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Elections in times of crisis

Report[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
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1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15866, Reference 4778 of 22 January 2024.

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that free and fair elections, based on universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage, are the cornerstone of democratic governance and a fundamental requirement under the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5).

2. Crises, and the State responses they require, can have profound implications for rights and freedoms, as well as for the functioning of democratic institutions. The Covid-19 pandemic, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and, most severely, the full-scale war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, have all placed extraordinary pressure on Council of Europe member States, requiring exceptional measures to uphold democratic processes.

3. The Assembly notes that elections today are rarely held in conditions of normalcy. Polarisation, widespread disinformation, foreign interference, cyberattacks, climate-related disruptions and the spillover of conflicts have created a persistent context of risk and vulnerability for electoral processes across Council of Europe member States and globally. These pressures compound wider trends of democratic backsliding, including restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, which are essential for open campaigning and meaningful political competition. Crises should therefore not be seen only as exceptional disruptions, but as a structural challenge of our times requiring adaptation and resilience at all phases of the electoral cycle.

4. When elections are scheduled or occur during such crises, the risks to democratic integrity are magnified. Both postponing elections and proceeding under constrained conditions may carry risks for democratic legitimacy. Gaps in the constitutional and legal frameworks governing elections may emerge, and the preparedness of institutions to respond effectively to extraordinary circumstances is subject to severe strain.

5. Further, limitations on campaigning, voter turnout, equality of participation and election observation pose challenges to electoral integrity and, ultimately, the legitimacy of results, which can be a major risk for democracies. These conditions underscore the need to further develop frameworks and practices capable of delivering safe, technically sound and credible elections, while safeguarding fundamental rights and ensuring public confidence in electoral processes.

6. The urgency to update national security concepts and to upgrade electoral security has been highlighted by the Russian Federation's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, and its hybrid threats across Council of Europe member States.

7. The Assembly recalls the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, endorsed by the Heads of State and Government in May 2023, which express the shared determination to "hold elections... in accordance with international standards and take all appropriate measures against any interference in electoral systems and processes". It stresses that ensuring credible elections in times of crisis is a central element of this commitment.

8. Building on the 2023 Bern Conference on "Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities" and echoing the Council of Europe's work towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe, the Assembly underlines that safeguarding electoral integrity must be at the heart of efforts to protect and revitalise democracy in Europe.

9. The Council of Europe has long provided a foundation for safeguarding the right to free elections. Through the work of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, the activities of the Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and the Council for Democratic Elections, member States have access to a unique and comprehensive body of principles, guidance and monitoring mechanisms on the conduct of democratic elections. Together, these instruments, ranging from standard-setting to monitoring and technical co-operation across all phases of the electoral process form the Council of Europe Electoral Cycle. These instruments protect and promote Europe's electoral heritage and offer a shared framework for upholding electoral integrity that is as relevant for times of crisis as it is for times of normalcy.

10. As part of its continuing commitment to free and fair elections, the Assembly has observed elections for over 40 years. It has integrated electoral co-operation activities with electoral management bodies to support the implementation of recommendations stemming from election observation missions, the Venice

2. Draft resolution unanimously adopted by the committee on 30 September 2025.

Commission, and Council of Europe monitoring bodies. The creation in 2025 of the Parliamentary Alliance for Free and Fair Elections is a further step to strengthen the Assembly's role in meeting the challenges of contemporary election trends.

11. Echoing the call by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for a New Democratic Pact to protect and strengthen democracy in Europe, the Assembly calls for determined efforts to ensure that the lessons learned from electoral processes during recent crises are translated into timely and effective reforms.

12. In light of these considerations, the Assembly stresses that safeguarding electoral integrity in times of crisis requires a comprehensive approach. This encompasses clear legal and procedural measures to regulate emergencies, operational adaptation and strengthened co-operation among State institutions, enhanced societal resilience to crisis situations and threats of foreign interference, robust and adaptable election observation methodologies, innovation and preparedness for digital and technical challenges, and specific strategies for elections held in prolonged emergencies or post-conflict settings.

13. To ensure legal and institutional preparedness, the Assembly encourages Council of Europe member States to:

13.1. undertake regular and timely assessments of electoral laws, rules and procedures to enhance resilience, agility, and adaptability for times of crisis;

13.2. ensure that constitutional and electoral legislation provides clear provisions for the holding of elections during emergencies, including clear and limited criteria for postponement, in line with the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, and temporariness;

13.3. provide that decisions to postpone or substantially alter elections require parliamentary approval, preferably with a qualified majority, and following a consultation of all relevant stakeholders, in particular political parties, with broad support across the political spectrum. Such decisions should be limited in time and subject to judicial oversight from an independent and impartial court;

13.4. ensure that any emergency-related changes to electoral legislation are consultative, transparent, and involve all affected stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, media and the wider public;

13.5. avoid late amendments to electoral law, and ensure that changes made to adapt to emergency situations are limited in scope, broadly consensual, and clearly communicated to the public;

13.6. consider creating a national election co-operation network that brings together the election authorities together with relevant administrative and operational services or agencies, including security, civil contingencies, cyberdefence, and communication.

14. To strengthen operational preparedness and institutional capacity, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:

14.1. undertake comprehensive risk assessments to evaluate the robustness of electoral processes against potential crises, and develop contingency plans to address identified vulnerabilities;

14.2. strengthen the independence, capacity and resources of electoral management bodies;

14.3. institutionalise crisis-management processes for electoral management bodies and relevant State bodies, including co-ordinated scenario planning and simulations to safeguard electoral continuity during emergencies;

14.4. adapt voting arrangements to ensure equality of participation in emergency situations;

14.5. guarantee transparency and public trust by developing clear crisis communication strategies by electoral management bodies and other partners.

15. In view of the need for strengthened resilience to counter foreign interference risks that aim to undermine electoral integrity and processes, the Assembly urges Council of Europe member States to:

15.1. develop comprehensive strategies for countering disinformation and malign foreign interference, including via the adoption of whole-of-society approaches to electoral resilience that involve political parties, security agencies, academia, civil society and the media;

15.2. enhance the protection of electoral infrastructure against foreign cyber operations and technical manipulation, including through independent audits, regular stress tests, and transparency measures;

15.3. strengthen the capacity to track, analyse and anticipate cyber-attacks and develop early-warning capabilities;

15.4. enhance voter education strategies on information integrity, including by promoting fact-checking, and media and information literacy.

16. In affirming that election observation is an integral part of electoral transparency, the Assembly:

16.1. calls on Council of Europe member States to ensure that international observers are able to access elections, even during emergencies, including by extending standing invitations;

16.2. supports the development of a common framework for international election observation that upholds the quality and integrity of observation in times of crisis, and that enables rapid methodological adaptation, including remote and hybrid observation;

16.3. calls for the use of adapted and innovative observation methods, such as remote stakeholder meetings and long-term monitoring, without diminishing the overall integrity of observation.

17. In recognising that some crises are not temporary disruptions, but prolonged states of emergency with profound implications for democratic governance, the Assembly:

17.1. recalls its Resolution 2605 (2025"Legal and human rights aspects of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine", and reaffirms that, under international democratic standards, elections cannot be held under martial law;

17.2. calls for continued support to member States affected by conflict or prolonged emergencies, with particular attention to Ukraine, to enable secure, inclusive and credible elections to be conducted in line with European and international standards as soon as conditions permit.

18. As regards its own work, the Assembly should:

18.1. further strengthen the coherence, impact and visibility of its work in the field of elections, relying on its deliberative work, election observation, co-operation, and the Parliamentary Alliance for Free and Fair Elections;

18.2. reinforce the Council of Europe Electoral Cycle as a comprehensive tool covering all phases of the electoral process and promote this tool actively in its activities;

18.3. intensify co-operation with international partners on protecting electoral resilience and integrity in times of crisis, as well as ensuring election observation methodologies evolve with contemporary electoral practice and current threats with a particular attention to digitalisation and cybersecurity;

18.4. consider observing national elections and referendums in member States not subject to any form of monitoring to further promote free, fair and transparent electoral processes throughout Europe and ensure the exchange of best practices;

18.5. assess its own election observation methods and procedures particularly in light of risks and developments linked to the digitalisation of electoral campaigns and election management;

18.6. actively promote and participate in regular exchanges of views and of experience between central electoral commissions of member States and partners, with a particular focus on threats on electoral processes and the measures to safeguard their integrity and resilience;

18.7. contribute actively to the ongoing development of the New Democratic Pact for Europe, ensuring that the protection and resilience of electoral processes are central to broader efforts to reinforce Europe's democratic foundations.

B. Draft recommendation[3]

1. The Parliamentary Assembly, referring to its Resolution... (2026) “Elections in times of crisis”, underlines that recent crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, armed conflicts and hybrid threats have risked seriously disrupting electoral processes and have challenged institutional safeguards.

2. Such crises both endanger the practical organisation of elections and risk having severe impacts on fundamental rights and freedoms essential to democratic participation.

3. The Assembly expresses its serious concern that elections are increasingly rarely held in conditions of normalcy. Polarisation, systemic disinformation, foreign interference, cyberattacks, climate-related disruptions and the spillover of conflicts have created a persistent context of risk and vulnerability for electoral processes.

4. The Assembly emphasises that free and fair elections are the cornerstone of democratic societies. Independent, transparent and resilient electoral processes are indispensable both to citizens’ trust in public institutions and for the competitiveness of the electoral environment.

5. In this regard, the Assembly recalls the extensive acquis of the Council of Europe in the electoral field, including the work of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, and the Assembly’s own election observation activities.

6. Building on the 2023 Bern parliamentary conference entitled “Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities” and echoing the Council of Europe’s work towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe, the Assembly underlines that safeguarding electoral integrity must be at the heart of efforts to protect and revitalise democracy in Europe.

7. In view of the central role played by the Council of Europe in ensuring electoral integrity, the Assembly asks the Committee of Ministers to:

7.1. strengthen the coherence and visibility of the Council of Europe’s work on electoral resilience, including by developing a set of standards for the preparation of elections in crisis situations, and by reinforcing the Organisation’s Electoral Cycle as a comprehensive tool covering all phases of the electoral process;

7.2. enhance support for member States in reviewing their legal and institutional frameworks to provide clear, proportionate and transparent mechanisms for holding or postponing elections in emergencies, in line with European and international standards;

7.3. promote reinforced co-operation between relevant stakeholders to strengthen whole-of-society resilience to disinformation, cyberattacks and foreign interference, especially during election periods;

7.4. promote regular exchanges between central election commissions of member States and international partners on threats to electoral processes and measures to strengthen their integrity and resilience, building on and reinforcing forums such as the European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies;

7.5. continue to provide support, including through technical assistance and co-operation programmes to member States affected by conflict or prolonged emergencies, with particular attention to Ukraine, to enable secure, inclusive and credible elections to be conducted in line with European and international standards as soon as conditions permit.

3. Draft recommendation unanimously adopted by the committee on 30 September 2025.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Damien Cottier, rapporteur[4]

1. Introduction

1. In times of crisis, governments face formidable challenges when protecting the health and safety of their population. Both a crisis and the State's response to it can have significant implications for a range of rights and freedoms, as well as for the functioning of democratic institutions.

2. Free and fair elections are the foundations upon which democracies are built, based on the five cardinal principles of Europe's electoral heritage of universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage. The Covid-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the impact public emergencies have on the functioning of our democratic institutions and the democratic process, not least on the organisation and holding of elections.

3. Beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, crises such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and the full-scale war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine have had an extensive impact on elections, testing the resilience, integrity and fairness of electoral processes in emergency situations.

4. At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that elections today are rarely held in conditions of normalcy. They take place against a constant environment of heightened strain: polarisation, systemic disinformation, foreign interference, cybersecurity threats, climate-related disruptions and the spillover of conflicts. This evolving landscape blurs the line between extraordinary and ordinary challenges, underscoring the need for States and institutions to treat electoral resilience as a structural necessity.

5. When elections are scheduled or occur during a crisis, gaps in legislation can be exposed and institutional shortcomings may appear. Limitations that may arise regarding campaigning, voter turnout, equality of participation and assuring election observation can weaken the integrity of the electoral process itself, and, ultimately, the legitimacy of results.

6. In the face of risks to the life, health and security of the population, authorities need to make difficult legal and operational decisions, including whether, in the interests of health and security, an election should be postponed. In the context of the wider pressures facing electoral processes, these dilemmas are not confined to moments of acute emergency but can arise where the integrity or safety of electoral processes is threatened. These decisions are made no easier where there is an absence of a clear legal basis for the possibility of postponing elections in emergency situations, nor an operational methodology for adjusting elections to extraordinary circumstances precipitated by a crisis.

7. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) face further pressure as they confront the effects of widespread foreign interference with electoral processes, which includes the expanded scope for pre-poll disinformation and manipulation heralded by advances in modern information and communication technologies (ICTs). These challenges are not confined to periods of declared crisis but have become a recurring feature of the electoral landscape, compounding operational pressures and posing major risks to citizen trust in electoral systems and the reliability of processes and results.

8. These myriad risks to the integrity of electoral processes take place against the European and global background of democratic backsliding. The challenges posed by holding elections in crisis situations can compound already existing risks to human rights standards, especially to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, which are essential during election campaigns.

9. In order to prevent and counter democratic backsliding, the Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member States committed to "securing and strengthening democracy and good governance at all levels throughout Europe" in their adoption of the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in May 2023.[5]

10. Furthermore, the commitment made in the Reykjavik Declaration to ensure that elections are held in accordance with international standards, grounded in respect for relevant human rights standards, demonstrated the continued need to take steps to protect and strengthen electoral processes in Europe.

11. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe has stressed the need for a New Democratic Pact in Europe to protect and strengthen our common heritage of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.[6] In this context, the importance of protecting democracy, the integrity of elections, and the need to strengthen election observation were all underlined.[7]

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4. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.
5. Council of Europe, "Reykjavík Declaration, United around our values" (Appendix III), May 2023.

12. The parliamentary conference on "Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities", organised by the Parliamentary Assembly in co-operation with the Swiss Parliament on 9 and 10 May 2023 in Bern, marked an important step in reflecting on how to ensure the security, the resilience and the strengthening of electoral processes.[8]

13. In addition to examining the aforementioned emergency situations, the Bern conference addressed challenges specific to the digital age and its impact on electoral processes. It also addressed the issue of organising elections in Ukraine, when conditions permit, and the role that the Council of Europe could play in this regard.

14. The Bern conference acknowledged that while crises are a test for democracy, they also provide an opportunity for member States to learn from each other, and adapt to challenges and changes more quickly. The lessons learned from crisis response can provide pathways for innovation, the enhancement of electoral operational effectiveness, and for re-addressing and re-evaluating election frameworks in the light of vulnerabilities found during crises.

15. As follow-up to the conference, it was proposed that the main recommendations emerging from the conference should be developed in an Assembly resolution.

16. In the light of the above considerations and the emphasis on democracy at the Reykjavík Summit, this report seeks to follow up on commitments contained in the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy. It builds on the recommendations made at the Bern Conference and the operational experience and the tools of the Assembly's Parliamentary and Electoral Co-operation Division, which supports national authorities in meeting European electoral standards.[9]

17. The report encourages the strengthening of the visibility, coherence and impact of the Council of Europe's work on the electoral cycle, covering the pre-election period (legal framework, planning and implementation, training and education, voter registration, electoral campaign, electoral co-operation), the election period (operations and election day, verification of results) and the post-election period.

2. Scope of the report

18. The report will highlight recent risks to electoral processes posed by crises, examine the conduct and resilience of electoral processes, and look at promising practices and steps that can be taken to safeguard electoral integrity in times of crises. These questions are relevant not only to electoral polls but also to the organisation of referendums in countries whose constitutional frameworks provide for such a mechanism.

19. Risk management, resiliencebuilding, crisis preparedness and crisis management methods will be explored in order to propose steps that can be taken in order to ensure that elections can be held in line with international standards, even when under the most severe stress.

20. The report will build on the *acquis* of the Council of Europe in the field of elections, with particular reference to principles applicable to states of emergency compiled by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission).[10]

21. Approaches proposed by election experts are explored, as are work and studies undertaken by national stakeholders and international organisations that promote electoral integrity. To this end, I am grateful to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Swedish authorities for providing expertise and insights during my fact-finding visit to Stockholm in February 2025.

22. Findings of the Assembly report entitled "Foreign interference: a threat to democratic security in Europe" inform the analysis of foreign interference and hybrid warfare as vectors of electoral disruption.[11] These phenomena both actively create crisis situations, and amplify their risks by exploiting emergencies at the very moment when institutions and societies are most vulnerable.

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6. Council of Europe, "The New Democratic Pact for Europe".
7. Council of Europe, Concept note, "Building a new Democratic Pact", 3 February 2025.
8. Parliamentary Assembly, "Progress report on Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities: Summary report and conclusions of the Bern Conference", June 2023.
9. Council of Europe, Electoral Assistance.
10. European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), "Compilation of Venice Commission Opinions and Reports on States of Emergency", 16 April 2020, and Study no. 987/2020, "Respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law during states of emergency - Reflections", 19 June 2020.

3. Crisis situations and electoral disruption

23. In legal and political terms, a "crisis" often denotes a state of emergency – a temporary and exceptional situation that poses a fundamental threat to the functioning of the State and requires a departure from ordinary legal norms.[12]

24. Under such conditions, emergency powers may be conferred upon the executive, enabling the adoption of extraordinary measures aimed at mitigating the threat and restoring normalcy.

25. Crisis situations may be triggered by a wide range of events including natural disasters, civil unrest, armed conflict, pandemics, large-scale terrorist attacks, economic crisis, or institutional collapse.

26. Such situations may provoke a tension between the need to protect public order, health, or national security with the need to take measures that inevitably encroach on rights and freedoms which are an integral and necessary part of a democratic society governed by the rule of law.[13]

27. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 exemplified this tension. The sudden and unprecedented nature of the health crisis led governments across Europe to adopt the most extensive set of emergency measures seen in the modern post-Second World War history of Europe in order to curb transmission and safeguard public health.[14] Council of Europe member States were confronted with the dual imperative of fulfilling their positive obligation to protect health, safety and well-being, while refraining from disproportionately restricting citizens' freedoms. The organisation and holding of elections rely on a range of freedoms that were significantly affected by Covid-19 measures, such as freedom of association and assembly.

28. The impact of the pandemic on electoral processes globally was widespread. According to the International IDEA, between February 2020 and February 2022 more than 80 countries and territories globally decided to postpone national and subnational elections due to the pandemic. In member States of the Council of Europe, some 30 electoral processes were rescheduled through the course of 2020.

29. At the same time, there were numerous occasions where elections were held during the pandemic under constrained conditions such as special health measures, remote voting options, or limiting campaign activities. The Venice Commission has noted that holding elections in emergency situations may be problematic from the point of view of free suffrage, in particular in view of the freedom of voters to form an opinion, as well as with respect for human rights during the electoral process. Conversely, risks of abuse of the right to periodic elections exist when deciding to not hold an election, and as an avenue for keeping incumbents in power.[15]

30. In both scenarios, the central challenge remained of reconciling crisis-driven constraints with the democratic imperative of holding credible, inclusive and transparent elections.

31. Crises affecting electoral integrity are not limited to formally declared states of emergency. Elections may also come under threat from a further range of factors. This could involve targeted violence against electoral actors or events, operational failures within electoral management bodies including electoral equipment, or deliberate malign attempts to manipulate the outcome such as large-scale cybersecurity attacks on electoral infrastructure or foreign interference operations. When such actions occur at a scale capable of undermining public confidence in the electoral process or distorting the fairness and credibility of results, they constitute a profound threat to democratic legitimacy.

4. Key democratic risks during elections in times of crisis

32. The most immediate and visible risk in times of crisis is that elections may be postponed, suspended, or cancelled altogether, thus interfering with the right to periodic elections under Article 3 of the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 9). Such decisions, even when justified by compelling public interest, risk undermining democratic legitimacy when made without sufficient legal clarity, political consensus, or proportional safeguards.

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11. See Doc. 16131, Resolution 2593 (2025) and Recommendation 2292 (2025).
12. Study no. 987/2020, op. cit.
13. Council of Europe, Secretary General, "Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis", SG/Inf(2020)11, 7 April 2020.
14. Venice Commission, Interim report, "Measures taken in the EU member States as a result of the Covid-19 Crisis and their impact on democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights", CDL-AD(2020)018, October 2020.
15. Ibid.

33. Crisis-driven measures such as curfews, restrictions or bans on gatherings or limitations on movement directly impede freedoms of assembly, association and expression. These rights, enshrined in Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, are foundational to democratic electoral engagement. Restrictions on public meetings and campaigning can create unequal conditions, often disadvantaging opposition parties and new political entrants with fewer digital resources or media access.

34. Unequal electoral conditions can be created via sudden or ad hoc changes to voting methods or electoral timelines. When electoral legislation is amended without proper public debate or parliamentary scrutiny, the risk of unfair advantage or the erosion of legal certainty is increased.

35. The onset of a crisis situation can also drastically reduce transparency and oversight. Parliamentary scrutiny may be weakened, judicial remedies delayed, and oversight bodies sidelined. At the same time the ability to evaluate electoral integrity is greatly reduced by the inability of electoral observers, particularly of international observers, to attend elections, due to restrictions on movement, deployment or access to polling stations limited during crises. Limited observation capacity can hamper efforts to verify electoral transparency and fairness, with the effect of diminishing public trust.

36. In circumstances where freedom of assembly and association are temporarily reduced to respond to crisis situations, member States have trialled the deeper use of digital tools. This increased reliance for both campaigning and voting poses contrasting risks. Digitally marginalised groups and those without online access may face heightened exclusion from their inability to freely receive information. Conversely, the greater use of digital tools increases the risks of digital manipulation and exposure to digital foreign interference through disinformation campaigns. However, it should also be emphasised that, when used appropriately, digital tools can enhance the inclusion of certain segments of the population and, as such, do not inherently pose a barrier to a credible electoral process.

5. Electoral resilience and crisis response

37. The ability of democratic systems to endure and adapt during crises depends heavily on the resilience of their electoral institutions. Regardless of the nature of the disruption, EMBs, legal frameworks and oversight institutions have a remit to safeguard the integrity, accessibility and legitimacy of electoral processes. The credibility of democracies hinges not only on the regular holding of elections, but on their ability to meet fundamental democratic standards, even under adverse conditions. Components of this include the legal mechanisms for crisis-era elections, operational adaptation by EMBs, and maintaining democratic safeguards.

5.1. Legal and procedural mechanisms

38. An important part of electoral resilience lies in the legal and procedural mechanisms available for adapting electoral modalities in response to extraordinary circumstances. The decision on whether, when and how to respond when a crisis affects a planned election involves a complex balancing act. It needs to uphold constitutional norms and political rights while responding proportionately to the exigencies of the crisis. In many Council of Europe member States, existing constitutional or electoral legislation provides limited flexibility in the face of unexpected disruptions.[16]

39. The principle of stability of electoral law, a guarantee for legal certainty, means that changes to the fundamental rules governing the conduct of an election should take place well in advance of an election, with the Venice Commission suggesting one year at least. However, the exigencies of extraordinary circumstances may justify late changes of electoral legislation if they are necessary to the holding of elections in conformity with international standards.[17] When adopted during an emergency situation, the changes should be as limited as possible and citizens provided with clear information about any such changes. Moreover, such changes require that all political forces be closely involved in these adaptations.

40. Legal provisions for the postponement or modification of elections during emergencies vary across Council of Europe member States. In some countries, constitutional or statutory provisions explicitly permit the rescheduling of elections under states of emergency, martial law, or natural disasters and provide for this by either extending the term of a parliament or precluding the dissolution of parliament.[18]

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

41. The Assembly has outlined in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic a number of safeguards that should exist to guard against abuses of the decision to postpone elections, as proposed by the Venice Commission.[19] These included the need for judicial control by a national independent and impartial court, the need for all political parties and stakeholders to be involved in the decision to postpone, that postponement be limited in time by law, and that a qualified majority in the parliament be required to decide on the postponement.

42. During the Covid-19 pandemic legislative gaps became particularly evident. In several cases, the absence of clearly defined legal pathways for postponement required ad hoc legislative interventions. As noted by the Assembly in the report entitled "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on human rights and the rule of law", many States chose to legislate especially for the pandemic situation, indicating that few, if any States felt that their existing emergency laws were adequate for the emergency at hand.[20] The absence of clear procedures risks legal and political uncertainty, and on occasion may contribute to political polarisation and distrust in political procedures and in some cases can give the impression that the incumbent majority wishes to extend its position.

43. The experience of the pandemic highlighted the importance of embedding legal flexibility within robust procedural safeguards. The Venice Commission has underscored that changes to electoral law during emergencies must adhere to the key principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, and temporariness. Moreover, alterations to the electoral process should be undertaken with broad political consensus, independent verification and clearly communicated to the public.

44. This need for robust procedural electoral safeguards was further stressed by the Venice Commission in its urgent report of March 2025 regarding the cancellation of election results by Constitutional Courts. The ability to invalidate elections can be allowed only under very exceptional circumstances and when clearly regulated.[21]

5.2. Operational adaptation

45. Emergencies pose major logistical challenges that can force elections into major compromises or make them undeliverable.[22] EMBs have been confronted in recent years with different crisis scenarios that can impact election processes, including public health crises, natural disasters, technology failures and cybersecurity breaches.

46. When elections are to take place in emergency situations, decisions must be made to ensure democratic institutions function during extraordinary circumstances.

47. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a large range of adaptations were trialled across Council of Europe member States to respond to the challenges raised by the health crisis. This included measures to expand early voting periods and enhance hygiene measures, as well as exploring how electoral processes could be automated, such as by the use of machine counting of ballot papers. Such steps also sought to ensure the security of election management staff and members of election commissions during election day and vote counting.[23]

48. A core risk in such contexts is that the need for rapid response can erode transparency, accountability and public trust. To mitigate this, States made efforts to ensure public communication and oversight remained key to the crisis response. In the Republic of Moldova, the Central Electoral Commission engaged proactively with health authorities and civil society in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election to try and establish confidence in new procedures, while in Germany, local electoral authorities collaborated closely with public health bodies to develop uniform hygiene protocols and communication campaigns.[24]

49. The Covid-19 pandemic also significantly hastened the transition of electoral campaigns to digital platforms, particularly through the extensive and systematic use of social media to engage with voters, creating new methodological challenges for election observation and heightening the risk of electoral processes being influenced by both domestic and external actors.

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19. Doc. 15157 "Democracies facing the Covid-19 pandemic", 5 October 2020.
20. Doc. 15139 "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on human rights and the rule of law", 16 September 2020.
21. Venice Commission, "Urgent Report on the cancellation of election results by Constitutional Courts", 18 March 2025.
22. T. James & S. Alihodzic, "When is it democratic to postpone an election? Elections during natural disasters, COVID-19 and emergency situations", *Election Law Journal*, 2020.
23. Doc. 15157 op. cit.
24. International IDEA, Case Study, "Responding to Covid-19 with 100 per cent Postal Voting: Local Elections in Bavaria, Germany", September 2020.

50. To address equality of participation concerns and to combat the risk of lower election turnout in emergency situations, where elderly people or certain vulnerable groups of voters are likely to participate less actively, special means of participation were introduced during the pandemic, such as the use of drive-through polling stations in Finland,[25] or the use of mobile ballot boxes in Montenegro.[26] In Ireland, legislation was adopted to provide for additional polling days and providing postal votes for certain groups of voters who would otherwise not be able to participate.[27]

51. Crisis situations have also impacted upon the possibility of out-of-country voting, with voters living abroad being disenfranchised on occasion during the Covid-19 pandemic.[28]

52. Different challenges have been faced when responding to other crisis situations. The earthquake in Türkiye in 2023 that struck three months ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections of 14 May 2023 affected 13 million people living in the earthquake-hit provinces, claimed 50 000 lives, and destroyed over 100 000 buildings. With constitutional provisions not allowing election postponement except in cases of war, the authorities sought to put in place measures to register some 3 million internally displaced persons, redesign electoral districts on the basis of relocated people, introduce security measures to carry out polls in affected provinces, and make provisions to ensure that campaigning could take place in those provinces to the extent possible.

53. In some contexts, administrative flexibility may be constrained by political or legal factors. The Council of Europe co-operation activities have sought to strengthen the institutional capacity and professional standards of EMBs through targeted training, certification schemes, and peer learning in order to contribute towards enhancing the ability to effectively adapt electoral processes to crisis situations.[29]

5.3. Co-operation and co-ordination networks

54. Co-operation and co-ordination among relevant State actors and entities can help respond to emergency situations in the electoral context. In 2018, the European Union recommended the establishment of national election co-operation networks.[30] Such networks can ensure an operational forum to strengthen government capacity to identify, counter and recover from risks to the election process.

55. In Sweden, a national election co-operation network was established in 2021 which brought together the Election Authority, County Administrative Boards, the Civil Contingencies Agency, the Psychological Defence Agency, the Police Authority and the Security Service. [31]

56. The installation of such networks allows for a systemised risk management framework that can utilise the specialist knowledge from different State agencies. In the Swedish example, this included using inputs from the Public Health Agency to develop comprehensive precautions to ensure in-person voting could be safely facilitated, and to provide special voting arrangement for vulnerable groups.[32]

57. Co-operation projects of the Assembly have also sought to foster such exchanges through regional and bilateral platforms that bring together EMBs, civil society and relevant institutions. The Council of Europe further facilitates the sharing of knowledge and expertise on international standards, domestic legislation, and good practice in the electoral field. Two key element for these activities include the Council for Democratic Elections, a tripartite body of the Council of Europe in charge of electoral matters, composed of representatives from the Venice Commission, the Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and the organisation by the Venice Commission of the European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies.

25. YLE News, Report, “Finland starts casting early votes, sometimes drive-in style”, 26 May 2021.
26. International IDEA, “Elections and Covid-19: How special voting arrangements were expanded in 2020”, 21 February 2021.
27. Ireland, Electoral Reform Act 2022, Number 30 of 2022.
28. International IDEA, “Elections and Covid-19: How special voting arrangements were expanded in 2020”, 21 February 2021.
29. Council of Europe, Projects, Electoral assistance.
30. European Commission, “Recommendation C(2018)5949 final”, 12 September 2018.
31. International IDEA, “Protecting Electoral Integrity: The Case of Sweden”, 27 February 2025.
32. Ibid.

5.4. Resilience building

58. Numerous Council of Europe member States have identified the need to strengthen the resilience of their electoral systems in view of the deteriorating security situation globally and increases in foreign interference risks.

59. Building electoral resilience requires more than technical safeguards. It necessitates legal, institutional, operational and societal measures. Resilience means ensuring that electoral processes can withstand shocks, adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, and maintain public trust. Best practice has seen flexibility embedded in legal frameworks while preserving stability, investment in the professionalisation and independence of electoral management bodies, the protection of infrastructure from cyberattacks, and providing avenues to ensure an informed and engaged electorate.

60. As part of these efforts, member States have taken steps to maintain public confidence in electoral processes, in recognition that even unsubstantiated allegations of interference could undermine trust in electoral integrity. Transparent communication by authorities and EMBs is essential to pre-empt hostile misinformation that seeks to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of electoral processes.

61. As outlined in Assembly Resolution "Foreign interference: a threat to democratic security in Europe",[33] member States should adopt holistic and "whole-of-society" approaches to combat foreign interference activities and enhance societal resilience. Such steps include training for public sector communication to respond to disinformation narratives about elections, partnership with news organisations to provide accurate information about electoral procedures, information literacy campaigns, and steps to improve the integrity of the online information environment. In Lithuania and Sweden, cross-agency networks have linked EMBs with security services, media regulators, and fact-checking organisations to counteract malign information campaigns in the pre-electoral period.

62. Authorities in Finland have pursued media literacy programmes that seek to equip citizens with the skills to recognise and resist disinformation. Established in 2013 under Cultural Policy Guidelines to promote media literacy, successive national strategies have sought to address threats to society and democracy by promoting a media literate society.[34] In Sweden, the Civil Contingencies Agency provided households with information regarding crisis situations and psychological defence.[35]

63. Efforts to enhance the protection of electoral infrastructure from cyber-attacks have included the creation of the European Union Permanent Structured Cooperation Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security initiated by Lithuania in 2018. Through the deployment of experts from European Union member States, these teams conduct cyber-threat analysis, analyses infrastructure vulnerabilities, and responds to potential incidents.[36]

64. More broadly, the solidity of democratic institutions helps ensure that electoral processes will be more resilient to stresses and shocks. Research by International IDEA has highlighted how effective parliaments can play an important role in ensuring the integrity of elections through their legislative and oversight functions, while judicial independence enables the fair resolution of electoral disputes.[37] Media integrity can help EMBs counter disinformation and ensure voter information and education, while free political parties and a strong civil society can ensure a healthy and thriving electoral environment. By strengthening these institutions in ordinary times, member States reinforce their ability to conduct credible elections under extraordinary pressure.

5.5. Election observation

65. Election observation is an integral part of democratic oversight and the promotion of transparency and trust in electoral processes. However, the ability to conduct effective observation in times of crisis is often severely constrained. The Covid-19 pandemic showed the range of issues, including travel restrictions, health concerns, and logistical barriers.

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33. Resolution 2593 (2025) "Foreign interference: a threat to democratic security in Europe", 8 April 2025.
34. EAVI, Finnish National Curriculum on Media Literacy: A Global Model for Eduction, 2023.
35. Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, Brochure, "In case of crisis or war", November 2024.
36. PESCO Projects, "Cyber rapid response teams and mutual assistance in cyber security".
37. International IDEA, "Protecting elections: Risk management, resilience-building and crisis management in elections", 22 June 2023.

66. In such contexts, both the Assembly's and other international electoral observer missions have had to innovate and adapt their methodologies. Flexibility and resilience have become essential features of election observation in crisis contexts, whether through shortened deployments, smaller teams, or the use of hybrid and remote methods.

67. Council of Europe member States also took extra measures to ensure that international observation remained possible. These included waiving quarantine and self-isolation periods on arrival for international observation missions,[38] and facilitating entry and unrestricted observation opportunities for international observers despite wider pandemic restrictions.[39]

68. The effectiveness of these adapted approaches varied. Reduced access to polling stations, limitations on in-person interviews and shortened deployment periods have sometimes compromised the ability to gather information. Alternative strategies might be necessary in cases where the physical presence of observers in a country is not possible. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe outlined how remote meetings with key stakeholders such as the Central Election Commission, candidates, political parties, domestic observers, civil society and the media can maintain a platform for dialogue.[40]

69. The Assembly has further identified methodological gaps within international election observation in relation to the effect of technological and hybrid threats to electoral processes. It has called for the modernisation of international election observation methodologies to mitigate these risks, and highlighted the need for collaboration among relevant institutions to establish a cohesive framework capable of countering foreign interference.[41]

70. The establishment by the Assembly of the Parliamentary Alliance for Free and Fair Elections provides a platform for addressing challenges to electoral integrity, and for upholding high standards in election observation to ensure transparent, fair, and inclusive democratic processes. It can foster further dialogue and co-operation on electoral issues in order to meet the electoral observation challenges outlined following Assembly election observation missions.[42]

71. In parallel, the Assembly's electoral co-operation activities reinforce the capacity of domestic observer organisations, enabling them to play a more active role in promoting transparency and credibility. Strengthening local observation is particularly valuable in contexts where international access is limited or impossible, as domestic actors are often best placed to provide continuous monitoring and insight. By supporting local expertise and fostering networks between international and domestic observers, the Assembly helps to build resilient systems of electoral accountability that can withstand the pressures of crisis.

5.6. Innovation and future preparedness

72. Crises are often a catalyst for innovation. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools for voter registration, communication and even for voting. Artificial intelligence is being used to monitor misinformation, manage logistics and enhance accessibility. Such innovations need to be accompanied by sufficient human rights protection to avoid new forms of bias, discrimination or surveillance.

73. The Council of Europe and its Venice Commission have issued guidance on the human rights implications of digital electoral technologies.[43] Safeguards such as transparency and human oversight are essential. At the same time, digital innovation can expand participation, streamline administration, and build resilience.

74. Preparedness for future crises must therefore include both physical and digital readiness. This involves investing in secure infrastructure. The numerous cyberattacks on online electoral infrastructure in recent years have shown the major strategic risks faced by Council of Europe member States to protect the legitimacy and fairness of elections and thus the integrity, legitimacy and confidence in the elected government The Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185, the "Budapest Convention") and its Protocols (ETS No.

38. Council of Europe, European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies, "Synopsis and Conclusions", 2021.
39. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Republic of Moldova, Presidential Election, "Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions", 1 November 2020.
40. Congress on Local and Regional Authorities, Report, "Local and regional elections in major crisis situations", CG-Forum(2020)01-05, 22 September 2020.
41. Doc 16096 Add.3, "Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2024: Summary report and recommendations", 23 January 2025.
42. Ibid.
43. Council of Europe, "Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in electoral processes in Council of Europe member States", CM(2022)10-final, 9 February 2022.

189 and CETS No. 224) are crucial instruments in this effort to secure electoral processes. The Second Additional Protocol to the Convention provides additional and expedited tools for enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence across borders and during emergency situations.[44]

75. The Council of Europe guidelines on the use of ICT in electoral processes and the Venice Commission's 2020 Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes provide further elements of the Organisation's electoral co-operation toolkit, alongside technical assistance projects to support safe digital voter registration and e-voting pilot reviews.[45]

6. Prolonged emergency situations

76. Some crises are not temporary disruptions, but prolonged states of emergency with profound implications for governance issues. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ukraine, where the full-scale war of aggression by the Russian Federation launched in February 2022 has placed extraordinary strain on State structures and the population.

77. Martial law, declared in Ukraine at the outset of the invasion, has suspended national elections, as permitted under the Ukrainian Constitution. The legal basis for this suspension is clear. Elections are prohibited during periods of martial law to preserve national security and prevent abuse.

78. Such provisions are not arbitrary political decisions, but constitutionally viable solutions aimed at ensuring stability in times of crisis and ensuring all branches of the State function until conditions allow for lawful elections.

79. International actors have provided support to Ukraine's electoral institutions through scenario planning, legal analysis and capacity building, but the fundamental dilemma remains of how to prepare credible elections as soon as conditions allow in a context of ongoing conflict where large parts of the population are displaced or under occupation and in the face of risks to the life, health and security of the population, as well as at a time where political debate and media interest are focused primarily on the war.

80. Any future electoral process in Ukraine will require careful sequencing. This may include defining minimum security thresholds, ensuring the participation of internally displaced persons and refugees (IDPs), and addressing the legal and logistical issues posed by territories under occupation. It will also be a matter of facilitating a public space in which the debate of ideas can unfold freely, between political parties, in the media and in society as a whole, beyond questions linked to the conflict itself and its consequences.

81. At the same time, post-conflict elections in Ukraine will need reinforced efforts to protect electoral processes from foreign interference. The heightened risks of large-scale disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, illicit financing of political proxies will require active responses in order to protect the integrity of democratic processes.

82. The Council of Europe, through its Action Plan for Ukraine "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction" for 2023-2026 provides electoral co-operation support for democratic post-war elections in Ukraine.[46] This work supports multilateral dialogue to reach consensus on the elaboration of the necessary legal framework on issues related to ensuring passive and active suffrage in a post-war period, and supporting the organisation and administration of post-war national and local elections in line with European electoral standards and good practices.[47] Support has included legal reviews of electoral legislation, operational guidance for out-of-country and IDP voting, and scenario-based planning for post-war electoral operations.[48]

83. Given the scale of the task, the Council of Europe's commitment must be complemented by that of member and observer States and the international community as a whole.

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44. Second Additional Protocol to the Cybercrime Convention on enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence (CETS No. 224).
45. CM(2022)10-final, "Committee of Ministers Guidelines on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in electoral processes in Council of Europe member States" op. cit, 9 February 2022; Venice Commission, Study, "Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes", 10 December 2020.
46. Committee of Ministers, "Action Plan for Ukraine 'Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction' 2023-2026", CM(2022)187-final, 14 December 2022.
47. Council of Europe, Electoral assistance, "Supporting democratic post-war elections in Ukraine".
48. Council of Europe, "Supporting democratic post-war elections in Ukraine – Phase II".

7. Conclusions and proposals

84. Recent crises have underlined the need to reflect on how our democracies are administered. The rules, norms, methods and procedures that govern the organisation and administration of elections need both to be protected and updated to provide the necessary resilience, agility and adaptability for EMBs to fulfil their mandates and ensure the populations confidence in the system and its integrity.

85. The institutionalisation of crisis-management processes can determine the effectiveness of EMBs and other State institutions in restoring the continuity of the electoral process when disrupted by emergency situations. A framework that combines best practices from risk management, resilience building, and crisis management could be explored to further strengthen a whole-of-society approach to the delivery of elections during or after emergencies. Equally, the modification of electoral legislation to provide for holding elections during emergencies as well as clear criteria for the postponement of elections is an avenue that should be explored to enhance legal and operational clarity.

86. The Russian Federation's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, and its hybrid threats across Council of Europe member States, have highlighted the urgency to update national security concepts and to upgrade election security, a question which has become a major strategic issue for all democratic States.

87. The war of aggression against Ukraine has equally shown a need to further develop standards and criteria for the preparation, conduct, observation and assessment of post-conflict elections. The Council of Europe should work with key stakeholders to provide relevant support to Ukraine when pre-conditions for holding elections are met.

88. In view of the importance of its election observation role, the Assembly has previously resolved to consider modalities, in co-ordination with its institutional partners, which would allow election observation missions to be carried out during emergency situations. The development of guidance and joint frameworks for how observation missions should approach emergency situations should be explored as a way of bridging the gaps that have been exposed during recent crises. The framework and methods of observation are likely to need to be re-evaluated in light of the risks and developments linked to the digitalisation of electoral campaigns and election management.

89. The Assembly can play an important role in safeguarding the functioning of democratic institutions by continuing to contribute to electoral integrity in Europe. This includes supporting efforts to bring greater clarity to electoral processes in times of crisis, reinforcing its own observation and co-operation activities, and fostering dialogue among parliamentarians on resilience and innovation throughout the electoral cycle. In this regard, the Assembly may consider conducting election observation missions in the future also in member States or partners that are not subject to monitoring or post-monitoring dialogue procedures, in order to contribute to the exchange of best practices and look particularly at the resilience of the electoral system throughout the continent. The Assembly may also contribute actively to the ongoing development of the New Democratic Pact for Europe, ensuring that the protection of electoral processes remains central to efforts to reinforce democratic foundations.