

TOWARDS TRUSTED AND INCLUSIVE ELECTORAL PROCESSES: THE ROLE OF OBSERVERS

Speech by Gunn Marit HELGESEN, President of the Congress

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Ms President of the Parliamentary Assembly

Ms President of the Venice Commission

Distinguished Participants

It is a great honour to open this joint debate, co-organised in the context of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

I am a Norwegian politician, and throughout my career I have taken part in many kinds of elections- parliamentary, regional and local.

Over more than 30 years, I have experienced a wide range of political traditions and challenges. And through those experiences, I have learned a great deal.

Above all, I have come to understand how closely legal guarantees and safeguards for electoral integrity are tied to public trust.

Democracy does not begin in institutions, it begins with confidence. Confidence that elections are fair, that the rules are respected and that the results truly reflect the will of people.

For many years, the Congress has played a leading role in observing local and regional elections across the member States of the Council of Europe. Before being elected President of the Congress last month, I myself served as an active rapporteur and observer of such elections.

This work is not merely technical. It is deeply political in the noblest sense of the term: it is about safeguarding the voice of citizens expressed in towns, cities and regions- the very places where democracy is lived on a daily basis.

Local and regional elections are the closest level of governance to the people. They are, above all, where citizens expect accountability, responsiveness, and fairness.

When these elections are credible, they strengthen trust not only in local institutions but in democracy as a whole.

Where they are flawed, the consequences resonate far beyond the local level.

Through our election observation missions, we have seen both encouraging progress and worrying trends. In some countries, legal frameworks remain incomplete or ambiguous. Observers may lack clear status, rights or protection. Without these guarantees, their independence and effectiveness are at risk.

Allow me to illustrate this with an example. The Congress was recently invited to observe local elections in one of the Council of Europe member States until national authorities identified an important gap: the legislation did not provide for election observation at local level. This gap came as a surprise, to the authorities themselves, and is unfortunately not an isolated experience.

In other contexts, practical obstacles persist.

These include restrictions on accreditations, limited access to certain areas, and difficulties in observing new voting modalities, such as out of country voting or increasingly digitalised procedures.

The broader context in which elections take place is also evolving rapidly.

We are all aware of the pressures facing democratic systems today: shrinking civic space, increasing political polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and attempts at foreign interference. In some cases, elections are even organised in conflict or post conflict environments, where the risks for observers, and for voters, are significantly heightened.

These trends do not only challenge electoral processes, they challenge the very foundations of democratic trust.

In this context, election observation is not optional. It is a core democratic safeguard.

This means, first and foremost, that election observation must be allowed in all member States, without exception. But beyond being allowed, it must be genuinely facilitated. Observers must have full, timely, and unhindered access to all stages of the electoral process.

It also means that both international and domestic observation must become standard practice, conducted in line with shared principles and high-quality methodologies.

For the Congress, cooperation is key. Our work complements that of the Parliamentary Assembly and benefits greatly from the legal expertise of the Venice Commission.

Together we form a unique institutional triangle within the Council of Europe combining political legitimacy, field experience and normative guidance. I will not forget about colleagues from the OECD-ODIHR with whom we have a great history of cooperation and complementarity.

This joint debate, at a time when we are observing a democratic backsliding, is therefore particularly timely.

It gives us an opportunity to reflect on how we can strengthen the legal and operational framework for election observation across our member States. It invites us to consider whether we need clear and more coherent standards, possibly even moving towards a more unified international legal framework.

And it challenges us to improve coordination between institutions, observer organisations, and national authorities, so that observations missions are not only credible but also impactful.

Finally, we must ensure that the recommendations resulting from observation missions are taken seriously and implemented.

Observation does not end with a report, it must lead to tangible improvements and that is why we should perhaps develop even more our post electoral activities.

Dear participants,

At its core, election observation is about confidence, confidence that every voice counts, that every process is fair, and that democratic institutions deserve the trust placed in them.

In times of uncertainty and rapid change, this confidence cannot be taken for granted. It must be actively protected and continuously reinforced.

It is our shared responsibility to ensure that elections observers are granted access in all 46 member States, in every polling station, and for every election. This access must be guaranteed not only in law but also in practice.

It is also the responsibility of all member States to ensure that the Congress is systematically invited to observe local and regional

elections. It is then our responsibility at the Congress to provide appropriate follow-up to the findings and conclusions of international election observation missions.

I hope that at the conclusion of this joint debate, we will agree on the best way to make full use of the wide range of soft law instruments and tools developed within the Council of Europe.

These should serve as practical resources for all of you, the practitioners of election administration, so that you may draw on them to find answers to your questions, and continue improving where needed, and ensure that observers remain true guardians of electoral processes.

I am confident that today and tomorrow's discussion will offer valuable insights and practical solutions to help us meet this challenge, together. I also believe that the New Democratic Pact for Europe is a welcomed initiative to boost and strengthen the role of observers and to develop new responses ensuring that election observation remains a watchdog protecting democracy at all levels of governance in all member States.

Thank you for your attention.