

Observing elections: better tackling fraud, pressure and threats

Improving cooperation between national and international observers, taking into account the votes of citizens living abroad and, above all, countering “fake observers” and exposing fraud, whilst protecting reliable and official observers – the expectations of election observation organisers are many, and have largely shaped the Paris Call. At the end of their European conference, the Call urges the Council of Europe to establish a specific instrument to guarantee, protect and promote election observation.

The Paris Call is based on experience gained during observation missions carried out in many countries, often under difficult conditions that “received little attention until a few years ago”. Today, certain large-scale manipulations, particularly those orchestrated by Russia, were denounced throughout the conference. Corruption of local, national or European elected officials, intimidation of voters, and the recruitment of numerous “fake observers”: according to Stefanie Schiller, president of the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), Russian actions during elections in Europe and elsewhere around the world have reached a deeply alarming level. Furthermore, Holly Ruthrauff, speaking on behalf of the EODS, the European Union’s election observation body, pointed out that observers are regularly imprisoned.

“Observers are human rights defenders”

The conference highlighted the need for better coordination among the various observation organisations. Too many observers can disrupt the smooth running of an election, as it is difficult to admit dozens of different observers into the same polling station at the same time. These organisations then publish conclusions and final statements, which are sometimes contradictory. Most observers, however, believe that a single joint statement is not the solution, and that having several conclusions is healthy – provided they do not contradict one another too much.

The conference’s general rapporteur, Rasto Kuzel, returned to some key principles of observation: firstly, guaranteeing and protecting observers’ activities and their access to polling stations, emphasising that this activity is an integral part of the electoral process. It is also important to strengthen the complementarity between international and national observers. Observation does not begin the day before the election but is prepared months in advance, and must then be part of genuine, long-term follow-up. Beyond these measures, it is essential to constantly recall that observers “are human rights defenders”, as Stewart Dickson concluded, and to guarantee them the resources and protections necessary to carry out their mission.