EU Electoral Observation Missions: an unshakeable witness watching over democracy worldwide

In long-standing democracies, where elections are held in an environment of ‘normality’, it is easy to forget how complex and fraught with pitfalls the process leading to the casting of the ballot can be. However, fraud, intimidation and violence, especially in fragile, post-conflict or developing regions, but also disinformation and the shrinking of political space remind us that everywhere in the world the expression of democracy through the holding of credible, transparent and inclusive elections is never a given. In this context, the EU Election Observation Missions (EU EOMs) play a fundamental role to assess how electoral processes in third countries comply with the international and regional standards for democratic elections that those countries have signed.
up to. Since 2000, 209 EU EOMs have been deployed in 78 countries from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. On the International Day of Democracy, it's a good moment to look at their valuable contribution to support democracy and promote human rights around the world.

"The European Union reaffirms its commitment towards democracy as a fundamental right of every human being", said the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini in an official statement to mark the date. "Every woman and every man has to be free to participate to the political, economic and social life of her or his country. No one should fear to speak up, to demonstrate peacefully, to go to vote or to expect fair and inclusive policies from a government".

Only in the last five years, EU electoral assistance has amounted for more than €250 million, allocated to deliver capacity-building, technical and material support to electoral processes in 50 countries. Electoral Observation Missions assess all aspects of an electoral process, including the legal framework, the delimitation of constituencies, the registration of voters and candidates, the training of election staff, voter education, media coverage, the campaign and preparations for the vote. On Election Day, the observers visit polling stations in order to assess the opening, voting, counting and aggregation of results.

"We don't look at the theory of what should happen in election, we look to see what is really happening on the ground", explains Hannah Roberts, a former Deputy Chief Observer in several EU EOMs. "Our role is not to interfere in the process in any way. We have no authority, we cannot guarantee or ensure anything, but we can be a witness. We can be an independent pair of eyes all across the country to look at what is really happening. By doing that, we can speak up to it, so the citizens themselves and the institutions can work out the best ways forward, the best ways for their own country".

After the elections, EU EOMs publish a final report with recommendations for improving the integrity and effectiveness of future electoral processes and the wider process of democratisation in the country. Currently, EU EOMs have been deployed to Tunisia for the presidential and legislative elections, scheduled for 15 September and 06 October 2019 respectively, to Kosovo for the legislative elections on 06 October and to Mozambique for the general elections on 15 October.
Partnering up with civil society to address press freedom, disinformation and electoral violence

"In Europe and elsewhere in the world, the erosion of civil liberties and different kinds of manipulation and disinformation, especially during electoral campaigns, are on the rise. Numerous pro-democracy movements and whistle-blowers continue to lead the way in standing up for democracy and to claim their civil and political rights", Mogherini stated.

Across the world, EU EOMs partner up with different civil society organisations to address issues that are essential to build trust on the political system in democratisation processes. "People who have faith in their democracy and in their ability to make change within the political system are much less likely to go to war, are much more likely to develop their country successfully", pointed out Jason Carter, from the Carter Center NGO, at the Conference on the Future of International Election Observation held in Brussels last year.

Defending press freedom and fighting against disinformation are at the forefront of European priorities when it comes to preserve electoral integrity. The EU supports investigative journalism worldwide and runs flagship programmes such as 'Media 4 Democracy' and 'Protect Defenders', focusing on freedom of expression and human rights activists at risk.

However, the ultimate battle is against the growing risk of interference and malicious manipulation of the public debate, both online and offline. In 2018, the EU adopted measures aimed at 'Securing Free and Fair European Elections' and agreed the Action Plan against Disinformation, to set standards to defend and safeguard democracy. Since March 2019, the Rapid Alert System, set up among the EU institutions and Member States, is active to help address foreign disinformation campaigns. On top of that, the EEAS East StratCom Task Force regularly produces communication materials aimed at empowering voters to better identify disinformation during electoral campaigns. Building on this work, a new methodology has been prepared to enable our election observation missions to observe the online aspects of the electoral campaign and this is now being piloted in a number of our current missions.

The EU also cooperates with civil society actors to tackle electoral violence against women and the youth. One of them is the Women Situation Room (WSR), which meets with politicians, traditional leaders and gangs in African countries "to make sure there is no electoral violence before, during and after the elections". "It's important that the gangs know that the peace of the country is truly in their hands", says Yvette Chesson-Wureh, the initiator of this peace-building project.

See also

Election observation missions (EUEOMs)
Election observation, a mission for democracy
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