

Towards Trusted and Inclusive Electoral Processes: The Role of Observers

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Opening statement by Ms Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Madam Helgesen

Dear President of the Venice Commission, Madam Cartabia,

Dear Lord Blencathra,

Dear colleagues, dear friends!

Let us go back to 1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall. Then the collapse of the Soviet Union. The political map of Europe was redrawn almost overnight.

Countries across Central and Eastern Europe embarked on democratic transitions. The Council of Europe stepped forward as the continent's **school of democracy** — guiding new member States toward democratic standards, supporting reforms, and building institutions. Between 1990 and 2009, our membership nearly doubled, from 23 to 47 member States.

As part of those accession commitments, countries agreed not only to democratic standards; but to the monitoring of their elections. And so, **PACE election observation missions were born**. They became, and remain, a flagship activity of this Assembly.

For more than three decades, the Assembly together with the Venice Commission and the Congress has not only monitored elections. We have helped shape electoral legislation, guided democratic reforms, and strengthened public trust in democratic institutions.

This is not a marginal activity. It is central to our mandate. Because when elections are credible, democracy is credible.

I say this not only as President of this Assembly, but as someone who has observed elections firsthand in many countries, under very different conditions.

As chair of a recent observation mission in **Moldova**, I witnessed how a country can fight for the integrity of its own democratic process against extraordinary pressure including relentless foreign interference and disinformation campaigns targeting voters. And yet Moldova election authorities developed innovative tools to detect and counter that interference.

In **Serbia**, we faced persistent challenges, including a prevailing “culture of early elections”, recurrent irregularities, biased media coverage, and serious concerns about pressure on both international and domestic election observers.

In **Georgia**, I observed a country deeply polarised, where the electoral environment was shaped by unequal access to resources and concerns about the independence of the judiciary.

In **North Macedonia**, we observed a country navigating electoral reform in the midst of a broader political transformation where the credibility of the vote was inseparable from its path toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

In **Kosovo**, I saw the fragility and the resilience of a young democracy holding elections in a contested political environment, with deep divisions, under the watchful eye of the international community. Observation there is not a formality. It is a lifeline for legitimacy.

And in **Kazakhstan**, in a very different regional context, our mission worked to assess progress against international standards in a country where the space for genuine political competition remains sharply constrained.

Each mission was different. Each taught me something. But across all of them, one truth was constant:

Observers matter. Their presence changes behaviour. Their reports drive reform. And their work depends entirely on being given the access, the protection, and the legal guarantees to do their job.

Today, the context is changing and not always for the better.

Crises do not suspend democratic obligations. Even in emergencies, pandemic, natural disaster or war – electoral principles must be upheld: universal, equal, free, secret, and direct suffrage.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed how easily health arguments can be used to restrict observers or limit their access. The earthquakes in Türkiye struck just three months before the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections displacing millions of voters. And Ukraine: when the first post-war elections eventually take place, they will require security guarantees, registration of displaced persons, protection against foreign interference, and, yes, credible international observation.

Then there is the **digital dimension**. Artificial intelligence, deepfakes, disinformation, cyber tools: these are now part of the electoral environment. New voting methods, including e-voting, create both opportunity and new risks.

This means observers can no longer limit their work to E-day observation in polling stations. They must assess online and offline campaigns, the use of digital tools, the security of electoral technology, and the impact of disinformation on voters ability to make a genuinely free choice.

In this context, **it is no longer sufficient for election observation to be merely allowed. It must be effectively facilitated.** And yet, recent observation reports document real obstacles: restricted access, accreditation barriers, limited reach in politically sensitive areas.

In response to these challenges, the Parliamentary Assembly established the **Parliamentary Alliance for Free and Fair Elections** as a unique network of PACE election observers, created in 2024 and formally named in 2025.

I am delighted to welcome its Chairperson, **Lord Blencathra**, who is with us today.

The Alliance is not just about empowering individual observers. It is about building collective capacity: fostering exchange, promoting Council of Europe standards, and formally representing PACE in external forums.

Let me give one concrete example. The Alliance developed a methodology for observing **out-of-country voting**, an approach that will be hopefully tested during the 2026 parliamentary elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina this autumn. And as regards digital and generative-AI risks, we are currently considering creating a digital and AI threats group of experts to brief and advise our observer delegations, scan for coordinated inauthentic behaviour and provide information on the digital environment for our election observation missions, similar to the legal assistance by the Venice Commission. These are exactly the kind of forward-looking, adaptive work this Assembly must champion.

This joint debate with the Venice Commission and the Congress comes at exactly the right moment and within exactly the right framework: the **New Democratic Pact for Europe**.

We need to ask hard questions. Are current soft-law instruments sufficient? Can they be consolidated or strengthened? Is it time to move toward a **coherent, binding international legal framework** on election observation, one that guarantees the status, rights, and protection of observers across all 46 member States?

The future of elections will not be simpler. It will be more complex, more digital, more exposed to interference and crisis. Our response must be equally ambitious.

If elections are the foundation of democracy, then election observers are among its guardians.

After my years of observation work from Chisinau to Tbilisi, from Pristina to Nur-Sultan, I know this not as an abstraction but as a lived reality.

It is our responsibility, in this room to ensure that observers are given the **status, the protection, and the means** they need to fulfil that role.

Let this debate be a step toward exactly that.

Thank you.