

EUROPEAN PLATFORM FOR DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

Policy paper

**Domestic Election Observation in Europe -
Strategy and Perspectives**

Warsaw 12 December 2012

Policy Paper

On August 16-17th 2012 the workshop “Domestic Election Observation in Europe” was held within the framework of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. Members of civil society organisations which support or conduct domestic election observations from Belarus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Moldova, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation and Sweden participated in the workshop in Prague. The workshop was organised on the initiative of the European Exchange (Germany) and the Association GOLOS (Russian Federation). The Policy Paper is based on the discussions and findings of this workshop and may serve as a working document for the further development of civil society cooperation in the field of election monitoring throughout Europe.

Summary

Election fraud has become a common tool to preserve power for some of the incumbent authoritarian regimes in Europe’s Eastern Neighbourhood region. Today networks of domestic election observation exist in all six states of the Eastern Partnership and in the Russian Federation, as well as in some of the new member states of the EU. They are powerful instruments for providing unbiased assessments of the election processes not only for the citizens of the concerned countries, but also for the European society and political structures in the EU. Until today the national networks of domestic election observation in the six EaP countries and in the Russian Federation work mostly independent of each other with only sporadic collaboration or casual contact. A European Platform for Election Observation comprising both civil society organisations in EU member states, in the European Neighbourhood and in Russia could significantly contribute to the further democratic transformation throughout Europe by means of civic control over election processes and the right to vote.

1. Political Background and Needs Assessment

Free elections are a basic precondition for the functioning of any democratic state. The obligation to hold free and transparent elections and the readiness to enable both international and domestic observers to control the quality of the electoral processes are endorsed by the European states in the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) and in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990). Non-partisan election observation and monitoring by citizens' organizations is increasingly accepted around the world as a standard practice for civil societies' control over electoral processes. Domestic election observation does not only provide independent, non-biased information about the quality and the legitimacy of the election process, it also promotes civic activism, political awareness and knowledge of legal and political procedures among citizens and thereby contributes to the development of responsible and active citizenship.

In Europe domestic election observation plays a decisive role in those European states that undergo transformation processes from authoritarian communist rule to electoral democracies. Whereas all six countries of the European Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and the Russian Federation have committed themselves to the principles of electoral democracies by their constitutions and international obligations, today none of these states fully meet the standards of democratic elections.¹ In recent years the poorest quality of election processes was observed in Belarus and Azerbaijan, while Georgia and Ukraine made significant steps towards transparent elections Together with Moldova, they have a positive record in the peaceful change of governments through transparent suffrage.

The system of rule in the Russian Federation today faces a crisis of legitimacy as a result of the increasingly authoritarian politics of the incumbent President, Vladimir Putin, and his system of "managed democracy" aiming to alienate the Russian people from effective political participation. Notorious falsifications of Parliamentary and Presidential elections in 2011/2012 have resulted in the most numerous public protests in Russia since the 90ies.

Today networks of domestic election observation exist in all six states of the Eastern Partnership and in the Russian Federation, as well as in some of the new member states of the EU. They are powerful instruments for providing unbiased assessment of the election processes not only for the citizens of their countries, but also for the European society and political structures in the EU. They are even more important in those cases, where OSCE member states are reluctant to fulfil their

¹ European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries, May 2012, p. 49

obligations to invite international observation missions of the OSCE/ODHIR as happened during the Parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation in 2007. In those cases, where intergovernmental missions of the OSCE/ODIHR are in the field together with domestic observers, both can effectively benefit each other; international observers can learn from domestic observers about pre-election incidents and domestic observers bring attention to those election districts where international presence can contribute to increase transparency of election procedures to international observers.

Until today the national networks of domestic election observation in the six EaP countries and in the Russian Federation work mostly independent of each other with only slight interference or casual contact. A European Platform of Election Observation would contribute to improve the professional quality of the election observation networks in Europe's new democracies. Unified standards and comparable observation methods could be developed and implemented for domestic election observation Europe-wide. Innovative tools and techniques of observation could be discussed, exchanged and applied through the members of the Platform. Those election observers, which are under pressure and suffer harassment for their activities, could benefit from the international reputation and the popularity that a European Platform for Election Observation would grant to all its members. The platform would help to increase the visibility of the work of domestic election observation internationally and it would contribute to intensify civil society cooperation throughout Europe in the monitoring of election processes.

Among the EU member states equal suffrage is guaranteed as a rule. Domestic election observation as a tool of civic control is neither necessary nor institutionally developed in most of the EU member states. However civil societies in a broad range of EU member states have developed experience and activities to provide support and assistance to the work of domestic election observers in those European states, where equal suffrage is at risk. A European Platform for Election Observation, comprising civil society organisations in EU member states, in the European Neighbourhood and in Russia could significantly contribute to further democratic transformation of Europe through the control over election processes and the right to vote.

2. Objectives and Activities

The main objectives of the Platform will be to improve the professionalism of domestic election observation throughout Europe and to increase the visibility of findings of domestic election observation nationally and internationally. These objectives can be obtained through a set of activities.

Improve the professional quality of the European Election Observation Networks:

- Regular experts' round table meetings for Platform members to share best practise and experience in domestic election observation techniques
- Tailored training for long-term and short-term election observers of domestic election observation networks
- Training of core team members (political, election and legal analysts, media analyst, long-term and short-term observers' coordinators) by international experts including experts from other member organisations of the Platform
- International peer-training through internet-based communication tools (Google group on specific election related topics)
- Organisation of volunteer campaigns, mobilisation and training programs for citizens wishing to participate in election observation
- Organisation of common election observation missions in the framework of the Platform

Increase visibility for findings of domestic election observation throughout Europe:

- Organisation of international information and lobby campaigns for the dissemination of the findings of independent domestic election observation missions
- Installation of information tools on election observation in Europe: website, newsletter, use of new media
- Presentation of findings of domestic election observation in the political structures of Europe (European Parliament, European Commission, Council of Europe, national governments and parliaments, OSCE/ODHIR)

3. Structure, Funding and Participants

The Platform will work as an association of experienced organisations specialised in the conduct of election observation from six countries of the Eastern Partnership, the Russian Federation and their partner organisations in the European Union. Each member organisation will deploy one representative to the Board of the Platform that will consequently form a Secretariat for the ongoing management of the Platform's activities.

Funding for the activities of the Platform can be provided through the European Commission, the national governments of the EU member states and other European states, which are not EU members but wish to support the objectives of the Platform. Private donations from European citizens should be pursued. The newly established European Endowment for Democracy could be a prominent supporter for the core financing of the European Platform for Election Observation.

The Platform should widely coordinate its efforts with already existing structures, such as the Election observation program of the Eastern Partnership Facility of the Council of Europe and the European Network of Election Observation Organisations ENEMO as well as with the Working Group on election observation of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership and the Working Group on democratic procedures in the EU Russia Civil Society Forum.

4. Perspectives and Recommendations

A European Platform for Election Observation will encourage, train and defend those experts and citizens who stand up for transparent and equal suffrage wherever it is at risk all over Europe – be it in the European Union's member states, in the Eastern partnership countries or in the Russian Federation. The European Platform for Election Observation will be comprised of organisations from EU member states, the six European Neighbourhood countries and the Russian Federation as well as from those European countries that do not belong to the EU but wish to participate in this effort such as Switzerland or Norway. The European Platform for Election Observation will be a strong and visible sign of European Union's institutions as well as EU' civil society support for those civil societies in Europe that still struggle for the right of people for free and fair elections. The European Platform for Election Observation will stand for European solidarity and civil activism in the field of electoral rights.

The Policy Paper and its recommendations are based on the discussions of the workshop “Domestic election observation in Europe” held in Prague on August 16th-17th 2012 within the framework of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

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