Towards trusted and inclusive electoral processes: the role of observers



The Paris Call to Action on election observation

Paris, 28-29 April 2026

Parliamentary Assembly
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The Paris Call to Action

The participants in the high-level event "Towards trusted and inclusive electoral processes: the role of observers", co-organised by the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe in Paris on 28-29 April 2026 within the framework of the New Democratic Pact for Europe, call on the Council of Europe's member States to:

- Recognise that electoral observation, both domestic and international, plays an important role in enhancing the transparency and integrity of electoral processes, thereby reinforcing public trust in democracy, and that election observers act both as watchdogs of democratic processes and human rights defenders;
- Provide a strong legislative framework for domestic observation with a view to facilitating the work of the observers and ensuring their free movement and unhindered access to polling stations, as well as observers' security;
- Systematically invite international election observation missions and facilitate their work by providing a framework that ensures access and security for international observers;
- Ensure meaningful and timely follow-up to the findings and conclusions of international election observation missions;
- Support the adoption of a specific Council of Europe instrument to guarantee, protect and promote electoral observation.

Executive summary[1]

1. Democratic elections are the foundation of representative democracy, but the environment in which they take place has become increasingly complex and contested. The Paris joint debate "Towards Trusted and Inclusive Electoral Processes: The Role of Observers", held on 28-29 April 2026, confirmed that election observation remains one of the Council of Europe's key tools for protecting electoral integrity, public trust and democratic accountability. Its central message was that observation remains indispensable, but must evolve to remain credible and effective amid democratic backsliding, polarisation, shrinking civic space, foreign interference, disinformation, cyber threats, artificial intelligence, new voting technologies and conflict-related insecurity.

2. Observation can no longer be mistaken for a technical exercise limited to election day. It must cover the full electoral cycle and the wider democratic environment in which voters make their choices, including media freedom, the campaign environment, political finance, misuse of state resources, digital platforms, civic space, judicial independence, fundamental freedoms and respect for election results. Observers are watchdogs of democratic processes and, increasingly, human rights defenders. They must be able to operate independently, access information, move freely, report irregularities, publish findings and, where appropriate, seek effective remedies. Domestic observers and civil society organisations are essential partners in this work: they bring contextual knowledge, long-term presence and the ability to follow up on recommendations between electoral cycles.

3. Legal guarantees and protection of observers need to be strengthened together. Legal frameworks remain uneven across Europe. In some member States, observers enjoy clear recognition and meaningful access; in others, observation remains unclear, restricted, insufficiently regulated or limited to election day. Even where observation is formally permitted, accreditation and access may still be applied inconsistently or restrictively. Pressure on observers, especially domestic observers, may also take the form of legal harassment, administrative burdens, financial restrictions, smear campaigns, surveillance,

1. This report was prepared with the contribution of Rast'o Kužel, Rapporteur of the joint debate.

delayed or denied accreditation, arbitrary prosecution and restrictive legislation on civil society or foreign funding.

4. Observation methodology must adapt to new political, digital and security realities. Digital campaigning, disinformation, foreign interference, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, political finance, platform accountability, new voting technologies and out-of-country voting increasingly shape voters' choices and public confidence in electoral processes. Observation missions will therefore require interdisciplinary expertise, including media and social media monitoring, digital analysis, cybersecurity knowledge, open-source intelligence, campaign finance expertise and strategic communication. Observation in conflict, post-conflict and post-war settings, including future elections in Ukraine, will require tailored approaches.

5. The credibility and impact of observation depend on stronger co-operation, protection against fake observation and sustained follow-up. International missions, domestic observers, electoral management bodies, parliaments, civil society and Council of Europe institutions all have complementary roles to play, while preserving their independence and distinct mandates. Fake or politically instrumentalised observation is a growing threat, as it may legitimise flawed elections, discredit genuine observers and promote narratives hostile to democratic standards. Responses should be based on transparency, professional standards, public communication and clear methodology, rather than broad discretionary restrictions that could be misused against legitimate observers.

6. Follow-up remains the key test of impact. Observation missions often produce strong recommendations, but implementation remains weak. Recommendations should therefore be prioritised strategically, linked to clear responsibilities and timelines, and followed through between electoral cycles, with domestic observers and civil society organisations playing an indispensable role.

7. The Paris Call to Action provides the framework for taking this work forward; the challenge now is to translate its commitments into concrete Council of Europe follow-up, notably by taking forward a specific Council of Europe instrument on election observation.



Summary report and conclusions of the joint debate

1. Introduction

1. Democratic elections are the foundation of representative democracy. They enable citizens to express their political will, hold elected representatives accountable and give legitimacy to public institutions. However, the environment in which elections are held has become increasingly complex. Across Europe and beyond, electoral processes have been affected by democratic backsliding, political polarisation, shrinking civic space, foreign interference, disinformation, cyber threats, new voting technologies and, in some cases, armed conflicts or post-conflict insecurity.

2. These developments make independent, professional and credible observation more necessary than ever. Election observation strengthens transparency, accountability and public confidence. It also helps to identify shortcomings in electoral processes and provides recommendations for reform.

3. The high-level joint debate "Towards Trusted and Inclusive Electoral Processes: The Role of Observers" was held in Paris on 28-29 April 2026. It was co-organised by the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, within the framework of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

4. The event brought together representatives of Council of Europe institutions, electoral management bodies, parliamentarians, domestic and international observer organisations, civil society and election experts. Discussions focused on the role, rights, protection and credibility of election observers in a rapidly changing electoral environment.

5. The joint debate was built on earlier Council of Europe work in the electoral field, including the Bern Conference on "Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities"[2], which highlighted the need to strengthen the Council of Europe's standard-setting, legal expertise, monitoring, election observation and technical co-operation. It also drew on related work, notably the Venice Commission's report recognising election observers as human rights defenders[3], the Parliamentary Assembly motion on the need to protect election observers[4] and the Congress report on "Free elections at local and regional levels: A fundamental right to strengthen grassroots democracy,"[5] which called for guaranteeing the right to domestic and international election observation. Together, these developments underscored the need for election observation to adapt to emergencies, online campaigning, new technologies, and post-conflict settings, while ensuring stronger guarantees for the status, rights, and protection of observers.

6. The opening discussions reaffirmed that election observation is not a marginal or purely technical exercise, but a central element of democratic accountability. Observers act as watchdogs of democratic processes and, increasingly, as human rights defenders. Their work helps protect the right to vote, the right to stand for election, the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, and the right of citizens to participate in public affairs.

7. Across the four sessions, several recurring issues were identified: legal guarantees for observation are uneven or insufficiently implemented; observers are operating in increasingly difficult environments; methodologies are under strain, particularly in digital spaces; co-operation among actors remains fragmented; and follow-up to observation recommendations is often insufficient. Together, these challenges show that election observation must remain credible, effective and trusted in an increasingly complex and contested environment.

2. Parliamentary Assembly (2023), Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities - Summary report and conclusions of the Bern Conference (9-10 May 2023), Progress report Doc. 15791 Add. 1.
3. Venice Commission (2024) Report on electoral observers as human rights defenders.
4. Parliamentary Assembly (2025), Need to protect election observers, Motion for a recommendation | Doc. 16241.
5. Monitoring Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2026), "Free Elections at local and regional levels: A fundamental right to strengthen grassroots democracy", Report CG(2026)50-12.



8. The joint debate culminated in the adoption of the Paris Call to Action[6], which called on Council of Europe member States to recognise the role of domestic and international observation in reinforcing transparency, integrity and public trust; to provide strong legislative frameworks for domestic observation; to systematically invite international observation missions; to ensure meaningful follow-up to observation findings; and to support the adoption of a specific Council of Europe instrument to guarantee, protect and promote electoral observation.

2. Opening statements

9. The opening statements by Petra Bayr, President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Gunn Marit Helgesen, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and Marta Cartabia, President of the Venice Commission, framed election observation as a central element of democratic trust and accountability. As Petra Bayr underlined, if elections are trusted and well observed, then democracy is trusted. Gunn Marit Helgesen stressed that free and fair elections are the foundation of democracy and that citizens must see that every voice counts. Marta Cartabia stated that strengthening the role of election observers deters misbehaviour, misconduct, fraud, violations and even violence. It encourages the participation of citizens.

10. The three Presidents highlighted the complementary roles of the Council of Europe institutions involved in the joint debate. The Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress bring political legitimacy and long-standing experience in election observation at all levels of governance; and the Venice Commission

6. Paris Call to Action, Towards Trusted and Inclusive Electoral Processes: The Role of Observers (Paris, 28-29 April).

provides legal expertise to member states, as well as standards, most notably through the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters. Together, these institutions form a distinctive Council of Europe framework for supporting electoral integrity.

11. The opening statements placed election observation in the context of a more demanding electoral environment. Democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, foreign interference, disinformation, cyber threats, artificial intelligence, new voting methods and out-of-country voting all require observation to adapt. It was stressed that observers can no longer limit their work to election day in polling stations, but should also assess the wider electoral environment, including online and offline campaigns, media conditions, digital tools and the impact of disinformation on voters' ability to make a free choice.

12. Access, protection and legal guarantees were identified as essential conditions for credible observation. The Presidents underlined that election observation must be permitted and genuinely facilitated in all member States, with full, timely, and unhindered access at all stages of the electoral process. They also stressed that observers are not only technical actors but also watchdogs of electoral integrity and human rights defenders, whose status, rights, and protection must be clearly guaranteed.

13. Finally, the opening statements anticipated the practical focus of the joint debate and the later Paris Call to Action. They called for concrete responses to new challenges, including stronger legal frameworks, better co-operation among institutions and observer organisations, improved follow-up to recommendations and reflection on whether existing soft-law instruments should be consolidated or strengthened through a specific Council of Europe instrument on election observation.

3. Legal Frameworks for Domestic and International Election Observation: Guarantees, Gaps and Good Practices

14. The first session examined the legal frameworks governing domestic and international election observation, with a focus on access, accreditation, legal status, protection, gaps in national legislation and good practices.

15. Recent election observation practice has highlighted increasing challenges for both domestic and international observers. Domestic observers, in particular, face mounting pressure, smear campaigns, legal and administrative obstacles and, in some cases, arrest or prosecution. International observers have also encountered growing difficulties, including accreditation problems,



restricted access and targeted attacks. These developments confirm that legal frameworks and practical guarantees for observation remain uneven across the continent.

16. The state of citizen election observation across Europe reveals an uneven picture. In some member States, observers enjoy clear legal recognition and meaningful access to the electoral process. In others, their role remains unclear, restricted or insufficiently regulated, particularly at the local and regional level. A European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) study[7] found that only 15 EU member states allow citizens to observe election day, and only 9 have formalised citizen election observation status in law. In many countries, observation is unregulated, limited to party representatives, or restricted to election day. Observers in some Council of Europe member States face administrative obstruction, legal pressure, and even criminal prosecution. Established democracies in Western Europe were also noted for having ambiguous or restrictive frameworks, with passive tolerance not equating to legal protection. The session showed that even where observation is formally permitted, misunderstandings at polling stations, inconsistent interpretation of rules or burdensome accreditation procedures may undermine effective observation.

17. It was stressed that observation should cover the entire electoral process, not only election day, since limiting observation to polling day or to selected polling stations significantly restricts observers' ability to assess the integrity of the process. This includes the legal framework, voter and candidate registration, campaign conditions, media coverage, political finance, online campaigning, voting, counting, tabulation, complaints and appeals, and the finalisation of results.

7. European Platform for Democratic Elections (2023), Active citizens for a vibrant democracy.

18. Accreditation can help ensure clarity, professionalism and accountability, but may also be misused to exclude critical or independent observers. While no single model was agreed upon, there was broad consensus that accreditation procedures should be transparent, non-discriminatory, timely, based on law, and subject to an effective remedy in the event of refusal. They should limit excessive discretion by public authorities, while also addressing the risk of misuse by biased, unqualified, or politically instrumentalised groups.

19. Particular concern was expressed about restrictive legislation affecting civil society organisations, including laws on foreign funding, "foreign agent" legislation, financial inspections, frozen accounts or other measures that may indirectly prevent domestic observer organisations from operating.

20. The question of whether observers have standing to challenge electoral violations and restrictions on observation before competent bodies or courts was also raised. While international observers typically observe and report, participants noted that domestic observers, as citizens and civil society actors, should have access to effective legal remedies.

21. The discussion also noted that recognising election observers as human rights defenders has practical implications. It requires that domestic and international observers be able to seek, receive, and use information; operate freely and independently; report on irregularities; publish their findings; and, where appropriate, have access to effective remedies. This recognition should strengthen, not replace, the specific standards of impartiality, professionalism and non-interference that apply to election observation.

22. The session further underlined the importance of legal stability. Fundamental rules governing observation, including who may observe and what access observers enjoy, should not be changed shortly before elections. Late amendments may undermine legal certainty and the level playing field.

23. Participants also discussed the growing phenomenon of so-called "fake" or politically instrumentalised observers, who may be used to create confusion, dilute the work of genuine observers or legitimise elections that fall short of democratic standards. At the same time, measures to prevent fake observation must not become tools for restricting legitimate domestic or international observers. The response should therefore be grounded in transparency, methodology, professional standards and public communication, rather than broad discretionary restrictions.



4. Security and Operational Challenges in Election Observation

24. The second session addressed security and operational challenges in election observation. It examined the safety of observers, access to remote or sensitive areas, observation in conflict and post-conflict settings, out-of-country voting, foreign interference, digital threats and data protection.

25. The session opened with a reminder that security challenges are real and immediate. Domestic election observers in several Council of Europe member States have faced imprisonment, prosecution and other forms of repression because of their work.

26. Participants underlined that election observation is increasingly affected by high-risk environments, including occupied territories, areas affected by armed conflict, post-conflict settings, regions under the influence of organised crime, politically sensitive areas, or contexts where authorities invoke security concerns to restrict access. Such environments do not alter the basic principles of observation, but they make their implementation more difficult: observation must remain independent, impartial, systematic and credible, while avoiding unnecessary risks to observers.

27. A central dilemma concerned the balance between access and security. If observers are unable to access significant parts of the territory or key stages of the process, the credibility and completeness of their assessment may be affected. At the same time, observation missions cannot disregard genuine security risks.

28. Participants discussed the methodological implications of security measures such as armed escorts, armoured vehicles, restricted movement or curfews. Such measures may be necessary in certain contexts, but they can affect the civilian

character of election observation and observers' perception among voters and electoral stakeholders. Security restrictions should therefore be assessed carefully to determine whether they are necessary, proportionate and genuinely related to safety, or whether they are being used to limit observation.

29. The situation of Ukraine was discussed as one of the most complex future challenges for election observation in Europe. Post-war elections will require careful consideration of security guarantees, the reconstruction of polling infrastructure, voter registration, the participation of internally and externally displaced voters, the situation in occupied territories, cybersecurity, foreign interference, the protection of sensitive information, and the safety of voters, candidates, election officials, and observers.

30. Different positions were expressed regarding observation in risk zones. One view stressed that if voters are expected to vote in difficult or dangerous conditions, observers should also be prepared to accept a degree of risk. Another view emphasised that election observation remains a civilian activity and must not become militarised.

31. The session concluded that post-war or high-risk elections will require tailored planning, risk assessments, evacuation protocols, secure communications, training, flexible deployment models and close co-operation with relevant authorities, while preserving the independence and impartiality of observation.

32. Out-of-country voting emerged as a methodological challenge, particularly in countries affected by migration, displacement or war, where voters abroad may represent a substantial share of the electorate. Participants noted that existing international observation methodologies do not yet provide sufficiently developed standards for this area. While many key decisions on out-of-country voting are made in the home country and may be assessed there, the discussion underlined that the issue now extends beyond polling abroad to campaigning, online political advertising, diaspora mobilisation, foreign funding, platform dynamics and disinformation targeting citizens outside the country.

33. Digital threats were another major focus. Observation missions themselves are increasingly targeted by disinformation campaigns, hacking attempts, manipulated narratives and external communication attacks. Such attacks may seek to undermine the credibility of observation findings before, during or after election day. Participants therefore stressed the need for missions to prepare proactively through risk assessment, strategic communication, "prebunking", clear public explanation of their mandate and methodology, and rapid responses to false claims.



34. The session also addressed foreign interference, cyber operations and technical manipulation. Digitalisation offers opportunities for electoral administration and observation, but it also creates vulnerabilities that must be understood and assessed. The session concluded that security, access, methodology and credibility are now closely interconnected, requiring stronger risk management, more flexible deployment models, clearer security protocols, enhanced digital preparedness and closer co-operation with domestic actors.

5. Fostering Co-operation for Enhanced Electoral Integrity and Public Trust

35. The third session focused on co-operation among observers and its importance for electoral integrity and public trust, underscoring that a credible election assessment depends on co-operation among international organisations, domestic observer groups, electoral management bodies, civil society, and other relevant actors. No single actor can assess all dimensions of increasingly complex electoral processes alone.

36. International observation missions often bring comparative expertise, recognised standards and political visibility. Domestic observers bring contextual knowledge, long-term presence and the ability to follow up on recommendations between elections. These roles are complementary and should be mutually reinforcing.

37. Participants stressed that domestic observers should not be treated merely as sources of information for international missions but as partners, while respecting the independence, mandate and methodology of each actor.

38. The session also acknowledged that co-operation among international observers is not always smooth. Institutions may differ in composition, mandate, perspective, methodology and political sensitivity, which can sometimes lead to inconsistent or contradictory messages.

39. Contradictory statements by credible observation actors can undermine public trust and be exploited by political stakeholders. The need for coordinated communication, methodological complementarity and clear procedures for addressing differences was therefore emphasised.

40. Co-operation should not mean uniformity. Different organisations may have different mandates and should preserve their independence. However, when observing the same election, their findings should be grounded in common standards, evidence-based assessment and professional methodology.

41. The discussion also raised questions about the integrity of international observation missions themselves. Participants noted that decisions on mission composition should be handled transparently and in line with clear standards, particularly where the participation of individual members may raise concerns among national stakeholders about impartiality, independence or political proximity. Such concerns, even when contested, can affect confidence in a mission, discourage engagement by local actors and weaken the credibility of its findings.

42. Fake election observation was identified as a serious and growing threat. It may be used to legitimise flawed elections, discredit genuine observers, create confusion among the public and promote alternative narratives hostile to democratic standards. Participants warned that such practices are evolving into more organised and transnational forms, including alternative networks that seek to challenge democratic standards and promote concepts of sovereignty detached from human rights obligations.

43. The session also stressed the importance of sustainable funding. Domestic observer organisations often lack predictable resources, even though they are expected to conduct increasingly complex monitoring, including online analysis, campaign finance tracking and long-term follow-up. Participants warned that when such support is missing, even strong and experienced organisations may weaken, become inactive or disappear, with immediate consequences for the quality of electoral oversight. Without strong domestic observation, there can be no sustainable electoral integrity.

44. Political finance was identified as an important methodological gap. It is difficult to observe but central to electoral integrity, especially regarding foreign influence, misuse of state resources, and opaque campaign support.

45. Public communication was another key issue. Observation reports often receive limited attention, or their findings are distorted in polarised media environments. Observers should therefore communicate more clearly, proactively and strategically. Such communication should explain who the observers are, what standards they apply, what methodology they use, what they can and cannot assess, and how they reach their conclusions.

46. The session concluded that co-operation is essential to public trust. Fragmentation among credible observation actors creates openings for manipulation by fake observers and hostile actors. Stronger partnerships, structured co-operation protocols, sustainable funding, methodological exchange and strategic communication are therefore needed to protect the credibility and impact of election observation.

6. The Way Forward: Priorities for Action

47. The fourth session focused on concrete priorities for action. It sought to move from diagnosis to implementation and to identify a limited number of realistic and actionable priorities. It reaffirmed that election observation is not an administrative formality, but a cornerstone of electoral integrity and an essential safeguard of public confidence in democratic institutions.

48. Participants stressed that the key question is not whether elections should be observed, but how to ensure that observation continues to enhance the credibility and trust of the electoral processes. Four main areas for action were identified: legal guarantees, protection of observers, systematic co-operation, and credibility and professionalisation, with follow-up to recommendations as a cross-cutting priority.

49. On legal guarantees, participants emphasised the need to move from general principles to enforceable rights. Observation should be clearly provided for in law, with effective accreditation, meaningful access, freedom of movement and remedies against arbitrary restrictions.

50. On protection, participants stressed that pressure on observers is no longer limited to physical threats. It may include legal harassment, administrative burdens, financial restrictions, reputational attacks, smear campaigns, surveillance, delayed accreditation and arbitrary prosecutions. Such pressure may affect not only individual observers, but also the operational capacity of observer organisations, including their ability to recruit, train, deploy and communicate findings independently.



51. Protection mechanisms should therefore be practical, comprehensive and capable of timely response. They should address the broader ecosystem of intimidation affecting both individual observers and observer organisations, including measures that undermine their ability to operate independently and effectively. Participants also called for more structured co-operation between international missions, domestic observers and electoral management bodies, supported by clearer frameworks rather than goodwill or personal contacts alone. They further stressed that observation must adapt to new electoral realities, including online campaigning, disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference, AI-generated content, cybersecurity, campaign finance, platform accountability and new voting technologies.

52. Observation missions will increasingly require interdisciplinary expertise. Legal and political analysis remain essential, but they must be complemented by media and social media monitoring, digital analysis, cybersecurity knowledge, Open Source Intelligence capacity, campaign finance expertise and strategic communication.

53. Participants acknowledged that elections are not only about voting and counting, but are shaped by the broader democratic environment, including media freedom, misuse of state resources, pressure on opposition actors, judicial independence, civic space, respect for fundamental freedoms and respect for election results. Elections may be competitive and well administered on election day, but still fail to provide genuinely equal conditions if this wider environment is distorted.

54. The session also underlined that credible observation requires confidence in observation structures themselves, including the professional conduct and democratic commitment of mission members. Positive practices were also

noted, including accessible polling arrangements for persons with disabilities, improved voter identification procedures and professional local election management, showing the value of learning from good practice as well as identifying shortcomings.

55. Training and public education were identified as essential. Election officials should understand the rights and role of observers. Observers should be properly trained in methodology and professional conduct. Citizens should understand why observation matters and how it contributes to trust.

56. Follow-up emerged as one of the most important issues. Observation missions often produce strong and clear recommendations, but implementation remains weak. The problem is usually not the absence of expertise, but the absence of political will and sustained pressure. Participants therefore suggested that recommendations should be prioritised more strategically, with institutions identifying the most urgent and politically significant issues and concentrating reform efforts around them. Follow-up was therefore presented not as an administrative afterthought, but as a core test of whether observation contributes to democratic reform.

57. Domestic observers and civil society organisations are key actors in follow-up. They remain active after international missions leave and can advocate for reform between electoral cycles. Supporting them is therefore essential to ensuring implementation.

7. Conclusions

58. The conference confirmed that election observation remains essential for protecting electoral integrity and strengthening public trust, but is also under increasing pressure. Legal guarantees remain uneven, incomplete, or poorly implemented; observers face restrictions on access, political pressure, security risks, and legal uncertainty; and domestic observers are particularly exposed to intimidation, harassment, and administrative or financial pressure.

59. Observation methodologies are also under strain as campaigns increasingly unfold online and are affected by disinformation, foreign interference, AI-generated content, cyber threats and opaque campaign finance. Observation should adapt accordingly.

60. Co-operation remains overly dependent on goodwill rather than structured frameworks, which weakens credibility, creates inconsistency, and leaves room for manipulation.



61. The discussions also showed that no single model is applicable to all contexts. Stable democracies, polarised societies, authoritarian environments, conflict settings and post-war situations each pose distinct challenges and require tailored responses. Participants also expressed differing views on the acceptable level of risk for observers in dangerous areas, the best way to regulate accreditation without empowering restrictive governments, the feasibility of observing voting outside the country, and the balance between security measures and the civilian character of observation.

62. Nevertheless, a broad consensus emerged that election observation is a core democratic safeguard. It should be guaranteed in law, facilitated in practice, involve domestic and international actors, cover the electoral cycle, adapt to digital realities, communicate more effectively and lead to meaningful reform.

63. The Paris Call to Action reflects this consensus and provides the political framework to advance these priorities.

64. The final session confirmed that the Paris Call to Action should not remain a declaratory text. It should be taken forward within relevant Council of Europe structures, including the Council for Democratic Elections, and inform future standard-setting, implementation support and political engagement. Through its legal expertise, monitoring mechanisms, parliamentary, local and regional dimensions, and co-operation activities, the Council of Europe is well placed to help translate the conclusions of the Paris joint debate into concrete action.

65. Trust is at the heart of both elections and democracy. It cannot simply be legislated; it must be built, protected and continuously reinforced. Election observation is one of the most important tools for doing so, but it must continue to evolve with the environment in which it operates.



8. Recommendations

66. The recommendations below seek to translate the main findings of the Paris joint debate and the Paris Call to Action into practical follow-up steps for member States, Council of Europe bodies, electoral management bodies and observers. They reflect both the need to strengthen existing guarantees and the need to assess whether further Council of Europe guidance or normative development is required.

A. Recommendations to Council of Europe member States

Council of Europe member States should:

- ensure that domestic and international election observation is clearly recognised and effectively facilitated in national legislation;
- define in law the status, rights and responsibilities of observers, including their effective access to all relevant stages of the electoral process and to legal remedies, in particular to challenge unlawful restrictions on observation;
- provide transparent, timely and non-discriminatory accreditation procedures, with effective remedies in cases of refusal, restriction or obstruction;
- guarantee observers' full, timely and unhindered access to the electoral process, including voter and candidate registration, campaign conditions, media and online campaigning, political finance, voting, counting, tabulation, complaints and appeals, and the finalisation of results;

- systematically invite international observation missions, including for local and regional elections, and ensure that observation is not merely formally permitted but genuinely facilitated in practice;
- ensure the implementation of recommendations made by international observation missions;
- strengthen the protection of observers, in line with the recognition of election observers as human rights defenders;
- address not only physical threats against observers, but also legal harassment, administrative pressure, financial restrictions, smear campaigns, surveillance, intimidation and unjustified legal proceedings affecting observers and observer organisations;
- refrain from using foreign funding rules, registration requirements, inspections, financial controls or other administrative mechanisms in a manner that unduly restricts or disables the legitimate work of domestic observer organisations;
- support credible domestic observer organisations and civil society as key actors in sustaining electoral reform between electoral cycles, including through dialogue with electoral management bodies, parliaments and relevant Council of Europe structures;

B. Recommendations to Council of Europe bodies and institutions

Council of Europe bodies and institutions should:

- continue to develop existing standards, opinions, recommendations and guidance relating to election observation and observers' rights and identify areas where further guidance, standard consolidation or normative development may be needed;
- ensure that existing standards are sufficiently known, consistently applied and effectively followed up in national practice;
- consider the added value, scope and feasibility of a specific Council of Europe instrument on election observation;
- ensure that any such instrument builds on the existing Council of Europe acquis, as well as on experience and new practical needs;
- invite the Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM) and the Council for Democratic Elections, to examine whether the Parameters for the application and implementation of the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy could be complemented by an explicit reference to the protection of election observers, including their legal status, accreditation,

access, safety, independence, freedom from intimidation and reprisals, access to information, ability to publish findings and access to effective remedies;

- support the development of more detailed guidance on observing out-of-country voting, covering not only voting abroad but also campaigning, online political advertising, diaspora mobilisation, foreign funding, platform dynamics and disinformation targeting voters outside the country;
- develop guidance and practical tools for election observation in conflict, post-conflict and post-war settings, including on security, displaced voters, damaged electoral infrastructure, occupied territories, cybersecurity, foreign interference and the protection of voters, candidates, election officials and observers;
- use the Paris Call to Action as a basis for continued political engagement, standard-setting, technical co-operation and dialogue with member States;
- invite relevant structures, including the Council for Democratic Elections, the CDDEM and other bodies, to examine how the conclusions of the Paris joint debate can be translated into concrete action within the framework of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

C. Recommendations to electoral management bodies

Electoral management bodies should:

- ensure that election officials at all levels understand the rights, role and added value of observers;
- provide guidance and training to election officials on how to facilitate the work of domestic and international observers impartially and consistently;
- treat observation as a normal and legitimate part of democratic elections, rather than as an exceptional or intrusive activity;
- ensure that any security-related restrictions on observers' access or movement are lawful, necessary, proportionate, transparent and genuinely linked to safety, and are not used to limit or control observation;
- co-operate with domestic and international observers throughout the electoral cycle, while respecting their independence and methodology;
- contribute to meaningful follow-up to observation recommendations, including through structured dialogue with observers, parliaments, civil society and relevant Council of Europe bodies.



D. Recommendations to international observation missions, domestic observer organisations and other observation actors

Election observers should:

- continue adapting observation methodologies to emerging challenges, including online campaigning, disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity risks, political finance, platform accountability, new voting technologies and out-of-country voting;
- ensure that observation missions are equipped with the interdisciplinary expertise needed to assess these issues credibly and consistently;
- strengthen structured co-operation throughout the electoral cycle, while respecting the independence, mandate and methodology of each actor;
- promote complementarity, information exchange, coordinated communication and effective follow-up on recommendations;
- establish procedures for addressing methodological or factual differences among credible observation actors, so that divergent assessments are handled professionally, transparently and without undermining public trust;
- strengthen safeguards for the credibility and integrity of observation missions, including transparent procedures for mission composition, clear standards of professional conduct, appropriate training and measures to prevent concerns about impartiality, independence or credibility;

- communicate more clearly and proactively with the public about their mandate, methodology, standards, findings and limitations, so that citizens understand how observation contributes to transparency, accountability and trust.

E. Recommendations to member States and observation actors jointly

Member States and observation actors should:

- address the growing threat of fake or politically instrumentalised observation;
- base responses to fake observation on transparency, professional standards, public communication and clear methodology;
- avoid broad discretionary restrictions that could be misused against legitimate domestic or international observers;
- ensure that domestic observers and civil society organisations are recognised and supported as essential partners in promoting electoral integrity, public trust and democratic reform.

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This initiative is a contribution towards the

New Democratic Pact for Europe

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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