Concluding Document

FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS' IMPLEMENTATION CONFERENCE (FURIC) 2026

FROM REFORM TO RESILIENCE:
FUTURE-PROOFING
DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

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FROM REFORM TO RESILIENCE: FUTURE-PROOFING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

Summary

FURIC 2026 took place amidst mounting **pressure** on elections and those who work to protect their integrity. Election observers and civil society actors are being imprisoned, prosecuted and restricted in carrying out their work, while funding and civic space are shrinking. At the same time, **threats** to elections are becoming increasingly hybrid: illicit political finance, cyberattacks, information manipulation and foreign interference intersect with domestic actors and political processes. **Restrictive practices** and tactics are travelling across borders, while "fake" and partisan observers seek to legitimise flawed elections or undermine trust in credible scrutiny. **Protecting** electoral integrity therefore means protecting not only elections, but also the institutions, organisations and individuals that make independent scrutiny possible.

Against this backdrop, FURIC 2026 delved into how democratic actors can adapt, cooperate better and turn observation findings into follow-up action. A central conclusion was that election observation must go beyond the publication of a report. Recommendations require **sustained follow-up,** while methodologies must evolve as threats, technologies and political finance practices change. Experiences shared across the conference showed the value of **preparing** for threats before they materialise. This means strengthening cooperation between citizen observers, international missions and election management bodies while sharing lessons and tools across borders. At the same time, cooperation must not come at the expense of independent scrutiny. Ultimately, electoral resilience depends on the capacity to learn, adapt and act together from one election to the next, and in between, while preserving the independence and credibility of election observation.

From Observation to Impact

Research presented at FURIC paints a stark picture of the **gap** between election observation and electoral reform. Across eight researched EU countries, only 39 of 904 recommendations, or around 4%, were fully implemented over the last two to three elections. **Politically sensitive areas, including campaign finance and campaign rules, proved particularly difficult to reform**. More than 70% of the recommendations examined require parliamentary action, placing implementation in the hands of actors with their own political interests in electoral rules. As one discussion put it, *"Winners say the system is perfect; losers say they cannot change it."*

The discussions nevertheless identified several ways of moving recommendations forward. International standards and ODIHR recommendations can provide domestic reform efforts with an external reference point, while linking implementation to EU accession benchmarks and progress reports has helped trigger action in candidate countries. However, international pressure cannot substitute for **domestic ownership.** Some of the most promising examples involved civil society collaborating with public institutions and lawmakers to deliver concrete legislative proposals rather than just recommendations. In **Poland**, for example, civil society coalitions worked with individual MPs and parliamentary

committees to develop detailed proposals showing where and how legislation should change. Advocacy can also mean challenging reforms that move the electoral framework in the wrong direction, as experience from **Bulgaria** demonstrated. Ultimately, the impact of observation depends as much on what happens after recommendations are published as on the recommendations themselves. As one participant reflected, "*Observation is the beginning, not the end product*."

Reforms and Cooperation leading to Resilience

Implementing election observation recommendations is already difficult. Electoral systems increasingly face hybrid threats combining cyberattacks, information manipulation, illicit finance and foreign interference. Building resilience therefore means not only addressing shortcomings identified in previous elections but anticipating how threats may evolve before the next one. **Moldova**, described during FURIC as a "laboratory for electoral resilience", illustrates the challenge. Since 2022, the country has faced attacks ranging from a cloned CEC website and extensive cyberattacks to AI-generated videos, inauthentic social media activity and illicit electoral finance. Moldova's experience has in turn informed responses elsewhere, including in Armenia. Yet **Armenia** also demonstrated that lessons cannot simply be copied. Interference there was described as increasingly sophisticated and locally embedded, involving domestic actors and narratives drawing on Armenian identity, religion, and security.

If those seeking to interfere in elections learn and adapt, those working to protect electoral integrity must do the same. FURIC discussions highlighted several ways of building this capacity. In Moldova, the CEC worked with a specialised government IT agency, established an inter-agency working group, and ran simulations of possible incidents, demonstrating the value of preparing across institutions before threats materialise. Exchange between the Moldovan and Armenian election authorities, together with Armenian civil society's efforts to draw on Moldova's experience, showed the value of sharing lessons across borders while adapting them to local conditions. More broadly, resilience depends on bringing together the different expertise of election authorities, specialised agencies, and civil society. Such cooperation must balance working together with preserving independence: actors can share knowledge and resources without blurring their respective roles or compromising their credibility.

Follow the Money: Political Finance as a Persistent Weak Point

Political finance remains one of the weakest points in electoral integrity. **Of 4,563 ODIHR recommendations issued since 2008, 576 concern political finance, with most either not implemented or only partly implemented.** Money also adapts to regulation. Third-party campaigning, online activity, and paid influencers create new ways of operating outside traditional campaign finance rules. Regulation must therefore balance transparency with freedom of expression and civic participation, while data protection adds another set of challenges. As one discussion put it, "*Privacy has become a magician's hat that everyone uses to avoid transparency.*" One approach discussed was to set thresholds for third-party campaign registration, allowing smaller-scale participation without registration while requiring greater transparency above a defined level.

FURIC discussions also pointed to a combination of stricter rules and sustained monitoring. The **EU Anti-Corruption Directive** provides an opportunity to strengthen funding

transparency through national transposition, while litigation offers another route where legislatures fail to act. Moldova demonstrated the value of sustained scrutiny. Over ten years, Promo-LEX systematically documented political finance and had concrete solutions ready when an opportunity for reform emerged. Civil society should therefore pair evidence with workable proposals and maintain scrutiny across electoral cycles.

Protecting and Adapting Election Observation

Election observation itself is coming under increasing pressure. Observers face prosecution, restrictive legislation, shrinking civic space, and declining funding, while legal recognition does not always translate into meaningful access. "Fake" and partisan observers can also be used to legitimise flawed elections or undermine credible findings, while measures intended to regulate them can become a pretext for restricting legitimate observers. Protection must therefore extend beyond individual observers to their organisations, data, and sources. **In this environment, clear and internationally recognised standards and methodologies are among the strongest safeguards of credible observation:** they demonstrate how findings are sourced and help distinguish genuine observation from its imitation. But methodology must also evolve as observers increasingly confront challenges to electoral integrity connected with political finance, digital campaigning, information manipulation, and other threats extending beyond election day.

Collaboration can further strengthen the reach and impact of observation. Citizen observers bring continuity and local knowledge, while international missions contribute comparative experience, international standards and additional scrutiny. Experience from **Zambia** showed how these roles can complement one another: despite using different methodologies, international and citizen observers reached findings that reinforced each other, while international missions, e.g. from the European Union, could amplify credible domestic findings and give them greater international visibility. Such cooperation can also help keep recommendations alive after election day, strengthen domestic advocacy, and connect locally identified problems to international standards and follow-up mechanisms.

Technology: Solutions Start with the Problem

Technology can strengthen election observation, but discussions stressed that innovation should start with the problem to be solved, rather than with the technology itself. Practical examples demonstrated this approach. CRTA from **Serbia** developed a closed AI chatbot using verified information to support voter and observer education. OPORA combined anonymised telecommunications data with established research methods to understand voter displacement in **Ukraine**, while Stateless Technologies demonstrated how AI-assisted tools can help map networks involved in information manipulation.

These examples also showed that **safeguards** need to be built in from the outset. Privacy, security, and ethics should be considered when tools are designed, alongside human oversight, trusted providers, and the ability to explain and challenge decisions. Electoral technologies should be assessed not only for efficiency, but also for their impact on participation, transparency, accountability and public trust. Innovation also requires room to learn. Tools need to be tested, adapted, and improved and experiences should be shared across the election observation community. Donors should therefore support iteration and testing rather than only the initial development of new tools. **The goal is not to introduce more technology into election observation, but to use it where it provides a meaningful**

solution while preserving the rights and principles that credible observation is intended to protect.

Resilience Requires Functioning Relationships

A recurring message throughout FURIC was that electoral resilience cannot be built by any one institution or organisation. As one participant put it, "*Resilience is all about relationships*." Election authorities, citizen observers, international missions, civil society, public institutions, and international partners bring different knowledge, experience, and capacities to protecting electoral integrity. Resilience depends on building relationships between them before a crisis or an election brings them under pressure.

This matters because those seeking to undermine elections are themselves learning and adapting. Foreign interference evolves, political money finds new routes around regulation, digital tools create new vulnerabilities, and "fake" observers imitate credible observation. Democratic actors must therefore also learn across elections and borders. Ultimately, resilience is not simply the ability to withstand the next threat. It is the capacity to learn, adapt, and act together from one election to the next.

Recommendations

To Governments and Parliaments

1. Make follow-up on and implementation of election observation recommendations a routine part of electoral reform. Establish clear institutional responsibility for follow-up and act on recommendations throughout the electoral cycle.

2. Strengthen political finance rules to address third-party campaigning and new forms of online political activity. Use clear definitions, thresholds, and registration requirements that increase transparency without unnecessarily restricting legitimate civic participation and freedom of expression.

3. Guarantee legal protection and clearly defined access for credible citizen and international election observers. Accreditation and security requirements should not become barriers to legitimate observation.

To Election Management Bodies and Oversight Authorities

4. Establish a standing procedure for assessing observer recommendations after each election. Identify the institution responsible for each recommendation and develop concrete implementation proposals.

5. Maintain structured dialogue with citizen and international observers throughout the electoral cycle, including when they raise criticism or demand accountability. Establish consultation, information-sharing, and data-access arrangements well before elections, while maintaining clear and independent roles.

6. Prepare for hybrid threats before they materialise. Cooperate with relevant specialist agencies and civil society, conduct simulations and scenario planning, exchange experience with EMBs facing similar threats.

7. Strengthen political finance oversight. Provide responsible bodies with sufficient resources, expertise, and guidance needed to monitor online campaigning and emerging forms of political finance and detect misuse.

8. Fight Fake Election Observation. Strengthen internal regulations and procedures in order to avoid even unintended instrumentalization of international or domestic actors to whitewash falsified or poorly conducted elections.

To Citizen and International Election Observers

8. Coordinate and prioritise recommendations where possible and support them with concrete reform proposals. Use international standards as a common reference point while strengthening domestic ownership of reform.

9. Protect the credibility of election observation through evidence-based findings, transparent methodology, and continued methodological development. Adapt observation methods to political finance, digital campaigning, AI, information manipulation and other emerging threats to election integrity.

10. Strengthen cooperation between citizen and international observers. International observation should complement, not replace, domestic observation, while citizen observers provide continuity, local knowledge, and sustained engagement between elections.

11. **Defend electoral integrity through citizen outreach and mobilization**. Reach out and mobilize all groups of society with a particular focus on young people to broaden the understanding and acceptance of election observation, integrity, and the necessity of reforms.

To the EU and International Institutions

11. Use existing international and European mechanisms more systematically to drive implementation. Include election observation recommendations in EU accession roadmaps, progress assessments, and Rule of Law Reports, including on political finance.

12. Defend credible election observation when observers face restrictions, prosecution, or attacks. Coordinate responses to restrictions and refusals to invite observers, defend the right to conduct and report on election observation, and support practical solidarity with threatened organisations.

To Donors and Democracy-Supporting Partners

13. Provide sustained support for citizen observation, cross-border networks, and adaptation throughout the electoral cycle. Strengthen domestic observation capacity, enable organisations to maintain relationships and follow up on recommendations between elections and fund the testing, iteration, and sharing of new tools and approaches.