

**Statement of Laura Jewett
Regional Director for Eurasia Programs
National Democratic Institute**

before a briefing of the

**United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
on**

“International Election Observation: Why It Matters”

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Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker, distinguished Commissioners: I welcome the opportunity to share with you some reflections on the critical role that international election observation plays in promoting democracy and OSCE human dimension commitments, as well as defending U.S. national security.

International Observation and Democracy Promotion

Genuine democratic elections are a necessary condition for democratic governance. They are the vehicle through which citizens freely and lawfully express their will about who will have the right to govern in their name and interests.

International election observation serves multiple purposes. On one level, it provides an impartial and accurate assessment about the nature of electoral processes. This is valuable in itself. On another level, however, observation has the potential to shift the incentive structure in a more democratic direction. It introduces measures of accountability and transparency. These, in turn, encourage integrity and raise the costs of manipulation. It has the potential to enhance the quality of election processes, by deterring and exposing irregularities and fraud and by providing recommendations for improving electoral processes. It can promote public confidence, as warranted; promote electoral participation; and mitigate the potential for election-related conflict. It also serves to enhance international understanding through the sharing of experiences and information about democratic development. International observation has thus become widely accepted around the world as an invaluable ingredient in democratic elections, which are themselves critical to establishing legitimate, effective, and democratic governance.

Some have cynically drawn a false equivalence between international election observation and subversive election interference of the sort practiced by the Kremlin. As you know, over the past 15 years, the Russian government has waged a massive and aggressive campaign throughout

Eurasia to undermine nascent democratic institutions, including elections, and thwart aspirations for sovereignty and transatlantic solidarity. This campaign has only intensified in recent years, while expanding to target Europe and the US. The term “hybrid war” has been used to describe it. The weapons include espionage; cyberattacks; information attacks; export of corruption; financing of political parties, think tanks, academic institutions and nongovernmental organizations; coercive economic measures and energy policies; assassinations; and covert and overt military actions.

Make no mistake: international election observation has absolutely nothing in common with the malicious subterfuge that the Kremlin and other authoritarian aggressor states practice. To compare them is like saying that a doctor who prescribes a cure and a doctor who administers poison are morally equivalent because they both attended to the patient.

Credible international observation:

- defends citizens’ right to freely express their will
- holds dictators accountable
- is offered in response to requests from governments, parliaments, political parties, civic groups, and election administrators
- is conducted in full and open cooperation with local partners
- promotes participation, inclusion, transparency, integrity, and accountability in elections
- contributes to peace and stability
- helps citizens express their views and make informed political choices
- focuses on strengthening the process, not determining results

Kremlin election interference, in contrast:

- subverts citizens’ right to sovereignty over their own election
- benefits dictators
- is launched as a hostile act of warfare
- is conducted through subterfuge, espionage, fraud, conspiracy, cyberhacking, impairment and obstruction of justice, identity theft and impersonation, and disinformation
- sows division, tension, mistrust, confusion, and suspicion in political life
- is designed to exacerbate social division and internal conflict
- deceives citizens and crowds out their voices
- corrupts the process and seeks to alter outcomes in breach of voters’ will

There is no equivalence. It is critical that we distinguish clearly between our own democratic values and hostile efforts to have us abandon those principles.

International Election Observation and the OSCE

As the Commission knows well, international election observation accords with multiple international conventions, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the Copenhagen Document of the OSCE. The rights of citizens to vote and to be elected at periodic, genuine democratic elections are internationally recognized human rights. By the same token, international election observation is part of international human rights monitoring.

When the Copenhagen Document was drafted in 1990, there was an enthusiastic consensus for its broad-ranging commitments, including those focused on organizing democratic elections and accepting election observation as a means to improvement. Election observation among OSCE participating states is thus not a practice imposed by one country or organization on another, but rather fulfillment of a commitment freely entered into. This Commission, and Congress more broadly, play vital roles in creating a sense of accountability on these issues within the OSCE.

In its work around the world, NDI engages all of the major organizations that conduct impartial and effective international election observation. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have been the most active interparliamentary and intergovernmental organizations in observing elections, as well as leading forces in establishing norms, methodologies, and practices for ensuring the integrity of election observation.

NDI has worked with the OSCE, through ODIHR and the OSCE/PA, over the last three decades on electoral matters in every country in the OSCE region that has experienced a democratic transition. This collaboration includes providing commentaries on election laws, supporting the efforts of thousands of domestic nonpartisan election observers, enhancing the electoral participation of women and minorities, and, of course, conducting international election observation.

Democratic Elections and U.S. National Security

Genuine democratic elections serve to resolve peacefully the competition for political power within a country and thus are central to the maintenance of peace and stability. Where governments are legitimized through genuine democratic elections, the scope for non-democratic challenges to power is reduced.

In this interconnected and interdependent world, what happens for good or for bad within the borders of states has regional and, sometimes, global impact. We thus have a direct interest in how people live and how they are treated by their governments.

Our ultimate foreign policy goal is a world that is secure, stable, humane and safe, where the risk of war is minimal. Yet the reality is that hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are nondemocratic. Democracy assistance measures to support potential or struggling democratic transitions, including through election observation, align closely with a range of so-called “hard” foreign policy interests, such as limiting the reach of autocratic rivals, fighting terrorism, reducing international drug trafficking, and undercutting drivers of massive refugee flows.

Many of the OSCE participating states have become training grounds for hybrid warfare. It is thus in the US national security interest to help these countries build resilience so that they can be responsible partners in the community of democracies rather than incubators for global instability. The “hard interests” in the OSCE region demand a full commitment to democracy assistance, with elections at its core, as a minimal response to hybrid warfare and authoritarian aggression.

NDI’s Election Observation

Along with the ODIHR and OSCE/PA and 53 other organizations, NDI has endorsed the [Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation](#). My NDI colleague, Patrick Merloe, was one of the Declaration’s key negotiators. Its 24 paragraphs and accompanying Code of Conduct provide a detailed approach to safeguarding the integrity of election observation.

Over the past five years, NDI has conducted international election observation activities in 15 countries around the world, including Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine among OSCE participating states. Importantly, during the same period, NDI has supported citizen election observation efforts in more than 40 countries, including Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania within the OSCE region. With networks of thousands of professionally trained observers, these domestic groups have the depth and reach to provide genuinely authoritative assessments of the quality of election processes and, often, the accuracy of the announced results. They are critical partners to international observers, with the added advantage that they offer avenues for constructive citizen participation in the process along with sustainability of election accountability measures.

Over the past twelve months, I have been closely involved in six international election missions: pre-election assessments to Moldova and Ukraine as well as observation of two rounds each of Georgia’s and Ukraine’s presidential elections.

Georgia held first and second rounds of a presidential election in October and November 2018. NDI found that voting procedures were largely orderly and concluded that the results reflected the will of voters. However, the period between the two rounds, in particular, was divisive and marked by incidents of violence, reports of intimidation, and other practices that violated the spirit, and arguably the letter, of election laws. Campaign rhetoric grew even more aggressive and hostile before the runoff, with messages of fear and threats of instability. The election lacked constructive debate on ideas, values, or visions for the presidency. Allegations of attempted vote buying and abuse of state resources were prominent.

Moldova held parliamentary elections in February 2019. In December 2018, NDI conducted an assessment of the pre-election environment. The delegation noted that Moldova can and should be a success story for democracy in the region, given its competitive and pluralistic political environment, proven capacity to conduct genuine elections, and motivated voters. However, the delegation was struck that Moldovans' confidence in political institutions and processes had declined, alongside a sense that hard-fought achievements were eroding. The delegation offered a series of recommendations for improving the process in advance of election day. The ODIHR final report on the election concluded that "elections were competitive and fundamental rights were generally respected." However, "the campaign took place against the backdrop of disaffection with public institutions and was tainted by allegations of pressure on public employees, strong indications of vote buying and the misuse of state resources. Control and ownership of the media by political actors limited the range of viewpoints presented to voters.

Ukraine held a presidential election over two rounds in March and April 2019. Both rounds of the election were genuinely competitive. Voters turned out in large numbers. Election administrators performed professionally. The process met key international standards and the outcome reflected the will of voters. It was in many ways historic. At the same time, although the country's electoral systems stood the test of the presidential campaign, the process highlighted numerous vulnerabilities, including shortcomings in the electoral framework, abuses of resources and power, oligarchic domination of the media and campaign finance, failures to promote equality between men and women and inclusion of marginalized groups, and disinformation in the media.

No election is perfect and the Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian balloting were not exceptions to this rule. Each had positive and negative aspects. In Ukraine's case, the election seemed to mark a democratic step forward, while in Georgia and Moldova the assessment is more mixed, at best. In all three cases, though, international election observation has provided us with a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the quality of those processes and has been valuable for that purpose alone. Unfortunately, we lack the tools to measure conclusively

whether or how any particular election *improved* as a result of an international observation mission.

We do know, however, that insufficient political will to make improvements and low public confidence are among the most common challenges facing elections in the OSCE region, and that these two factors can feed on each other in a vicious cycle. The problem is rarely, if ever, one of technical competence or capacity. To the extent there were problems in the Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian elections, they were not really with the electoral framework or administration. The problems were with government and political leaders who valued their political agendas over the integrity of the process, and this in turn caused voters to lose trust.

We also know that international observation, combined with robust domestic monitoring, *can* generate political will where it is lacking and *does* contribute to public confidence where it is warranted. In the scheme of foreign assistance, these initiatives are very low-cost investments with potentially high-value returns.

Democracy assistance as a defense against authoritarian aggression in the OSCE region remains an essential investment in sovereignty, stability and global security. International election observation is an absolutely critical element in that equation.