Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by expressing my sincere thanks to the organizers of this important meeting, both the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania and the Secretariat of the ACEEEO. It is not surprising that we are here in Romania for this event, as Bucharest has become a cornerstone for support to electoral assistance in the region – from the generous financial support Romania has provided to electoral support projects, to having previously acted as the host country for ENEMO, and having been the location for other important meetings in the past, we have seen first hand Romania’s commitment to promoting electoral reform. And this forum is an excellent opportunity to gather and discuss issues that are not only of importance for the region, but issues that have an impact on elections and electoral assistance more broadly.

As part of the panel on planning an election, I want to discuss today the UN perspective and the role of the UN in providing electoral assistance. Thus, my presentation will focus on two simple elements of the provision of UN electoral assistance: what we do and how we do it.

I - I will briefly say a few words about what we do. The UN provides many different types of electoral assistance. Technical assistance, such as technical advice to EMBs, operational support to planning and logistics, training for EMBs and judicial authorities with a role in elections, capacity building of civil society organizations, or engagement with political parties, is the most common. Support to creating a conducive environment for elections, such as through political good offices, or through deployment of human rights monitoring is another common area where the UN engages. The UN also deploys high-level panels and advisory diplomatic missions; coordinates international observers, or as in the case of Kyrgyzstan coordinates the work of other assistance providers; and, although very rarely, the UN occasionally engages in organization and conduct of elections, or provides certification or observation.

Electoral assistance is provided only by mandate of the General Assembly or Security Council, or upon a direct request from the Member State. Assistance must be based upon a DPA led Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) and can only occur after the approval by the UN focal point for electoral assistance, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.
Many entities are in charge of the implementation of the assistance set up by this process, including UNDP, DPKO, DPA, UNOPS, UNWOMEN, OHCHR, and UNESCO. But assistance is most often led by DPA and DPKO when there are peacekeeping or special political missions, or UNDP in non-mission settings.

The Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) supports the focal point for electoral assistance, by undertaking assessments and providing strategic direction to the approximately 60 countries in which the UN operates assistance programming. The division develops UN system-wide policy on topics related to the provision of electoral assistance, and manages the UN’s institutional memory for electoral assistance. EAD is also in charge of the UN electoral experts’ roster, with almost 1,500 experts ready to be deployed to the countries where we operate.

Finally, the UN has a strategic partnership with international organisations. In addition to the ACEEEO, these include the African Union, OAS, SADC, OIC, LAS, IFES, NDI, EISA, as well as regional and sub-regional organisations. In Africa, we have an electoral team in Addis Ababa to support the AU and UN electoral projects on the continent. We also have experts in Gaborone and the UN regional office in West Africa. Closer to this meeting, we have experts who understand electoral assistance integrated into the UNDP Regional Center for Europe and Central Asia based in Istanbul.

II - Now let me turn to how we provide assistance, by making a few comments that take into consideration one of the main topics of this conference “Planning of a General Election”.

1) First, I would like to bring to your attention the following point that we regularly make to our counterparts worldwide: We must adopt a more political approach to the planning of elections and electoral assistance. For too long, we have concentrated solely on addressing technical improvements and not paid sufficient attention to political advice and interventions.

Let me give some examples throughout the phases of an election that illustrate what I mean by adopting “more political approach”.

Pre-election period: Understanding that no voter register is one hundred per cent accurate, focusing only on the technical elements of the registration process risks missing a more important element: election stakeholders and the wider public should have confidence in the fairness of the process. Technical functioning builds confidence, of course. But there are other elements which build confidence as well, that should be considered. A process developed with the acceptance of all parties, for example, is more likely to maintain the confidence of voters even in the face of technical challenges. In the run-up to the (postponed) parliamentary elections in Bangladesh in January 2007, the voter register became the key point of controversy and was a factor in the demonstrations that resulted in loss of life and a decision by the main opposition party to
boycott the elections. In contrast, the new voter register, prepared in advance of the January 2009 elections with the broad support of all stakeholders, commanded high levels of public confidence and pride, and was a significant factor in the elections passing off smoothly and peacefully. In Moldova, the UN is currently supporting national efforts in the areas of voter registration, through the development of a registration roadmap that will help ensure for a broadly accepted process.

**Election period:** A more political approach is also one that places greater attention on encouraging transparency in all phases of the process. In order to ensure public confidence, the election management body should communicate regularly with all stakeholders, make procedures publically available and ensure that expectations for sensitive parts of the electoral process are realistic. In a number of countries in which election-related violence has recently occurred, for example, a lack of transparency in the results process has been a factor responsible for heightening tensions. In contrast, the transparent publication of all polling station results in Liberia in 2005 was a key element in the elections there being concluded peacefully.

**Post-election period:** Finally, a political approach means promoting trust in authorities and processes, but perhaps most importantly in outcomes. To build trust, we should pay greater attention to encouraging a fair publication of the results, and an expeditious and accessible dispute resolution system. Election stakeholders and the wider public have the right to an effective remedy where their political rights have been infringed or denied. As a result, an efficient, timely and transparent complaints and appeals process, in which there is stakeholder and public confidence, is an important aspect of a credible election process. Where this is not the case, contestants can be reluctant to seek redress through formal procedures.

A political approach also means that particular attention should be paid to the following:

a) Seeking to encourage the establishment and development of election management bodies and other institutions involved in election administration that possess broad public trust and confidence in their fairness, impartiality and general competence. While there is no particular model, such as an independent or governmental election commission, that must be recommended, every effort should be made to ensure that senior members of the election management body are selected through a process that is consultative and commands public and stakeholder confidence. Election commissions in Liberia in 2005, Sierra Leone in 2007 and Ghana in 2008 did command such confidence, not least because they included individuals of high personal integrity.

b) Encouraging a consultative approach, which attempts to make all stakeholders co-responsible. This begins with the development and agreement of election legislation. A process that provides for input from a wide range of election stakeholders, and is concluded well in advance of Election day, is more likely to
encourage the conduct of a peaceful election. It also concerns the approach taken by the election management body. In Georgia the UN supported increased participation of citizenry in decision-making processes among youth and vulnerable groups as well as raising awareness about reforms in election legislation. In the Maldives in 2009 and Bangladesh in 2008, both election commissions adopted a highly consultative and transparent approach, which contributed significantly to the successful and peaceful completion of the election process in contexts in which there was a real potential for violence to break out.

c) Encouraging the establishment of a level playing field for contestants. From the start of the election process, a legal framework that all election stakeholders consider to be fair, that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that is inclusive and equitable to all contestants, is more likely to result in a credible election. This also means that candidate and party registration should be open and inclusive, equal opportunities should be provided for campaigning, equitable access should be provided to the media and security forces should behave in a professional and neutral manner.

2) Beyond a political approach, when planning elections we place prevention of election-related violence at the heart of our assistance work.

Following the outbreak of violence following the 2005 election in Togo, the 2007 elections in Kenya, and the 2010 elections in CDI and Nigeria it was agreed that we needed to better understand the complicated link between elections and conflict. It is widely understood that serious conflict is not caused by elections themselves, but is instead based on deeper rooted grievances. Elections act as a potential trigger for these grievances. With that in mind, the Secretary General in his last report to the General Assembly called on more to be done to better identify measures that will reduce the likelihood for elections to spark violence.

What can be done? First, understanding the need to address underlying causes of violence, a broad approach is needed. This should involve a co-ordinated strategy among international and national bodies that brings together conflict, mediation and election expertise. Second, accurate information is needed, so forecasting ahead to identify countries or particular periods at high risk of violence is essential; third, deploying measures to prevent or mitigate the potential for violence must be based upon those risk assessments. This includes technical electoral measures, such as ensuring there are clear counting procedures and that results are accurate and issued in a timely manner. But they also include political measures, such as dispatching envoys and missions during an election process to encourage contestants to use rhetoric carefully, call for calm, address disputes through legally bound procedures, and most importantly accept the results when they are reached.
3) A third important element to consider when planning elections is to give priority to ensuring that assistance is sustainable and cost effective.

Some of the poorest countries in the world, many of which are far behind in their MDGs, have chosen some of the most expensive electoral systems in the world. Primarily in the name of fraud prevention, and funded in large part by donors, we are seeing countries spend tens of millions of dollars on cutting-edge electoral equipment seen rarely in more established democracies – such as digital fingerprint scanning for registration.

Now I am not against technology, and every country has a sovereign right to choose what is best for its unique context. But no technology is a panacea for fraud, and some of these systems raise questions about sustainability, especially as development funds become tighter. Countries like our hosts here, Romania, who have supported election projects throughout the Black Sea Region, surely understand this point well. Investments need to be carefully considered. New technology may be best introduced as a solution to problems that might hinder the credibility of the process or the acceptance of results, not as an end in itself. Where that is the case, comprehensive and consultative feasibility studies should be considered before introducing any new technological solutions into an electoral process.

4) And finally, in all of the above, we should ensure that elections preserve national ownership.

As the General Assembly has stated on numerous occasions, there is no single recipe for democracy. We should add to this that there should be no single recipe for electoral assistance. The support we provide should therefore be designed to meet specific requirements, rather than be based on a “one size fits all” approach, which has too frequently been the case in the past. Any time there is new political momentum, the UN should conduct a new assessment mission, or review mission to make sure the assistance provided is in accordance with the political requirements of the Member State.

We must be careful not to push for elections to be conducted where the security and political environment are not sufficiently conducive. In such cases, the conduct of elections can lead to political failure with consequences for peace and security.

We also need to pay careful attention to the “electoral cycle approach”. This is a helpful tool in ensuring that support is provided before, during and after an election and encouraging planning to take place in advance for financial reasons. But we must make sure that it is not used to perpetuate electoral assistance. Assistance should be provided with the aim of ensuring that national capacity can be built as quickly as possible.

In addition, we must make sure that the experts we employ are of the highest possible calibre, and are from more diverse backgrounds. At the moment the pool of experts is largely from the global north and could be more gender balanced.
Finally, we need to be more honest about our achievements. Too often we adopt a self-congratulatory approach which does not properly reflect the reality on ground. Of course for most of us politics, or diplomacy, sets limits on what we can say publicly; and donors expect results. But these realities do not need to prevent us from being more realistic and pragmatic in our discourse.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With these thoughts, I have tried to place frankly on the table a number of issues relating to electoral assistance as relates to the planning of elections that we need to address seriously, urgently and with maximum commitment if we are to make further progress in building strong electoral institutions and processes. This must go hand in hand with greater efforts to improve democracy and good governance through strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law. I urge that we work together in a spirit of commitment and partnership on this vital task.

Thank you for your attention.