

Election observation: a reflection and safeguard of democracy in Europe

At a time when national, regional and local elections may be marred by irregularities or subject to manipulation, election observers play an irreplaceable role as “guardians of democracy” and defenders of human rights. Faced with new challenges, including political pressure and even physical threats, they are calling on Europe to clarify their role and responsibilities, as well as to provide better protection for what is becoming, at times, a dangerous activity.

Organised in Paris on 28 and 29 April by the Congress, the Parliamentary Assembly, and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, a conference on “the role of observers in ensuring trusted and inclusive electoral processes” confirmed what observer networks and European elected officials have already sensed for several years, against the backdrop of a worrying and multifaceted “democratic backsliding”. “Our mission is much more challenging than it was a few years ago,” agreed all elected officials involved in election observation. Yet their work remains a cornerstone of electoral credibility, especially since an election whose fairness has been demonstrated “strengthens citizens’ trust in democracy.” Conversely, as Congress President Gunn Marit Helgesen pointed out, the consequences of an election tainted by irregularities extend far beyond the electoral process itself.

An often vague legal framework, obstacles placed in the way observers’ activities, and the growing influence of “fake observers” acting on behalf of a political party or even a neighbouring state—there is no shortage of ways to attempt to “influence” an election or to distort its conduct, creating the illusion that everything proceeded properly when in fact it was manipulated. Added to these forms of political interference are now manipulation strategies relying on social media and artificial intelligence.

The Congress’s experience in tackling electoral fraud

Having carried out 135 observation missions since its creation, the Congress has acquired solid field experience enabling it to thwart certain traps and manipulation attempts. Like other institutional observers, notably those of the Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE/ODIHR, its observers do not limit themselves to urban centres; they are also deployed in suburban and rural areas, where irregularities are often most frequent. Stewart Dickson (United Kingdom, ILDG) has participated in 27 observation missions and now uses his experience to support his colleagues. He stresses that “observing is never about taking sides” and underlines the need to strengthen observer training, particularly in response to new threats weighing on the proper conduct of elections.

Observation of local and regional elections remains impossible in some countries

Alongside the intimidation tactics and unlawful acts identified during observation missions – which were widely discussed on the second day of the conference – is the issue of the often overly vague status of observers, particularly during local and regional elections. To date, only 15 member states of the Council of Europe have granted observers a precise and clearly defined status. Even more concerning, some countries still do not allow the observation of local and regional elections, a situation deplored by both observer NGOs and associations of elected

officials. Furthermore, as the President of the Congress's Chamber of Local Authorities, Konstantinos Koukas (Greece, EPP/CCE), noted with regret, "we can only intervene if we are invited... and we would gladly do so more often if we were asked to do so more frequently."

Finally, the critical situations observed in certain countries should not obscure a broader reality: even in long-established democracies, election observation helps uncover breaches of electoral rules that require correction.