization process of societies in Central-eastern Europe makes this ever-green-topic one of the most actual and most relevant ones of contemporary public discourse on the regional level. Therefore, the idea to organize a theme on “Media and Elections” emerged as a result of a bottom-up process. To understand the correspondence between Media and Elections in Central-Eastern Europe, the ACEEEO Secretariat prepared a study and questionnaire concerning this topic, which was the main theme of the annual conference held in 2003, London. The fact that the annual conference was held in the United Kingdom proved our willingness to open to Western Europe and to establish closer relationship with experts and organization outside Eastern and Central Europe. The conference was organized by the ACEEEO in co-operation with The Electoral Commission of UK, the Association of Electoral Administrators of UK, and the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). This year the Association accepted Kazakhstan as a new institutional member.

As one year passed on, the Association still continued its main activity: election observation mission. In 2004 the ACEEEO sent representatives to the countries such as: Georgia, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus and Ukraine (three rounds). The Association went on strengthening its relations with international organizations, namely OSCE-ODIHR, Council of Europe, International IDEA and IFES. Besides co-operation with international and Western-European organizations, the Association committed itself to a different path. In view of the election situation in the Middle East, the ACEEEO considered it important to hand over its expertise and knowledge to the countries in that region and offered its professional background. Firstly representatives participated in the statutory meeting of the International Mission for Iraqi Elections organized by the Elections Canada and supported by the United Nations and the

Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq with the involvement of the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). Comprised mainly of independent electoral management bodies, the IMIE was focusing on the election process in Iraq, as well as the registration and voting process outside Iraq. The second step was the visit to Palestine, upon the invitation of the Palestinian Election Commission. During the stay in Palestine, there were meetings with several election officials and representatives of organizations interested in elections and made discussions about the further cooperation. This meeting was the first station in a project of greater importance.

The Association continued its Firstvoter.eu project, which entered the second phase. It was an exchange program among our member states and countries from the European Union. Participants were from Russia, Hungary, Spain, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lithuania.

At the beginning of 2004, the Association took on a long-term project, the ACEEEO publication. The first edition of the ACEEEO newsletter – *Elections in Europe* – was issued in English and Russian. The newsletter was distributed in our annual conference in Tirana, Albania, where the main topic was “Voter Turnout with special regard to the first time voters”. The Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the Association during the Tirana conference.

Besides the participation in the continuation of the EPIC project, which was started in the summer of 2004, the ACEEEO contributed to an other International IDEA project, which was International IDEA and regional partners on the political parties program. The aim of this project was to provide legislators, policymakers, political parties and other reformers with a good basis to assess the advantages and disadvantages of their own systems in order to identify opportunities for reform. ACEEEO experts collected the information on country context and the external regulation of political parties in the ACEEEO countries concerned.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that the year of 2004 was a very successful year in the life of the Association, both in regional and in international point of view.

According to the agreements, the ACEEEO continued its participation in the International Mission for Iraqi Elections (IMIE) in 2005 as well. Moreover the Association took another role in the Middle East. Representing the Foundation of Afghanistan and the ACEEEO Secretariat, a Middle East election expert travelled to Afghanistan to observe the election preparations and the elections. After the elections, the Acting Chairman of the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan visited Hungary and discussed the possible ways of collaboration. In order to continue the co-operation with the Election Commission of Palestine, the Association, cooperating with Panorama Center (Palestinian NGO), organized a workshop for ACEEEO and Palestinian election experts in order to exchange views and experiences on the development of the election systems and to discuss current topics of elections. As a follow-up, the presentations and the summary of the discussions were published by the ACEEEO. This project was initiated and financed by the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of the Interior of Hungary.

Having observer status at the Venice Commission, representatives attended its meeting and discussed the feasibilities of a jointly-organized conference in 2007. After the meeting, an agreement was concluded, to organize a European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies jointly with the Venice Commission in 2007. This would be an important step in the strengthening of the pan-European dimension of the ongoing activities in the electoral field as well as in the co-operation between our organizations.

The newest initiative of the Association was introduced at the third Conference of Global Election Organizations and ACEEEO General Assembly Meeting, held in Siófok, Hungary. The 3rd International Meeting of the Global Election Organizations (GEO) – previously held in Canada and Mexico – was now hosted by Hungary. One of the main topics of this very significant Conference was „The role of courts in the judging of electoral disputes”. Participants of the Global Election Officials Conference launched an initiative to hold an annual Global Elections Day on the first Thursday of February every year. The main goals of this day are: confirming our belief in the irreversibility of democratic processes; informing the public of new achievements and challenges related to various types of voting systems; calling the attention of parliaments, governments, politicians and world leaders about the important leadership role they play in promoting a

culture of democracy and high levels of voter participation; influencing first-time voters and young voters to commit themselves to democratic values.

Finally the ACEEEO contributed to the Handbook of Electoral Management Bodies, composed by the International IDEA.

The last year to report on, is 2006, the jubilee year in the existence of the Association. The following projects and initiatives were continued: Global Elections Day, election observation missions, ACEEEO newsletter.

A new project was launched in 2006: "Non armis, sed vi suffragiorum" (By the authority of the ballot, not the force of the bullet). The goal is to make youth understand the importance of participating in the political processes of the democratic life of the European Union, particularly the right to vote and to stand as a candidate at elections. This project supported by the European Commission contains different activity plans e.g. discussions, exchange of best practices, publication of writings, creating a website, that complement each other and will be undertaken by a coalition of NGOs from member states of the EU. In the frame of this project a conference took place in 2006, in Budapest. The conference provided good opportunity to get acquainted with methods and practices of how to educate youngsters and raise their interest in election processes. Participants of the conference were representatives of non-governmental organisations and election management bodies from Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Spain. As a result of the conference, the special edition of the ACEEEO newsletter was issued and by the end of 2006 there is an intention to prepare a handbook aiming at widening the youths' knowledge about the electoral processes and improving their „citizenship skills" (critical way of thinking, knowledge of political preferences, analysis of political alternatives). The handbook will serve as an important tool in providing electoral knowledge in secondary schools during history or citizenship lessons as well as in the course of non-formal education activities, trainings.

Our jubilee year will be closed and celebrated with a festive Annual Conference and general Assembly meeting in Jurmala, Latvia. This event will give the possibility to celebrate the ACEEEO anniversary worthily.

Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO) was founded in 1991 by 6 countries. Currently the Association has 22 institutional members and 1 member supporter. During the past 15 years it held 14 annual conferences where election experts from almost the whole world were represented. Since 1991 it has built out fruitful and continuous co-operation with election commission in Europe, America, Africa and Australia, with the IFES, International IDEA, OSCE-ODIHR, and Council of Europe.

The professional and organizational improvements of the Association were due to the continuous support provided by the members of the ACEEEO, the Mott Foundation, IFES, International IDEA, the European Commission, Council of Europe and the Hungarian National Assembly.

As for future plans, 2006 is a significant year in the life of the Association. On the basis of the last 15 years' experiences, it is time to become an Association of Election Officials without any regional limitation and to open new perspectives in the inter-regional co-operation of electoral experts.

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This year we went further on deepening our relations with the OSCE department responsible for elections. The aim of these steps was to promote the relations and to discuss the possibility of our participation in the international observer missions in Kosovo.

In order to gain acknowledgement of our Association in Western Europe and to build up co-operation with international organizations, the ACEEEO started negotiations with the Council of Europe. The Political Chief Director of the Council of Europe initiated that the Association should tender for consultative NGO status.

Hungarian election experts, representing the ACEEEO, participated in an election-technique experience exchange both at IFES (based in Washington) and the Election Committee of New York, in 2000. At the same time the representatives of ACEEEO continued conversations with the Election Department of the UN in order to obtain information concerning UN experiences in elections, and on how the Association could take part in the activities of the world organization.

In the year 2000 the Association held its annual conference in Warsaw, in the presence of 26 country representatives, with 180 participants, and 15 exhibitors. During the conference an election history exhibition was displayed, which met with a great success. The main topic of the conference was the interconnection of information technology and elections. Main events of the conference were: Macedonia and Turkey were admitted as institutional members, modification of the charter was accepted, and the idea of establishing a South-European subgroup within the framework of ACEEEO came to life. On the basis of an agreement with the Central Registration, Data Processing and Election Office of the Ministry of Interior, Hungary the ACEEEO prepared a program with the intention of collecting international experience relating to campaign financing. Experts analyzed codification and legal practice of several countries in detail. Its importance had lain in that it functioned as a base for submitting a proposal for modernization of the present Hungarian regulation.

In 2000 we renewed the website of the Association and participated in the so-called Essex project. It was about to construct an election database of the Central and Eastern European region. Due to the vivid and rapidly altering practice of the elections in the region, the creation of an election database became essential, including election laws and results of elections.

From the activities of 2000, we can come to the conclusion that after almost 10 years of its establishment, the ACEEEO started to flourish and act as a regional, professional association, in co-operation with international organizations. During these years it could successfully build up close relations with its member states and world-wide organizations devoted to elections.

The third five years - stabilization 2001-2006

The last chapter in the history of the ACEEEO is about the last five years, when the Association continued its projects and missions, and expanded its activities and relations. 2001 was a very important year in the history of the Association, because it was the year of the 10th anniversary of the ACEEEO.

During this year representatives of the ACEEEO kept on participating in observation missions, such as in Montenegro and Belarus. The Belarus mission was the first mission organized and implemented by the Association. In virtue of the invitation of the Belarus Central Election Commission, the ACEEEO – as the only international organisation – started the first phase of the long-term observational mission. During the long-term observation, this mission followed with attention the whole election procedure. In the last phase of the observational mission – in parallel with other international organisations – 61 short-term observers, from 11 countries, represented the Association. On the election day, teams of two visited 240 polling stations on the whole area of the Republic of Belarus. The professional content of the ACEEEO summary report harmonised with the report of the observers of the OSCE-ODIHR, the European Council and the European Union. The European organisations appraised positively the first independent observation mission of the ACEEEO.

Owing to the professional acknowledgement, the Council of Europe, granted consultative status to the ACEEEO. It was considered a great achievement and with this status, the ACEEEO gained international acknowledgement. At the same time, the Association received the UN/NGO regional network membership in November 2001 as well.

The jubilee annual conference of the ACEEEO was held in Brijuni, Croatia in 2001. During this conference, members celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Association. President of the Republic of Croatia opened the Conference. The main topic was the financing of the election campaigns. The conference gave recommendations concerning the regulation of campaign financing for the members. For the ten-year-anniversary, a CD was prepared, in order to present the activity and the history of the Association.

In 2001, after the jubilee year of the ACEEEO, participation in election observation missions, as one of the main projects of the Association, was increased, because the ACEEEO sent representatives to the following countries: Ukraine, Hungary, Latvia, and Yugoslavia. As the title of this part indicates, the ACEEEO was open to establish relations with international organizations. Besides strengthening the relationship and co-operation with the Council of Europe, especially with the Venice Commission, the Secretariat participated in meetings with the representatives of the European Parliament, European Commission, and European Policy Centre in order to discuss the possible collaboration. As a result of continuous co-operation and the expertise, the Council for Democratic Elections of the Venice Commission decided, to grant the ACEEEO observer status. With this decision we were authorized to attend the meetings of the Venice Commission and work with them cooperatively. Moreover a co-operation agreement was signed between the OSCE-ODIHR and the ACEEEO strengthening our co-operative relationship in 2002.

One of the most important projects of this year was introduced at the Moscow conference, where the Convention on Election Standards, Electoral Rights and Freedoms was presented. The topic of remodelling of the existing European electoral standards in a format unified international document seemed to be in full correspondence to the political spirit. The fact that Mr Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, opened the conference shows the importance of this event. In the Moscow conference the Association admitted the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Azerbaijan as new members of the ACEEEO.

Regarding the main projects of the ACEEEO, 2002 was a very successful year from a professional point of view. The Convention was prepared and adopted; the multilingual

election dictionary was enlarged, the ACEEEO developed the Firstvoter.eu project. The project's aim was to create a web-based informative forum for the widening of knowledge among the youths of Europe about the importance of electoral participation in the form of voting. The project is scheduled in three steps. As the first step toward the realization of the project the Secretariat of the Association organized a preparatory meeting in Budapest for the team leaders appointed by the ACEEEO. At the preparatory meeting Albania, Hungary, Lithuania, and Sweden were represented. During the preparatory meeting the participating team leaders agreed on the continuation of the project through an international youth exchange program (step 2), which took place in 2003.

Moreover, the Association contributed in two important international projects. One of them was the Money and Politics project, in co-operation with the IFES, which was developed to test the Political Finance Disclosure Database in Hungary and in Lithuania. The goal of the project was to develop the transparency of political process by giving free access to the campaign and financing information. The second project was the Electoral Process Information Collection (EPIC) project developed by the International IDEA and designed to introduce electoral systems all over the world and make them available easily through the internet. By presenting information about electoral systems, electoral management, legislative framework, voter registration, voter education and other related topics in a wide range of countries, users are able to compare, and identify common practice within electoral administration. According to the signed cooperation agreement on the EPIC (Elections Process Information Collection) Project between the International IDEA and the ACEEEO, the ACEEEO Secretariat collected all the information needed for the project from its member states and completed the EPIC project.

2003 was the year of missions, because the ACEEEO observed the elections in the following countries: Estonia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Serbia and Montenegro (three times), the Russian Federation. This year was significant in the respect of co-operation with the Council of Europe. The ACEEEO sent representatives to the Multidisciplinary Ad Hoc Group of Specialists on legal, operational and technical standards for e-enabled voting, to the Council for Democratic Elections of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission) and to the Group of Specialists on core technical standards for e-enabled voting. This year the Committee of Ministers (Council of Europe) proclaimed that the

consultative status granted in 2001, changed to participatory status with the Council of Europe from 2003.

The ACEEEO devoted its working program in 2003 to the theme “Media and Elections”. The reasons were twofold. First, the utmost importance of the role of media in a better functioning democratic processes compels us to reconsider the link between media and elections on the global level in the course of events that shaped so dramatically the history of the 20th century. Second, and, with regard to the scope of activities of ACEEEO, most importantly, the democratization process of societies in Central-eastern Europe makes this ever-green-topic one of the most actual and most relevant ones of contemporary public discourse on the regional level. Therefore, the idea to organize a theme on “Media and Elections” emerged as a result of a bottom-up process. To understand the correspondence between Media and Elections in Central-Eastern Europe, the ACEEEO Secretariat prepared a study and questionnaire concerning this topic, which was the main theme of the annual conference held in 2003, London. The fact that the annual conference was held in the United Kingdom proved our willingness to open to Western Europe and to establish closer relationship with experts and organization outside Eastern and Central Europe. The conference was organized by the ACEEEO in co-operation with The Electoral Commission of UK, the Association of Electoral Administrators of UK, and the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). This year the Association accepted Kazakhstan as a new institutional member.

As one year passed on, the Association still continued its main activity: election observation mission. In 2004 the ACEEEO sent representatives to the countries such as: Georgia, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus and Ukraine (three rounds). The Association went on strengthening its relations with international organizations, namely OSCE-ODIHR, Council of Europe, International IDEA and IFES. Besides co-operation with international and Western-European organizations, the Association committed itself to a different path. In view of the election situation in the Middle East, the ACEEEO considered it important to hand over its expertise and knowledge to the countries in that region and offered its professional background. Firstly representatives participated in the statutory meeting of the International Mission for Iraqi Elections organized by the Elections Canada and supported by the United Nations and the

Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq with the involvement of the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). Comprised mainly of independent electoral management bodies, the IMIE was focusing on the election process in Iraq, as well as the registration and voting process outside Iraq. The second step was the visit to Palestine, upon the invitation of the Palestinian Election Commission. During the stay in Palestine, there were meetings with several election officials and representatives of organizations interested in elections and made discussions about the further cooperation. This meeting was the first station in a project of greater importance.

The Association continued its Firstvoter.eu project, which entered the second phase. It was an exchange program among our member states and countries from the European Union. Participants were from Russia, Hungary, Spain, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lithuania.

At the beginning of 2004, the Association took on a long-term project, the ACEEEO publication. The first edition of the ACEEEO newsletter – *Elections in Europe* – was issued in English and Russian. The newsletter was distributed in our annual conference in Tirana, Albania, where the main topic was “Voter Turnout with special regard to the first time voters”. The Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the Association during the Tirana conference.

Besides the participation in the continuation of the EPIC project, which was started in the summer of 2004, the ACEEEO contributed to an other International IDEA project, which was International IDEA and regional partners on the political parties program. The aim of this project was to provide legislators, policymakers, political parties and other reformers with a good basis to assess the advantages and disadvantages of their own systems in order to identify opportunities for reform. ACEEEO experts collected the information on country context and the external regulation of political parties in the ACEEEO countries concerned.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that the year of 2004 was a very successful year in the life of the Association, both in regional and in international point of view.

According to the agreements, the ACEEEO continued its participation in the International Mission for Iraqi Elections (IMIE) in 2005 as well. Moreover the Association took another role in the Middle East. Representing the Foundation of Afghanistan and the ACEEEO Secretariat, a Middle East election expert travelled to Afghanistan to observe the election preparations and the elections. After the elections, the Acting Chairman of the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan visited Hungary and discussed the possible ways of collaboration. In order to continue the co-operation with the Election Commission of Palestine, the Association, cooperating with Panorama Center (Palestinian NGO), organized a workshop for ACEEEO and Palestinian election experts in order to exchange views and experiences on the development of the election systems and to discuss current topics of elections. As a follow-up, the presentations and the summary of the discussions were published by the ACEEEO. This project was initiated and financed by the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of the Interior of Hungary.

Having observer status at the Venice Commission, representatives attended its meeting and discussed the feasibilities of a jointly-organized conference in 2007. After the meeting, an agreement was concluded, to organize a European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies jointly with the Venice Commission in 2007. This would be an important step in the strengthening of the pan-European dimension of the ongoing activities in the electoral field as well as in the co-operation between our organizations.

The newest initiative of the Association was introduced at the third Conference of Global Election Organizations and ACEEEO General Assembly Meeting, held in Siófok, Hungary. The 3rd International Meeting of the Global Election Organizations (GEO) – previously held in Canada and Mexico – was now hosted by Hungary. One of the main topics of this very significant Conference was „The role of courts in the judging of electoral disputes”. Participants of the Global Election Officials Conference launched an initiative to hold an annual Global Elections Day on the first Thursday of February every year. The main goals of this day are: confirming our belief in the irreversibility of democratic processes; informing the public of new achievements and challenges related to various types of voting systems; calling the attention of parliaments, governments, politicians and world leaders about the important leadership role they play in promoting a

culture of democracy and high levels of voter participation; influencing first-time voters and young voters to commit themselves to democratic values.

Finally the ACEEEO contributed to the Handbook of Electoral Management Bodies, composed by the International IDEA.

The last year to report on, is 2006, the jubilee year in the existence of the Association. The following projects and initiatives were continued: Global Elections Day, election observation missions, ACEEEO newsletter.

A new project was launched in 2006: "Non armis, sed vi suffragiorum" (By the authority of the ballot, not the force of the bullet). The goal is to make youth understand the importance of participating in the political processes of the democratic life of the European Union, particularly the right to vote and to stand as a candidate at elections. This project supported by the European Commission contains different activity plans e.g. discussions, exchange of best practices, publication of writings, creating a website, that complement each other and will be undertaken by a coalition of NGOs from member states of the EU. In the frame of this project a conference took place in 2006, in Budapest. The conference provided good opportunity to get acquainted with methods and practices of how to educate youngsters and raise their interest in election processes. Participants of the conference were representatives of non-governmental organisations and election management bodies from Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Spain. As a result of the conference, the special edition of the ACEEEO newsletter was issued and by the end of 2006 there is an intention to prepare a handbook aiming at widening the youths' knowledge about the electoral processes and improving their „citizenship skills" (critical way of thinking, knowledge of political preferences, analysis of political alternatives). The handbook will serve as an important tool in providing electoral knowledge in secondary schools during history or citizenship lessons as well as in the course of non-formal education activities, trainings.

Our jubilee year will be closed and celebrated with a festive Annual Conference and general Assembly meeting in Jurmala, Latvia. This event will give the possibility to celebrate the ACEEEO anniversary worthily.

Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO) was founded in 1991 by 6 countries. Currently the Association has 22 institutional members and 1 member supporter. During the past 15 years it held 14 annual conferences where election experts from almost the whole world were represented. Since 1991 it has built out fruitful and continuous co-operation with election commission in Europe, America, Africa and Australia, with the IFES, International IDEA, OSCE-ODIHR, and Council of Europe.

The professional and organizational improvements of the Association were due to the continuous support provided by the members of the ACEEEO, the Mott Foundation, IFES, International IDEA, the European Commission, Council of Europe and the Hungarian National Assembly.

As for future plans, 2006 is a significant year in the life of the Association. On the basis of the last 15 years' experiences, it is time to become an Association of Election Officials without any regional limitation and to open new perspectives in the inter-regional co-operation of electoral experts.