

**EPDE ANNUAL CONFERENCE | FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS'
IMPLEMENTATION CONFERENCE 2024 | 11-12 DECEMBER 2024**

FROM BALLOTS TO SECURITY: ADVANCING RESILIENCE THROUGH ELECTORAL REFORMS

CONFERENCE REPORT & CONCLUDING DOCUMENT

The FURIC conference, organized by the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) in cooperation with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), was a joint effort of citizen election observation organizations 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 122 representatives of 45 election observer organizations from 30 countries, 16 international and intergovernmental organizations, as well as prominent independent experts, policymakers, 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 Central and East Asia.

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 of 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 2024 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 and its neighborhood, are facing tremendous pressure from authoritarian regimes that seek to discredit elections and the organizations that monitor them. Even in so-called well-established democracies, trends are emerging that undermine the essence of democratic elections.

In response to this growing challenge and to reflect on best practices and lessons learned in the collaboration 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

FROM BALLOTS TO SECURITY: ADVANCING RESILIENCE THROUGH ELECTORAL REFORMS

- ▶ **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, National Leader of Belarus and a Head of the United Transition Cabinet of Belarus
- ▶ **Commissioner Benjamin Hovland**, Chairman of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission
- ▶ **Dr. Stanislav Secieru**, National Security Advisor, President Maia Sandu's administration
- ▶ **Vlad Vasile Voiculescu**, Member of the European Parliament
- ▶ **Nino Dolidze**, Executive Director, International Society for Free Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Georgia, Board Member of EPDE
- ▶ **Petras Auštrevičius**, Member of the European Parliament Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Security and Defence
- ▶ **Stefanie Schiffer**, Chair of Board, European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) (*moderator*)

In her keynote address, **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya National Leader of Belarus and Head of the United Transition Cabinet of Belarus**, emphasized that elections are a cornerstone of security, both national and international. She specifically noted that citizen observers are the frontline defenders of security, as they are committed to protecting their countries against hybrid threats. She called for unwavering support to citizen election observers to uphold and strengthen democracy. Noting that dictators around the world learn from each other, she called on the FURIC participants and election observers community to also share best practices and support one another in their shared pursuit of democracy, human rights, and security

In the opening remarks, **Nino Dolidze, Executive Director at the International Society for Free Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and board member of EPDE**, focused on the current events in Georgia, noting how the state is operating outside of the constitutional and legal norms. She underlined that the citizen observers recorded multiple violations despite facing unfair treatment, verbal and physical confrontations. ISFED concluded that the election results do not truly reflect the will of the Georgian voters, as both the campaign and the voting process were marred by violations and irregularities. Dolidze called on the international community to stand with Georgia, refrain from recognizing the elections, and encourage ODIHR to engage with all relevant actors to change the dynamic. She concluded that the elections are about peace and security, not only about electing officials.

Dr. Stanislav Secieru, National Security Advisor at President Maia Sandu's administration, outlined the massive hybrid campaign of the Russian Federation aimed at influencing the



Presidential Elections in 2024 and how Moldova addressed it. Secieru noted that Russian influence in Moldova was strategically planned, well-resourced, and tech-savvy. It unfolded in several stages: Russia studied Moldovan society to craft and amplify polarizing narratives about critical concerns, introduced financial support to Moldovan voters using cash, foreign bank cards, and crypto, invested in kinetic operations through youth, priests, and coordinated flash mobs, organized cyber attacks, including on critical infrastructure connecting the CEC to voting stations abroad, and issuing bomb alerts to test police response. Mass media conducted extensive investigations, infiltrated networks, and provided a wealth of information. The whole law enforcement apparatus was also mobilized to address the threats. Likewise, a government-wide action plan is being developed to address the threats before the 2025 parliamentary elections. He made it clear that Russia would also employ this approach within EU countries, which must now prepare accordingly.

Vlad Vasile Voiculescu, Member of the European Parliament, focused on the most recent developments in Romania. Noting that the disillusionment with the old corrupt political class fed into support of the emerging political forces. Călin Georgescu, winner of the first round of the later annulled elections in November 2024 combined traits of multiple characters in himself – those of an authoritarian, a charmer, and a straight-speaking entertainer. He refrained from campaigning on his most extremist ideas, and while TikTok played a role in his success, it was not the primary factor. Security services overlooked the threat, civil society did not sufficiently question Georgescu’s past, and no investigations were initiated by state institutions when he claimed not to have made any financial investments in his campaign. The rationale of overturning the election by the Constitutional Court may still be unclear for the Romanian voters,

“Implementing election recommendations is key to strengthening the resilience of democratic societies and institutions against hybrid threats” - Stefanie Schiffer, Chair of Board EPDE

Voiculescu said, which can have a negative impact on the repeated election.

Petras Auštrevičius, Member of the European Parliament, spoke of the EU’s approach to the issue of hybrid threats. The MEP noted that the European Commission continues monitoring hybrid threats, and the EP needs to push for additional measures. He noted certain progress, highlighting that even 2-3 years ago broadcasts by Sputnik were available on television. He noted the plans of the EU Commission and the EP to focus in the current political cycle on the European Democracy Shield to combat foreign information manipulation and interference and support civic and institutional resilience in Europe and globally.

Benjamin Hovland, Chairman of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, noted how the US elections are administered in an increasingly complex and threatening environment. The story of the 2024 elections is about hybrid threats, disinformation, and the aftermath of national disasters like hurricanes, and wildfires. Still, the 2024 presidential election was a well-run election despite serious challenges to the election administration. Some things that stood out were hacks and leaks, attempts by Iran to hack Trump-affiliated individuals, and attempts by Russian fake videos (election workers destroying postal ballots, Haitian immigrants claiming they used fake IDs in Georgia) to question the integrity of elections. These attempts did not have the traction such disinformation had in the previous election cycle. Hovland specifically praised election administrators for stepping up to deal with these threats quickly and efficiently. He concluded that trust should not be based on any candidate winning or losing and that election administrators should be transparent for transparency’s sake and invest in extensive voter education.

OPENING SESSION

STRENGTHENING SECURITY WITH OBSERVER RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Zofia Lutkiewicz**, President of Political Accountability Foundation (Poland), Board member of EPDE and GNDEM
- ▶ **Brady Hills-Nowacki**, Director of Programmes of the International Republican Institute's Brussels Office
- ▶ **Riccardo Chelleri**, Senior Election Expert, European External Action Service
- ▶ **Brynja Huld Oskarsdottir**, Committee Director, NATO Parliamentary Assembly
- ▶ **Adam Busuleanu**, Senior Program Officer, European Platform for Democratic Elections (*moderator*)

In her remarks, **Brynja Huld Oskarsdottir, Committee Director at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly**, highlighted the importance of constantly remaining on top of security threats. Oskarsdottir noted that an increase in funding of democratic structures and education preparations should help prepare against hybrid threats months ahead of elections. Oskarsdottir additionally noted that policymakers, such as the MEPs and NATO PA members need to understand hybrid threats to elections as a matter of national security and that national defence plans should involve civil society mobilization.

Brady Hills-Nowacki, Director of Programmes at the International Republican Institute's Brussels Office, added that finding ways of communicating observers' findings and recommendations with the general population is most crucial. He noted that legal and regulatory safeguards are important in highly polarized environments. Nowacki stressed the importance of involving those who are part of the communities through building strong networks and task forces, as well as facilitating access to key data to identify threats. He encouraged the participants to consult

the core framework for hybrid threats developed by HybridCoE.

Riccardo Chelleri, Senior Election Expert at European External Action Service, addressed the concept of resilience, noting that it has an institutional component, exemplified by the Kenyan judiciary challenging the electoral process and outcomes, as well as a societal component as witnessed recently in South Korea where large protests forced president Yoon Suk Yeol to lift the previously declared martial law. Chelleri argued that electoral recommendations promote resilience and trust in the democratic process, noting the importance of having them implemented which could be strengthened by focusing on selected key recommendations. He also noted some of the limitations of citizen and international election observers in addressing hybrid threats, specifically stressing the lack of funds and access to data as limiting factors. While political will remains essential, as is the understanding by the donors of where funding is needed, which is not always the case.

Zofia Lutkiewicz, President of the Political Accountability Foundation (Poland) and board member of EPDE and GNDEM, noted that citizen observers are on the ground before any other observers arrive and after they leave. She, however, posed a question of whether fighting hybrid threats



is a task for citizen observers. Noting that democratic resilience relies on civic education, independence of the judiciary, transparency, and access to data, she pointed out that citizen observers are just one, albeit a very important, part of the societal structure that underpins resilience. In this regard, Lutkiewicz noted that access to data from technological platforms, as well as from governments, is a key limiting factor for the activities and the contribution of citizen observers.

Session participants stressed the need for prompt communication of findings and recommendations, emphasizing the critical role journalists play in countering hybrid threats, both foreign and domestic, in real-time—during elections, not just afterward. Additionally, speakers highlighted the urgency of addressing disinformation, urging pro-European and pro-NATO political forces to adopt a more proactive and coordinated approach.

ROUND TABLE 1

IMPROVEMENT OF OBSERVATION METHODOLOGY

- ▶ **Vladimir Misev**, OSCE/ODIHR Senior Advisor on New Voting Technologies
- ▶ **Mulle Musau**, National Coordinator, Elections Observation Group (ELOG); Regional Coordinator, East and Horn of Africa Elections Observation Network (EHORN)
- ▶ **Tatyana Hilscher-Bogussevich**, Independent Election Expert, Election-Watch.EU
- ▶ **Jessica Keegan**, Senior Advisor, Electoral Integrity, International Republican Institute
- ▶ **Alex Shlyk**, Independent Election Expert (*moderator*)

This roundtable highlighted that some of the threats to elections are not entirely new, and observers should focus on enhancing existing methodologies as well as developing new ones. Some panelists proposed investing in inclusive dialogues and working groups to propose electoral reforms, and expanding voter literacy to help citizens make informed choices. Others noted that methodological developments by observer organizations should be publicized more widely and picked up by other groups, citizen and international. Speakers noted that many previous technology-related recommendations remain unaddressed, and suggested that cooperation with more specialized third parties can be helpful for implementation. A number of speakers emphasized a need for consistent monitoring throughout the electoral cycle, beyond the election period. They also noted that the expertise for continuous monitoring of highly complex issues is sometimes lacking, and authorities may limit access to certain processes and data. Discussion participants additionally noted the need for clearer communication and messaging by citizen observers, including to increase trust in the methodologies they use. Suggestions were also made for more horizontal exchanges focused on methodologies, including between regional citizen observer communities.



ROUND TABLE 2

SYNERGIES BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS TO TACKLE HYBRID THREATS

- ▶ **Ulvi Akhundlu**, Deputy Head of the Election Department, ODIHR
- ▶ **Ken Godfrey**, Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)
- ▶ **Dr. Staffan Darnolf**, Senior Global Advisor, Electoral Operations and Administration, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)
- ▶ **Holly Ruthrauff**, Team Leader, Election Observation and Democracy Support (EODS) (*moderator*)

The roundtable discussion focused on institutional actors involved in addressing hybrid threats and how election observation groups—both citizen and international—can better coordinate their efforts in this space. Panelists highlighted the importance of building explicit partnerships between citizen and international observer groups to capitalize on their comparative strengths when assessing and responding to hybrid threats. Such cooperation ensures that both local context knowledge and international standards are integrated into observation efforts and how to coordinate an approach with election observation groups, both citizen and international. The roundtable covered how Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) deal with hybrid threats, noting the challenges they face in liaising with security agencies due to their lack of capacity on these issues and the limited transparency provided by security actors. Panelists suggested that these gaps present an opportunity for observer groups to work more closely with EMBs, using strategic and operational planning processes as entry points to engage on hybrid threats throughout the entire electoral cycle. At the same time, EMBs have been relatively successful with cy-

bersecurity – making sure their databases and infrastructures are protected. The discussion touched upon the EU policy framework for dealing with information integrity and the possible effects of the EU policy that may be felt globally over time. A good resource is the European Cooperation Network on Elections, which networks EMBs in EU member states and allows them to share good practices and resources for addressing emerging issues, including hybrid threats.

Panelists also discussed that election observers can assess the degree to which institutions such as EMBs, the judiciary, and the media are addressing these issues. The dominance of private media interests in some countries can enable hybrid threats, they noted. Effective voter education was highlighted as a necessary tool to equip citizens with the knowledge to identify and resist such manipulation risks, ultimately helping to safeguard democratic processes.

Donors were identified as another key stakeholder who should be brought into the conversation. Ensuring that donors understand the evolving nature of hybrid threats will help secure their support for election observation missions throughout the electoral cycle.

“Today’s challenges to election integrity call for a collaborative approach - bringing together citizen and international observers, assistance providers, and tech companies to develop a strong and relevant set of recommendations” - Adam Busuleanu, Senior Program Officer EPDE

Finally, panelists stressed the need for improved follow-up mechanisms and iterative learning across regions, recognizing that new threats observed in one context are likely to surface elsewhere. Sharing experiences and developing flexible, adaptive responses will be crucial in staying ahead of hybrid threats.



ROUND TABLE 3

TECHNICAL IMPROVEMENT TO TACKLE HYBRID THREATS

- ▶ **Miklós Danka**, Co-Founder and Chief Technology Officer, Stateless
- ▶ **Ellen Dingani**, Programmes Director for the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN)
- ▶ **Dr. Anthony DeMattee**, Data Scientist, Democracy Program at the Carter Center
- ▶ **Lukasz Kondraciuk**, Program Manager, Head of Electoral Integrity, EPDE (*moderator*)

The discussion highlighted the challenges faced by citizen observers when they operate in environments where they are seen as a threat to autocrats and try to use observation tools at a scale. Experts noted that the need for large-scale election observation tools will increase in the future and that AI tools may be useful to process large volumes of unstructured observation data. Experts noted that besides social media, offline speech, particularly from influential individuals, often drives election-related disinformation. Monitoring must begin months before elections to effectively identify emerging threats. Distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation remains complex due to the role of intent, and platform regulation is still inadequate. Assessing how technology can help prepare against and prevent vote manipulation, the experts advocated for observer groups to try to enhance coordination and standardize data collection methods. Sharing findings more openly could improve collective assessments and help preempt election manipulation. While technology can reveal electoral fraud, it is not a standalone safeguard against manipulation orchestrated through legal and structural means.



CLOSING PANEL

BACK TO THE FUTURE (OF ELECTION OBSERVATION): RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING

- ▶ **Sebastian Bay**, Expert in Election Security, Hybrid Threats and Disinformation
- ▶ **Richard Klein**, Director of Elections Programs, National Democratic Institute
- ▶ **Helen Graido**, Consultant for Electoral and Technological Policies, LENTE
- ▶ **Beata Martin-Rozumilowicz**, Independent Election Expert (*moderator*)

Richard Klein, Director of Elections Programs, National Democratic Institute (NDI), welcomed that FURIC brought together participants from all world regions, as although there are critical differences between their contexts, citizen and international observers should strive to learn from each other, share experiences, and express solidarity. While methodologies are largely in place and continue developing, there is a lot of knowledge that goes beyond formal handbooks. A global GNDEM summit in 2025 may be a good opportunity for such an exchange. There are certain challenges with funding, as donors remain focused on the immediate pre-election period, even as continuous monitoring proves its importance. Still, Klein suggested that citizen observers should not wait for an invitation to contribute but, instead, proactively, as hosts in the country where the elections take place, reach out to the international observers.

David Becker, Executive Director at the Center for Election Innovation & Research, highlighted how the complexity of US elections gives a security advantage – it is impossible to steal the whole election, as there are thousands of ways in which the process is run. Hybrid threats to US elections often focus not on altering the results but on the perception of the process and its legitimacy. He advocated that the authorities, international, and citizen observers shift to a more proactive way of addressing such threats. For this, he argued, there is a need to explore when transparency can enhance caution and

oversight without being weaponized to discredit democratic processes.

Helen Graido, Consultant for Electoral and Technological Policies of LENTE, Member of the COMELEC (Commission on Elections) Advisory Council for the 2025 National and Local elections in the Philippines, highlighted that voters consider elections in the Philippines as entertainment. She questioned how to instill a more somber attitude towards elections that would help treat malfeasance more seriously. She highlighted other challenges to successful reforms, such as the need for persistence, creating political will, and building alliances with partners who may not even know they are valuable for advancing electoral reform processes.

Sebastian Bay, Expert in Election Security, Hybrid Threats, and Disinformation, focused in his remarks on the most recent cases of deployment of hybrid attacks on elections (in the US, UK, Romania, and Moldova), noting that the volume of these attacks is increasing to an industrial scale. He highlighted the HybridCoE report “[Countering hybrid threats to elections](#)” which emphasizes a need for a collaborative approach to build cross-government efforts to secure election integrity. The report also notes that the sustainability of such efforts over time is needed to ensure safeguards from election to



election as threats are advanced and persistent. Mr. Bay specifically noted the importance of crowd-sourcing as a tool for election protection efforts, emphasizing the role that citizen observers can play in the process.

Pat Merloe, Independent Election Expert, concluded the conference with a call to action for the global community to work together to combat authoritarianism and promote democratic values, highlighting the need for improved communication strategies and the importance of building and maintaining democratic ecosystems.

The participants agreed to work together more closely, leveraging their respective strengths and expertise to counteract the threats to democracy. The conference also emphasized the importance of empowering citizens to control their own destinies and the need for a whole-of-society approach to address the complexities of hybrid threats to elections.





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ANNEX 1 | EPDE ANNUAL CONFERENCE | FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS' IMPLEMENTATION CONFERENCE 2024 | 11-12 DECEMBER 2024

FURIC 2024 CONCLUDING DOCUMENT

Building on the *Communiqué on Benefits of Cooperation 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 the *Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations (DGoP, GNDEM)*, as well as the *FURIC 2023 Concluding Document*, which underscores the need for closer collaboration between international and citizen election observers, this document reaffirms the critical role of citizen election observation in safeguarding democratic integrity.

The recognition of citizen election observers as human rights defenders, as acknowledged by the UN Special Rapporteur and reflected in the Venice Commission-CoE report, highlights their essential contribution to democratic governance. Furthermore, the Model Commitments for Advancing Genuine and Credible Elections consolidate existing international norms, standards, and best practices, providing a framework for strengthening electoral processes.

Regional networks of citizen observers have proven instrumental in facilitating technical expertise and knowledge exchange on electoral reform. Their cooperation with international observers enhances efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and electoral integrity. At the same time, election observation plays a vital role in reinforcing national, regional, and global security, particularly in the face of increasing hybrid threats that challenge state sov-

eighty and democratic institutions. Given their presence on the ground and deep understanding of local contexts, citizen election observers can serve as an early warning mechanism for authorities by identifying emerging hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns and foreign interference, at an early stage. Their insights help expose vulnerabilities in electoral processes and strengthen resilience against external manipulation, ensuring that democratic institutions can respond proactively to these challenges.

These threats, often orchestrated by foreign actors in collaboration with domestic political forces, are highly context-specific and employ both traditional and digital methods of influence. Their complexity underscores the urgency of coordinated responses that leverage the strengths of both international and citizen election observers.

With these challenges in mind, this document aims to outline concrete steps and best practices for strengthening cooperation, enhancing the effectiveness of election observation, and advancing the commitments outlined in the Communiqué and the FURIC Concluding Document.

To enhance the election observation community's response to hybrid threats against democracy and international security through better collaboration between key stakeholders, participants of the FURIC declare that:

INTERNATIONAL AND CITIZEN ELECTION OBSERVERS SHOULD:

1. Regularly exchange information and methodological approaches related to combating hybrid threats to democracy, electoral integrity, and security,
2. Engage in exchanging assessments of risks posed by hybrid threats to electoral integrity, their likelihood and possible impact on domestic and international security,
3. Consult each other on the formulation and prioritization of electoral recommendations regarding hybrid threats to improve synergies,
4. Continue to involve each other in electoral reform activities and jointly advocate for the implementation of electoral reforms and follow-up to the recommendations in the respective countries.

INTERNATIONAL ELECTION ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS SHOULD:

5. Support capacity building of citizen observers as their key partners in countering hybrid threats,
6. Prioritize international and citizen election observer recommendations when planning their activities.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD:

7. Consider assessments and recommendations of citizen and international election observers in developing their policies and institutional responses to hybrid threats to democracy and international security,
8. Share with citizen and international election observers their expertise on security risk assessments, as well as appropriate information on the emerging threats and their likely impact.

TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES SHOULD:

9. Share with citizens and international election observers their expertise in tracing and preventing hybrid threats to democracy and international security,
10. Consult with citizen and international election observers on internationally recognized best practices when shaping their policies to counter hybrid threats to democracy and international security.

THE INTERNATIONAL DONOR COMMUNITY SHOULD:

11. In the dialogue with partner governments highlight that the authorities are responsible for ensuring a secure environment for citizen election observers and that constructive engagement with citizen election observers contributes to maintaining and strengthening domestic and international security,
12. Explore ways to provide citizen observers and their regional networks with sustainable funding throughout entire electoral cycles to enable them to support electoral reforms,
13. Consider the prioritization of electoral recommendations of international and citizen election observers when devising support programs for respective countries.