

## **International vs. Domestic Observers** **Advantages and Disadvantages for both and Impact on Elections**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Taking advantage of this opportunity the Youth Center for Democratic Initiatives NGO has specific recommendations addressed to OSCE/ODIHR and the Government of Armenia for improving the quality of domestic and international observation missions.

Before moving on, there is a need to define the types of domestic observation missions. Experience shows that domestic missions can be grouped into at least two categories, namely pro-government missions usually with public officials, school headmasters and village or town mayors in charge. Observers here are teachers, doctors or other public servants whose jobs may be threatened or who could be exposed to public leverages. A good example of such a GoNGO (that is, a government NGO) is the Armenian mission "It's Your Choice." The second group of missions consists of impartial and objective organizations primarily organized by human rights NGOs.

Domestic organizations and missions possess valuable local knowledge, knowledge of the area, people, influences, linkages, knowledge on ways of bypassing election-related or other regulations, sharing of which will considerably improve the quality of foreign observation missions. On the other hand, international observers possess professional and legal knowledge on OSCE/ODIHR commitments, international laws and regulations that may add great value to domestic observation missions.

The current shortfalls in the electoral processes in Armenia allow the ill-practices described below to prosper without restraints.

During the last presidential elections in 2008, a number of domestic observers have been forcibly removed from polling stations, accused for reporting irregularities in electoral commissions, experienced intimidations and threatening, and could not in many cases intensify the sense of responsibility of commission members. Numerous specific examples have been reported during the 2008 Armenian presidential elections by almost all international observation missions, so consulting these reports would be more useful than listing of one or two examples here that I am afraid would not show the wide spread scales of violations and irregularities.

Since the foreign observers work through interpreters and assistants the quality of interpretation, the level of interpreters' legal awareness and the issue of their personal security during and after elections directly affect the quality of observation. Unfortunately, one may also meet incompetent or largely indifferent observers who just come as tourists, having no real connection to the purpose of election observation mission.

The lack of communication between the OSECE/ODIHR observation missions and the local civil society and human rights groups allows the Armenian government to be less accountable to the wider public and to question the level of awareness of foreign missions. The overall picture is sometimes not clear for observers for making more accurate judgments on the observed processes. The lack of more proactive management of resources does not allow facilitating and coordinating observation tasks, taking prompt action in response to emergency situations, and preventing potential violations. There is very limited exchange of practical information between the domestic

and international observation missions that could help increase observers' overall legal and professional awareness and decrease their vulnerability.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Considering the issues mentioned above, we suggest combining the advantages of both domestic and international observation missions, thereby eliminating the disadvantages of both. Our recommendations to the OSCE/ODHR and member states are as follows:

- 1. Provide security and protection measures to the domestic observation missions, thus granting them a special status during the whole period of elections. That would then push OSCE states adopt regulatory changes, such as providing immunity from prosecution for fulfilling their observation duties or other measures guaranteeing the security of observers and their access to justice.**
- 2. Establish ongoing communication between the domestic and international observation missions and local civil society and human rights groups, as well as require electoral reports and other statements on the progress of democratization be confirmed by independent missions.**
- 3. Better assess the level of recruited interpreters and assistants in terms of their educational background, political and legal awareness, and knowledge of the election code, to ultimately select more qualified interpreters and assistants, while not forgetting about the professionalism of foreign observers.**
- 4. Conduct training sessions on OSCE/ODIHR observation standards, OSCE commitments, and OSCE/ODIHR code of conduct for observers, interpreters and assistants. Also, have the local observation groups provide orientation for the OSCE/ODIHR long-term and short-term observers to eliminate their unawareness of local issues:**

The suggested approaches are based on 13 years' experience in elections and in cooperation with OSCE/ODIHR and other foreign election observation missions. This partnership could prevent potential violations and falsifications in all stages of the electoral process and increase the presence of observers at more polling sites, constraining potential violations of electoral norms.

## **FURTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER**

OSCE/ODIHR missions have to stick to adopted standards while observing elections and issuing statements. The missions should also avoid using double standards and succumbing to political pressures. This type of deviation from OSCE standards and the lack of consistency in reporting:

- affects the level of public trust in member states and harms OSCE's reputation,
- deepens the public's apathy and weakens their belief in change,
- promotes corrupt practices and fuels the sense of impunity among the falsifiers.

Frequently changing the tone of initial statements and publishing extra interim reports, as was the case after the Armenian presidential elections in 2008, undermine the seriousness and weight of these statements as they become subject to the criticism of all parties involved. A loss of clarity in reporting and public statements allows for vague interpretations, which result in more confusion instead of giving more answers. Unfortunately, these and other similar reasons, such as accusations

in fueling revolutions, prompted some CIS countries to start a petition against OSCE/ODIHR election observation missions, which has been strongly condemned by the civil society of those countries. The civil society calls for eradication of the discussed deficiencies to recover the OSCE/ODIHR's reputation and help the member states develop democratic institutions.

Thank you!