

Remarks of Richard W. Soudriette

President, Center for Diplomacy and Democracy

ACEEEO 20th Anniversary Conference –Opening Plenary Session

June 16-18, 2011

The great Mexican leader, Benito Juarez, said, “Democracy is the future destiny of humanity, liberty is its indestructible weapon, and the possibility of perfecting it, is the end to which we are dedicated.”

For more than 20 years the Association of European Election Officials has been working to perfect the election process in Europe and across the globe. Shortly after the Berlin Wall came down, election officials from Central Europe gathered in Budapest in 1991 to form the Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials. The purpose of the association was to offer election officials from this region the opportunity to share experiences, and ideas on all aspects of election administration.

I am deeply honored to speak at the opening plenary session of this historic 20th anniversary conference

The person who planted the seed for ACEEEO was F. Clifton White, renowned international political strategist and the founder of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

At the 1991 Budapest conference Mr. White said, “Only amateurs steal elections on election day. To safeguard the election process, administrators need to learn best practices from their colleagues, and this is why we need ACEEEO.”

Since 1991 the person who has nurtured the association is Dr. Zoltan Toth, ACEEEO Secretary General. I ask you to join in expressing our appreciation to Dr. Zoltan Toth for his tireless service as Secretary General of ACEEEO and to his wife Katí for her constant support.

We also acknowledge the hard work and devotion of past and current members of the ACEEEO Executive Board, honorary members, institutional members, and donors who have contributed to the success of ACEEEO. My thanks also to Zsolt Szolnoki Director of Operations for ACEEEO and the Secretariat Staff for the great work they do on behalf of your association.

We are gathered on the banks of the Danube, one of Europe’s great rivers to celebrate two auspicious events: Hungary’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the 20th anniversary of ACEEEO.

Out of the ruins of the Second World War one of mankind’s greatest achievements emerged; the European Union. The founding fathers of modern Europe, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Winston Churchill to name a few worked to lay the groundwork for EU that culminated with the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993. The EU is an inspiring example of how

people torn apart by war can work together for the common good. ACEEEO embraces the ballot box as the preferred means of change and reconciliation.

One of the association's most significant accomplishments was improving election processes in the Central and Eastern European countries that became EU members in 2005 and 2007. ACEEEO assisted with capacity building and strengthening the knowledge base of election officials in the ten new EU member countries.

In 2006, in recognition of ACEEEO's expanding role in Europe the name was changed to the Association of European Election Officials at the 16th Annual Conference in Latvia

Over the years ACEEEO has served its members well through such activities as the documentation center, annual conferences, training programs, election observation missions and publications. Through all of these activities the association has had a profound impact on improving election administration in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

The association has also played an essential role in providing technical assistance in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Jordan, Kosovo, and Moldova.

ACEEEO has assisted with establishment of national election networks such as the Association of Election Officials of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The AEOBIH with help from ACEEEO laid the foundation for establishing the Central Election Commission of Bosnia Herzegovina. We all look forward to joining Irina Hadziabdic, President of the CEC of Bosnia Herzegovina and her colleagues for next year's ACEEEO Conference in Sarajevo.

ACEEEO works on the basis of mutual respect for all the members and never imposes election solutions. This year's conference theme is, "Independence of Election Management Bodies". This concept is necessary to protect the integrity of the election process. If voters have confidence in the institutions that are organizing the elections then they will trust the results.

The ballot box is the well spring from which democratic government derives its legitimacy. For democracy to function, voters must have faith that they may vote freely, secretly and without fear of retribution. Above all voters must be convinced that every vote counts.

The key to building this kind of credibility is having professional election administration. Unfortunately many countries continue to rely upon ad hoc election procedures.

"Adhocracy" undermines the faith of the citizens in the sanctity of their vote. In his book, "Election Commissions as Institutions of Governance" Dr. Rafael Lopez Pintor says that the best way to serve democracy is for the establishment of independent and permanent institutions.

He points out that countries often prefer to rely on ad hoc election procedures because of a mistaken belief permanent election institutions lead to dramatic increases in the cost of elections. Dr. Lopez Pintor's research actually shows the exact opposite result because having permanent

election management bodies offer more cost effective electoral processes. It should be noted that ACEEEO has been instrumental in helping many member countries to shift from ad hoc to permanent election management bodies.

For the past two decades ACEEEO has been working on the international scene to promote independent election administration. This association has actively cooperated with a number of international initiatives such as the:

- . Assisting with the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Knowledge Network.
- Participating in 6 Global Election Officials Conferences and hosting the 2005 GEO Conference.
- Supporting the formation of regional election associations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.
- Implementing an important voter registration study for the UN Democracy Fund.

In closing, I wish to recognize all of the election administrators from more than 40 countries who are present. You are making great contributions to democracy through your efforts to safeguard electoral integrity

In 1991 ACEEEO was born during a time of democratic renewal in Central and Eastern Europe. Twenty years later the Arab Spring demonstrates the yearning of people to freely choose their leaders through the ballot box instead of through the barrel of a gun.

Let us be inspired by the words uttered in 1852 by the father of Hungarian democracy, Kossuth Lajos, who said,

“All for the people, and all by the people.
Nothing about the people, without the people.
This is Democracy, the guiding spirit of our age.”

###