Ten years of international election assistance and observation

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Early 1990s euphoria
Ten years ago, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe established the Office for Free Elections (OFE), the predecessor of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), to ‘foster the implementation’ of the Copenhagen Document’s election-related commitments. The office opened for business in May 1991 with a staff of only two. Within a year, its responsibilities had been expanded beyond elections and the office became the ODIHR.

In those euphoric early 1990s, the New Europe foresaw a fresh era of ‘democracy, peace and unity’, where ‘the will of the people, freely and fairly expressed through periodic and genuine elections, is the basis of the authority and legitimacy of all government’. While the Charter of Paris foresaw these changes for the entire Euro-Atlantic space, the focus was obviously on the States still timidly starting their transition away from one-party rule or experimenting with ‘perestroika’ and ‘glasnost’. These transitions were accelerated and the Charter of Paris commitments were upheld early on in most Central European States, the Baltics, and in Slovenia, and were good indicators for the deeper changes at hand in the broader contexts of human rights, democratic institutions and good governance. Economic progress, though relative in most cases, was not late to follow these changes.

However, the Charter of Paris euphoria was short-lived as ‘peace and unity’ could not be maintained across the OSCE region and some rulers chose to ignore the will of the people they had so solemnly committed to uphold. Thus, one of the principal tenets of the Charter of Paris was flouted — the integral link between, on the one hand, intra-State peace and unity, or peace and stability and, on the other, democratic development. Not surprisingly, those who chose to ignore the will of the people in general were often the ones to also undermine, inter alia, the rights of minorities, and to pilfer economic opportunities.

This article briefly traces in the next section — ‘Observing the Electoral Process’ — ODIHR’s growth through its activities in the electoral field and its observation methodology. The experience of the OSCE field missions administering elections in the context of peace agreements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo is not covered in this article.

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1 Hrair Balian heads the OSCE/ODIHR election activities. The views expressed herein are the writer’s personal opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of the OSCE/ODIHR.
3 Charter of Paris, title of introductory paragraphs.
4 Copenhagen Document, para. 6.
5 For this, see: Helsinki Monitor 2000, Vol. 11, No. 4, Democratisation through supporting
Added’, the article looks at the objectives pursued with election observation missions, and follows in ‘The Road Travelled in the Past 10 Years’ with an analysis of regional trends observed during election observations in the transitional democracies. The ‘Lessons Learned’ section looks into the deteriorating environment for democratic elections in some regions and countries, in particular for civil society organisations, and concludes in the following section — ‘Pledge to Follow Up’ — that, without more serious and effective political follow up to election observation missions, the environment is not likely to improve in the foreseeable future. The article then focuses on ‘What Next for ODIHR’, detailing the institution’s plans for the years ahead. The article concludes in the final section that the institution ‘Needs to Redouble and Refocus Efforts’.

**Observing the election process**

In the early years, ODIHR could only deploy modest missions of one or two experts for a few days, documenting as best as possible both the progress and disappointments of developments, albeit in the limited field of elections.

Gradually, the resources available to ODIHR grew to accommodate the added responsibilities. From only two missions during the first year, observing only the election day, ODIHR could increase its short missions to as many as 10 by 1994, the year its mandate was expanded to include observations before, during and after the day of the election.⁶

Over time, ODIHR’s responsibilities were also expanded from election observation to include a broad range of human rights, monitoring developments in the field and promoting democracy through targeted and high-impact projects. While these broader ODIHR mandate and activities ultimately inform and influence its electoral activities and *vice versa*, this article is limited to the institution’s electoral mandate. With the expanded mandate of the institution, the staff grew from half a dozen in the early 1990s to over 80 today, including eight experts dedicated to election work. The methodology for election observation was lacking in those days and the output was not consistent. But, with the added responsibilities, the need for a consistent approach became more and more obvious. ODIHR developed this methodology by 1997, summarised in its Election Observation Handbook, or the ‘bluebook’.⁷

Thus, in advance of an election observation mission, ODIHR prepares an analysis of the legislative framework for elections and the broader human rights and political context. Once an election observation mission is established 5-6 weeks before election day, a team of experts deployed in the capital and in important regions monitor the registration of voters and candidates, the election

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