



Joint Debate “Towards Trusted and Inclusive Electoral Processes: The Role of Observers”

Paris, 28-29 April 2026

Opening Speech by Marta Cartabia, *President of the Venice Commission*

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a true pleasure to address you today as President of the European Commission for Democracy through Law — the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe — at this important and timely debate: *“Towards Trusted and Inclusive Electoral Processes: the Role of Observers.”*

We meet at a crucial moment for democracy in Europe and beyond. This discussion forms part of the broader vision of the New Democratic Pact for Europe of the Council of Europe — a vision that stems from the challenges of our time and the responsibility we share to confront them.

Let me begin by warmly thanking our partners — the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. This event is the result of our shared commitment and longstanding cooperation, particularly within the Council for Democratic Elections — a unique tripartite body that brings together legal expertise and political experience in the service of a common goal: upholding the principles of Europe’s electoral heritage.

The cooperation between the Venice Commission, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress is rich and constructive.

The Venice Commission codifies, develops and safeguards internationally recognized standards — most notably through the *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters* — and constantly update them, to address emerging challenges, particularly those arising from digital technologies and foreign interference.

The Commission provides tailored legal opinions to our 61 member states, supporting them as they navigate increasingly complex and sensitive electoral issues.

Our opinions are at times triggered by the Parliamentary Assembly and by the Congress and are also taken up by these bodies in their work with the member states.

Our recent work — addressing, for example, the cancellation of election results by constitutional courts or measures to combat electoral corruption — illustrates how urgent, and how consequential, these questions have become.

The Commission supports the electoral management bodies, through targeted pre and post electoral missions often prepared in cooperation with the Parliamentary Assembly or the Congress.

The Commission also facilitates the sharing of experience and solutions within the framework of the Electoral management bodies conferences.

The Venice Commission contributes as legal advisor to the observation missions of the Parliamentary Assembly.

The Commission further assists in the upgrading of the national electoral rules, based on the shortcomings observed during election observation missions, notably by ODIHR.

The Commission greatly values this cooperation and is determined to pursue it and strengthen it. Today's event is yet another example of joining forces to assist our member states in finding solutions to new and unpredictable issues.

Dear participants,

Let me restate the obvious.

Elections matter. They stand at the heart of any democracy.

Today, in an age of democratic regression, they matter more than ever.

When they are free and fair, they empower citizens to choose their representatives and leaders, confer legitimacy to government, ensure the accountability of political leaders, promote transparency in public life, make political alternation possible, and ensure the peaceful transition of power.

How can we ensure that elections remain genuinely free, fair, and transparent in an age marked, on the one hand, by growing “democratic fatigue” among the citizens, if not outright indifference or mistrust, and, on the other hand, by hybrid threats, disinformation, and foreign interference?

Today more than ever, safeguarding the integrity of meaningful democratic elections demands vigilance. It demands a proactive and creative approach. It demands prevention and firm and rapid reaction.

This brings me to the heart of our discussion: election observation.

As has been emphasized by Albert Ramdin, the Secretary General of the Organisation of American States with which the Venice Commission cooperates closely including on election observation, “electoral observation is a fundamental democratic practice that reinforces transparency, builds trust and safeguards the will of the people. As recognized by the Inter-American Democratic Charter,

independent observation helps ensure that elections are not only free and fair, but also perceived as such, strengthening legitimacy and protecting democracy”. Election observation is a powerful instrument for maintaining, renovating and reconstructing trust between citizens and political institutions. The trust of citizens is essential to a vibrant democratic life. Without the trust of the people, democratic institutions become weaker and more vulnerable.

Electoral observation strengthens democratic trust in two ways: it serves as a *deterrent* against misconduct and as a *catalyst* for a more vibrant participation.

First, it deters fraud; exposes irregularities, abuses and violations of the electoral rules, both national and international, thus contributing to legality, transparency and accountability. It also deters and mitigates risks for election-related violence. In a word, it helps ensure electoral integrity.

Second, election observation fosters civic engagement. Citizens are more likely to participate when they know that elections take place in a safe and fair context. Moreover, when citizens come together to observe elections, they choose to engage in the election process, they report not only on how the authorities have behaved, but also on how the opposition has behaved, how all candidates have behaved. How the election campaign has been conducted, how the media have reported on it, how the social media have covered the elections – or influenced them for example, through disinformation campaigns.

Establishing an election process that is open to citizen and international observation is essential in a democracy, because citizens not only have the right to genuine elections, but they also have the right to know whether the free expression of the will of the voters has been safeguarded and whether the electoral results have respected the voters’ will.

Election observation is indeed in the interest of the public, but also of democratic governments, of all political contestants, as well as in the interest of the election management bodies, with which election observers cooperate.

Election observers are the watchdogs of electoral integrity and democracy.

Election observers are also human rights defenders, as the Venice Commission has affirmed in its recent report. They contribute to the protection of a wide range of those fundamental rights that are essential for democratic elections — including the right to vote, the right to stand for election, freedoms of expression, assembly and association, and the right of citizens to participate in public affairs, equal protection for voters and candidates and a right to an effective remedy.

Overall, impartial, accurate and professional election observation helps sustain democracy well beyond the election cycle.

But ensuring credible observation in today's difficult and changing environment is not an easy task.

In many countries, observers face legal and practical barriers that limit their ability to carry out their mission. In some cases, observation — whether domestic or international — is not even foreseen in national legislation. Elsewhere, the legal status of observers remains unclear, leaving critical questions about their rights, their access, and their protection unanswered.

At the same time, operational challenges are evolving rapidly. New voting methods — including out-of-country voting and digitalised processes — raise complex questions about transparency and oversight. Access to key stages of the electoral process may be restricted. And the logistical demands placed on observation missions continue to grow.

This is why our debate today is so important. We look forward to an open and constructive dialogue with all stakeholders: governments, electoral management bodies, parliamentarians, local authorities, civil society organizations, and both domestic and international observers.

Together, we wish to develop responses to the new challenges. Our aim today is to identify concrete ways forward — whether through strengthening national legal frameworks, enhancing practical cooperation and capacity-building, or refining international standards.

Our “Paris call”, based on the results of our discussions, is intended to ensure that our conclusions outlive this event and will be disseminated and implemented across all the democratic states.

Dear participants,

Trust cannot be legislated into existence.

It needs to be built and renewed day by day.

The contribution of independent, impartial, and professional election observers to this ongoing endeavour cannot be underestimated.

Let me conclude by reaffirming the Venice Commission's resolute commitment to our common goal, to the integrity of democracy.

Together with our partners in the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress, and in cooperation with all Council of Europe member States and international partners, we will continue working to safeguard the legal foundations of democratic elections in Europe. The strength of our democracies depends on the quality of our dialogue — and the determination of our collective action.

Thank you very much.