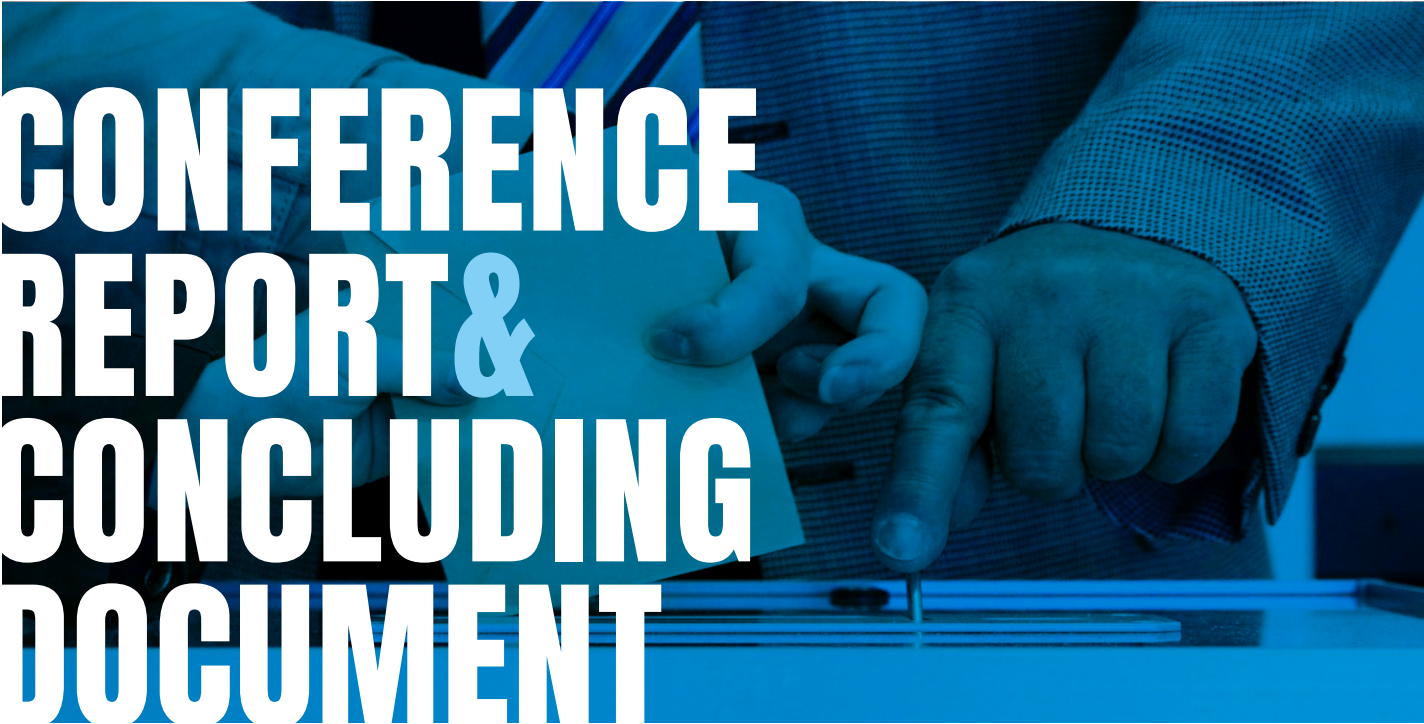


EPDE ANNUAL CONFERENCE
FOLLOW-UP ON
RECOMMENDATIONS'
IMPLEMENTATION
CONFERENCE 2023

NEW SYNERGIES
FOR DEMOCRATIC
ELECTIONS IN EUROPE



CONFERENCE
REPORT &
CONCLUDING
DOCUMENT

28-29 NOVEMBER 2023 | COMET MEETINGS, BRUSSELS

The FURIC conference, organized by the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), was a joint effort of citizen election observation organizations in Europe to identify methods of strengthening democratic electoral standards by promoting synergies between national and international election observers throughout the electoral cycle.

The FURIC conference brought together 97 representatives of 41 citizen observer organizations from 30 countries, 13 international and intergovernmental organizations, as well as prominent independent experts and journalists. While focusing primarily on the electoral follow-up in Europe, the conference benefited from the presence and contributions of international and citizen observer organizations working in Africa, Latin America, and East Asia. The full list of participating organizations is annexed to this report.

This report provides an outline of the discussions held in each session of the conference. It should be read in conjunction with and as a foundation of the Concluding Document that has been prepared, circulated, discussed, and amended prior to and during the conference. While the Concluding Document has not been formally endorsed by the organizations taking part in the Conference, the broad consensus it enjoyed in the discussions allows it to become a guiding document for revising and establishing good practice. The FURIC 2023 Concluding Document is annexed to this report.

Background



Since the adoption of the Copenhagen Document over 30 years ago, election observation has become the key instrument for European citizens to provide guarantees for the proper functioning of democratic institutions. By providing recommendations and following up on their implementation, both citizen and international election observation contribute to democratic electoral reform and to strengthening democratic institutions.

Today, however, institutions that are supposed to uphold democratic order in Europe are under tremendous pressure from authoritarian regimes that seek to discredit elections and the organizations that monitor them. Even in so-called well-established democracies, trends that undermine the essence of democratic elections are strong.

Partially in recognition of this trend, as well as to reflect on the good practice and lessons learned in the cooperation between citizen and international observers, the two communities launched a [Joint Communiqué](#)¹ in December 2022 to “highlight the importance of systematic coordination of activities and the value of exchanging experience, good practices and methodologies.” Central to the FURIC conference, the Communiqué recognized that the “co-operation strengthens monitoring of the implementation of recommendations enhancing adoption of reforms.”

The FURIC conference and the discussions summarized below aim to take the next step from the valuable and principled-based Communiqué by adding a practical dimension to the discussion and by proposing tangible steps to implement the action points highlighted by the Communiqué.

1 GNDEM (December 8, 2022), Joint Communiqué on Co-operation between International and Citizen Observers, Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors. <https://gndem.org/stories/joint-communicue-on-co-operation-between-international-and-citizen-observers/>

High Level Session



KEYNOTES:

- **Dame Audrey Glover**, former Director of the OSCE-ODIHR
- **Patrick Merloe**, Independent Election Expert

SPEAKERS:

- **Olha Aivazovska**, OPORA, Ukraine; GNDEM
- **Nacho Sánchez Amor**, Member of the European Parliament
- **Stefanie Schiffer**, Chair of EPDE (Moderator)

In her keynote address, **Dame Audrey Glover** reflected on how the enthusiasm for new democracies in the 1990s has given way to an increasing trend towards authoritarianism, noting that this is taking place amidst anxieties about global challenges such as climate change and cybersecurity. She underpinned that citizen and national observers must cooperate, recognizing that election observation is not an end in itself. Their objective is to help states to implement and put into effect their obligations to uphold electoral standards. The willingness of governments to embrace reforms is pivotal, and the inclusivity of the process is essential. Dame Audrey noted that there is a need for international observers to work more closely with civil society organizations based in a country throughout the cycle. In their statements, they should also amplify the need for a comprehensive follow-up strategy, and in their work should draw on the influence of their parliamentary bodies. Lastly, Dame Audrey noted that efforts should be made to support

the collaborative efforts between the elections by ensuring appropriate funding.

In his keynote, **Mr. Patrick Merloe** called for the conference to be seen not only through the practical lens of how to establish and improve co-operation but rather as a contribution to defend and advance democracy. While the public recognizes that democratic governance is in jeopardy, citizen and international observers have a unique role as they understand where the system is breached and what needs to be done to repair it. Mr. Merloe proposed that investing in the effective follow-up to the recommendations requires coordination and alliances. He noted such positive examples as the recognition of election observers as human rights defenders (which calls for their stronger protection), the unyielding strength of Paragraph 8 of the OSCE Copenhagen Document (particularly for citizen observers), as well as the November 2023 [resolution](#)² of the European Parliament. On the negative side, Mr Merloe highlighted the continuing efforts to smear election observation and diminish public confidence in their findings, and electoral processes as such, through the use of fake observers, as well as conspiracy theories, disinformation, attacks on election observers etc.

In the ensuing discussion and Q&A session, the panelists noted the elections are a value-based exercise. **Ms Aivazovska** highlighted that it is part of a social contract that entails justice, security, and inclusivity. She proposed that cooperation between the elections is vital because democracy is not a one-day event but a process of arriving at values. Ms Aivazovska reiterated

2 European Parliament (November 9, 2023), Strengthening the right to participate: legitimacy and resilience of electoral processes in illiberal political systems and authoritarian regimes, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0396_EN.html

that democracy is also an issue of security, something that also links international and domestic communities. She particularly noted that the EU Integration Process is an important leverage for civil society to push for reforms. **Mr Sánchez Amor** agreed that the approach to the elections and cooperation needs a rights-based perspective, noting that the illiberal practices tend to legitimize authoritarian rules through elections without rights. He noted the particular

challenges to the security of citizen observers that should be taken into account when planning cooperation. He also noted that the EU relies on being invited to observe but called to explore how electoral findings could influence economic and political cooperation. Lastly, he noted that technical improvements could be made to the language, positioning, and promotion of recommendations through a collaborative exercise.

Plenary Session 1: Aiming for synergies for electoral reform



- **Nino Dolidze**, Executive Director, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, ISFED, Georgia
- **Mette Bakken**, Policy Officer, European External Action Service (EEAS)
- **Ulvi Akhundlu**, Deputy Head, Election Department, ODIHR-OSCE
- **Zofia Lutkiewicz**, Director, Political Accountability Foundation, Poland
- **Alexander Shlyk**, Independent election expert (Moderator)

Ms Dolidze noted that elections are a very long process, which is becoming even more pronounced now that the campaigns are longer, including due to running online. She proposed that efforts should be made to explore the compatibility of methodologies of citizen and international observers. The EU accession process could be an incentive for the implementation of recommendations in candidate states. Strong messages of international and citizen election observers can have an impact on public opinion and influence politics. **Ms Bakken** noted specifically that the EU missions have guidelines for cooperation with

civil society and domestic observers, as well as a formalized and structured follow-up procedure after an election observation. The EU Delegations report on recommendation implementation within the annual democracy and human rights country strategy. **Ms Bakken** specifically noted the importance of consultations on and around the ways recommendations are formulated and presented. The importance of working with civil society observers is going to increase on the background of democratic backslide. **Mr Akhundlu** noted that ODIHR makes explicit references to civil society actors and reinforces the importance of collaboration in official documents. He recognized that resources are occasionally a limiting factor but noted many mechanisms, such as regular exchanges of information, that are not too costly and work well. **Mr Akhundlu** also noted that the exchange with civil society helps track the implementation of recommendations. **Ms Lutkiewicz** welcomed the already existing cooperation but called for it to be formalized more to create accountability. She specifically noted that citizen observer organizations – also in EU member states – need sustainable and institutionalized funding. **Ms Lutkiewicz** also highlighted the importance of capacity building for citizen observers, particularly

on impact tracking, to advance electoral reform and achieve common goals. In the **Q&A session**, participants reiterated the need to view that observation is becoming even longer-term and noted that the regional observer networks can help exchange information. They supported the call for more sustainable funding as a means to rely on solid findings. Election observation is not a charity but an investment in the common

good, donors should take more of an entrepreneurial approach. Lastly, the EP and ODIHR proposed to co-host a conference in the European Parliament with the EU ambassadors in the ODIHR member states. The conference would allow to check whether the EU delegations in the ODIHR countries take the ODIHR recommendations as seriously as the EU recommendations in the rest of the world.

Parallel Session 1: Recommendations - how do we formulate, present, and track them?



- **Vardine Grigoryan**, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, Armenia
- **Nicolae Panfil**, Associatia Promo-Lex, Moldova
- **Pierre Peytier**, ENEMO
- **Melene Glynn**, Organization of American States (OAS)
- **Tatyana Hilscher-Bogussevich**, Independent election expert (Moderator)

The working group concluded that the drafting of recommendations has to find a balance between specificity and generality to ensure relevance without overwhelming implementers. Recommendations should also be kept as simple and short as possible. It was agreed that recommendations of domestic and international observers usually align well (60-70%).

It is crucial to strengthen cooperation between domestic and international observers to prevent “cherry-picking” of authorities and conflicting provisions. As a good practice, diverse stakeholders should be engaged, including bringing citizen observers to international missions, and insights should be shared for a comprehensive approach. At least priority recommendations should be coordinated and agreed upon. Recommendations can also be shared with the Venice Commission or within the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process (in cases of a particularly grave human rights situation). For the tracking of recommendations, the establishment of mechanisms, such as databases, was seen as useful to track implementation progress, enhance accountability, and facilitate ongoing assessment.

Parallel Session 2: Pushing for electoral reforms together - advocacy practices and cooperation



- **Paul James**, Yiaga Africa
- **Holly Ruthrauff**, EODS
- **Iryna Shvets**, OPORA, Ukraine
- **Sona Ayvazyan**, Transparency International
Anti-corruption Centre, Armenia
- **Harald Hartvig Jepsen**, IFES
Ukraine (Moderator)

The working group concluded that international and citizen observers bring diverse skills to the observation – deep knowledge of international standards and ability to extend pressure, and an understanding of the local context and political culture. There sometimes is a perception that the internationals leave citizen observers on their own after the observation. Citizen observers often struggle to find financing sources and retain human resources between elections. It was

uniformly seen that domestic observers can strengthen the effect of advocacy by building coalitions and finding allies (Disabled People Organisations, IDP groups, media, women’s organizations), coordinating and dividing tasks, and exchanging contacts with facilitators of national reforms. Internationals can be useful convenors and provide an opportunity for national dialogue. It was proposed that domestic observers be invited to donor coordination meetings in the field of elections and democracy to ensure alignment. Still, it was noted as important that CSOs maintain a clear independent image from the donors or organizations that support them, including the EU, while at the same time cooperating with their observers. It was proposed that citizen and international observers should popularize the notion of electoral reform, including through modern communication means.

Parallel Session 3: Combining strengths of observer communities for long-term electoral issues



- **Prof. Carsten Schuermann**, University of Copenhagen
- **Anna Frydrych-Depka**, Political Accountability Foundation, Poland
- **Mulle Musau**, Elections Observation Group (ELOG), East and Horn of Africa Elections Observation Network (EHORN)
- **Najia Hashemee**, UNDP
- **Beata Martin-Rozumilovicz**, Independent election expert (Moderator)

The working group proposed to look into joint frameworks for tracking electoral reforms as a way to exchange good practice and lessons learned. It was noted that citizen observer groups can be a local hub bringing in knowledge from other CSOs who may not be dealing with elections directly. Participants noted that regional networks could be useful in this

bridging the gap between knowledge of the context and of the international standards. The regional approach to exchange of information and evaluation of progress can also be less politicized than the national one. Additional investment should be made into cascade capacity-building for observers, particularly with regard to emerging issues where methodologies are still nascent. Better knowledge of methodologies and emerging issues by citizen observers also makes them a more reliable source of information for the internationals. Additionally, it was proposed that citizen observers have direct contacts to international experts when working on long-term issues. Regional networks can assist in that. International and regional support can be provided by offering common services for domestic observers (IT support, website development) that help mitigate some pressures of running an organization to focus on the work at hand and the challenges they work on.

Plenary Session 2: Looking Ahead: Collaborative Visions of Election Integrity



- **Laura Thornton**, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)
- **Patrick Merloe**, Independent Election Expert
- **Adam Busuleanu**, EPDE
- **Alexander Shlyk, Independent election expert (Moderator)**

The panelists reflected on the conclusions of the working groups and the discussions during other sessions of the conference. **Ms Thornton** reiterated the point that democratic elections are about security. In the current debates it is important to emphasize that democracy should be part of the security infrastructure, and that additional investment is needed in the technological components of democracy/security. She suggested that citizen and international observers alike should interact regularly with specialists in narrower areas – AI, technology, policy, security – and it may be a good idea for them to do it jointly. **Mr Merloe** highlighted the importance of mutual learning and exchange of good practices, including through expert exchange on trial and errors in methodologies. Specific issues in focus should be disinformation and how to tackle it. He suggested that experts from different parts of the world should

be involved in discussing what shape disinformation takes and, looking forward, how to address the emergence of AI. **Mr Busuleanu** noted that problems of the EPDE region are not unique, hence international approaches and collaboration also of different regions is necessary. He suggested that the conference is a good sign of citizen organizations demonstrating how they take the lead in electoral reform. Mr Busuleanu noted that the implementation of recommendations is even more sensitive than the election observation. This is particularly the reason why the resources and impact of both citizen and international observers should be combined. In the **Q&A session** the participants once again noted the importance of debunking fake observers, for which solid methodologies are the key. They noted that fake observation is a form of disinformation aimed at confusing the voters. They also noted the importance of predictable and sustainable funding mechanisms for citizen observer groups and their regional networks, including citizen observers' organizations operating in the European Union. It was mentioned that pilot projects initiated by the European Parliament and reviewed and supported by the European Commission could play an important role in this respect.

Annex 1

List of participant organisations

- Agora Election Observation
- Belarusian Helsinki Committee BHC
- Centre for Democratic Integrity
- Civil Network OPORA
- Committee of Voters of Ukraine CVU
- Common Cause Public Foundation
- DemTech Group
- Denník N
- Economic Policy Research Center EPRC
- Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center EMDS
- Election Observation and Democracy Support EODS
- Election Watch
- Elections Observation Group ELOG / East and Horn of Africa Elections Observation Network EHORN
- Embassy of Hungary
- European Citizen Action Service ECAS
- European External Action Service EEAS
- European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations ENEMO
- European Parliament
- European Partnership for Democracy EPD
- European Platform for Democratic Elections EPDE
- European Resources for Mediation Support ERMES
- European University Association
- Expert Forum EFOR
- Gender Concerns International
- German Marshall Fund of the United States
- Global Cyber Alliance
- Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor
- Human Rights Center Viasna
- Independent Election Expert
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems IFES
- International Society for Free Elections and Democracy ISFED
- Media, Promotion, Innovations, Consulting Association - MPIC
- Memo 98
- Meridia Partners
- NORCAP
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee NHC
- Organization of American States
- OSCE/ODIHR
- Österreich-Bibliothek Kyjiv
- Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe PACE
- Permanent Representation of Germany to the European Union
- Permanent Representation of Luxembourg to the European Union
- Political Accountability Foundation
- Privacy International
- Promo-Lex Association
- Public Association ECHO
- Royal United Services Institute RUSI
- Swedish International Liberal Centre SILC
- Unhack Democracy
- UNHCR
- United National Movement
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Arab States
- Westminster Foundation for Democracy
- Yiaga Africa
- Youth NGO "Protests"

FURIC 2023 Concluding Document

- A. Recalling the *Communiqué on Benefits of Co-operation between International and Non-Partisan Citizen Election Observer Organizations* launched on 8 December 2022 by endorsers and supporters of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (DoP) and endorsers and supporters of the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations (DGoP, GNDEM),
- B. Recognizing that both international and citizen election observers play a fundamental role in promoting electoral integrity, democracy and human rights,
- C. Recognizing that the co-operation between citizen and international observers should respond to evolving political contexts and emerging practices,
- D. Recognizing the positive role played by regional networks of citizen observers in providing technical expertise and assisting in the exchange of good practices and lessons learned on specific aspects of electoral reform,
- E. Reconfirming the mutual commitment of citizen and international observer organizations to co-operate,
- F. Recognizing that international and citizen election observers can employ a variety of credible methodologies based on the same principles to independently exercise their respective mandates,
- G. Noting that the *Communiqué* particularly calls on international and citizen election observers to pay attention to the assessments and recommendations made by their counterparts,
- H. Taking note of the statement by the UN Special Rapporteurs from 27 October 2022 on the situation of election observers as human rights defenders,
- I. Aiming to identify concrete steps and good practice for the realization of the goals stated in the *Communiqué*,

To strengthen co-operation between international and citizen election observers throughout the electoral cycle and to facilitate that such co-operation leads to the improvement of the conduct of elections in the respective countries, participants of the FURIC declare that:

International and citizen election observers should:

1. Regularly exchange information on developments between elections that can impact assessments during election observation,
2. Consult each other on the formulation and prioritization of electoral recommendations to improve synergies,
3. Establish communication channels at the working and management level in between elections with a view to regularly coordinate follow-up activities in the respective countries,
4. Involve each other in electoral reform activities and follow-up to the recommendations in the respective countries,
5. Strengthen consultations to assess electoral reform processes and the status of implementation of previous recommendations,
6. Regularly exchange on the experiences and methodological approaches to advocacy of electoral reforms and follow-up to the recommendations,

International election assistance providers should:

7. Support capacity building of citizen observers as one of their key partners in electoral reform,
8. Proactively involve citizen and international observers in planning and conducting activities concerning electoral reform, including follow-up missions,
9. Prioritize international and citizen election observer recommendations when planning their activities,

International donor community should:

10. In the dialogue with partner governments highlight that the authorities have a role in ensuring a secure environment for citizen election observers and that constructive engagement with citizen election observers contributes to maintaining and strengthening democracy in the country,
11. Explore ways to provide citizen observers' organisations and their regional networks with sustainable funding and appropriate financial instruments in the period between the elections to help them maintain and improve their capacity throughout the electoral cycle and play a substantive role in any electoral reform process,
12. Consider the prioritization of electoral recommendations of international and citizen election observers when devising support programs for respective countries.



The European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) is a network of 16 independent European citizen election observation organizations. The aim of EPDE is to support citizen election observation and to contribute to democratic election processes throughout Europe. EPDE is a signatory of the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations and the Code of Conduct for Nonpartisan Election Observation. EPDE also is a member of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM).

About EPDE



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European Platform for Democratic Elections

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Committee BHC (Belarus)



Committee of Voters of
Ukraine CVU (Ukraine)



Election Monitoring and
Democracy Studies Center
EMDS (Azerbaijan)

Europäischer Austausch
European Exchange

European Exchange
(Germany)



Helsinki Citizens' Assembly
Vanadzor (Armenia)



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Civil Network OPORA (Ukraine)



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