



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Ambassador Gilbert, Head of Center, Dushanbe

Delivered by Deputy Political Counselor David Kostelancik
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 15, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We would also like to very warmly welcome Ambassador Gilbert to the Permanent Council and to thank him for his thorough and thoughtful report. We are encouraged by Ambassador Gilbert's observations that positive change is taking place in Tajikistan. We share his concerns, however, about the preparations for the proposed constitutional referendum in June.

In particular, we are concerned about the proposed presidential term limit extension. Two four- or five-year terms is more the norm among democratic multi-party states. These shorter terms also give developing democracies greater opportunity to entrench themselves in democratic structures and processes. Both citizens and government benefit when popular assessment of government's performance is measured in shorter intervals than being proposed now in Tajikistan.

We are also concerned about the lack of public participation or debate in the constitutional amendment process. There is still a short time remaining before the referendum, and we would urge the Government of Tajikistan to work to encourage public debate and awareness of the proposed changes.

Still, we are encouraged to hear from Ambassador Gilbert that political parties plan to urge their members to participate in the referendum; this is a clear sign of growing political maturity. Voter dissatisfaction as expressed at the polls is a powerful signal to governments of the need for change. At the same time, voter education is an essential factor for a successful democracy.

Likewise, we hope that the Government of Tajikistan can find a way, within the parameters of its constitutional mandate, to inform the Tajik people of pending legislation, such as the draft law on religion. Public feedback to parliamentary representatives could be an integral part of the democratic process, ensuring the will of the people is accurately reflected.

On referenda and elections, the Government of Tajikistan could avail itself of the ODIHR's expertise to ensure that procedures conform not only to the Tajik Constitution, but also to the highest possible international standards. ODIHR could even advise on formatting questions and ballots to ensure that voters can make

clear decisions on clear questions. In this regard, we are concerned by reports that the text of the June 22 referendum is confusing and requires voters to consider batches of seemingly unrelated questions with a simple "yes" or "no" answer on the lot.

We are encouraged to hear from Ambassador Gilbert that the Center enjoys a very satisfactory relationship with the host government. Given this good rapport, and the rich project work already underway in Tajikistan, we would hope the Tajik authorities would take full advantage of the Center's resources. As the OSCE has a wealth of experience in prison reform, for example, the Government of Tajikistan might seek assistance to relieve poor prison conditions.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate Ambassador Gilbert and his staff on a series of creative activities aimed at promoting OSCE values among the youth of Tajikistan. OSCE Civic Education Summer camps, held throughout Tajikistan, give Tajik youngsters valuable exposure to the roles played by political parties, civil society and journalists. Similar camps teach them about responsible stewardship of the environment. By targeting young people, Ambassador Gilbert and his staff are helping to solve the problems of tomorrow, today. These youth camps will pay dividends for Tajikistan far into the future.

Finally, I'd like to signal our support for the Center's de-mining activities. This is clearly an opportunity for the OSCE to serve as a catalyst to mobilize the various actors who will undertake the important and difficult task of de-mining throughout Tajikistan. Cooperative work with Tajikistan's neighbors to de-mine borders can be an important confidence building measure and thus contribute to security throughout the region.

Thank you, and thanks again to Ambassador Gilbert and his dedicated staff on the terrific work they are doing and for Ambassador Gilbert's devotion to his duties. We wish him all the best in his future. Thank you.