



INTERVENTION ON BEHALF OF THE NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE
1 OCTOBER 2013: ELECTIONS/ELECTION OBSERVATION/SHARING PRACTICES

CIVIL SOCIETY ELECTION OBSERVERS: A relevant and important player in democratic elections

Norwegian Helsinki Committee strongly believes in the importance of domestic election observation. In order for democratic institutions to function well, to safeguard against abuse of power and to develop societies in a positive direction, the necessary checks and balances need to be in place. Elections are the most pungent expressions of democracy, a process where all citizens are welcome to take part in order to express their will. This process should also be monitored by citizens, in fully fledged democracies as well as in much less democratic regimes.

As a founding member of the newly established European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), uniting many of Europe's most important NGOs for election observation, NHC strongly believes in the important role civil society plays in building democracies. We underline that, even though we support and encourage international election observation missions organized via intergovernmental institutions such as the OSCE, these missions need to be supplemented by domestic observers.

First, because while domestic observers monitor elections in their own countries, they also form a part of the democratic processes. They have the advantage of knowing language, culture and backgrounds no international missions can replace. Secondly, domestic observers remain in-country to continue building democratic societies when the international election observation missions have left.

NHC has joined European Platform for Democratic Elections in order to jointly build and strengthen a network and the competence of such domestic NGOs. We invited 34 experienced observers from 11 former to Soviet Union states to observe the September 9, 2013 parliamentary election in Norway. Observations they made make the point that even in well established democracies monitoring and assessment according to international standards for election do make sense and contribute to progress.

The observers noted that even though Norwegians enjoy great confidence in their own system; and this election probably was the most democratic elections they had observed to date, there is room for improvement also in the Norwegian election process. For instance, in many places the ballot boxes were not sealed. Law and instructions do not state clear and consistent rules for safe handling of ballots. The observers questioned the lack of ban against election campaigning and the tradition of party campaigners handing out of ballots

(party lists) to voters outside polling stations. Several voters claimed they were confused by these lists and the observers recommend regulating the practice.

In our experience, the Norwegian authorities take our findings and recommendations seriously. Unfortunately, not all countries in the OSCE area accept the important role of domestic observers. In countries like Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan qualified NGOs observing elections are harassed and hindered by the authorities. This weakens democracies even further.