

PART I

Creating strong democratic institutions based on rule of law to increase public trust

With widespread challenges to democracy and rule of law, backsliding on gender equality and inclusion, and the continued decline of public trust in democratic institutions in many parts of the OSCE region, ODIHR supports participating States in ensuring ethical and effective parliaments, an independent judiciary and genuinely democratic elections.

The following impact stories illustrate the wide variety of ways in which ODIHR helps to strengthen democratic institutions and make them more representative, accessible and trustworthy.



1.1

20 years of ODIHR legislative assistance

For two decades, ODIHR has played a pivotal role in advancing human rights-compliant legislation and in strengthening democratic lawmaking processes across the OSCE region. Since the establishment of its Legislative Support Unit in 2004, ODIHR has provided legislative assistance upon the request of nearly 40 countries in over 500 [legal reviews](#) and 14 [legislative process assessments](#). The number of new requests each year remains high and they come from a growing range of participating States from across the OSCE region. This work has strengthened the rule of law, worked against the trend towards democratic backsliding and improved legislative practices to help countries meet human rights standards, and rule of law and democratic principles.

Through its nine sets of [legislative guidelines](#) and legal reviews, ODIHR has addressed critical issues across the OSCE space. ODIHR legal reviews look not only at the content of laws, but also at the drafting and consultation process, which directly impacts the quality of the legislation. Twenty years ago, ODIHR also started assessing lawmaking systems and processes to identify entry points for improving elements of legislative processes, eventually to adopt better laws. By treating the legislative process as a cycle, from policy setting through to monitoring and evaluation, ODIHR's methodology promotes openness, transparency and inclusivity at every stage. Building on this experience, ODIHR's 2024 [Guidelines on Democratic Lawmaking for Better Laws](#) serve

Key areas of legislative assistance

Geographical coverage of requests for legislative assistance

Judicial independence and the rule of law	Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Poland, Spain, Ukraine and Uzbekistan
Electoral and political party reform	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan
Violence against women and anti-trafficking	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine
Restrictions to the right to freedom of association	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan
Restrictions to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan
Restrictions to the right to freedom of religion or belief	Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan
National Human Rights Institutions legislation	Armenia, Bulgaria, Iceland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia, Switzerland, Sweden, Ukraine and Uzbekistan
Anti-corruption and public integrity	Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan



Polish Justice Minister Adam Bodnar, speaking at an ODIHR side event at the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference, 4 October 2024

“

ADAM BODNAR
Polish Minister of Justice

ODIHR’s legal reviews are of immense significance, particularly in the context of ongoing efforts to uphold the rule of law and ensure the integrity of the judicial system in Poland. Their thorough analysis and recommendations play a crucial role in informing policy decisions and legal reforms aimed at preserving the impartiality and effectiveness of our judiciary. ODIHR’s commitment to promoting judicial independence and integrity is evident in the quality and depth of their work and we are grateful for ODIHR’s expert guidance on such critical issues.”

2024 ODIHR Legislative Assistance

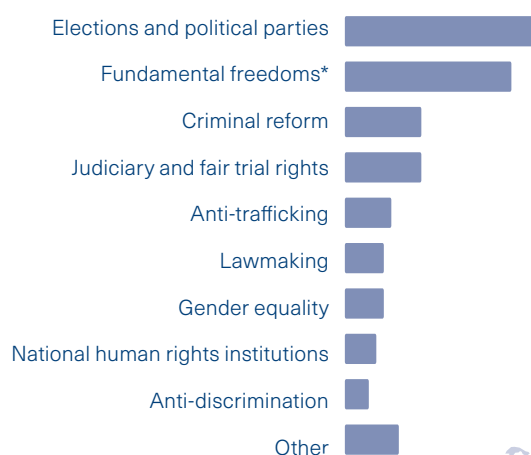
- Received 33 requests for assistance
- Finalized 26 legal reviews and assessments for 10 participating States (6 urgent) including:
 - Five reviews for Poland, including an urgent Opinion on the reform of the National Council of the Judiciary and an analysis of the proposed reform of the Constitutional Tribunal
 - Urgent Opinions connected to respect for fundamental freedoms, including: Draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in Georgia; Public Security Bill in Italy; amendments to the Criminal Code in Cyprus aiming to re-criminalize defamation; and proposed amendments to restrict the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Slovakia
 - An Opinion advising against the removal of gender quotas in Georgia
- Support to structural reform in Moldova (parliamentary reform and integrity/ethics of MPs) and in Montenegro (electoral reform/political party legislation and regulatory reform)

20 Years of ODIHR legislative assistance

Since 2004, ODIHR has carried out more than **500** legal reviews at the request of **38** OSCE participating States

What topics did we cover?

% of requests overall



Who requested our legal reviews?

% of requests overall



*Fundamental freedoms such as religion or belief, assembly, association and expression.



as a practical toolkit for lawmakers, grounded in OSCE human dimension commitments and international human rights and rule of law standards.

This assistance has led to better-informed decision-making and improved legislative and policy options, and enhanced lawmaking overall. It has also often raised the level of public debate on complex human rights, democratic governance and rule of law issues. By focusing on the compliance of key legal reforms with OSCE commitments and human rights standards, ODIHR's reviews and assessments can foster enhanced dialogue between society, human rights defenders and legislative authorities.

The establishment of ODIHR's Legislative Support Unit 20 years ago was a milestone in the Office's development, enabling ODIHR to provide coherent, sustainable support to participating States. Today, ODIHR's legislative assistance is trusted by governments, parliaments, NHRIs and civil society across the region, with requests rising substantially in recent years. ODIHR's legal reviews and legislative guidelines are regularly cited in international and national forums, including in the caselaw of the European Court of Human Rights, the European Commission's Rule of Law Reports and the UN Special Rapporteurs' publications, further demonstrating the lasting influence of its work.



Nadiya Sirenko, ODIHR Legislative Support Officer, presenting the ODIHR *Guidelines on Democratic Lawmaking for Better Laws* (2024) at the “Parliaments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Citizens: Towards a successful partnership” event organized by the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, 5 December 2024

1.2

Listening to survivors

ODIHR's Ukraine Monitoring Initiative (UMI) has collected testimonies from witnesses of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law since the very early stages of the invasion by the Russian Federation in Ukraine and, by the end of 2024, had conducted 491 interviews. Throughout this time, the UMI team continued to refine its interviewing and data-collection methodology. Adapting to the ever-shifting conditions on the ground, while ensuring respect for fundamental monitoring principles at all times, makes interviewing witnesses a complex endeavour.

Each monitoring mission is based on the principle of 'do no harm'. This principle is of paramount importance and is the point of departure for all the mission's activities, beginning far ahead of a deployment. For example, ahead of missions UMI team members look for interview venues that ensure witnesses will come to a space that is private and guarantees confidentiality, is easily accessible, is comfortable and has an air raid shelter.

Next, the team contacts potential witnesses to verify their suitability for interview. As this is the first contact witnesses will have with a UMI representative, the team has a great responsibility to respect the 'do no harm' principle. They need to develop a rapport and trust with the witnesses swiftly, often over the telephone and hundreds of kilometres away.

UMI monitors come from different backgrounds, often multi-disciplinary, but all have experience in interviewing displaced people, victims of crimes

or members of vulnerable groups. Operating in a two-person team, with a lead interviewer and second interviewer/note taker, together with an interpreter, they conduct two interviews per day, using a trauma-informed approach. In the course of approximately nine consecutive days, monitors conduct more than 30 interviews, each lasting anywhere between one and seven hours.

All monitors aim to make witnesses feel safe, build trust, ensure they have ongoing informed consent, and to empower the witness. At the same time, the experience they have had is only one of the innumerable ways in which witnesses differ: their age and gender, background, psychological readiness and state of health, motivation and narrative skills, for example, all influence how an interview is conducted. The skill of the monitor lies in their ability to account for these differences.

The interviews give witnesses the opportunity to be listened to. Often, witnesses have not had a chance to tell their stories, even at a personal level with family or acquaintances. They often express their gratitude openly for having been given such an opportunity, with some commenting on how the interview has lifted a weight off their shoulders. One of the most satisfying developments is when a referral comes to the UMI team as a result of one person being interviewed and relaying that experience to others. While ODIHR's UMI has conducted nearly 500 interviews, it is not possible to interview all those who want to provide their testimony.

“

ANTONIO POLIMENI
Monitoring Team Leader

Our colleagues on the ground play a crucial role: it is no easy task to prepare a witness to come for interview with people they do not know, in a place they are not familiar with, and to speak about traumatic experiences. And it certainly takes an incredible amount of courage on the side of the witnesses to provide testimony. Due to the limited time we have on the ground, I am often asked, by the local team responsible for identifying potential witnesses for us, who to prioritize for interview. Personally, I dread this moment every time — it is not possible to say that one story matters more or less than another.”



OSCE/Marine Constant



OSCE/Marine Constant

Borodyanka, Ukraine, July 2022

Ukraine Monitoring Initiative

The Ukraine Monitoring Initiative (UMI) was set up in 2022 to monitor reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the context of the war in Ukraine, and focuses on the most pressing issues impacting the lives of civilians and prisoners of war. During 2024, ODIHR conducted seven separate monitoring deployments to interview Ukrainian witnesses and survivors. During these deployments, fourteen monitoring teams interviewed 181 people about the violations they experienced or witnessed. Information collected through in-person interviews was complemented by remote monitoring, including verification of digital evidence.

ODIHR published the UMI's *Fifth* and *Sixth* Interim Reports in July and December respectively, providing OSCE participating States and the wider public with up-to-date and well-documented evidence of violations. The reports centred on specific issues focused on by witnesses and survivors during their interviews, giving prominence to their voices. They also contained updated recommendations aimed at preventing further violations.

ODIHR's Trauma-informed interviewing e-Learning course

ODIHR's Trauma-Informed Interviewing: Skills and Techniques for Monitors e-Learning course, available on [FreedomLab](https://freedomlab.org), in English, Russian and Ukrainian languages, has seen a steady rise in user engagement. Since its launch in mid-2023, 238 feedback forms have been submitted by registered users, while a far higher number of people have used the course without registering, demonstrating the ongoing impact of this course for human rights defenders working across the region.



“

FEEDBACK FROM REGISTERED COURSE USER IN 2024

My understanding of trauma-informed interviewing has improved significantly as a result of this training. It has deepened my ability to create a safe space for individuals to share their experiences and provided me with practical tools to navigate sensitive conversations with empathy and precision. This training has not only enhanced my professional skills but also reinforced the importance of approaching each interview with respect and awareness of the unique challenges faced by those who have experienced trauma.”

1.3

Observing the 2024 European Parliament elections

ODIHR deployed a special election assessment mission (SEAM) to the 2024 European Parliament elections, following an invitation by all the European Union Member States to observe.

The observation of these elections presented ODIHR with a number of unique challenges, as there were effectively 27 different national elections to a supra-national body. They were administered nationally and conducted on the basis of 27 different sets of election rules, with only a few EU-wide rules that all Member States are obliged to follow. The format chosen for this mission was tailored to its specific scale and nature, and enabled the Office to meaningfully follow these elections while taking into account the Office's resource constraints.

The mission observed the entirety of the European Parliament elections and assessed the conduct of the elections for their compliance with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections, as well as with national legislation across all 27 EU Member States. Expert teams visited 20 of the EU Member States in the run-up to election day.

The mission was headed by Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir and consisted of seven international experts based in Brussels, as well as ten regional analysts deployed in teams of two across the EU. The team focused on a number of specific electoral issues:

- Practical implementation of European and national legal frameworks
- Controls on party and campaign finance
- Monitoring social networks
- Voter and candidate registration
- Participation of under-represented groups: women, youth, national minorities, persons with disabilities
- Participation of citizen observers and international observers

The observation mission's findings and conclusions aim to help participating States and EU institutions improve their electoral processes for the benefit of their citizens. Constructive recommendations are made in the spirit of working towards the fulfilment of shared OSCE commitments.

To maintain productive dialogue with the authorities and discuss ways in which the Office can assist in implementing recommendations, ODIHR presented its final report on the elections at the meeting of the European Co-Operation Network on Elections, a network that brings together election administration officials for a concrete and practical exchange. Key recommendations can be found in the [final report](#). ODIHR stands ready to support all EU Member States in their efforts to improve their electoral processes and to follow up on ODIHR's recommendations, by reviewing election-related legislation, providing technical expertise and supporting the activities of citizen observer groups.



INGIBJÖRG SÓLRÚN GÍSLADÓTTIR
Head of the Special Election
Assessment Mission

The European Parliament plays an important role in the EU's legislative process and its decisions affect close to 450 million EU citizens, making up almost half of the OSCE participating States. Our mission provided a meaningful and systematic assessment of the diverse ways individual EU Member States conduct the elections to the European Parliament and also contributed to ODIHR's efforts to follow electoral developments across the entire OSCE area, including in those countries with a long tradition of holding democratic elections.



“

MARIE-HELENE BOULANGER

Head of Unit, Union Citizenship and Free Movement (Democracy), European Commission Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers

The observation of the 2024 elections to the European Parliament by ODIHR provided important information on the conduct of these elections. We look forward to continuing the very fruitful cooperation with ODIHR on elections-related topics, in view of fostering democratic values and in particular in view of supporting the integrity and transparency of democratic electoral processes.”



Monitoring the European Parliament Election monitoring in Brussels, Belgium, 6-9 June 2024



Monitoring the European Parliament Election monitoring in Brussels, Belgium, 6-9 June 2024

In February, ODIHR published the new edition of its *Handbook for the Observation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Elections*. With almost all OSCE participating States using some form of ICT during elections, the handbook can also be used as guidance to ensure ICT is introduced and used in the election process fully in line with democratic standards and principles. This edition of the handbook updates the ODIHR methodology for the observation and assessment of ICT used during voting and counting processes and includes new aspects such as electronic registration, verification of voters and candidates, and cybersecurity.



ODIHR's 2024 election journey

23

pre-election needs assessment visits to countries across the OSCE region, leading to...

15

election observations with 22 press conferences conducted in...

32

OSCE states, including 20 EU countries for the European Parliamentary Elections

2,476

observers deployed from 50 participating States including...

1,159

women

59

election reports...

325

recommendations and a...

new

handbook on observation of ICT in elections

10

follow-up visits to assist countries in implementing ODIHR recommendations

1.4

Promoting inclusive leadership

ODIHR marked an historic milestone in 2024 when the Office contracted Helga Stevens as the Head of its Election Assessment Mission to the United Kingdom parliamentary elections in July. Ms. Stevens, a member of ODIHR's Advisory Panel on the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities and a former Member of the European Parliament, is deaf and is the first person with a disability to lead an ODIHR election observation mission and brought her extensive experience as a politician and advocate for accessibility and inclusion to the mission.

This appointment underlined ODIHR's commitment to inclusive leadership and the Office's broader efforts to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities across the OSCE region. Through initiatives such as the [eLearning course](#) on disability-inclusive political participation, the [Recommendations on the Rights of Persons with](#)

Disabilities to Participate in Political and Public Life in the OSCE Region (Dublin Recommendations) and the cutting-edge disability assessment methodology for parliaments, ODIHR has been at the forefront of breaking down barriers and ensuring that those with disabilities are not only included in decision-making processes but can lead them.

The success of this mission showcases the expertise and lived experience of leaders like Ms. Stevens. It also demonstrates the importance of sustained advocacy, strategic partnerships and networks such as ODIHR's [Advisory Panel on the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities](#). The appointment highlights that disability inclusion requires not just accessibility measures but also targeted action to remove systemic barriers and ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of democratic governance.



“

HELGA STEVENS

Head of the ODIHR Election Assessment Mission to the United Kingdom parliamentary elections

It was a real honour to lead the ODIHR Election Assessment Mission to the UK in June 2024, and I believe that my experience and views enriched the ODIHR report on the UK elections.”



Election Assessment Mission to the United Kingdom, 19 June to 8 July 2024

1.5

Transforming national parliaments to deliver on gender equality



Participants of the gender audit in the National Assembly of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 September 2024

National parliaments are democratic institutions like no other, with the potential to represent the full diversity of society. The composition of parliaments may reflect different groups in society: women and men, old and young, students, working people and pensioners, people with or without disabilities, and different ethnic groups. But parliaments should not just be representative in their makeup. They should represent the diverse needs and interests that exist in society, which need to be reflected both in lawmaking and in parliamentary oversight.

In 2024, ODIHR continued to work with parliaments across the OSCE region, supporting them in advancing gender equality, both within parliament and in wider society. As part of its direct assistance to national

parliaments, ODIHR completed a gender equality assessment of the National Assembly of Slovenia and conducted a gender audit of the National Assembly of Serbia (supported by the OSCE Mission to Serbia). Additionally, ODIHR worked with the Assembly of Albania (supported by the OSCE Presence in Albania) and the Parliament of Latvia, launching gender audits of these two parliaments. The focus of these gender equality assessments is not just looking at whether representation in the parliament (including parliamentary committees, delegations and leadership) is gender balanced. Even more important is the work on reviewing the lawmaking and parliamentary oversight processes from a gender equality perspective. The assessments include recommendations to parliaments on

how they can ensure the different needs and interests of society are better reflected in legislation and in the implementation of the law.

ODIHR also partnered with the OSCE Mission to Skopje in 2024 to support the Assembly of North Macedonia in developing its third parliamentary gender equality action plan for the period 2025-2027. One of only a few parliaments in the world to have such a plan, the Assembly of North Macedonia has set ambitious new goals. These include the establishment of a gender equality unit within the parliamentary administration, a review of its Code of Conduct from a gender equality perspective, and the drive to increase the engagement of male parliamentarians in gender equality initiatives.



“

ALEKSANDAR MARKOVIĆ

Chair, Committee for Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality, National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia

Advancing women’s representation has been an important aim for our parliament over the last decade. ODIHR’s support in conducting a gender audit of the National Assembly has helped us to identify the biggest challenges, especially on how we can improve our lawmaking and oversight activities.”



“

ZHAKLINA PESHEVSKA

Chair, Committee for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men, Member of Parliament, Assembly of North Macedonia

Making our parliament deliver for all women and men is a long-term goal. Our third action plan will guide the Sobranie in advancing women’s representation and making laws for the benefit of all.”



Participants of the gender audit in the National Assembly of Serbia, including (2nd from right) Tatjana Macura, Serbian Government Minister for Gender Equality, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 September 2024

ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly also completed a research project on parliamentary bodies for gender equality. Forty-eight national parliaments from the OSCE region took part, enabling the project to understand and learn from the work, mandate and results of both formal bodies (such as parliamentary committees) and informal bodies (such as women’s caucuses). The results of this comprehensive, two-year research were published in December, in *Parliamentary bodies for gender equality – Overview and recommendations*. This is the third tool in ODIHR’s new series, the *Gender-responsive Governance toolkit*.



Alongside ODIHR’s direct support to parliaments on gender equality, the Office continued its work on addressing violence against women in politics with the Russian translation of the *Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region: Toolkit*. Additionally, ODIHR created a training course from the Toolkit, which was piloted with members of North Macedonia’s parliament and parliamentary staff in October, under the auspices of ODIHR’s ‘CHANGE’ project. MPs and staff learned about practical measures and tools that can be used, at individual and institutional levels, to prevent and address violence against women in politics and, specifically, in parliament.



1.6

Building resilience in the election observation community to meet new challenges

In November, ODIHR hosted organizations from across the globe to discuss emerging challenges in international election observation, exchange good practices and explore new tools.

The Declaration of Principles (DoP) for International Election Observation was created in 2005 to establish a set of common principles and ethics to build the confidence of governments, media and the wider public in the credibility of election observers' assessments. ODIHR was among the first organizations to endorse the DoP and has been an active member ever since in what has become a vibrant community.

One key concern raised at this year's meeting was the potential

impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on elections. While harmful instances of the use of AI in elections have been sporadic so far, rapidly advancing generative AI technologies could amplify disinformation and manipulate the information space in the coming years, affecting election campaigns and eroding public trust. By sharing research, information and methodologies, DoP organizations can learn from the experiences of others, including in regions outside their own.

Another issue on the agenda was the effort to make observation missions more inclusive of people with disabilities, where ODIHR was able to share its own progress. Recognizing that in order to be serious about observing inclusion, organizations

need to first ensure that their own practices meet high standards, ODIHR examined the accessibility of its election observation activities over the past five years. This covered issues such as observer recruitment policies, procurement processes and the availability of information and training in accessible formats. Among those presenting was Helga Stevens, the first head of an international election mission with a disability, who led the Election Assessment Mission to the 2024 United Kingdom Parliamentary Elections.

The DoP celebrates its 20th anniversary in New York in 2025. Since inception, it has grown from about 20 to more than 50 of the leading organizations from five continents.



2024 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation conference, Gdańsk, Poland, 20-22 November 2024



Democratic echoes in Gdańsk

As organizers of this year's DoP meeting, ODIHR choice of venue reflected ODIHR's democratic values. It was held at the site of the Gdańsk shipyard in Poland, from where Lech Wałęsa put the Solidarity trade union movement in the 1980s on the path towards the first democratic elections in Poland after Communism, becoming president of Poland in 1990.

Former President Wałęsa opened the meeting, setting an inspirational tone for the rest of the event, while also warning of the current threats to democracy. In addition, the City of Gdansk hosted DoP participants in the city museum for a presentation by prizewinning British-Polish photographer Chris Niedenthal, who documented many key political moments in the region before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.



2024 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation conference, Gdańsk, Poland, 20-22 November 2024



“

DAVID CARROLL

Director of the Carter Center's Elections Program and one of the DoP's founders

We are all working in different places, regions and institutions, but we need to communicate to ensure we approach elections consistently. The challenges to democracy are growing stronger, and, as a community, we must meet them — ‘though it's becoming more difficult.’



“

BRIZZA ROSALE

Executive Director, Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)

Democratic backsliding is regrettably a growing trend, so we need to hear also from the best practitioners from across the globe on how international election observation serves as a form of resilience building and an early warning system for potential backsliding.”

“

AS ONE PARTICIPANT PUT IT

It's not every day that you get to meet both a Nobel Peace Prize-winner and a World Press Photo Prize-winner on the same day!”

1.7

Enhancing criminal justice reform: Central Asia Criminal Justice Forum 2024

The Expert Forum on Criminal Justice for Central Asia is a biennial event that provides a platform for dialogue among criminal justice professionals and other stakeholders: judges, prosecutors, attorneys, representatives of penitentiary and probation institutions, civil society and international experts on good practices and human rights-compliant policies and reform initiatives in the field of criminal justice. This, the ninth forum, took place in Astana, Kazakhstan in November, bringing together over 200 participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Plenary sessions were held on the topic of women and justice as well as on digitalizing criminal justice systems, which explored new aspects and challenges such as the ethics of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the criminal justice system, or the protection of human rights and data protection when using AI in case management in criminal justice.

Participants focused on recent trends and ongoing reforms, changes to criminal procedure in Central Asia, and their impact specifically on the right to a fair trial and on criminal justice systems overall. Topics along the entire criminal justice chain were discussed, from arrest, through investigation and interrogation and the digitalization process in the area of criminal justice, to court proceedings and alternatives to imprisonment.

Organized in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Regional Office for Central Asia (OHCHR), the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime in Central Asia (UNODC), the United Nations Development Programme Hub for Regional for Europe and Central Asia (UNDP), the Legal Policy and Research Center (LPRC), and Dignity Kazakhstan, and supported by the OSCE Programme Offices in Astana, Bishkek and Dushanbe, the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat and the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan, the event enabled an in-depth assessment of new developments in the criminal justice system.

The Ninth Forum underscored the importance of sustained dialogue and trust-building among stakeholders. One key takeaway was the need for more inclusive participation, particularly from women and minority groups, whose voices are often under-represented in justice reform processes. While experts recognized the importance of merit-based recruitment in criminal justice systems, they stressed the importance of continuing to implement measures that ensure better gender balance and the representation of minorities.

The Criminal Justice Forum is an example of how collaborative action can create lasting change, promoting justice systems that are fair, inclusive and accountable. This includes discussions on emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or



“

MADINA SARIEVA

Head of the UNODC Regional Office for Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran and Pakistan

Over the course of the Forum, we had the privilege of engaging in meaningful discussions on a wide range of issues, from legal reforms and the promotion of fair trial standards to the digitalization of criminal justice systems and the empowerment of female justice sector professionals. The Forum also gave us another opportunity to reflect on the benefits of developing probation services and other non-custodial measures, as well as to exchange experiences in developing programmes for the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders into society.”



“

GULCHEHRA KHOLMATOVA

Defence lawyer and Director of 'The World of Law', Tajikistan

The Forum on Criminal Justice for Central Asian Countries is a significant and necessary platform for us human rights defenders. At this Forum, we learned about the reforms and achievements in the criminal justice system carried out by our neighbours. The exchange of contacts, study of successful experience and possible implementation of similar reforms in Tajikistan is one of the important results of the Forum.”



“

ASLAMBEK MERGALIYEV

Chairman of the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan strongly believes in ensuring a balanced system, aimed at respecting and protecting the rights of everyone involved in the process. In Kazakhstan, there has been a steady decline over the last 30 years in the share of those sentenced to actual imprisonment from 60 per cent to 38 per cent, and the use of alternative measures to imprisonment.”

the aftermath of the January 2022 protests, as well as the importance of clear legislation for such situations. While there have been a number of positive developments in the field of criminal justice in Central Asia in recent years, restrictions on fundamental rights have undermined reform efforts. The lack of guarantees to ensure the independence of the judiciary and fair trial rights remains among the main challenges to the effective functioning of criminal justice systems in the region.

ODIHR will continue to support Central Asian countries in implementing and monitoring their commitments with regards to criminal justice reforms, with activities such as follow-up assessments, training sessions, roundtables and trial monitoring activities.



Valeriy Dementsko



Valeriy Dementsko



Valeriy Dementsko

Ninth Expert Forum on Criminal Justice for Central Asia, Astana, Kazakhstan, 20–21 November 2024

1.8

Engaging male politicians on gender equality in politics

2025 will mark the 30th anniversary of the 1995 Conference of Women and the Beijing Platform for Action, a foundational set of international norms on women's rights and gender equality. The Platform for Action covers 12 critical areas that are as relevant today as 30 years ago: poverty; education and training; health; violence; armed conflict; economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; human rights; media; environment; and the girl child. For each area, there are strategic objectives and a detailed list of actions to be taken by governments, parliaments and other stakeholders, at national, regional and international level.

Since 1995, the OSCE region has seen far-reaching developments towards the full and equal participation of women in politics and decision-making. For example, OSCE States have tripled the average number of female

parliamentarians (to 31.6 per cent) and many adopted ground-breaking gender equality laws. Some states set up stronger government ministries, agencies and councils to lead on gender equality policy, and 26 OSCE participating States also introduced legally binding gender quotas, aimed at reducing the over-representation of men politicians and targeting gender-balanced politics in the long run. In recent years, however, the OSCE region has witnessed stagnation in progress on gender equality, together with backsliding in some cases and an emerging mobilization against gender equality. Too often, political and elected offices are still seen as positions for men, while advancing gender equality remains predominantly a 'women's issue'; left to women politicians to work on, often without any meaningful engagement by men. Male politicians remain in the background, as silent sympathisers or providing unseen support.



MILOŠ ĐAJIĆ

Academy of Women's Leadership,
President of the Steering Board

We have realized that we are 95 years behind full equality between men and women. In order to ensure women enjoy the same rights as men, politics needs to be gender balanced."



Expert meeting on the role of male politicians in promoting gender equality in politics, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 5-6 June 2024



OSCE/Zejd Kadric



OSCE/Zeljko Kadric



OSCE/Zeljko Kadric

Expert meeting on the role of male politicians in promoting gender equality in politics, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 5-6 June 2024

With the anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, there is a strong and growing sense that the world is at a turning point for women's rights; a recognition that achieving gender equality, the empowerment of women and the protection of the human rights of women and girls should be an urgent and central task for all decision-makers. To this end, ODIHR has begun working with OSCE participating States to engage male politicians in gender equality. ODIHR's assistance is multi-layered and includes awareness raising and capacity building, as well as strategic guidance to States on concrete action and regional exchanges.

For example, ODIHR partnered with the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina to organize a two-day expert meeting on the role of male politicians in promoting gender equality in politics. Held in Sarajevo in June, it was the first event of its kind and brought together 90 participants from South-Eastern Europe, the United States, Türkiye and Denmark,

including ministers, deputy speakers of parliaments, chairs of parliamentary committees for gender equality, other members of parliament, political party leaders, representatives of women and youth wings in political parties, leaders of women's movements and civil society, and representatives of governmental bodies for gender equality.

The event both facilitated a wide-ranging exchange of views and practices and guided participants to commit to clearly defined follow-up action, demonstrating their concrete support for the 'Engaging Men' agenda and the need to make politics more gender-responsive. The event also inspired representatives of the six OSCE field operations in South-Eastern Europe to conduct further work on engaging male politicians. The discussions and conclusions of the meeting will be published in 2025 as the 'Sarajevo Tool' and will be disseminated through workshops for OSCE participating States.

“



IGOR JADROVSKI

President of the National Equality Body, Skopje

The political education programmes for young male politicians have to be based on a human rights and gender equality approach. The lack of information about gender equality and related concepts, such as gender-responsive budgeting and gender-sensitive policies, results in misconceptions about gender equality in public discourse.”

“



SANDRA PEPERA

NDI Director for Gender, Women and Democracy

Engaging men in pushing for gender equality is key. However, this must be done in full consultation with women's movements. Gender equality is not a zero-sum game; it is good for all of us.”

1.9

Strengthening NHRIs to address human rights challenges related to securitization

Growing securitization poses a major challenge to the protection of human rights across the OSCE region. Securitization is defined as a process by which the state categorizes certain developments or entities as a security problem, thus justifying the implementation of extraordinary measures nominally to protect the country and its citizens. This can have a significant negative impact on human rights, the rule of law and democracy, including reduced transparency and accountability, and excessive restrictions. In response, the focus of the annual NHRI Academy organized by ODIHR and the European Network of National Human Rights



2024 NHRI Academy, Belgrade, Serbia, 17-21 June 2024

ODIHR/ENNHRI

The National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) Academy is a flagship annual event organized by ODIHR and the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI). It brings together senior- and mid-level staff from NHRIs across the OSCE region for tailored and practical training on how to address particular challenges that NHRIs face in their work. This week-long event for the professional development of staff at NHRIs also supports the exchange of good practices and professional networking between NHRIs in the OSCE region to improve synergies and cooperation.

Institutions (ENNHRI) in 2024 was strengthening the capacity of NHRIs to better address securitization issues with a direct impact on the promotion and protection of human rights.

The 2024 Academy brought together staff members from 23 NHRIs across the OSCE region in Bratislava, Slovakia. They learnt about the theory of securitization, what it means in the context of states of emergency, migration, use of technology, anti-terrorism and policing, and the resultant restrictions for human rights and civic space.

During the five-day course, participants shared experiences, case studies and best practices, and discussed how to address the risks and challenges of securitization. They explored ways to use their human

rights mandates to counter security measures that restrict human rights and also how to address public discourse that prioritizes security over rights. Participants also drafted action plans for implementing different activities for their own NHRIs, in order to put into practice what they had learnt.

During an online follow-up meeting, Academy participants reported back on their plans and their progress in implementation. Some NHRIs said they were actively challenging securitization through legislation in their countries. Others were considering adding a discussion of securitization to their annual reports, while others had started sharing their new knowledge of securitization among their NHRI colleagues as well as schools and other audiences.



2024 NHRI Academy, Belgrade, Serbia, 17-21 June 2024

A SELECTION OF THE FEEDBACK FROM REPRESENTATIVES OF THE NHRIS OF BULGARIA, FINLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND AND PORTUGAL WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE 2024 NHRI ACADEMY

“

An excellent opportunity to learn from and with peers, along with very well-structured input from international experts.”

“

Really thought-provoking and inspiring sessions, with great trainers. The topic has a lot of crossovers with our work/mandate and will be useful going forward.”

“

The sessions were an excellent combination of theory, exercises and discussions. The Academy as a whole managed to create a wonderful arena for sharing and learning, during the lessons and also outside of them.”

“

The Academy represents an excellent and unique opportunity to discuss issues of common interest to NHRIs, in an environment of open debate, to learn more about what each NHRI does, to share experiences and networking.”

1.10

Using gender audits to help political parties deliver on gender equality

Despite considerable progress in the last 30 years, the OSCE region is far from reaching gender parity (50/50), a target set by the United Nations' CEDAW committee, and data from the last five years clearly shows a slowdown in the growth of women's representation. In fact, the representation of women in national parliaments in the OSCE region reached 31.6 per cent by the end of 2024, an increase of just 0.1 per cent on the year before. Men continue to be significantly over-represented in all major legislative and executive bodies, especially in the position of party leaders, parliamentary speakers, heads of governments, heads of state and mayors.

Political parties are sometimes called the 'secret gardens of politics'; what happens within political parties can have a huge impact on women's political participation. It is parties that nominate candidates to be elected as representatives and decision-makers. This is why political parties play such a vital role in ensuring that a country's governance framework is gender responsive and follows good practice. Recognizing this, OSCE participating States have committed to encouraging political parties to promote the equal participation of women and men as a means to achieve gender balance in elected office at all levels of decision-making. ODIHR is specifically tasked with assisting participating States in promoting women's participation in political and public life, and provides direct and targeted support to parliamentary political parties. This includes gender audits to help political

parties assess their progress towards gender equality.

Gender audits are one of many tools that can help participating States and their democratic institutions — including political parties — implement their commitments on gender mainstreaming in practice. As tools for institutional transformation, they assess and evaluate how well gender equality is already institutionalized within an organization, including in their policies, programmes, projects, structures, proceedings and budgets. The goal of gender audits is to support change, helping institutions to move away from directly or indirectly discriminatory practices and rules and towards a framework and environment that supports genuine gender equality.

ODIHR carried out gender audits for five parliamentary political parties in 2024, finalizing projects with political parties in Denmark and working in Montenegro, in cooperation with the OSCE mission there. The gender audits provided the political parties with targeted recommendations, specific to their ideological profile, size, resources, internal structure and leadership commitment. They also enabled the parties to look beyond established tools and aim at institutionalizing gender equality across party bodies, policies and decision-making. Based on ODIHR's audit, one political party established an internal gender equality committee, an expert body tasked to lead internal gender equality reforms.



ADNAN KADRIBAŠIĆ
International Gender Audits Expert

Like many of us, I thought the solution to women's under-representation lies in election laws and gender quotas, but we have hit the ceiling on increasing women's participation. Despite this, there is still an appetite within political parties to work towards greater gender equality. Political parties want to become places where gender equality policy is developed and further advocated. Gender audits have helped in this transformation.



OSCE/Maria Kókoe



OSCE/Maria Kókoe



Edita Miliutin

ODIHR's Intensive Course for Change Makers on Gender Audits and Gender Action Plans, Warsaw, Poland, 27-29 February 2024



“

VALENTINA MINIĆ

President of the Women's Forum,
'Democrats' party, Montenegro

We are grateful for the support provided, which has not only made the Women's Forum the focus of attention but also pointed out the importance of some activities, like the need to develop a Gender Equality Action Plan and Code of Conduct and set up a gender equality advisory body.”

Transforming political parties from within — Gender audits and action plans

ODIHR's revised gender audit methodology

In the last decade, ODIHR has supported more than 45 political parties in 11 OSCE participating States in conducting gender audits and developing party-specific gender equality action plans, as well as publishing numerous guides, manuals and toolkits on gender equality. Using the lessons learned from its work with political parties, ODIHR has constantly revised and refined its methodology and has published it for the first time as part of its new Gender-responsive Governance Toolkit.

The revised gender audit methodology for political parties covers three assessment areas:

- Gender-balanced representation
- Vision and policy
- Organizational culture

The new methodology was launched in December 2024, with the participation of 119 members of parliament, party leaders and representatives of international and civil society organizations who work with political parties all around the world. ODIHR's work on gender audits was also presented to the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission and the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination and to members of parliament and representatives of governmental bodies for gender equality from 45 states that are also part of the OSCE.



Recognizing ODIHR's role as a knowledge hub and the need to share that knowledge with others who can bring ODIHR's gender audit methodology to a wider audience, the Office ran an intensive course for 20 future gender audit facilitators from a broad geographical spread of 15 OSCE states, from the United Kingdom to Kazakhstan. Over four months, participants were trained on how to prepare and carry out a gender audit of a political party, and on how to prepare recommendations for follow-up action that balances ambitious goals with technical feasibility. The participants are already applying their new skills, either within individual parties or to run gender audits for multiple parties as, for example, the National Democratic Institute in Ukraine is doing.



“

LAURA SIMONYAN

Programme Manager for Women's
Empowerment, National Democratic Institute
(NDI) Armenia Office

ODIHR's unique training on gender audits was very hands-on, concrete and practical. It will help me to contribute to the institutional transformation of political parties in Armenia, supporting them to improve women's political participation.”



ODIHR's Intensive Course for Change Makers on Gender Audits and Gender Action Plans, Warsaw, Poland, 27-29 February 2024

1.11

Inspiring young professionals to advance political participation

Engaging young people in politics is vital for strengthening democratic institutions, fostering good governance and ensuring inclusive, gender-sensitive policies. However, across the OSCE region, young people face many barriers to meaningful participation. These include limited access to decision-making processes, a lack of practical skills, and insufficient opportunities to connect with their peers and mentors in other countries. Addressing these challenges is essential to building resilient, accountable democratic institutions that reflect the voices and needs of all members of society.

In response to these challenges, ODIHR, in partnership with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, organizes the School on Politics, Leadership and Advocacy to equip young people with the tools they need to lead change. The 2024 edition brought together 24 young political party representatives, local election candidates and youth activists from the European Union's Eastern Partnership and several EU countries — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Poland, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania.

During the training, participants developed practical skills and collaborated to create ideas for enhancing youth political participation. Through a combination of expert-led lectures and workshops, participants learned about leadership, advocacy campaigning, negotiation and policy analysis.

A study visit to the Parliament of Poland (*Sejm*) gave participants the opportunity to engage directly with

young Polish parliamentarians. This encouraged participants to think beyond their immediate experiences and envision strategies to reshape politics in their home countries. The course content prioritized inclusivity, addressing key topics such as gender mainstreaming.

Participants developed four advocacy initiatives to address critical issues: promoting digital literacy; raising awareness about political activism; labour rights for youth; and increasing ability at local level to cooperate on initiatives related to EU accession.

By creating a space for collaboration and learning, the school not only strengthens the capacity of young political activists, but also lays the foundation for more inclusive, democratic governance across the OSCE region. At the same time, it fostered lasting personal connections among participants from diverse cultural and regional backgrounds.



“

VICTOR PRUTEANU
a participant from Moldova.

‘Unity through diversity’ is not just a slogan; it’s a belief we all share. The advocacy and negotiation skills I learned were invaluable, helping me immediately in organizing the setting up of local structures for my political party. The people I met, and their commitment, strengthened my view that we can and must create positive change together.’



School on Politics, Leadership and Advocacy, Warsaw, Poland, 18-22 November 2024

1.12

Strengthening electoral reforms in the Western Balkans



Regional event in Warsaw, Poland, 21–22 February 2024

In 2024, ODIHR continued to support institutions and civil society in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, as well as Kosovo* to implement election recommendations through its [Support to Electoral Reforms in the Western Balkans](#) project. While the 2020-2024 iteration of the project (initially funded by the EU and the Austrian Development Agency) has come to a close, ODIHR was able to extend the project through the support of Germany and Norway.

Highlights of ODIHR's work in 2024 include support to the electoral legal reform committee in the Serbian

parliament, to the Central Election Commissions of Albania and of Bosnia and Herzegovina in developing by-laws, to the Republic Electoral Commission of Serbia in adopting a voter education programme for the period 2024-2026, and to the Kosovo Central Election Commission on discussing the introduction of electronic voter lists, voter identification systems and an electoral training centre.

The project supports local and international partners to strengthen the integrity and effectiveness of electoral processes. Efforts focus on enhancing the capacity of election



IVANA SAVIC

Social Media Coordinator at the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability, Serbia and participant of the regional conference Informing and Engaging Voters / A Regional Perspective on How to Increase Voter Turnout in Warsaw, 17–18 December 2024

Regional exchanges in the Western Balkans are essential for strengthening electoral integrity and fostering mutual learning. By sharing best practices, lessons learned and innovative strategies, we collectively fortify inclusive, transparent and accountable electoral processes. This collaboration amplifies our impact and also ensures that elections credibly reflect the people's will, paving the way for stronger democratic institutions.

* There is no consensus among OSCE participating States on the status of Kosovo and, as such, the Organization does not have a position on this issue. All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text should be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.



Regional event in Podgorica, Montenegro, 14-15 May 2024

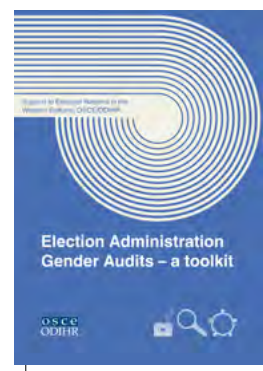
management bodies to administer elections with efficiency, impartiality and transparency. Emphasis is also placed on increasing the accuracy of voter lists and registration processes through improved coordination with population registers and by enabling public scrutiny. Increasing the knowledge and capacity of media regulation bodies to oversee media conduct during elections is also a key area of support, fostering a pluralistic and fair campaign environment. The initiative also aims to improve campaign rules and practices, ensuring that parties and candidates can freely present their views without fear of state interference, violence or intimidation, while promoting transparency through transparent campaign finance rules and practices. Lastly, efforts are directed at improving the capacity and independence of electoral dispute resolution bodies, including election management bodies and courts, to adjudicate disputes effectively, thereby reinforcing electoral integrity, public confidence and the rule of law.

So far, the project has produced over 60 expert papers (comparative analyses and legal comments) aimed particularly at parliamentary working groups, election management bodies, media and campaign finance regulators, as well as partners from all beneficiaries. In collaboration with local OSCE field offices, ODIHR has

also organized a number of topical workshops and regional events, with almost 500 participants in total. These platforms helped an exchange of best practices across the region, supported by over 500 working days and 28 visits by external experts.

Through collaboration with nearly 150 institutions and civil society organizations, the project has made a significant impact, strengthening the capacity of election management bodies and other institutions and advancing much-needed electoral reform across the Western Balkans region. By promoting transparency, inclusivity and accountability, ODIHR continues to build public trust in democratic institutions and the rule of law.

As part of the project, ODIHR has conducted pioneering audits on the electoral participation of persons with disabilities and the election administration in North Macedonia, as well as gender audits of the election administration in Albania and Montenegro. This work led to the publication, this year, of ODIHR's *Election Administration Gender Audit — a Toolkit*, providing guidance on assessing the gender-responsiveness of election administrations across OSCE participating States and beyond.



1.13

Encouraging youth political participation in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Consultative Meeting on the *Methodology for Conducting Youth Assessments within Political Parties*, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14–15 December 2024



NEZIM ALAGIC

Member of the Narod i Pravda (NiP)
Youth Forum, Bosnia and Herzegovina

While there has been a decline in the proportion of youth holding politically critical positions, their activism remains the driving force behind more than half of the party's electoral successes."

Young people face significant barriers to meaningful political involvement across the OSCE region. These include limited opportunities for structured participation, lack of recognition within political party frameworks and insufficient mechanisms to allow them to influence policies.

Recognizing these challenges, ODIHR and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, launched an initiative to develop a *Methodology for Conducting Youth Assessments within Political Parties*. This is designed to provide a structured framework for assessing youth political participation within party structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and identify gaps and barriers that hinder such engagement. Political parties can then use these

assessments as a foundation to enhance youth participation and address challenges effectively.

A consultative meeting in December in Sarajevo brought together the presidents of youth forums and young politicians who had previously taken part in OSCE capacity-building programmes. The participants came from ten different political parties operating within the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), the National Assembly of Republika Srpska (RS) and at the cantonal level.

The goal of the meeting was to ensure that the direct experiences and insights of young political actors fed into the methodology. The participants explored areas essential

for assessing youth engagement, such as formal mechanisms and informal practices that enable or hinder youth participation. The two-day event included interactive discussions, networking sessions and focus-group work. Participants identified a number of critical challenges common to all youth representatives from across the political spectrum, such as the limited space for youth in decision-making roles.

This initiative illustrates the commitment of the OSCE and ODIHR to foster youth-inclusive democratic governance. By engaging young political actors as partners in this process, ODIHR and the Mission are laying the foundations for sustainable and effective participation by young people in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond.