



# Promoting free and fair elections in times of democratic decline

## Independent Evaluation of the OSCE's Work on Elections 2013 - 2023



## Acknowledgments

*This evaluation report was written by Charlemagne Gomez, Team Leader, Stephane Mondon, Senior Expert on Elections (both independent experts) and Libor Grospic, Senior Evaluator at the OSCE's Office of Internal Oversight (OIO), who also served as evaluation manager. Nynke de Witte, Head of Evaluation and Deputy Director of the OIO, provided strategic guidance and quality assurance throughout the evaluation process and supported the completion of the final report in 2026. Borana Fuqi, Samir Maharramov and Lucia Canziani, interns at the OIO, supported the process through research, administrative co-ordination and logistical assistance. The OIO gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the Evaluation Reference Group, which consisted of Meaghan Fitzgerald, Head of ODIHR's Election Department, Pascale Roussy, Director of OMIK's Democratization Department, Jannat Soronbaeva, National Democratic Institutions Officer of the Programme Office in Bishkek, Ahmed Rifatbegovic, national political officer of the Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Stephanie Koltchanov, Head of Elections of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and Emma Corneliusson, project co-ordinator at ODIHR. OIO also thanks all interlocutors and stakeholders for their engagement and for sharing their experiences and insights throughout the evaluation process. Finally, OIO is grateful to the Federal Republic of Germany for its extrabudgetary funding, which made it possible to conduct this evaluation.*

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## List of abbreviations

<b>CEC</b>	Central Election Commission	<b>NAM</b>	Needs assessment mission
<b>CiO</b>	Chairperson-in-Office	<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organization	<b>ODIHR</b>	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<b>EMB</b>	Electoral management body	<b>OIO</b>	Office of Independent Oversight
<b>EOM</b>	Election observation mission	<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>ExB</b>	Extrabudgetary	<b>OSCE PA</b>	OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
<b>FOs</b>	Field Operations	<b>PC</b>	Permanent Council
<b>HCNM</b>	High Commissioner on National Minorities	<b>RFoM</b>	Representative on Freedom of the Media
<b>HDC</b>	Human Dimension Committee	<b>UB</b>	Unified Budget
<b>HDIM</b>	Human Dimension Implementation Meeting	<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>IFES</b>	International Foundation for Electoral Systems	<b>WHDC</b>	Warsaw Human Dimension Conference
<b>KPI</b>	Key performance indicator		



# 1. Introduction

Democratic elections are regarded as a pillar of long-term security and stability in the OSCE. Ensuring the conduct of free, fair and transparent elections, as emphasized in the OSCE's foundational commitments, is a cornerstone of democratic stability and governance across the OSCE region. Without credible electoral processes grounded in universal suffrage, impartial administration and inclusive participation, democracy cannot flourish. The OSCE, through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and its field operations, supports participating States in strengthening electoral systems, enhancing legal frameworks and fostering trust in democratic institutions. The High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) also play a role in relation to their specific mandates, as does the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA).

Many participating States continue to face challenges to electoral integrity, often accompanied by political sensitivities and limited willingness to pursue electoral reform. The OSCE seeks to address such challenges and promote democratic election processes through the observation of elections, ad hoc responsive engagement, long-term partnerships and sustained follow-up on

election observation recommendations. Within this framework, electoral integrity remains a cornerstone of the OSCE's concept of comprehensive security, underpinning political stability, inclusive governance and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

ODIHR's election observation activities are one of the OSCE's most visible and widely recognized tools for promoting democratic commitments. ODIHR is one of the leading international election observation bodies operating across the OSCE region and is often the only international actor systematically observing elections. While other international election observation activities may be present in some cases — such as EU missions in specific contexts like Kosovo<sup>i</sup> — this is not the norm. In most instances, ODIHR provides the principal international observation effort, offering independent, professional assessments and recommendations grounded in OSCE commitments and international standards. Its methodology, developed over decades, is widely regarded for its transparency, impartiality and comprehensive scope.

In addition to election observation, ODIHR and field operations play a crucial role in follow-up, capacity development and technical assistance to participating States. ODIHR supports the implementation of its recommendations through targeted follow-up visits, thematic reviews and dialogue platforms that bring

together electoral stakeholders — such as electoral management bodies (EMBs), legislators, political parties and civil society — to identify feasible reform pathways. Field operations complement this work by providing sustained in-country engagement, helping to translate recommendations into concrete actions through technical advisory support on electoral legislation, training programmes and institutional support. Together, these efforts aim not only to improve the conduct of elections but also to strengthen democratic institutions, public trust and the rule of law.

This independent evaluation of the OSCE's work on elections during the period 2013–2023 provides an assessment of the performance and results of the OSCE's election-related work from a cross-organizational perspective. The evaluation was launched in 2024 and managed by the OSCE Office of Internal Oversight's (OIO) Evaluation Unit. The purpose of the evaluation was twofold: to provide accountability for results vis-à-vis the OSCE's participating States and to inform organizational learning by providing insights into factors that support or hinder the achievement of results.

The following section presents further background on the context and object of the evaluation, the evaluation purpose, scope and methodology, presentation of key findings, conclusions and recommendations.



## 2. Context and object of the evaluation

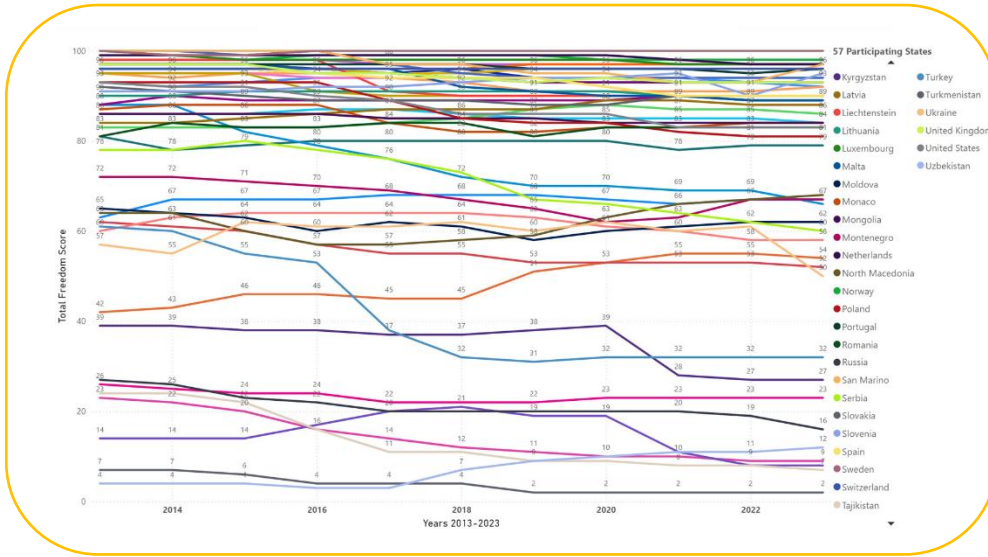
### Democracy trends in the OSCE region

The OSCE's election-related work is taking place in an increasingly complex and politically charged environment. Across many participating States, electoral processes are unfolding amid heightened political polarization, shrinking space for civil society and signs of democratic erosion. These trends are reflected in wider governance indicators, such as Freedom House scores and the Electoral Democracy Index, which suggest a decline in democratic resilience across several OSCE regions. Within the OSCE itself, institutional challenges — such as the inability to convene the mandated Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIMs) since 2020 due to lack of consensus — further constrain dialogue around electoral and human rights commitments. These developments, coupled with broader resource limitations and the lack of an approved Unified Budget (UB) in the OSCE since 2021, have shaped the operating space in which the OSCE engages in work on elections.

Figure 1 presents Freedom House's freedom scores across the OSCE region over the last decade, demonstrating notable regional variations in these scores. While a group of participating States consistently maintain high and stable scores in the upper range, a broad middle tier shows moderate scores with some fluctuations.

Several participating States remain below the regional median, with scores that are either persistently low or trending downward. A few participating States show sharper declines or score consistently at lower levels, reflecting more constrained environments over time. Figure 2 presents the cumulative Freedom House's scores for the OSCE region.

**FIGURE 1. OSCE-WIDE FREEDOM SCORES, 2013-2023**



**FIGURE 2. OSCE-WIDE CUMULATIVE FREEDOM SCORES 2013-2023**

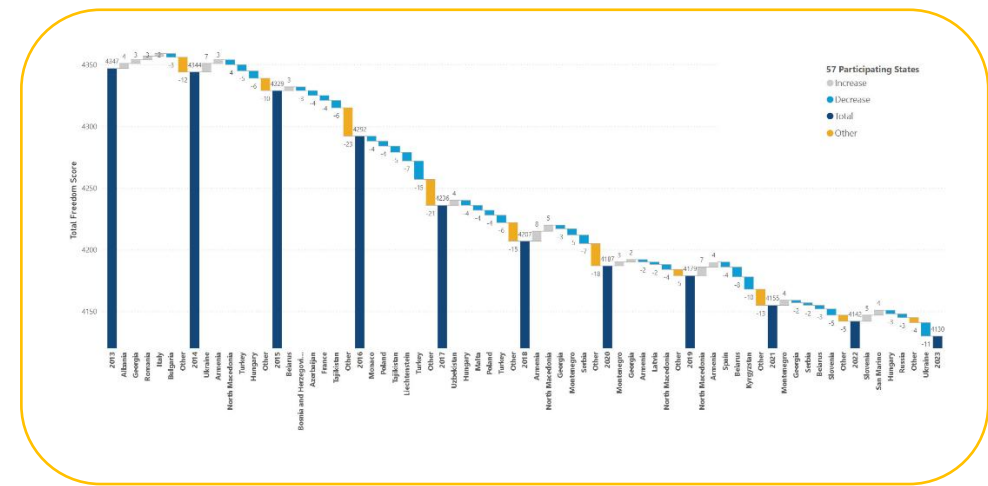
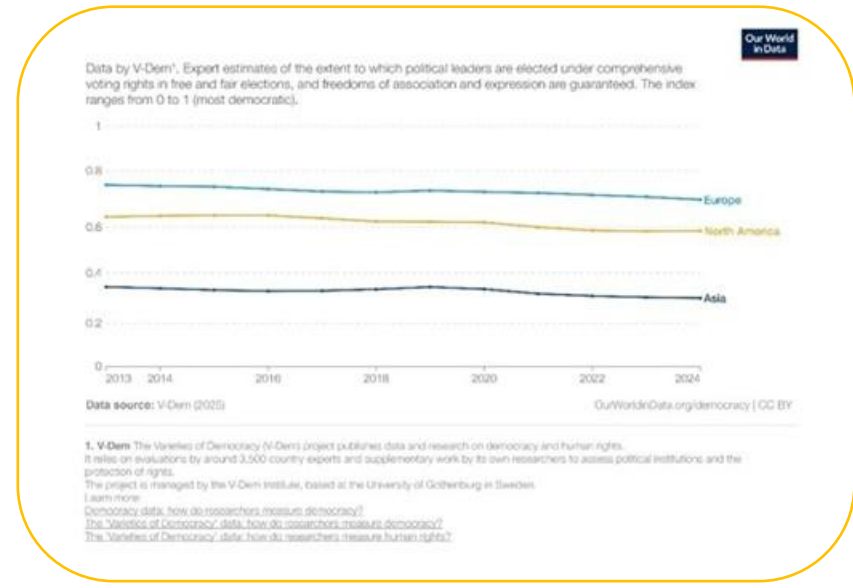


Figure 3 depicts the 2013–2023 Electoral Democracy Index, as compiled by the V-Dem project, disaggregated in a way to reflect key OSCE regions. Similar to the Freedom Scores, it reflects electoral democracy scores and trends across the OSCE region, including instances of consistently low compliance, suggesting a general decline in the Electoral Democracy Index OSCE-wide over the observed period.

**FIGURE 3. ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY INDEX 2013-2023**



## OSCE election-related commitments and mandates

### *Ministerial Council decisions and mandates*

The OSCE Ministerial Council has been instrumental in embedding democratic elections within the OSCE's normative framework. Since the 1990 Paris Charter, which identified democracy and electoral integrity as central to the OSCE's mission, several Ministerial Council decisions have shaped the political direction of the OSCE's election-related work.

In particular, the 1990 Copenhagen Document is considered the cornerstone of the OSCE's electoral activities and provides the political commitments and benchmark standards that guide ODIHR's observation methodology and participating States' democratic obligations.

While not legally binding, Ministerial Council decisions carry political weight and have guided the OSCE's work, including that of ODIHR and the field operations. From Paris to Maastricht (for more information, see Table 1), Ministerial Council decisions expanded ODIHR's mandate and informed the mandates of field operations, operationalized field oversight and emphasized the importance of follow-up on ODIHR's electoral recommendations.

TABLE 1. KEY ELECTIONS-RELATED SUMMIT/MINISTERIAL COUNCIL DECISIONS

Summit/Ministerial Decision	Focus on elections
● <b>Paris 1990</b>	Declared democratic elections a core OSCE value; created the Office for Free Elections, which was later named the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in 1992
● <b>Copenhagen 1990</b>	Political commitments and benchmark standards that guide ODIHR's observation methodology and pS democratic obligations
● <b>Rome 1993</b>	Strengthened ODIHR's monitoring mandate and coordination role; expanded support through OSCE FOs to new pS
● <b>Budapest 1995</b>	Operationalized OSCE election oversight through the establishment of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Dayton Accords
● <b>Oslo 1998</b>	Expanded ODIHR-led election observation and field operations work in post-conflict

	and transitional contexts (e.g. Kosovo, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina)
<b>Istanbul 1999</b>	Commitment to invite ODIHR/OSCE PA election observers and follow up on ODIHR's recommendations
<b>Porto 2002</b>	Reaffirmed pS commitments to follow-up on ODIHR recommendations and encouraged the countries concerned to take further steps to amend their electoral legislation in line with ODIHR recommendations
<b>Maastricht 2003</b>	Institutionalized ODIHR's leadership in election observation and expertise in assisting pS in the implementation of election-related commitments and standards. Emphasized national-level implementation of recommendations

Ministerial Council decisions have consistently emphasized the importance of transparent and fair elections, reinforcing ODIHR's leadership in election observation and its co-operation with structures and bodies like the field operations and the OSCE PA. The role of the other autonomous institutions is less explicit but

can be derived from broader decisions and mandates related to media freedom and the safety of journalists, conflict prevention and tolerance and discrimination.

Parallel to the Ministerial Council's strategic guidance for the OSCE's provision of electoral support, HDIMs serve as a platform (with strong civil society participation) for annual reviews of participating States' implementation of human dimension commitments, including on democratic elections and electoral reform.

## **OSCE's work on Elections: objectives, activities and spending**

### *Objectives and intended outcomes*

The mandates given to the OSCE by the participating States have been translated into the UB objectives of relevant executive structures and programmes, especially ODIHR's Elections Programme and the democratization programmes of field operations. While ODIHR has a separate Unified Budget programme dedicated to elections, field operations generally address elections through democratization programmes, depending on their mandate.

The overall objective of ODIHR’s Elections Programme has been “to increase implementation by the [participating States] of their commitments with regard to democratic elections”. Table 2 provides an overview of the intended outcomes and key performance indicators (KPIs) under this objective in the Unified Budget proposals of ODIHR (2013–2023). The intended outcomes are not fully consistent with standard results-based management terminology, as the formulated KPIs remain primarily at the output level, but they do provide relevant insight into how ODIHR has implemented its mandate.

**TABLE 2. ODIHR ELECTIONS PROGRAMME OUTCOMES AND KPI’S (2013-2023)**

Key Outcomes	KPIs (only from 2019 onwards)
<p><b>Outcome 1.1:</b> <u>Better equipping key stakeholders to implement OSCE commitments for democratic elections through the deployment of needs assessment missions and election observation missions:</u> The outcome formulation remains stable, focusing on better equipping election stakeholders (state authorities, election administrations, political parties, civil society and media) to implement OSCE commitments across participating States, with the notable evolution from forward-looking (“will be better equipped”) to</p>	<p>Deploy needs assessment and observation or assessment missions that engage the full range of stakeholders; publish mission reports that include concrete, constructive recommendations. KPIs are defined at activity and output level.</p>

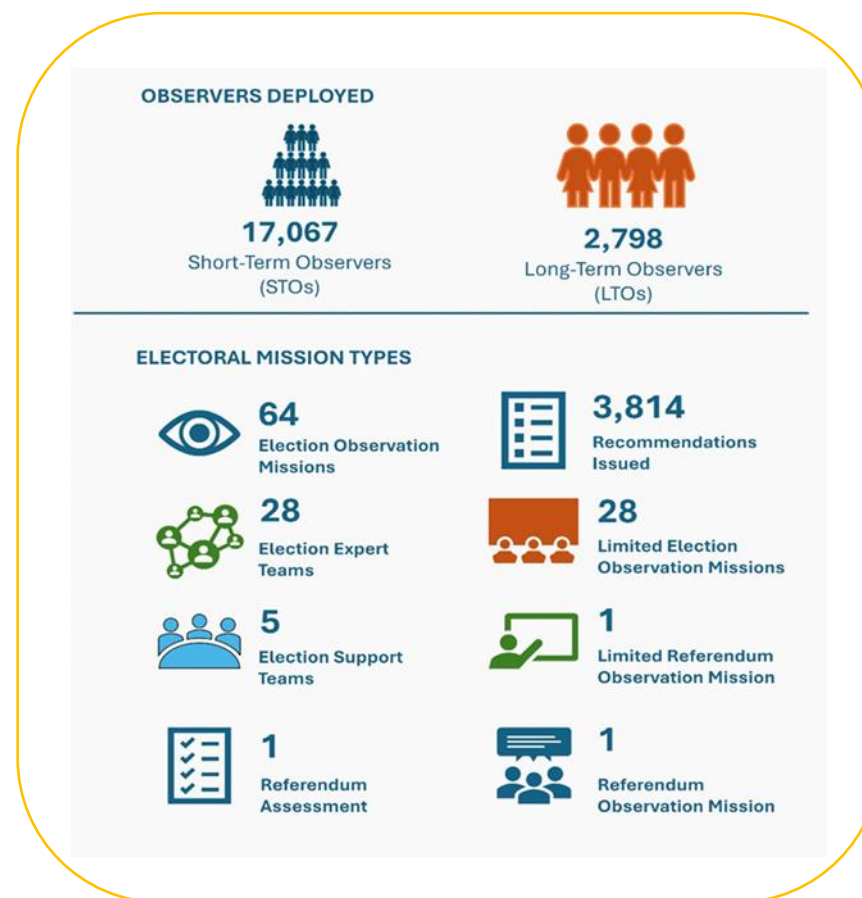
<p>achieved status (“are better equipped”).</p>	
<p><b>Outcome 1.2. Strengthening election stakeholders’ capacity to implement and follow up on ODIHR recommendations:</b> This outcome consistently links capacity to implement and follow up on ODIHR recommendations with sustained dialogue, consultation and assistance; wording shifts from prospective (“will improve”) to realized (“have improved/have increased capacity”).</p>	<p>Undertake in-country visits to present final reports and discuss recommendations; provide tailored follow-up support to participating States; issue legal reviews, including joint reviews with the Venice Commission. (Voluntary participating States’ reporting on recommendations appears in 2019 only). KPIs are defined at activity and output level.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 1.3. Expanding pool of trained election observers and increasing field operations’ capacity to follow election-related processes:</b> The outcome is consistent over time but defined largely at output level: an expanding pool of trained election observers and increased capacity and expertise on the part of OSCE field operations to follow up on election-related processes; the only notable evolution is a shift from forward-looking phrasing (“will have expanded/will have increased capacity”) in earlier years to achieved results (“has expanded/have increased capacity”) in later years.</p>	<p>Deliver observer training across a diverse range of participating States; provide universal e-learning opportunities; and supply expertise to OSCE field offices. (Broad dissemination of methodological materials is listed in 2019 only). KPIs are defined at activity level.</p>

## OSCE election-related activities and outputs

At the core of the OSCE's electoral efforts is the aforementioned ODIHR, based in Warsaw. ODIHR is the principal OSCE institution tasked with advancing democratic governance and promoting electoral integrity across the 57 participating States. Through its election observation work — such as the election observation missions (EOMs) — ODIHR aims to provide impartial assessments of electoral processes and offers electoral recommendations aimed at improving the legal, administrative and political environment in which elections occur.

Although all 57 OSCE participating States held elections between 2013 and 2023, ODIHR deployed Election Observation Activities only where invited, and assessed as needed. During this period, ODIHR conducted 253 election observation activities across the region, deploying a total of 2,708 long-term observers and 17,067 short-term observers. Deployment intensity varied significantly, with missions most frequently sent to Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia — regions where electoral processes often face sustained scrutiny or are undergoing reform. The key data are provided in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4. ODIHR ELECTION-RELATED OBSERVATION ACTIVITIES (2013–2023)



Ukraine consistently hosted the largest number of observers, reflecting ODIHR's sustained engagement amid political instability and conflict. Other top recipients included Albania, Georgia and North Macedonia, each hosting multiple EOMs with sizeable

deployments. Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova also saw a notable observer presence, often in the context of politically sensitive or transitional elections. In contrast, countries with smaller electorates or more stable electoral environments — such as Iceland or San Marino — were less frequently selected for full-scale missions.

In more consolidated democracies, ODIHR's engagement was typically lighter, relying more on technical or needs-based assessments. Beyond observation, ODIHR produced over 80 legal reviews focused on elections. Aimed at aligning national frameworks with OSCE commitments and international standards, these reviews addressed key issues such as draft electoral laws, political finance, party competition, voter registration, media regulation and inclusion.

Electoral recommendations are an important output of the OSCE's work on elections, as they translate observations from EOMs into concrete, actionable steps for reform. In particular, they offer participating States guidance on where to align electoral frameworks and practices with OSCE commitments and international standards, while fostering transparency, accountability and dialogue among national stakeholders.

ODIHR tracks their implementation through the [ODIHR electoral recommendations database](#) developed under the ExB Support to

Elections in the Western Balkans project (2017–2020), funded by the European Union and the Austrian Development Agency. In April 2018, ODIHR introduced a systematic approach to assessing the implementation of recommendations, classifying each recommendation made during subsequent election missions as *fully, mostly, partially or not implemented*. The database provides a centralized, searchable and publicly accessible online repository that contains all recommendations issued by ODIHR in its election observation final reports since 2014, offering p5, civil society and media, among others, a tool to monitor electoral reform and conduct comparative analysis.<sup>ii</sup>

ODIHR also provides assistance to participating States and supports field operations in follow-up to electoral recommendations. Follow-up in this context refers to the post-election process of using ODIHR's recommendations as the basis for dialogue and action to improve electoral processes. Key follow-up activities undertaken by participating States and/or ODIHR — as outlined in ODIHR's Handbook for the Follow-Up of Election Observation Recommendations and/or as applied in practice — are outlined in Table 3.

**TABLE 3. EXAMPLES OF FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES BY PS AND ODIHR**

pS	ODIHR (in cooperation with other OSCE structures, as applicable)
Legal/Legislative Review	In country visits to present final reports and discuss recommendations
Legal/Legislative Review	Legal/legislative Reviews
Electoral Review and Strategic Planning	Legal Expertise on Drafting Legislation (legislative reform working groups)
CSO Reviews, Advocacy, and Monitoring	In-depth Assessments of Specific Electoral Components
Voluntary Reporting at the OSCE Permanent Council and Human Dimension Committee	Long-term Dialogue and Field Support and Technical Advice on Implementation of Recommendations and other Electoral Good Practices
Reporting to UN Treaty monitoring Bodies, the Universal Periodic Review and Other Mechanisms	Support to Citizen Observer Groups; Mid-term Review Visits; Facilitation and Co-ordination (briefings, etc.); Thematic and regional Roundtables

In the framework of follow-up activities, some ODIHR services — most notably legal reviews related to electoral reform — are provided only upon a formal request from a participating State or relevant national institution. At the same time, ODIHR also engages in follow-up without a formal request through facilitating stakeholder dialogues, targeted regional workshops and thematic events on issues such as media, voter registration and campaign finance — all designed to support the implementation of election observation recommendations. In parallel, ODIHR follow-up involves returning to a country after an electoral process to present and discuss the findings and recommendations of the final election observation report with national authorities, parliaments, election commissions and civil society. Through these mechanisms, ODIHR promotes dialogue and encourages participating States to act on its electoral recommendations.

Field operations also engage in election-related support, adapting their roles to their specific mandates and political contexts. In Kosovo, the OSCE administered elections under a dedicated operational mandate, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina it focused on post-conflict reform and electoral capacity-building. In Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, field operations operated under broader democratization mandates, supporting civic education, legal reform and political dialogue. In Moldova, the Organization promoted electoral integrity through inclusive political processes, while in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and

Uzbekistan, field operations provided technical and accessibility-related support.

### OSCE spending on election-related activities

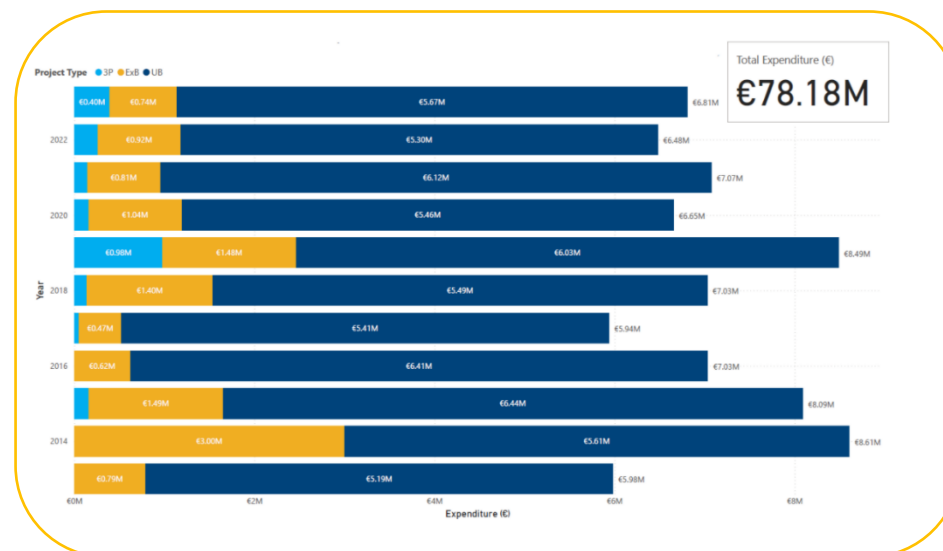
Between 2013 and 2023, OSCE-wide project expenditures on election-related activities (including, *inter alia*, election observation and technical assistance and capacity building projects) totalled approximately EUR 78 million (Figure 5).<sup>iii</sup> Around 91 per cent of this amount was spent by ODIHR, with the remainder spent by various field operations. ODIHR predominantly allocated its UB operational budget to EOMs (about 80 per cent), while spending on follow-up — though less prominent — was similar in value to that of field operations.

The overwhelming majority of election-related activities conducted by ODIHR between 2013 and 2023 were funded through the Unified Budget, supplemented by some extrabudgetary (ExB) funding and contributions of observers by participating States. While UB project spending nominally remained stable throughout the period, ExB spending showed notable fluctuations — particularly in 2017, when a EUR 1.4 million election-related cybersecurity project was implemented in Ukraine. ExB resources also supported observer-related activities, including the Diversification Fund (approximately EUR 4 million) and the Sustainability Fund (approximately EUR 6 million), to

promote and finance secondments of long- and short-term observers from under-represented participating States. Most of ODIHR's work related to follow-up on electoral recommendations was also covered by ExB funding.

For a breakdown of project expenditure by funding source, see Figure 5. It should be noted that the below are estimates, UB projects do not include staff costs, and costs for seconded election observers paid by participating States are not included.<sup>iv</sup>

FIGURE 5. OSCE-WIDE ELECTION-RELATED PROJECT EXPENDITURE



ODIHR's election-related project expenditures between 2013 and 2023 were predominantly funded through the UB (see Figure 6). In this context, it should be noted that the OSCE has not had an approved UB since 2021 and has continued to operate on provisional allotments based on the 2021 budget. In some cases, needs assessment missions (NAMs) recommended the deployment of a full EOM that could not be deployed for lack of funds. At the same time, ODIHR has requested and received additional funding for election observation activities when necessary, including for several large-scale EOMs.

**FIGURE 6. OSCE-WIDE ELECTION-RELATED EXPENDITURES BY PROJECT TYPE**

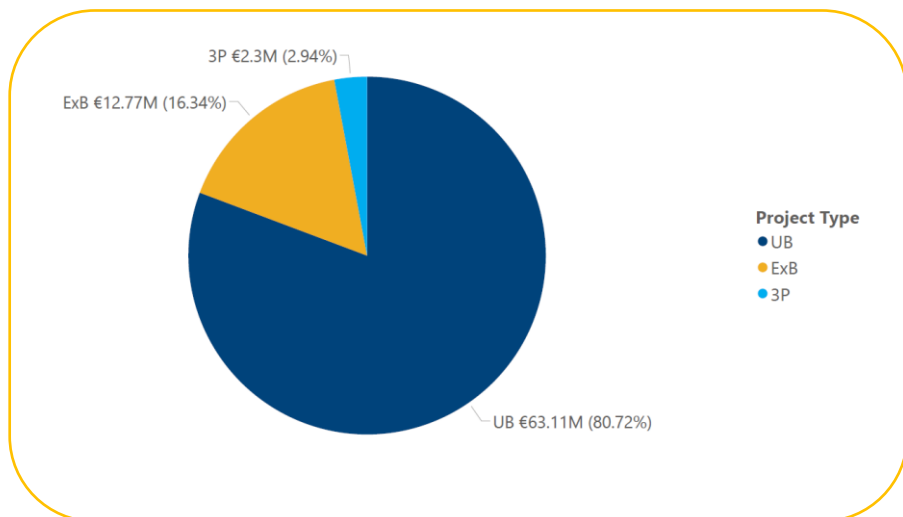


Figure 7 provides a detailed annual breakdown of election-related project expenditures by OSCE executive structures. While ODIHR accounts for most of the spending, several field operations — particularly the field operations mentioned earlier — also report notable expenditures. The presented data additionally reflect past spending by now-closed field operations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

**FIGURE 7. OSCE-WIDE ELECTION-RELATED EXPENDITURES ODIHR VS FIELD OPERATION**

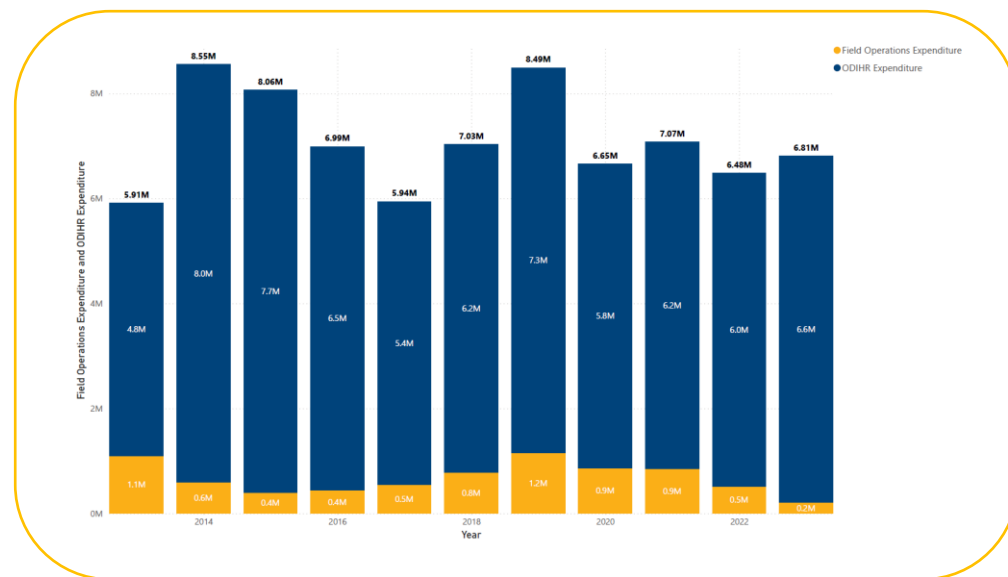
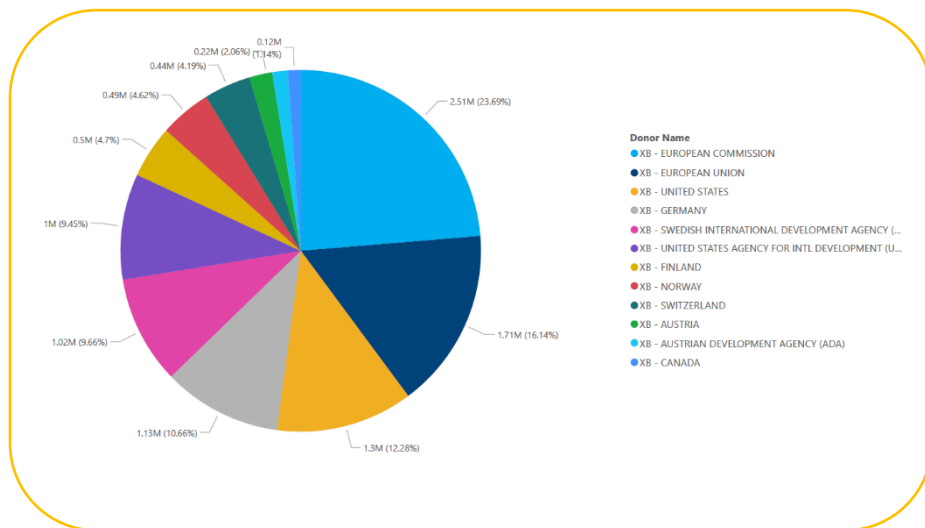


Figure 8 shows the main ExB donors for OSCE's work on elections. The European Union is the largest contributor, providing approximately 70 per cent of total ExB project funding over the period 2013-2023. This includes both EU-wide institutional support and bilateral assistance from individual EU member states.

**FIGURE 8. KEY DONORS OF EXB ELECTION-RELATED WORK**





### 3. Evaluation purpose, scope and methodology

#### Evaluation purpose and objectives

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide accountability for results vis-à-vis the OSCE's participating States and to inform organizational learning by providing insights into factors that support or hinder the achievement of results. As the OSCE's work on Elections has not been recently evaluated, the evaluation aims to provide insights in the effectiveness of the OSCE's work, and where possible impact and sustainability of results. To inform organizational learning, the evaluation aims to provide insights into the factors that support or hinder achievement of results, with particular attention for internal and external coordination and collaboration.

The primary users of this evaluation are ODIHR and field operation staff and management working in the realm of elections and democratization. In addition, the evaluation is also intended to support OSCE participating States, including national authorities responsible for electoral processes, by providing insights into the coherence and results of the OSCE's activities in this area of work.

The OSCE PA can also benefit from this evaluation, and the evaluation can also be of interest to civil society organizations (CSOs), especially domestic observer groups, media professionals as well as international partners and donors who fund or align with the OSCE's efforts to promote free, fair and transparent elections.

As part of the evaluation process, the evaluation team reconstructed a provisional theory of change of the OSCE's work on elections, including plausible pathways through which the OSCE's activities and outputs are supposed to contribute to intended outcomes. The reconstructed Theory of Change comprises two interlinked pathways (1) a normative accountability and reform pathway, through which election observation and the issuance of recommendations generate pressure and incentives for reform and (2) a sustained engagement and capacity-building pathway, through which longer-term reform processes are supported. See figure 9 below.

FIGURE 9. REFINED THEORY OF CHANGE FOR THE OSCE'S WORK ON ELECTIONS

### PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The OSCE's work on elections seeks to support participating States in implementing their OSCE commitments on democratic elections, as set out most prominently in the Copenhagen Document. Through election observation, technical assistance, political dialogue and follow-up, the OSCE aims to strengthen electoral integrity, institutional capacity and inclusion. This Theory of Change reflects the differentiated but complementary roles of ODIHR, field operations and other OSCE institutions, and recognizes that progress depends heavily on national political will, institutional capacity and external incentives.



#### INPUTS / ENABLING CONDITIONS

##### Normative and institutional foundations

- OSCE commitments (Copenhagen 1990 and subsequent MC decisions)
- Mandates of ODIHR, field operations, HCNM, RFoM and OSCE PA
- Established election observation methodology and credibility

##### Operational enablers

- Invitations by participating States
- Access and cooperation by national authorities
- Availability of Unified Budget and extrabudgetary resources
- Presence (or absence) of OSCE field operations
- Partnerships with civil society and international actors (EU, CoE, UNDP, etc.)



#### ACTIVITIES

(There are various actors but the lead is of course thorough ODIHR and complemented by others).

##### ODIHR (lead technical and normative actor)

- Needs Assessment Missions (NAMs)
- Election Observation Missions (EOMs)
- Issuance of findings and recommendations
- Follow-Up missions to deliver final EOM report with recommendations
- Legal and legislative reviews (often with Venice Commission)
- Methodological guidance, handbooks and tools
- Follow-up dialogue and targeted technical assistance (resources permitting)

##### Field Operations (contextual and facilitative role, mandate-dependent)

- Long-term engagement with EMBs, parliaments and civil society
- Facilitation of dialogue and trust-building
- Technical assistance and capacity-building
- Support to follow-up on ODIHR recommendations
- Civic education and inclusion programming

##### Other OSCE institutions

- **OSCE PA:** political visibility, parliamentary dialogue, short-term observation
- **HCNM:** advice on minority inclusion and participation
- **RFoM:** expertise on media freedom, disinformation and journalist safety
- **Secretariat/CPC:** conflict sensitivity and early warning



#### OUTPUTS (what the OSCE directly produces)

- NAM reports and EOM preliminary statements and final reports
- Electoral recommendations (legal, procedural, administrative)
- Legal opinions and reviews
- Capacity-building activities and training
- Stakeholder dialogues and workshops
- Public databases, guidance and methodological tools
- Inclusion- and media-related advisory outputs

These outputs are **within OSCE control and what they do effectively.**



#### SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES (0-12 months)

##### Primarily attribution-light, contribution-based outcomes

- Shared factual basis and transparency on election quality
- Increased awareness of gaps vis-à-vis OSCE commitments
- Disputes channelled into lawful and institutional mechanisms
- Improved preparedness and professionalism of EMBs
- Strengthened stakeholder dialogue and trust
- Reduced immediate risk of election-related instability

#### MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES (1-5 years)

##### Where sustained engagement and enabling conditions exist

- Improved institutional capacity of EMBs and oversight bodies
- Partial implementation of ODIHR recommendations
- Incremental legal, procedural or administrative reforms
- Greater inclusion of persons with disabilities, women and minorities (uneven)
- Strengthened role of civil society in electoral oversight
- More resilient information and media environment (context-dependent)

These outcomes depend on **national ownership, context, mandate of Fos where present, political will, resources and incentives** (e.g. EU accession), inputs from different external actors contributing to electoral support.

#### LONG-TERM OUTCOMES (5-10 years)

##### Aspirational, non-linear

- Electoral frameworks increasingly aligned with OSCE commitments
- More credible, professional and trusted electoral institutions
- More inclusive participation and representation
- Elections contribute to democratic governance and comprehensive security



#### CROSS-CUTTING Assumptions and Risks (explicitly stated)

##### Assumptions

- Participating States remain willing to engage
- ODIHR retains credibility and access
- Field operations can operate within mandates
- Adequate funding for follow-up exists

##### Risks

- Political resistance and democratic backsliding
- Limited national absorption capacity
- Fragmented OSCE coordination
- Insufficient results monitoring and learning
- Shrinking civic and media space



#### IMPACT (Peace and Stability)

##### OSCE contribution, not attribution

- Reduced risk of election-related conflict and political crises
- Greater democratic resilience and social cohesion

Elections serve as a stabilizing, not destabilizing, political mechanism

Both pathways are contingent on key enabling assumptions, including the timely issuance of invitations by pS for election observation, unrestricted access for observers, constructive engagement by electoral management bodies, sustained political will to pursue reform, and the availability of adequate and predictable funding for follow-up. For the purpose of the evaluation, enabling conditions are understood to include effective co-ordination among relevant OSCE structures and bodies, adequate funding and sufficient local absorption capacity for reform. In interpreting evidence across different country contexts, the evaluation takes into account factors that may shape implementation trajectories, including political resistance to electoral reform, the presence of disinformation affecting public trust and variations in OSCE field presence and resources, which influence the modalities and intensity of stakeholder engagement.

The focus of this evaluation is on how ODIHR's election recommendations and relevant follow-up work by different executive structures (primarily ODIHR and field operations) have contributed to electoral reform in the OSCE region. The evaluation does not assess individual election observation missions and is not focused on the more short-term objectives of election observation work, nor does it assess ODIHR's election observation methodology.

Concretely, the evaluation assesses how the outputs of the OSCE's election observation work (primarily recommendations) and relevant follow-up and technical assistance work by different OSCE executive structures have contributed to electoral reforms in the OSCE region. In addition, it assesses the coherence and sustainability of the OSCE's Organization-wide efforts and the integration of gender and human rights. Temporally, the evaluation considered OSCE election-related work over a ten-year period (2013–2023) in order to be able to assess longer-term results and sustainability. Geographically, the evaluation focused primarily on 12 jurisdictions where the OSCE currently has a field presence, which allowed for in-depth assessment of internal coordination and collaboration, as outlined also in the Terms of Reference and Inception Report.

### **Evaluation criteria and questions**

In line with the above scope, the OSCE's work on elections was assessed against five evaluation criteria: coherence (internal and external), effectiveness, impact, sustainability, and the integration of gender and human rights. Table 4 presents the key questions guiding this evaluation, as established in the Terms of Reference and finetuned in the Inception Report.

**TABLE 4. EVALUATION QUESTIONS**

 <p><b>COHERENCE</b> (Internal &amp; External)</p> <p><b>EQ1:</b> To what extent has the OSCE coordinated its election-related work, internally and externally, to leverage its comparative advantage, to promote free, fair and democratic elections in the OSCE region?</p>	 <p><b>EFFECTIVENESS</b></p> <p><b>EQ2:</b> To what extent did the OSCE succeed in assisting election stakeholders in the OSCE region to implement OSCE commitments and principles on democratic elections?</p>	 <p><b>IMPACT</b></p> <p><b>EQ3:</b> To what extent have ODIHR's election recommendations and FOs and institutions election follow-up work contributed to the implementation of OSCE commitments on elections?</p>	 <p><b>SUSTAINABILITY</b></p> <p><b>EQ4:</b> To what extent has the OSCE used available instruments and platforms to promote ownership of the results by relevant stakeholder?</p>	 <p><b>GENDER AND HUMAN RIGHTS</b></p> <p><b>EQ5:</b> To what degree and how has the OSCE assisted pS to enhance citizen and civil society participation, as well as an inclusion of women, minorities, youth, and persons with disabilities with the electoral systems and processes in the OSCE region?</p>
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Each evaluation question was operationalized through a tailored approach, based on a clear rationale aligned with the relevant assessment criteria, while also considering the contexts in different participating States.

Regarding the criterion of coherence, the analysis focuses on the internal co-ordination and co-operation between OSCE executive structures engaged in election-related work (mainly ODIHR and field operations). In addition, it examines the external coherence of OSCE work in terms of co-ordination and co-operation with relevant actors outside the Organization.

Under effectiveness, the evaluation provides a focused assessment of the OSCE's contributions to advancing electoral reform by supporting key stakeholders in contexts where enabling conditions are present, focusing in particular on jurisdictions with OSCE field operations that allow for sustained engagement, access, and follow-up. The term "success", as used in the evaluation question, does not imply a binary success-failure judgement, but is used in more relative terms — i.e., as a tangible contribution to intended outcomes in specific local contexts. The richest data set stems from the six jurisdictions visited by the evaluation team, where in-depth consultations enabled a more granular understanding of results, OSCE contributions, challenges and context-specific dynamics.

For the impact criterion, the evaluation team explored the extent to which ODIHR's recommendations have been implemented OSCE-wide and in specific contexts, where feasible with available data. In this regard, the evaluation offers a bird's-eye view across the OSCE region in terms of implementation rates and patterns when it comes to electoral recommendations, complemented by an informative snapshot of the OSCE's contribution to the implementation of recommendations in the 12 jurisdictions where the OSCE currently has a field operation. Patterns of recommendation uptake are used as a proxy for participating States' progress in implementing their commitments with regard to

democratic elections (the long-term objective of the OSCE's work on elections).

The sustainability criterion is similarly addressed using a dual lens that considers both use of OSCE-wide instruments and platforms and the experience of the 12 jurisdictions where the OSCE has a field operation, with particular attention to ownership, institutional absorption capacity and enabling conditions required for electoral reforms to be sustained over time.

Under gender and human rights, the evaluation concentrated on the key recommendations linked to this topic in order to explore these themes from a broader perspective. In the jurisdictions visited, the evaluation team also consulted a wide range of stakeholders, enabling stronger triangulation and richer insight into the progress of inclusion and gender mainstreaming.

## **Methodology**

The evaluation questions guided data collection from various sources, ensuring that the evidence gathered, analysed and triangulated was consistently linked to the focus areas of the evaluation. The evaluation findings were synthesized to answer the evaluation questions and formed the basis for the conclusions and

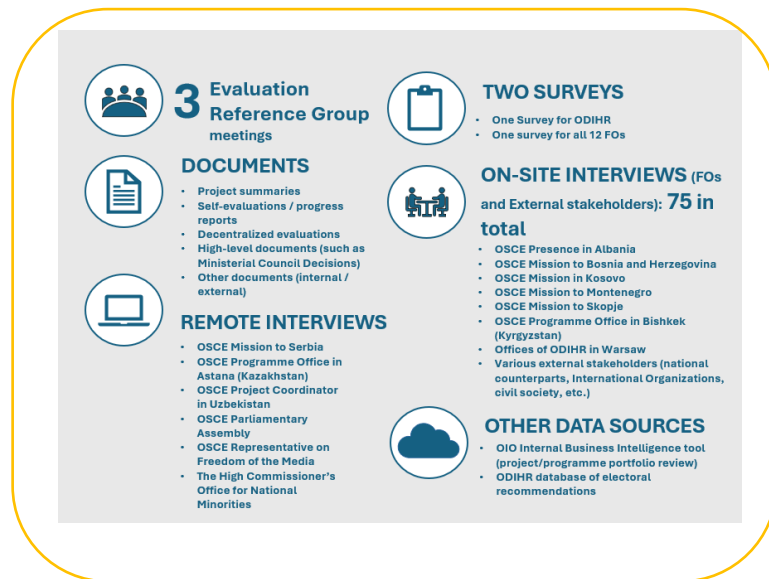
resulting recommendations, ensuring strong links between them. Anonymous quotations from interviewees, shown in italics and enclosed in quotation marks, are included in this report to support key findings.

The evaluation began with in-house stocktaking (document review and initial scoping interviews), followed by extensive data collection and analysis, including desk research, six field visits (to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kyrgyzstan) and a visit to Warsaw (to interview key interlocutors from ODIHR), as well as interviews with OSCE staff and key stakeholders (e.g., election management bodies, CSOs, media regulators, development partners and international organizations).

In addition to in-person consultations, remote interviews were conducted with OSCE staff from three field operations — the OSCE Mission to Serbia, the Programme Office in Astana (Kazakhstan) and the Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan — ensuring geographic diversity and coverage of regions not visited in person. Further interviews were held with representatives from the PA, the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the High Commissioner on National Minorities. Surveys were also distributed to relevant staff across all field operations and ODIHR to validate evidence collected from interviews.

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative data sources, including, *inter alia*, election observation reports, the conducted surveys, interviews, ODIHR handbooks, financial data, and internal (project) documentation from OSCE internal systems. The evidence was triangulated and synthesized to derive findings on the evaluation questions (for an overview of key data sets, see Figure 10).

**FIGURE 10. KEY EVALUATION DATA SETS AND PLATFORMS**



Quality assurance was supported by the OIO and the Evaluation Reference Group, comprising of OSCE stakeholders from ODIHR, field operations and the OSCE PA.

## Challenges and limitations

**Budgetary constraints and delays:** The evaluation relied on ExB funding, which put constraints on the timing of field visits, and resulted in the inception report being finalized after the field data collection at the end of 2024. This has been mitigated by transparent communication to the Evaluation Reference Group, and additional data collection in 2025. Budgetary constraints and high workloads also delayed inputs from key stakeholders, which was mitigated by extension of timelines.

**Data availability and quality:** Gaps and quality shortcomings in results data and documentation, particularly for UB-funded election programmes and projects (including the Programme-Based Performance Reporting and/or Results-Based Utilization of Resources and related KPIs and decentralized evaluations). Projects did not always provide consistent or sufficient results data to support systematic analysis. The evaluation team mitigated this shortcoming through interviews and additional document review, particularly reviews of EOM reports and other OSCE documents, but relied partly on limited secondary sources. As a result, some evaluation questions were supported by richer data sets than others, resulting in varying levels of analytical depth.

**Gauging effectiveness and progress towards impact:** Assessing the effectiveness and impact of the OSCE's work in terms of the Organization's contributions to actual change within participating States is not always a straightforward endeavour, and results often depend largely on political will. This challenge is especially linked to the implementation of ODIHR's electoral recommendations, which — although ODIHR commits itself to supporting the process — ultimately depends on the efforts of participating States. In this context, the effectiveness question focuses primarily on the results of specific OSCE activities aimed at equipping and supporting the capacities of stakeholders to implement the relevant commitments, while the impact question explores the results of the OSCE's broader efforts to support participating States with their implementation of electoral commitments. The OSCE's span of control and influence is comparatively stronger with respect to the former than to the latter. Using implementation rates to gauge impact has inherent limitations, particularly given the timing of formal implementation assessments, which are typically conducted only when an election observation mission returns in a subsequent electoral cycle. The evaluation therefore draws on implementation patterns as an indicative, rather than definitive, data source to generate findings related to impact, triangulating these with qualitative evidence on institutional change, stakeholder capacity and sustained engagement to inform the assessment of progress towards impact.

**Data on requests and stakeholder uptake:** Systematic institutional data on requests for observation or electoral support and on how national stakeholders use OSCE outputs were not available. The evaluation team reconstructed trends manually using publicly accessible ODIHR data on needs assessment missions and election observation missions, which confirmed consistently high engagement levels between 2013 and 2023. However, information on invitations declined, delayed or deemed unviable could not be verified. Likewise, evidence on how electoral stakeholders — such as election commissions, parliaments and civil society — use OSCE reports and recommendations was drawn primarily from interviews and secondary sources, rather than through systematic tracking. These gaps highlight the need for improved institutional monitoring of demand and uptake.

**Documentation variability across field operations:** The quality and completeness of project documentation varied considerably across field operations. While some missions maintained comprehensive records, others provided limited results data or activity-level reporting. This uneven documentation affected the comparability of findings across countries and regions. Mitigation measures included targeted interviews with field operation staff and triangulation, extrabudgetary documentation, and internal decentralized evaluations and self-evaluations.

**Field visits and remote data collection:** Fieldwork was conducted in six jurisdictions where the OSCE has a field presence, alongside visits to ODIHR in Warsaw. These missions generated valuable context-specific insights. However, differences in field operation mandates, the prioritization of election-related work and interlocutor diversity posed challenges to comparability. Remote interviews helped extend coverage but, by their nature, limited engagement with broader stakeholder groups, particularly in politically constrained environments. For jurisdictions not visited, analysis relied on secondary documentation, EOM reports and a smaller number of virtual interviews.

**Conceptual challenges:** The evaluation did not apply all features of a fully theory-based evaluation. A comprehensive Organization-wide validation of the reconstructed theory of change was not undertaken due to time, contextual and resource constraints. Such an effort could have further refined evaluation questions — especially under the effectiveness and impact criteria. The theory of change should therefore be considered a provisional conceptual framework for reflection and future development rather than a fully validated model.

**Geographical and temporal scope:** Although the evaluation aims to provide insights into the OSCE's work on elections in general, the focus was primarily on jurisdictions where the OSCE currently has a

field operation. While not representative of the entire OSCE area, this focus reflects where the majority of electoral support and capacity-building activities took place between 2013 and 2023. Where feasible, data for all 57 participating States were integrated to provide a broader contextual perspective. As with regard to the timeframe, turnover in staff and related gaps in institutional memory, limited data collection in some cases for the earlier years of the scope, which has been mitigated by review of documentation and additional interviews where possible.

**Political sensitivities and ethical considerations:** Elections are inherently political and often occur in polarized or fragile contexts. Some stakeholders, particularly from government institutions, expressed caution or preferred anonymity when discussing politically sensitive issues. The evaluation team adhered to the “do no harm” principle, obtained informed consent, ensured confidentiality and anonymized data to encourage openness. All interviews were conducted with sensitivity to context, and the findings were carefully phrased to protect respondent identities and avoid political repercussions.



## 4. Evaluation findings

### Coherence

**Evaluation question 1: To what extent has the OSCE coordinated its election-related work, internally and externally, to leverage its comparative advantage to promote free, fair and democratic elections in the OSCE region?**

✓ **Finding 1:** Ministerial Council decisions have built a coherent OSCE-wide framework that positions ODIHR as a key actor in promoting democratic elections and providing electoral assistance, with complementary roles for other OSCE executive structures and bodies.

The evaluation's desk review found that, over the years, a series of pivotal Ministerial Council decisions have not only defined the OSCE's electoral commitments but also established a solid conceptual framework for internal co-ordination. These decisions have provided clear strategic direction, enabling OSCE executive structures, bodies and institutions to align their efforts internally while also guiding their engagement with external stakeholders in the electoral support domain.

The 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe set the foundational principles for OSCE engagement in democratic elections, asserting that democracy, grounded in the will of the people, is the sole legitimate form of governance. By underscoring principles such as universal suffrage, equal participation and impartial justice, the Charter provided both normative clarity and institutional impetus through the creation of the Office for Free Elections — later transformed into the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. This marked a structural shift towards sustained, standardized electoral assistance, setting a precedent for permanent international observation mechanisms and positioning ODIHR as a normative model later emulated by other organizations.

The 1990 Copenhagen Document is the cornerstone of the OSCE's work on elections. Agreed by all participating States, it sets out key commitments such as universal and equal suffrage, the right to run for office, fair access to media and transparent vote counting. These commitments guide ODIHR's election observation methodology and provide the standards against which electoral processes are assessed. The document also shapes broader OSCE support for elections, from engaging with governments and electoral bodies to strengthening local capacity. Though not legally binding, its political

weight makes it a powerful tool for promoting democratic standards and holding participating States to account.

Subsequent ministerial meetings — Rome (1993) and Budapest (1994) — further institutionalized this framework. In Rome, ODIHR was tasked with building a roster of electoral experts, providing information and advice to missions, and co-ordinating with other organizations, thereby reinforcing its central role in election observation. The meeting underscored the need for sustained inter-institutional collaboration to strengthen democratic processes and follow-up. At the 1994 Budapest Summit, the OSCE took a decisive step by assuming direct responsibility for organizing and supervising elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Dayton Peace Accords, thereby extending its mandate into post-conflict electoral administration. The Budapest document marked a decisive step in operationalizing ODIHR's lead role in elections, including by assigning the OSCE responsibility for organizing and supervising elections in post-conflict contexts. While Kosovo was not explicitly referenced in the Budapest Summit documents, the foundational role established there laid the groundwork for the OSCE's later operational engagement in Kosovo, where it would eventually assume full responsibility for administering elections under UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

The evolution continued with the Oslo Ministerial Council (1998), which encouraged pS to follow up promptly on ODIHR recommendations and tasked ODIHR with offering assistance in their implementation. It also further encouraged interagency co-operation, and reinforced ODIHR's central role and methodology. The Istanbul Summit (1999) includes commitments of pS to invite observers also from the OSCE PA and other appropriate organizations, and another commitment to follow up promptly to ODIHR's recommendations.

Ministerial Council decisions at Porto (2002) and Maastricht (2003) further strengthened this trajectory. Decision 7/02 reaffirmed the core electoral principles and once again encouraged participating States to follow up on ODIHR's post-election recommendations, promoting accountability and continuous improvement. Decision 5/03 consolidates ODIHR's leadership, emphasizing transparency in electoral processes and broadening ODIHR's support across the OSCE region, including tasking ODIHR to consider ways to improve the effectiveness of its assistance to participating States.

Taken together, the Ministerial Council decisions reflect an evolving but increasingly coherent framework that supports normative alignment among key OSCE executive structures and bodies — such as ODIHR, field operations and the OSCE PA — while clarifying their complementary roles. The decisions reaffirm ODIHR's lead

responsibility for election observation and methodological development, define the OSCE PA's role in contributing short-term observers and providing political visibility, and encourage field operations to support follow-up and dialogue on ODIHR recommendations within their respective mandates. In practice, this coordination has taken place through information exchange, joint communication and cooperation during post-election follow-up processes, even when such modalities are not explicitly prescribed. In this sense, the Ministerial Council decisions have functioned as both a compass and an anchor, orienting the OSCE's mission. As a result, the OSCE has broadened its instruments beyond norm-setting to take on a more proactive role in electoral assistance, becoming a key actor in supporting democratic governance across the OSCE region.

✓ **Finding 2:** Co-ordination between ODIHR and field operations on electoral activities varies considerably in practice and is shaped by mandates, timing and contextual constraints.

Regarding co-ordination between ODIHR and field operations, both survey responses and interviews reveal a mixed picture — particularly concerning field operations' involvement in supporting NAMs, election observation activities and follow-up on recommendations. Both ODIHR and field operation respondents

noted that coordination often depends heavily on individual initiative, working relationships and contextual factors, rather than on formal procedures or joint strategic planning and implementation. Interviews also indicate that expectations regarding initiative and responsibility for engagement are not always aligned. While ODIHR operates according to standardized internal procedures for election observation missions, field operations vary in the extent to which proactive outreach on electoral issues is embedded in their own practices. While most field operations contribute to ODIHR's NAMs and post-election engagement to support implementation of ODIHR's recommendations, FOs are not invited to read election observation reports in advance of their publication. An exception is OMIK, who has supported EU EOMs by offering structured inputs, noting that the EU follows a different approach than ODIHR in this respect.

Involvement in NAMs was reported by almost all field operations, usually in the form of logistical support and contextual input. Field operations observed that their involvement was often limited or arranged at short notice. At the same time, both ODIHR and field operation staff emphasized that such timing constraints frequently reflect practical realities of election observation. When early elections are called, NAMs must be organized quickly, invitations from participating States may arrive only at the last minute, and, as ODIHR leads the missions, their timing also depends on the

availability of national authorities. These dynamics can reduce opportunities for more structured field operation engagement.

The value of field operations in contextualizing recommendations is recognized by both field staff and some interviewed EOM core team members. Field operations bring institutional memory, trusted national relationships and an understanding of local sensitivities that can make recommendations more actionable. As one EOM expert noted, *“Knowledge in the field offices on the ground ... is just beneficial.”* Election observation experiences in Kosovo illustrates this: the field operation has supported EU EOMs by offering structured input and helping shape final EU electoral recommendations, illustrating how field operations can add value in complementary observation contexts. Importantly, several field operation representatives interviewed for this evaluation had strong election-related portfolios and expressed interest in contributing more systematically to ODIHR’s work, particularly by helping ensure that recommendations are context-sensitive and feasible.

At the same time, some stakeholders stressed that it is important to be precise about the stage at which field operations can contribute. During an EOM, recommendations and the final report are not yet completed; they are developed in the months following the mission. What field operations can reasonably be consulted on

at that stage are ideas for potential recommendations; not the drafting of final reports.

The survey results indicate that only five field operations were consulted by ODIHR on follow-up, but this figure should be interpreted cautiously: not all field operations have a mandate to cover electoral issues or seek involvement, and the feasibility of recommendations can depend on highly technical matters such as voter registration procedures or party finance regulations, where not all field operations have direct exposure. ODIHR interviewees also pointed to instances where follow-up efforts were constrained by limited communication or coordination from field operations.

Interviews further suggest that perceptions of limited consultation are sometimes linked to differing understandings of follow-up processes, including whether and when ODIHR follow-up visits take place. Some respondents also noted that the extent of collaboration can depend on personalities, communication practices and the specific mandates of field operations. Taken together, these factors point to occasional ambiguity in the operationalization of roles and responsibilities between ODIHR and field operations, particularly with regard to consultation, sequencing and expectations around follow-up.

The evaluation therefore finds that while field operation contributions vary, strengthening clarity and predictability in consultation practices, within existing roles and mandates, could add value to ensure that recommendations are grounded in local realities.

✓ **Finding 3:** The HCNM's contributions to electoral processes — particularly in supporting the inclusion of non-majority communities — are valued by both ODIHR and field operations, but they remain largely informal and unevenly integrated, reflecting the HCNM's mandate, operating modalities and the nature of its engagement with election observation processes.

Although the HCNM has no formal mandate to observe elections, its contributions to electoral processes — particularly in promoting the inclusion of non-majority communities — have long been valued by both ODIHR and OSCE field operations. In earlier years, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the HCNM was regularly included in EOM core teams, offering expert insight that shaped both pre-election assessments and recommendations for inclusive participation.

However, this level of engagement has diminished in recent years, reflecting a combination of operational shifts since the COVID-19 pandemic, resource constraints and a greater reliance on remote

modalities of engagement. As one interlocutor remarked, *"It's no longer the same as having the HCNM on the ground."* Resource constraints have further limited the HCNM's ability to participate directly in field deployments, reducing its visibility and influence during key electoral periods and follow-up. As a result, the HCNM engagement in election observation activities is now primarily conducted through remote modalities, which — while allowing for continued input — do not fully substitute for sustained on-the-ground engagement.

While the HCNM's contributions remain valued, particularly in relation to non-majority inclusion, the current mode of engagement differs from the more regular embedded role the HCNM once played within EOM core teams, particularly in terms of visibility, depth of interaction and real-time contextual input.

Various interlocutors stressed that, in the absence of formalized coordination arrangements — and given the HCNM's mandate and quiet diplomacy approach — its involvement remains largely informal and ad hoc. While both ODIHR and field operations continue to recognize the value of the HCNM's expertise — particularly in addressing barriers to participation for non-majority communities (as reflected in various electoral recommendations) — the issue is now inconsistently integrated into relevant workstreams.

✓ **Finding 4:** The RFoM brings valued expertise to ODIHR's election work and is actively drawn upon across election observation processes, however collaboration remains largely ad hoc and episodic, limiting the consistent and systematic leveraging of RFoM's expertise.

ODIHR's engagement with the RFoM on electoral issues is acknowledged as both valuable and necessary, particularly where media freedom is directly linked to the credibility of elections. The collaboration is mutually enforcing and operational: the RFoM provides expertise on journalist safety and legal frameworks, while ODIHR systematically draws on RFoM analysis and contributes to RFoM reports, guidance and policy papers, including through references in its observation reports and participation in HDIM side events. At the same time, the collected data suggest that co-ordination remains largely informal and reactive in terms of timing and planning, with exchanges often taking place shortly before or during EOMs. While this co-ordination has proved useful in addressing immediate concerns, the evaluation finds that the largely ad hoc nature of engagement can limit the systematic and timely integration of RFoM's expertise into electoral assessments and subsequent follow-up.

Field operations generally recognize the RFoM as an underused asset in election-related work. Most field operations reported ad hoc collaboration with the RFoM, typically triggered by external developments such as proposed legislation or incidents involving media repression. Although the support provided is seen as impactful, it is rarely part of a sustained or institutionalized process. As one interviewee noted, *"We should collaborate more systematically — elections are about public debate, and without media freedom, that debate is distorted."* It has been a frequently expressed opinion that, in contexts where pluralism and journalist safety are increasingly threatened, more predictable and consistent co-operation between the RFoM, field operations and ODIHR could enhance the OSCE's collective response.

The Office of the RFoM itself acknowledged these co-ordination gaps in interviews, pointing to limited resources and the absence of joint planning and implementation frameworks as key constraints. It expressed a strong willingness to be more actively involved in electoral cycles, including through early-warning input, public advocacy and policy development. Greater integration into OSCE-wide planning was identified by the RFoM's staff as one potential avenue through which its technical and political insights could inform not only post-election recommendations but also pre-election assessments and longer-term reforms. As noted in the

interviews, the Office of the RFoM sees its value not just in reacting to crises but in contributing to a more coherent and proactive OSCE-wide strategy for defending media space and democratic resilience. Overall, the evidence points to a relationship characterized by strong substantive exchange and mutual reliance, but with scope for more predictable and strategically sequenced engagement across electoral cycles.

✓ **Finding 5:** Strengthened co-operation between ODIHR and the OSCE PA has enhanced the political reach of election observation and contributed to civic engagement and democratic participation. However, this co-operation is primarily focused on short-term election observation, limiting its potential to support sustained post-election engagement and broader democratic participation outcomes.

ODIHR leads the OSCE's election observation work through methodologically grounded election observation activities. The OSCE PA, as a political institution composed of over 300 legislators from participating States, contributes a complementary political perspective through its participation in short-term observation missions, particularly on election day. Joint missions allow for the combination of ODIHR's technical expertise and the PA's political visibility, which stakeholders noted can enhance the accessibility, resonance and public reach of preliminary findings, thereby

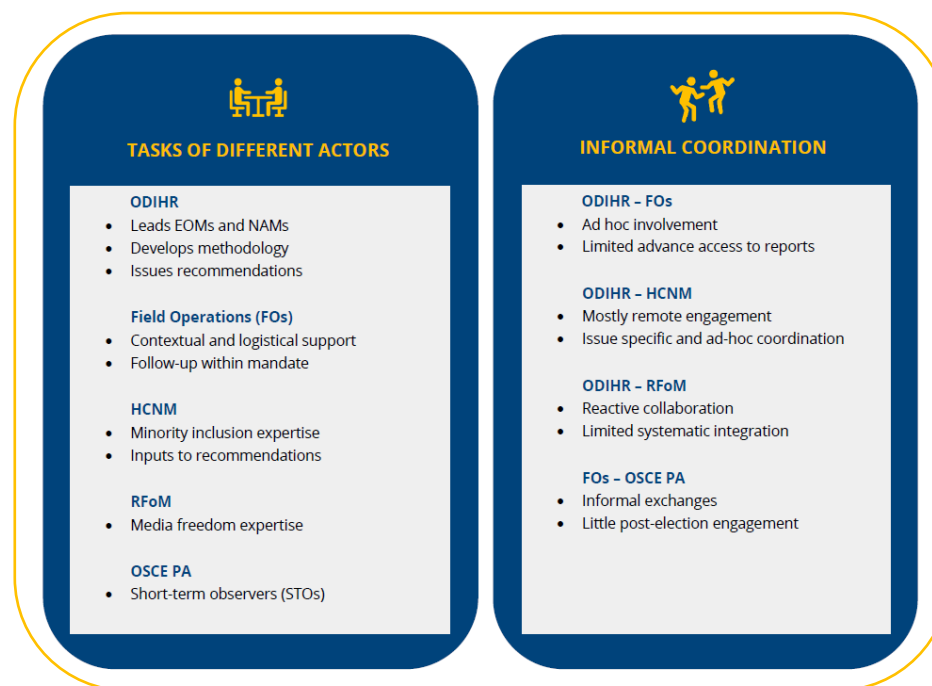
supporting public understanding of electoral processes and reinforcing civic engagement.

Interviews, nonetheless, revealed that co-ordination — particularly on messaging and the presentation of findings — has not always been seamless. While both institutions acknowledged improvements in recent years, supported by clearer procedures and more structured interaction, the scope of co-operation remains largely confined to election periods. This limits opportunities for sustained engagement that could reinforce democratic participation beyond election day, including follow-up dialogue with national stakeholders on electoral reform and inclusive participation.

Collaboration between field operations and the OSCE PA is limited and largely informal, reflecting the PA's episodic presence in country contexts and the absence of standing co-ordination arrangements beyond election periods. Most field operations reported little or no direct engagement with the OSCE PA outside of election periods. In several contexts, field operations noted that closer interaction with PA could help amplify reform messages, support civic awareness initiatives and strengthen political follow-up on issues affecting inclusive participation.

Despite these operational gaps, the OSCE PA is widely regarded as a politically influential actor with untapped potential to contribute more systemically to post-election follow-up and reform processes. Its access to national parliament and senior political actors — particularly ministries of foreign affairs and national legislatures — positions it well to reinforce momentum between elections, including by supporting dialogue on electoral reform and democratic participation. This potential mirrors findings elsewhere in the evaluation that sustained engagement — particularly when combined with political leverage and institutional continuity — can contribute positively to democratic participation and civic involvement in contexts marked by fluctuating political will. Overall, stakeholders emphasized that closer alignment between the PA’s political reach, ODIHR’s technical expertise and the long-term engagement of field operations could strengthen the OSCE’s contribution to civic participation and democratic processes across participating states.

**FIGURE 11. COORDINATION IN ODIHR ELECTION OBSERVATION**



✓ **Finding 6:** The OSCE's flexibility in politically sensitive contexts is a significant asset. While ODIHR provides technical expertise on request, field operations adapt by shifting from electoral legal support to technical support, operating discreetly and responding to external stakeholders' emerging needs. This enables continued engagement even when formal reforms are blocked.

A defining strength of field operations is their ability to adapt strategically in politically sensitive or gridlocked environments, maintaining relevance even when formal electoral reform is stalled. In Albania, when political negotiations around the electoral law collapsed due to partisan political deadlock, the field operation quickly shifted to non-legislative interventions, organizing technical workshops on vote buying, campaign conduct and voter education. This pivot allowed the mission to address core electoral issues without directly challenging the political status quo. The ability to move from legislative assistance to technical dialogue illustrates both a deep understanding of local dynamics and a commitment to constructive engagement.

In North Macedonia, the OSCE's responsiveness was evident in its work with the State Election Commission during institutional transition periods. When resources were constrained and the Commission lacked internal capacity, the field operation stepped in to assist with internal procedures, promote transparency and

enhance operational planning — all without overstepping its neutral role. Field staff were praised for working within the *"limits of what could be done"*, while still advancing improvements on inclusion and accessibility. This balancing act between diplomacy and advocacy illustrates how field operations can deliver value in politically brittle settings.

Flexibility also stems from close co-ordination with ODIHR, particularly where legal expertise is required. In Kyrgyzstan, the field operation acted as a trusted conduit for the Central Election Commission (CEC), while ODIHR provided rapid legal reviews and consultations. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the field operation helped channel requests and maintain local trust, while ODIHR supplied technical advice and legal input. This model of collaboration enables field operations to maintain space with stakeholders while ODIHR delivers specialized expertise, ensuring credibility and continuity in reform efforts.

In other political contexts, OSCE engagement has focused on areas with broader acceptance. In Uzbekistan, this has focused on accessibility, training and voter education, while in Kazakhstan, it has taken the form of relationship-based diplomacy and targeted input — whenever invited to provide such input. In Serbia, engagement has been sustained through informal briefings and co-ordination, despite limited direct involvement. Across these

contexts, engagement is typically shaped by the scope of field operation mandates and political receptiveness, with ODIHR's involvement primarily focused on providing technical expertise upon request rather than sustained in-country presence.

Taken together, the collected data suggest that both field operations and ODIHR demonstrate adaptability, with the former leveraging proximity and trust to maintain access, and the latter providing targeted technical expertise on request. Where combined effectively, this flexibility enables the OSCE to remain engaged and relevant under varying political circumstances.

✓ **Finding 7:** Electoral authorities across diverse jurisdictions view the OSCE as a credible and supportive partner. While the different roles of ODIHR and field operations are widely recognized, interlocutors pointed to scope for more consistent co-ordination — particularly around post-election engagement — to improve continuity of engagement.

Electoral authorities interviewed across the six jurisdictions generally viewed co-operation with ODIHR and field operations as constructive, though experiences varied depending on local conditions and political dynamics.

In Kyrgyzstan, the CEC emphasized strong collaboration with the OSCE on legal reform, electoral security and inclusion. ODIHR was recognized for its technical input, while the field operation played a key role in sustained on-the-ground engagement. In Kosovo, representatives from the CEC, the Election Complaints and Appeals Panel and related IT departments underscored the OSCE's foundational role in building electoral institutions and legal frameworks.

While ODIHR does not observe elections in Kosovo, its visibility has been high through its leadership of the Western Balkans Project, which focused on follow-up to electoral recommendations and regional good practices. The field operation was viewed as the main interlocutor for daily co-ordination, though some concerns were raised about the sustainability of externally supported reforms — particularly in areas such as digital modernization, where continuous investment is required to ensure regular system updates.

The Albanian State Election Commissioner highlighted ODIHR's impartiality and the quality of its recommendations but noted that implementation often depends on the political will of national actors. OSCE assistance was considered especially important during sensitive reform periods, although the Organization's influence can be constrained in the absence of broad domestic consensus.

These examples reflect broader patterns. ODIHR is widely respected for its legal expertise and international credibility, while field operations are recognized for their local knowledge, continuous engagement and trusted relationships with electoral authorities. In this context, several interlocutors noted that more predictable co-ordination between ODIHR and field operations — particularly around post-election engagement — could improve the consistency of the OSCE’s election-related work. Ultimately, while technical assistance is highly valued, many electoral authorities emphasized that long-term reform also hinges on political dynamics — an area where field operations often serve as critical bridges between the OSCE as a whole and national institutions.

## Effectiveness

### Evaluation question 2: To what extent did the OSCE succeed in assisting the election stakeholders in the OSCE region to implement OSCE commitments and principles on democratic elections?

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✓ **Finding 8:** EOMs are a central mechanism through which ODIHR supports participating States in assessing their compliance with OSCE electoral commitments and identifying areas for improvement.

Between 2013 and 2023, 3,814 recommendations were issued across the 57 participating States, with recurring themes like media freedom, election administration and campaign finance highlighting persistent challenges.

The 1990 Copenhagen Document outlines participating States’ political commitment to hold democratic elections in line with key principles — such as universal suffrage, transparency and political pluralism — and to invite ODIHR to observe their elections. While these commitments are not legally binding, they form the normative basis of ODIHR’s election observation mandate. EOMs are deployed only following an invitation and a NAM that evaluates whether an observation mission is needed and what format it should take.<sup>v</sup> NAMs often recommend lighter engagement where democratic institutions function well and there is trust in the process and the institutions that administer the process, or where observation would add limited additional value. While NAMs produce an assessment of what is needed to effectively observe, deployment decisions are also shaped by budgetary and logistical limitations, and in recent years observer numbers have occasionally been scaled back or additional funding was required due to limited resource availability.

Between 2013 and 2023, a total of 270 elections of various types were held across the whole OSCE region (Annex II provides further

information). During this period, ODIHR conducted 196 NAMs and deployed 205 election observation activities, 153 of which were full EOMs. Across these engagements, ODIHR issued 3,814 recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic practices and helping participating States meet their OSCE electoral commitments. The recurrence of recommendations across cycles reflects ODIHR's consistent methodological approach and the persistence of underlying structural or political constraints, rather than a lack of diagnostic clarity. These missions are not simply evaluative exercises; they serve as mechanisms for assisting participating States in aligning their electoral processes with OSCE principles and improving the integrity, inclusivity and transparency of their systems. EOMs offer impartial assessments of the electoral process and provide tailored guidance to national authorities, civil society and electoral commissions on closing gaps between practice and commitments.

The frequency and intensity of missions varied by context. Countries such as Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine were observed repeatedly, receiving updated or reiterated recommendations across cycles. In contrast, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino did not host any election observation activities between 2013 and 2023 following NAMs.<sup>vi</sup> Some other participating States such as Belarus and the Russian Federation decided not to invite OSCE observers.

In terms of volume, some jurisdictions received particularly high numbers of recommendations in a single cycle. Countries such as Montenegro, Moldova and North Macedonia received a high volume, reflecting persistent structural reform needs. Conversely, countries like Finland and Sweden consistently received fewer recommendations, suggesting stronger compliance with OSCE election-related standards and fewer structural gaps requiring reform.

Across the region, recurring themes emerged in the electoral recommendations. Issues related to media freedom, election administration and campaign finance were most frequently flagged, followed by complaints and appeals, election day conduct and voter registration. The growing prominence of concerns like disinformation and media capture — especially in strongly politically polarized or restricted settings — reflects the evolving challenges to electoral integrity.

Between 2013 and 2023, EOMs served as a key mechanism for promoting adherence to OSCE electoral commitments. Effectiveness in this context is also reflected in the continued demand for ODIHR's engagement, the credibility of its assessments, and its ability to maintain dialogue with national stakeholders across electoral cycles, including in politically constrained environments. Their evidence-based analysis and tailored

recommendations provide participating States with a credible framework for identifying reform needs and aligning national practices with international standards. The collected data suggest that the effectiveness of this support, however, depends on how national stakeholders — such as election commissions, parliaments and civil society — respond to and act upon the recommendations. While the extent of engagement and follow-up varies across contexts, the consistent recurrence of similar issues in successive reports highlights the need for more sustained national action and collaboration to bridge the (often persistent) gap between declaratory commitment and actual implementation.

✓ **Finding 9:** The OSCE's most effective contributions to electoral reform processes have often occurred where field operations and ODIHR coordinate closely, combining ODIHR's technical expertise with field operations' local presence and knowledge, continuity and trusted relationships.

Internal co-ordination emerges as a key driver of meaningful engagement, particularly when sequenced around reform windows and stakeholder readiness. The OSCE's ability to support electoral reform<sup>vii</sup> through its field operations is shaped by a combination of mandate clarity, intra-organizational alignment and political access. Internal co-ordination emerges as a key driver of meaningful engagement. In some contexts, a clear division of labour between

ODIHR and field operations has proven effective: ODIHR leads on technical and legislative reform issues, while field operations maintain some distance from contentious debates and use their relationships to convene dialogue with otherwise divided stakeholders. In Serbia, for example, ODIHR engages directly with the parliamentary working group on electoral reform, while the field operation facilitates broader discussions among political parties, civil society and other actors.

Where mandates are broad and long-lasting relationships with local counterparts are well established — as in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro — field operations have, within their mandates, played more proactive roles in electoral processes. These roles include providing legal advice technical assistance and capacity-building, and facilitating reforms with election commissions and domestic actors. In Kosovo, electoral support is explicitly mandated, while in Albania the field operation is perceived as a central actor due to its long-standing visibility and relationships. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, requests for legal support are channelled through the field operation, which coordinates with ODIHR to provide expert legal reviews. This model strengthens reform credibility while allowing the field operation to maintain trust with stakeholders by acting as facilitator.

Field operations have also supported follow-up on ODIHR recommendations, though this varies by context. In North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, field operations have helped advance reforms on issues such as campaign finance, accessibility and harmonization of legal standards with OSCE commitments. In Kyrgyzstan, where the Programme Office in Bishkek has no explicit mandate to engage in election-related work, the CEC nonetheless described the OSCE as a *“main partner”* for reform implementation. Here too, the field operation acted as the primary interlocutor with the CEC, while ODIHR provided rapid technical input upon request, illustrating how joint engagement can make the OSCE a trusted reform partner.

While technical expertise is important, interviewees stressed that facilitating co-ordination among stakeholders is just as critical. In Albania, Kosovo and Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE was noted for convening dialogue across institutions — from election commissions to civil society and law enforcement. In more constrained settings, engagement has been more cautious, shaped by mandates and host government preferences. Although some support was noted in areas like accessibility and civic education, limited access to key institutions reduced the OSCE's ability to act as a constant reform partner.

✓ **Finding 10:** ODIHR's election observation outputs — such as EOM recommendations — are widely recognized by national and international stakeholders interviewed as a primary impartial and credible reference point for electoral reform across the OSCE region.

International actors consistently identified ODIHR's recommendations as the principal springboard for electoral reform. In Montenegro and Kyrgyzstan, ODIHR's technical recommendations are regularly cited in reform road maps, legal amendments and donor co-ordination. Although ODIHR does not observe elections in Kosovo, its visibility remains high due to its leadership of the Western Balkans Project, widely credited for facilitating recommendation follow-up and regional co-operation.

While other international institutions — such as the EU, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Republican Institute — also support(-ed) electoral processes, their roles are distinct. The EU, which does not observe elections elsewhere in the OSCE region beyond Kosovo, plays a critical political and financial role. It maintains EU delegations in most jurisdictions and is the primary funder of ODIHR's Western Balkans Project. At the same time, several stakeholders emphasized that EU accession processes are closely tied to progress on ODIHR

recommendations, which are frequently used as reference benchmarks in accession dialogues.

The Council of Europe — particularly through the Venice Commission — plays a legal advisory role on electoral matters and occasionally deploys short-term observers through its Parliamentary Assembly when it joins ODIHR observation missions. The Venice Commission is often cited for its legal opinions on draft electoral laws and works closely with ODIHR in this domain, issuing joint opinions.

Despite the engagement of other international actors, interviews indicated that national stakeholders largely treat ODIHR's election observation findings as the most authoritative and detailed basis for guiding reform, reflecting both their methodological rigor and continuity across electoral cycles.

✓ **Finding 11:** Although ODIHR has a structured approach to follow-up, and follow-up is referenced in two out of three intended programme outcomes, engagement in practice remains uneven, with overall limited resources dedicated to follow-up. More sustained engagement and progress are evident where dedicated financing and clear demand exists, such as in South Eastern-Europe.

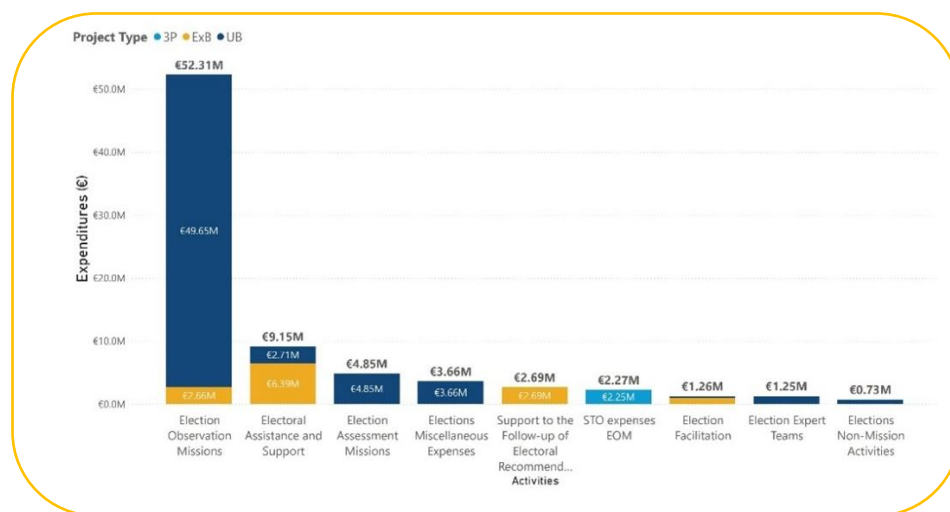
There has been limited UB spending on follow-up by ODIHR, and the most notable follow-up activities have been ExB funded. As emphasized in interviews, ODIHR's follow-up activities are primarily demand-driven and depend on the willingness of participating States to request support. ODIHR indicated that it has not had to decline any requests for follow-up assistance due to resource constraints, and invitations to them for follow-up visits and request for opinions or technical support are fulfilled when received.

At the same time, the absence of dedicated resources for systematic follow-up — outside of certain region-specific extrabudgetary support — limits the extent to which follow-up can be pursued more proactively between electoral cycles across the OSCE region. This is further compounded by the fact that the OSCE has not had an approved UB since 2021 and has operated under quarterly and monthly allotments, reducing the ability to plan (and fund) longer-term electoral assistance. Reliance on ad hoc funding has created uncertainty and unevenness in the planning and sequencing of observation and follow-up activities. Interviews further indicate that the scope and intensity of follow-up may be influenced by the presence, mandate, and capacity of field operations, which vary significantly across participating States.

In addition, as shown in Figure 12, ODIHR has allocated the overwhelming majority of its UB resources to the deployment of

EOMs and NAMs, with comparatively little funding dedicated to stand-alone follow-up activities, reflecting the resource-intensive nature of observation missions and the prioritization of core mandates. At the same time, when it comes to ODIHR’s Unified Budget Proposals, follow-up is referenced in two out of three intended outcomes of the Election’s programme (see also Table 2).

**FIGURE 12. ODIHR ELECTION-RELATED UB/EXB PROJECT EXPENDITURES (2013–2023)**



An exception to these limitations is ODIHR’s Western Balkans Project, enabled by extrabudgetary funding and strong political backing from the EU. This initiative has enabled ODIHR to pursue a more systematic and hands-on approach to follow-up in the region, working closely not only with field operations but also with national

institutions and international partners. The project has enabled structured dialogue, targeted technical assistance and more regular tracking of electoral reform efforts. When an election event takes place in a participating State involved in the project, the project suspends its engagement to avoid overlap with the observation process. Outside these periods, however, it provides continuity between electoral cycles and maintains momentum for reform.

The mid-term evaluation of the second iteration of the project showed that this approach has led to tangible progress, with nearly 60 per cent of assessed recommendations implemented to varying degrees, although only a smaller percentage were fully addressed. Stakeholders consistently noted the project’s value as a neutral and trusted interlocutor, though they also observed that its reach can be stretched thin and that broader political leverage — such as from the EU or other actors — is often needed to translate advice into legal change. Overall, ODIHR’s Western Balkans Project illustrates how dedicated resources and a field presence can enhance follow-up. In addition, the evaluation identified the ExB Project Fund for Enhancing the Follow-up of ODIHR Electoral Assessments and Recommendations, which currently is inactive, but received donor contributions in the evaluated period.

✓ **Finding 12:** ODIHR has played a leading role in providing electoral legal expertise through reviews, informal guidance and dialogue, complemented by the efforts of field operations, which have often convened stakeholders and supported broader reform processes.

Electoral reform processes may result in new laws, amendments to existing legislation or updates to administrative and technical procedures, depending on the national context and political will. They are often linked to electoral recommendations.

In Kosovo, the OSCE facilitated electoral reform efforts that included support for legal harmonization and inclusive procedural reforms and enhancements to the voter list, alongside the introduction of comprehensive election management software. Moreover, the OSCE provided legal input into amendments on diaspora voting, voter list management and EMB harmonization in line with EU recommendations and taking into consideration OSCE suggestions. In Albania, expertise focused on campaign finance transparency and restrictions on the use of public resources. In Uzbekistan, OSCE support contributed to the digitalization of electoral administration systems and legislative reform to enhance minority and gender access. In Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, support included the digitalization of candidate registration and polling staff accreditation, while in Montenegro the

support addressed media obligations, dispute resolution and access for marginalized groups.

One of ODIHR's core functions has been to provide legal and technical expertise underpinning electoral reform. While field operations often convened political parties and facilitated platforms for debate, ODIHR supplied the reviews, informal comments and guidance that shaped those discussions from legal and technical perspective, sometimes also engaging directly in parliamentary and working group debates. This role has been particularly visible in ODIHR's Western Balkans Project, which supported draft laws, by-laws and EMB regulations.

Although comprehensive legislative reform often proved politically challenging, ODIHR's input supported the incremental incorporation of elements of many recommendations through by-laws, administrative instructions or EMB procedures. This approach-maintained reform momentum and gave governments pragmatic entry points for implementation. Communication platforms supported by ODIHR and field operations led to clearer electoral codes, strengthened gender thresholds and simplified candidate registration and campaign finance procedures. In politically sensitive environments, these platforms also fostered cross-party dialogue and alignment with OSCE electoral standards. In this way, ODIHR's legal engagement often helped preserve

technically sound reform options until political conditions allowed for their adoption.

✓ **Finding 13:** Efforts to address the role of media in electoral contexts have been primarily constrained by limited regulatory capacity, legislative gaps and insufficient political backing.

Although most participating States have media laws that are broadly aligned with international standards, the implementation of electoral recommendations on media oversight has often been constrained by political interference, chronic underfunding and institutional capacity limitations. These factors limit the independence and effectiveness of media regulators, restricting their ability to ensure compliance with campaign coverage rules and other safeguards of fair electoral competition, particularly during election periods when regulatory demands intensify.

In Montenegro and Kyrgyzstan, field operations facilitated parliamentary workshops and technical dialogue on media literacy and media regulation during the election period, while in Albania targeted support focused on political advertising oversight. However, as reported by interviewees in Albania, *“ongoing concerns over the political independence of media regulators, chronic underfunding, and lack of adequate staffing during election periods”*. Similar challenges were reported in other contexts, where weak

regulatory capacity and limited political will continue to hinder the effective implementation of media-related recommendations.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, some media representatives stressed the challenge of implementing electoral recommendations under tight political and financial constraints. Despite strong collaboration with ODIHR on by-law revision at the technical level, including Chapter 16 of the election law, regulating online and electronic media, implementation was hindered by *“staff shortages and limited political backing”*. In North Macedonia, stakeholders raised concerns about increased verbal attacks on journalists and the use of polarized language by political parties during campaign periods. In Kosovo, the Independent Media Commission faced persistent challenges in enforcing media obligations due to legislative gaps and weak enforcement mechanisms, despite public expectations for neutral and timely oversight.

Across several participating States, the OSCE helped develop strategic communication tools for election commissions to improve transparency and voter trust. However, persistent gaps — such as inadequate enforcement mechanisms, limited regulatory capacity and weak political backing — continue to undermine the implementation of media-related recommendations, despite sustained OSCE engagement.

## Progress towards impact

### Evaluation question 3: To what extent have ODIHR's election recommendations and field operations and Institutions election follow-up work contributed to the implementation of OSCE commitments on elections?

✓ **Finding 14:** Implementation of ODIHR recommendations remains uneven across the OSCE region, reflecting political, institutional and temporal factors, with recommendations on legal reforms showing the lowest uptake. However, ODIHR's legal reviews add significant value beyond quantitative evidence on implementation status, shaping reform debates, transparency and civil society advocacy.

Between 2013 and 2023, ODIHR issued 3,814 electoral recommendations based on 153 EOMs across the OSCE region. These are categorized as legal (61 per cent), practice-based (28 per cent) or sub-legal (10 per cent), with priority recommendations flagged as critical to the integrity of the process. Importantly, implementation status is updated only when ODIHR deploys a follow-up mission.<sup>viii</sup> This means that implementation rates reflect assessed recommendations, and in some cases a lower apparent uptake could be due to the absence of a subsequent mission rather than a lack of reform. ODIHR also deliberately repeats recommendations across cycles where persistent shortcomings

remain. This makes it difficult to assess implemented recommendations in absolute terms and to use implementation rates as a reliable indicator of progress towards impact, as there might be significant information gaps, duplications and/or redundancies, particularly in contexts where no subsequent observation has taken place.

For this reason, the evaluation focuses on the implementation *patterns*, which remain uneven. Legal reforms are the most frequently recommended but show the lowest rate of uptake, reflecting the greater complexity of passing, and implementing, legislation compared with administrative or procedural reforms. In this context, practice-based and sub-legal recommendations, such as changes to election procedures or administrative rules, are more readily implemented. This is partly because EMBs or oversight bodies can adopt these reforms directly without parliamentary involvement, reducing political sensitivity and complexity and enabling faster progress.

At the same time, even where direct implementation rates appear low, ODIHR's legal opinions provide added value. These reviews give the public and civil society clear benchmarks for assessing legislative changes, supporting advocacy efforts and helping scrutinize the lawmaking process. In this way, ODIHR's contribution extends beyond directly measurable statistics, possibly shaping

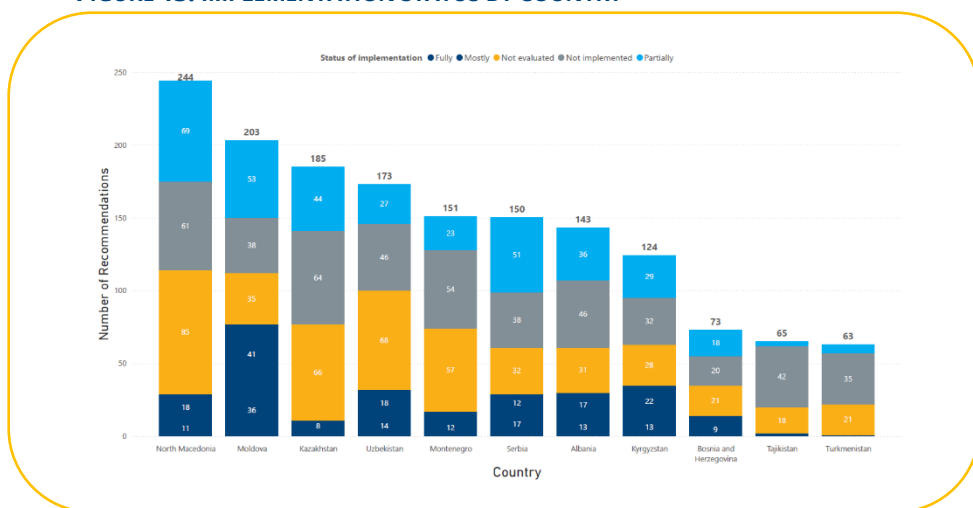
policy dialogue and transparency around electoral reform, including beyond individual electoral cycles, by providing authoritative reference points for public and institutional debate. This broader normative impact is also reflected in ODIHR's contribution to the development of shared principles and standards at the international level. Interviewees highlighted ODIHR's role in the working group that developed the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation as an example of how its expertise informs global norms on electoral integrity. While not linked to immediate implementation outcomes in specific countries, this engagement has helped shape common expectations, professional standards and reference points that continue to guide election observation and reform efforts across the OSCE region and beyond.

✓ **Finding 15:** Implementation of electoral recommendations is higher in South-Eastern Europe, supported by EU accession incentives and the OSCE Western Balkans Project, while Central Asia has faced some structural barriers, though Kyrgyzstan stands out as partial exception.

Implementation varies significantly across regions, reflecting differing institutional trajectories and political contexts. South-Eastern Europe shows comparatively higher uptake of recommendations, particularly in procedural aspects of election management. This is driven by EU accession aspirations and requirements, which embed ODIHR recommendations into formal monitoring and accountability frameworks, alongside more pluralistic political systems and targeted OSCE follow-up support, such as through ODIHR's Western Balkans Project. In contrast, implementation in Central Asia remains much lower due to structural barriers such as executive dominance over electoral bodies, limited civic space and constrained opportunities for sustained follow-up engagement. Kyrgyzstan stands out as a partial exception, with stronger reform uptake during earlier periods of greater political openness.

These regional differences are also evident in legal reforms. EU candidate countries such as Serbia and North Macedonia have implemented more than 60 per cent of ODIHR's legal reform

**FIGURE 13. IMPLEMENTATION STATUS BY COUNTRY**



recommendations, reflecting both external incentives and domestic reform momentum. Meanwhile, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have not implemented any such recommendations, illustrating how entrenched institutional and political barriers can prevent meaningful electoral progress. This gap underscores how structural constraints, not just technical feasibility, determine whether reforms advance.

Freedom House data reinforces this regional divide. Countries with higher scores on political rights and civil liberties tend to implement more recommendations. These trends suggest that the broader political environment and institutional openness strongly shape the prospects for electoral reform, though they do not alone determine reform outcomes.

✓ **Finding 16:** Where co-ordination and targeted support have been stronger — such as through ODIHR's Western Balkans Project and in contexts like Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo and Montenegro — the OSCE's electoral assistance has, in some cases, contributed to the implementation of recommendations and supported reform momentum.

Where co-ordination has been stronger and targeted support provided, the election-related work carried out by ODIHR and field operations has contributed to progress in the implementation of

recommendations. Projects in contexts such as Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo and Montenegro demonstrate how structured co-operation can help translate recommendations into concrete reforms. In Kyrgyzstan, ODIHR contributed to reforms ranging from biometric voting systems to data protection, particularly during periods of greater political openness, with support channelled through UB funding and ExB follow-up projects alongside field operation activities. In Kosovo, a series of election support operations projects helped advance reforms, while in Montenegro ODIHR projects provided technical assistance to the State Elections Commission and strengthened the overall election process.

The Western Balkans Project, funded by the EU and implemented by ODIHR, stands out as a best practice in reinforcing follow-up and sustaining reform momentum. It provided structured and sustained support to electoral reform processes across South-Eastern Europe, assisting participating States and Kosovo in implementing or advancing a significant number of electoral recommendations. Stakeholders noted that ODIHR's targeted engagement in the region, combining technical expertise, legal reviews and capacity-building activities, was critical in maintaining reform dialogue.

ODIHR and field operations' assistance in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan focused on the technical administration of elections, civic

awareness and advocacy for legislative reform. These activities not only addressed immediate electoral needs but also laid the groundwork for potential longer-term institutional development.

✓ **Finding 17:** OSCE assistance in the 12 jurisdictions studied in more depth contributed to improved implementation of recommendations related to appeal systems and complaint resolution mechanisms, as well as the technical capacity of electoral commissions, reinforcing impartial and inclusive election management.

Across the 12 jurisdictions examined in greater detail during the evaluation, a total of 143 out of 1,772 recommendations addressed electoral systems and/or the legal framework. Of the 101 recommendations that were assessed by ODIHR — meaning those evaluated for their status during an EOM in a subsequent electoral cycle — 42 were found to be either fully, mostly or partially implemented, representing nearly 42 per cent of those assessed.

Support for this implementation has come through a combination of efforts on the part of ODIHR and field operations. ODIHR has maintained the lead role in providing legal reviews and technical assistance on electoral and political party legislation, including through the Western Balkans Project and under some (more

limited) UB-funded activities. In Serbia and Moldova, where field operations do not have election-specific mandates, ODIHR's legal opinions, informal comments on draft laws and follow-up dialogues were the primary channel through which recommendations were taken forward. Similarly, in several other participating States, ODIHR's legal expertise was complemented by field operation initiatives, although on a rather ad hoc basis, creating opportunities for coordinated advocacy and reform.

At the same time, field operations played a central role within their mandates in building the institutional capacity of electoral management bodies, strengthening professionalism, transparency and responsiveness to complaints and appeals. In Kosovo, support for the CEC and the Election Complaints and Appeals Panel included software upgrades (although the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES] financed and developed the system), diaspora case-handling training and legal resource development. In Albania, the field operation helped professionalize polling administration and improve impartiality in complaints resolution through projects such as Towards Improved Electoral Legislation and Administration in Albania (Phases III–IV). In North Macedonia, the Programme Promoting Good Governance through Democratic Elections strengthened dispute adjudication and improved the timeliness of procedures. In Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, projects similarly focused on

professionalization, standardization of procedures and technical improvements in election administration.

These combined efforts — ODIHR’s legal expertise and follow-up support, often delivered in co-operation with field operations, and field operations’ capacity-building activities on electoral administration — enhanced institutional effectiveness and supported progress in the implementation of recommendations. In several contexts, this collaboration helped maintain reform momentum and supported participating States in working on the implementation of OSCE commitments on transparent, impartial and inclusive electoral processes. Interviewees noted that reforms related to complaints and appeals mechanisms are often more technically framed and less politically contentious, which can make them more feasible entry points for implementation compared to broader legal or political reforms.

✓ **Finding 18:** The uptake of recommendations chiefly depends on political will, clarity of recommendations and effective co-ordination between ODIHR, field operations and national institutions.

The implementation of electoral recommendations is largely dependent on political will, though that is not the only factor of relevance. In several cases, stakeholders noted that while ODIHR

recommendations are valued, they are sometimes perceived as too broad or lacking sufficient practical detail to be readily operationalized by national institutions to act on. Electoral commissions highlighted the need for clearer, actionable guidance to translate recommendations into concrete steps.

Country examples show the importance of vibrant partnerships. In Kyrgyzstan, ODIHR and the field operation developed a strong relationship with the CEC, which contributed to substantial reforms in the earlier years of the evaluation period. In Kazakhstan, the field operation maintains good relations with the CEC, but implementation of recommendations has been limited due to various factors, including political limitations, limited technical follow-up, and co-ordination gaps between ODIHR and the field operation, particularly in the sequencing and follow-up of technical assistance.

ODIHR’s role in follow-up extends beyond EOMs and related final reports. Legal reviews, parliamentary dialogues and UB- and ExB-funded projects in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kyrgyzstan illustrate how ODIHR’s technical expertise complements the convening power of field operations. Stakeholders across regions emphasized that closer co-ordination between ODIHR and field operations — particularly in contextualizing recommendations and aligning them with national strategies were widely perceived as

factors that could strengthen ownership, increase uptake and ensure longer-term impact.

✓ **Finding 19:** In South-Eastern Europe, electoral recommendations serve as important benchmarks in EU accession processes, valued for their technical rigour and credibility, though implementation varies with political will and institutional priorities.

In South-Eastern Europe, EU institutions and donors consistently track ODIHR's findings in accession reports and dialogues, using them as one measure of democratic progress. Interviews confirmed that stakeholders regard ODIHR's recommendations as technically rigorous and credible. In Moldova and North Macedonia, interlocutors described them as *"essential reference points"*, *"litmus tests"* and *"benchmarks for legitimacy"*. This reflects the significant weight attached to ODIHR's assessments in shaping perceptions of electoral quality and reform.

The influence of EU conditionality, however, is uneven. While EU pressure and funding can create reform momentum, entrenched political interests often slow or stall implementation. In Kosovo, for example, external incentives have driven substantial investment in electoral reform, but key gaps remain. In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, even modest reforms, such as improving gender representation or minority voter education, required sustained

external pressure to materialize. This underscores that political will remains a decisive factor, even where external benchmarks exist.

At the same time, engagement with recommendations varies across institutions. Electoral commissions, governments, civil society and political parties approach them from different vantage points, depending on political priorities and institutional capacity. Interlocutors emphasized that more context-sensitive approaches to follow-up are perceived as important, tailored to national circumstances. For example, where recommendations align with broader reform agendas — such as anti-corruption or electoral transparency — they can offer governments a credible, externally recognized road map for democratic consolidation.

✓ **Finding 20:** Technical recommendations are more readily implemented, often directly by EMBs, while legal and political reforms face stronger resistance. Timing, sequencing and comprehensive reform strategies emerge as important factors in advancing more complex changes.

Differences in implementation also reflect the type of recommendation. Technical and administrative reforms — such as technical improvements to voter registration systems or election day procedures — are more frequently adopted. These can often be implemented directly by EMBs or oversight bodies without

requiring parliamentary approval or political negotiation, making them less contentious. This also highlights the strong working relationships ODIHR and field operations maintain with EMBs, which provide a channel for procedural improvements.

By contrast, legal and political reforms face significantly greater resistance. Recommendations on media freedom, candidate rights or constitutional change often require complex legislative processes and broad political consensus, making them harder to implement. While some stakeholders suggested that beginning with technical reforms and gradually advancing to legal or political changes could be an effective sequencing strategy, ODIHR and the Venice Commission have consistently emphasized the need for comprehensive electoral law reforms, particularly where systemic deficiencies persist. The rationale behind this approach is that without systemic change, piecemeal adjustments are unlikely to resolve deeper electoral shortcomings. Interviewees noted that sequencing is not always a strategic choice but is often shaped by political constraints, with technical reforms sometimes representing the only feasible entry point in restrictive environments.

Timing also plays a critical role. Reforms often gain traction around election cycles or when linked to external incentives, such as EU accession or heightened international scrutiny. This pattern

underscores the importance of aligning recommendations with political opportunity structures, and institutional readiness and international engagement. Evidence further suggests that countries adopting a phased or sequenced approach — combining short-term technical improvements with longer-term or structural changes — were more successful in maintaining reform momentum across electoral cycles.

✓ **Finding 21:** Uneven implementation of recommendations reflects a combination of factors, with political will emerging as a necessary condition for successful electoral reform beyond the Organization's control, and co-ordination of the follow-up process across OSCE executive structures constituting a contributory factor within the Organization's control.



The uneven uptake of ODIHR recommendations reflects a combination of factors, including political will, institutional capacity and the degree of co-ordination, collaboration and sustained follow-up among ODIHR, field operations and domestic institutions. While co-ordination is a critical enabling factor, even well-designed follow-up frameworks have limited impact when national ownership or reform incentives are weak. ODIHR has developed systematic approaches and tools for follow-up, but these alone have not always been sufficient, or fully utilized, to sustain reform momentum. The evaluation found that broader, multi-actor co-

ordination — especially linking ODIHR’s technical work with field operations’ long-term engagement and national stakeholders’ reform agendas — provides a strong foundation for sustained dialogue and implementation of electoral recommendations.

Even where there is broad recognition that recommendations are important for democratic development, various constraints — legal, technical or political — frequently limit the ability to act on them. In some contexts, the political environment does not create an open or conducive space for reform, even when the will may exist. Moreover, when recommendations are highly technical and not sufficiently contextualized or translated into nationally actionable frameworks, they risk generating less domestic buy-in, with the observation cycle perceived more as a procedural exercise than as a catalyst for meaningful change.

As a result, progress across the OSCE region has remained uneven. While some countries have taken forward recommendations through structured reform processes, others have seen limited or sporadic uptake, with implementation often depending on (shifting) political dynamics.

**FIGURE 14. ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE ELECTORAL REFORM**

 <b>ENABLERS</b>	 <b>BLOCKERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ EU accession &amp; external incentives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x Political resistance &amp; weak will</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ FO presences &amp; sustained engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x Legal complexity &amp; bottlenecks</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Targeted ODIHR follow-up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x Fragmented follow-up coordination</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Technical &amp; practice-based reforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x Restricted media &amp; civic space</li> </ul>

## Sustainability

**Evaluation question 4: To what extent has the OSCE used available instruments and platforms to promote ownership of the results by relevant stakeholders?**

✓ **Finding 22:** OSCE-wide platforms reinforce participating States’ electoral commitments and provide space for dialogue and accountability, but with follow-up being upon invitation/request, progress depends on the national context, and ODIHR has not

systematically reported to pS on OSCE-wide implementation of its recommendations.

Ministerial Council decisions from Porto (2002) and Maastricht (2003) explicitly encourage participating States to engage with ODIHR recommendations, but uptake relies on political will. The Budapest document also includes that ODIHR, as the main institution of the human dimension, will 1) participate in discussions of the Permanent Council by reporting at regular intervals on its activities and provide information on implementation issues, 2) provide supporting material for the annual review of implementation of human dimension commitments and 3) that the Director of ODIHR may propose further action in consultation with the Chair.

While OSCE platforms, such as the HDC and the HDIM, regularly reaffirm participating States' commitments to democratic elections, the consensus-based nature of the OSCE means that compliance with these commitments remains politically, rather than legally, binding. While the publicly available database allows different actors to track progress in the implementation of recommendations, ODIHR has not systematically reported to pS on OSCE-wide trends and issues in their implementation.

There is no formal accountability framework to compel participating States to report on or implement reforms, and monitoring typically takes place through EOMs or participating States' voluntary references at the HDIM or within the HDC. Agenda's for HDIM are set by consensus of all pS, and since 2022, the CiO has set the agenda for the WHDC.

In practice, ODIHR used these platforms primarily for reporting on observation findings and presenting cross-cutting electoral trends, consistent with the dialogue-oriented nature of these platforms, rather than as systematic platforms for reporting on OSCE wide implementation of recommendations to foster accountability.

Below is an overview of HDIMs that took place during the period covered by this evaluation and the extent to which they covered election-related topics. From 2020 onwards, the participating States were unable to reach a consensus on HDIMs. As a result, a different, less formal, meeting format was introduced, with in 2020 and 2021 supplementary Human Dimension Meetings, and since 2022 the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC), organized by the respective OSCE Chairpersonships. More information is provided in Table 5.

**TABLE 5. OVERVIEW OF ELECTION-RELATED TOPICS DISCUSSED AT HDIMS AND ALTERNATIVE MEETING FORMATS 2013-2023**

● 2013	ODIHR's recommendations emphasized; calls for substantive reform over symbolic gestures.
● 2014	Methodology issues were raised; while concerns over uneven implementation sparked increased calls for follow-up
● 2015	Attention shifted to follow-up. Mixed progress led to calls for stronger legal and advisory roles.
● 2016	ODIHR linked to reforms in law and finance; political resistance remained a barrier.
● 2017	Implementation seen as inconsistent; ODIHR urged to improve tracking and coordination.
● 2018	Civil society warned against surface-level compliance; structured follow-up encouraged.
● 2019	Observation seen as part of a reform cycle; support for implementation reaffirmed.
● 2020	COVID-19 led to adaptive methods and highlighted need for flexible observation tools.
● 2021	ODIHR promoted systematic follow-up and electoral transparency.
● 2022	Focus on campaign finance, media freedom, and civil society's role in election integrity.

● <b>Post-2022 (WHDC)</b>	Emphasis on fundamental freedoms, tolerance and non-discrimination, incl. inclusion, especially for persons with disabilities.
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*Meetings of the OSCE Permanent Council and its Human Dimension Committee*

The OSCE Permanent Council (PC) — especially its Human Dimension Committee (HDC) — is also an important platform for diplomatic engagement and follow-up among participating States, and the timeline below summarizes discussions on elections and ODIHR electoral recommendations at HDC meetings (Table 6).

**TABLE 6. OVERVIEW OF ELECTION-RELATED TOPICS DISCUSSED AT HDC MEETINGS**

● 2014	ODIHR raised concerns about electoral fairness, urging pS to implement recommendations.
● 2015	Attention shifted to follow-up. Mixed progress led to calls for stronger legal and advisory roles.
● 2016	PC reviewed ODIHR's work in election monitoring and technical assistance. Attention was given to training and capacitating efforts for electoral officials, especially in areas such as voter

	registration, campaign finance, and electoral security.
<b>2017</b>	Discussions in the PC and HDC focused on electoral integrity. ODIHR highlighted the need for greater transparency in campaign financing and equal media access.
<b>2018</b>	Follow-up by pS to electoral recommendations was a central topic. ODIHR emphasized implementation gaps, particularly regarding voter registration and election integrity.
<b>2019</b>	Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ODIHR put an emphasis on transparency and inclusivity. Key challenges identified in media freedom and campaign finance regulation.
<b>2021</b>	The HDC held a session on Elections; role to assist and oversight mechanisms.
<b>2022 onwards</b>	ODIHR reaffirmed its mandate and the value of its support to democratic institutions and electoral integrity.

While EOM final reports and recommendations are routinely presented to individual participating States and referenced at HDC meetings, there is no structured or recurring mechanism within

these platforms to review progress on the implementation of recommendations within the OSCE region, beyond voluntary reporting by participating States. Similarly, ODIHR's participation in HDC discussions on elections has remained largely informational, focusing on transparency and awareness-raising. The evaluation did not identify formal reporting cycles or consolidated updates on the status of recommendation implementation presented through these platforms.

At the same time, civil society engagement through the HDIM and the WHDC added value in promoting dialogue on implementation. NGOs and watchdog organizations have highlighted follow-up gaps and occasionally coordinated with field operations to encourage national-level reform efforts — for example, advancing disability rights for voters and candidates in Montenegro and Kyrgyzstan. However, such engagement remains ad hoc and is not systematically integrated into the OSCE's institutional follow-up approach.

Overall, the OSCE's election support framework relies on political consensus, dialogue and voluntary follow-up rather than binding accountability mechanisms. This model enables broad participation and trust but also leaves implementation inconsistent across participating States, and limits the function of these platforms for

accountability on the implementation of human dimension commitments.

✓ **Finding 23:** The sustainability of electoral reforms in national contexts is linked to ODIHR's technical follow-up and the facilitative role of field operations, with outcomes strongest where these modalities align with political will and international attention. Where these factors come together, implementation is more likely to take root.

ODIHR's electoral activities extend well beyond EOMs and have an important enabling role in sustaining reform momentum. Through legal reviews, informal comments, parliamentary dialogues and technical assistance — often in co-operation with the Venice Commission — ODIHR provides an internationally recognized technical foundation that helps depoliticize reforms and embed them within domestic legislative processes. These activities are typically carried out upon request from national authorities or EMBs, underscoring that ODIHR's follow-up role is demand-driven rather than automatic. By systematically linking current findings with earlier recommendations, ODIHR frames reform as an iterative, cumulative process.

Field operations complement this role by leveraging their presence and long-standing relationships with electoral commissions,

parliaments, civil society and political parties. Their ability to convene stakeholders and maintain dialogue after EOMs helps ensure continuity and national ownership of reforms. Targeted initiatives, such as ODIHR's Western Balkans Project, illustrate how joint efforts — comparative legal analyses, technical advice and co-ordination — can translate recommendations into concrete reforms, particularly when tied to broader processes such as EU accession and sustained international engagement.

The Western Balkans Project suggests that successful implementation is rarely driven by a single factor: the evidence suggests that sustainable reforms are more likely where ODIHR's technical expertise, proactive follow-up and facilitation by field operations intersect with political will and sustained international engagement.

✓ **Finding 24:** The OSCE's soft power, in addition to, the formal follow-up process, particularly its field presence and convening and confidence-building capacity, is an enabling factor in strengthening the sustainability of its election-related work, while administrative procedures and lack of resources, may, in some contexts, hinder sustainable results.

The OSCE's strength lies in its neutrality, long-standing presence and ability to coordinate actors, bridge capacity gaps and operate

discreetly in complex contexts. Field operations are valued for their local knowledge and trusted relationships with electoral authorities. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the field operation facilitated dialogue during elections. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it advanced transparency through CEC livestreaming and biometric voter verification — key steps towards rebuilding public trust.

The OSCE is often engaged in quiet diplomacy, working behind the scenes to encourage reform, mediate tensions and align stakeholders around sensitive issues. This less visible role, while difficult to measure, is widely appreciated by national actors who see the OSCE as a neutral interlocutor capable of facilitating dialogue in politically charged contexts. These qualities make it not only a technical partner but also a stabilizing presence in volatile environments.

At the same time, stakeholders highlighted key challenges, including constraints on the OSCE's operational flexibility, limited resources and slow administrative procedures, such as in North Macedonia, where it struggled to match the responsiveness of actors like IFES or the EU, which operate under different mandates and funding arrangements. In Serbia and Moldova, the mandates of the field operations do not encompass electoral support which restricts direct engagement in this area.

As a result, the OSCE's capacity to deliver and maintain results can, in some contexts, be constrained by administrative rigidity and a lack of resources. Various stakeholders stress that these factors can undermine the durability of OSCE engagement and restrict the Organization's ability to consistently capitalize on its unique position as both a technical partner and a diplomatic actor in sensitive electoral contexts.

✓ **Finding 25:** National ownership of ODIHR recommendations across South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia is uneven and context-dependent. While broadly seen as relevant, implementation often depends on political will, institutional capacity and alignment with domestic or external reform agendas.

The degree of national ownership of ODIHR electoral recommendations varies widely across the two OSCE regions in focus, shaped by domestic political priorities, institutional capacity and external incentives. In contexts where recommendations align with national reform agendas or EU accession goals, uptake tends to be stronger. In contrast, in more centralized environments, ownership remains limited and often largely symbolic. While most stakeholders interviewed viewed the recommendations as important and relevant, even where full implementation was not politically feasible, their implementation was uneven, often

constrained by limited understanding, low political will or competing reform agendas.

In Kosovo, the CEC incorporated ODIHR guidance into its secondary legislation. Kyrgyzstan has an institutionalized follow-up process in place, regularly evaluating recommendations in collaboration with domestic stakeholders. These instances suggest that where ODIHR's recommendations align with internal reform goals or external incentives — such as EU integration in the case of Kosovo — domestic uptake tends to be stronger. Similarly, Montenegro and North Macedonia provide partial examples of engagement, where dialogue — especially on inclusion — is welcomed, but follow-through often relies on EU pressure or political momentum.

In more centralized environments, ownership remained very limited. While ODIHR recommendations were occasionally acknowledged, they were rarely pursued substantively, and the space for implementation, including civil society engagement, was severely restricted. Some participating States reflect a complex middle ground. Some reforms, often framed as modernization, have improved administrative aspects like voter registration, but politically sensitive issues — such as candidate registration and media freedom — remain largely untouched, reflecting selective updates rather than comprehensive ownership.

✓ **Finding 26:** The OSCE's convening role is a key strength for sustaining electoral reform efforts, reinforced by its neutrality, field presence and trusted relationships. While this role frequently helps bridge divides in polarized contexts, it is not always leveraged systematically to support longer-term coordination and sustainability of reform processes.

Several interviewees expressed the view that OSCE's consistent strength in convening diverse actors — i.e., electoral commissions, political parties, civil society and donors — especially in polarized or fragmented environments. These dialogue platforms help fill institutional gaps where domestic bodies lack the neutrality or capacity to lead. Field operations are often praised for fostering inclusive, non-political spaces to address sensitive issues constructively.

In countries like North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE played a key role in coordinating international assistance and aligning support around electoral recommendations. However, several interviewees suggested this role could be further strengthened. As one interlocutor in Montenegro noted, *“There could be a clearer role for [the] OSCE [field operation] in convening actors and setting priorities. The field office knows the terrain better than most donors.”* Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, CEC officials welcomed the OSCE's co-ordination work but noted the lack of consistent

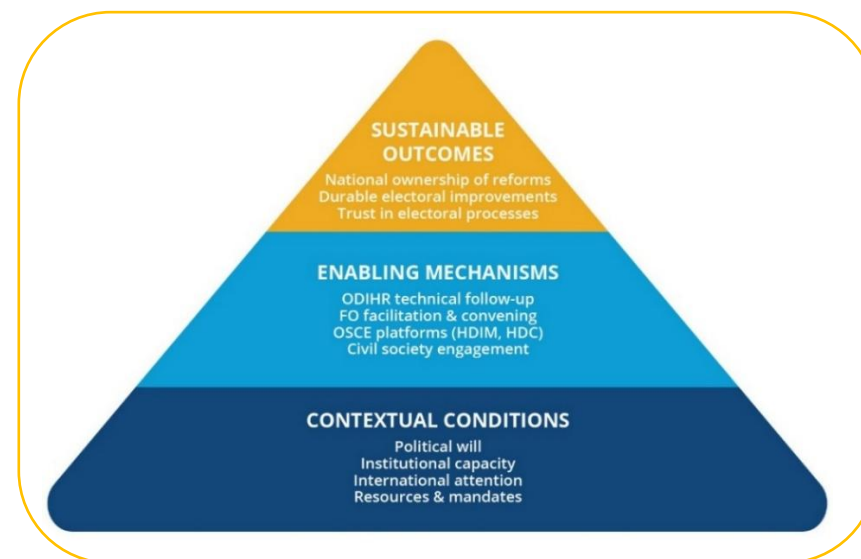
multi-actor forums: *“We are in need of different forums and workshops ... OSCE could help create them.”*

The OSCE’s convening role often extends beyond formal events. In practice, OSCE staff regularly act as *“behind-the-scenes facilitators”*, connecting civil society with electoral bodies or building trust between political stakeholders and international actors. In Albania, stakeholders recognized the OSCE as a point of convergence — able to maintain contact with all sides during moments of political deadlock. In Kosovo, the OSCE’s relationships at multiple levels — municipal, assembly-level and institutional — enabled it to coordinate technical discussions even in politically sensitive situations. Despite this value, one donor reflected, *“The OSCE could do more to bring us all together. There’s a vacuum when they don’t step up”*, reflecting expectations among some donors for stronger coordination in the absence of other convening actors. This suggests that while the OSCE is often well placed to coordinate, the extent to which it assumes a visible convening role is shaped by mandate considerations and resource constraints.

Even in politically challenging environments, where the OSCE cannot publicly convene on politically sensitive reforms, interviewees acknowledged the OSCE’s quiet role in sustaining continuity between electoral cycles. This suggest that while OSCE is often well positioned to support sustainability through convening

and coordination, the extent to which it does so is shaped by mandate considerations, political context and resource constraints – and may not always fully capitalize on its comparative advantage.

**FIGURE 15. CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE ELECTORAL REFORMS**



## Gender and human rights

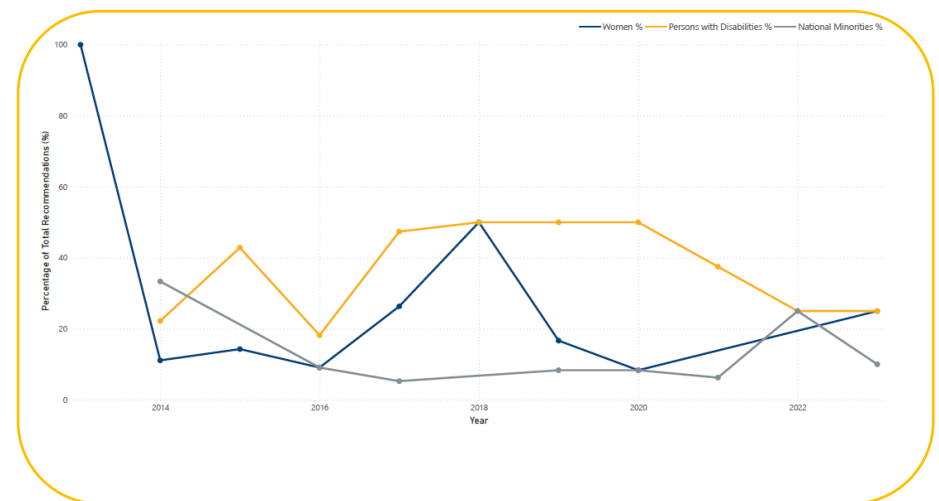
**Evaluation question 5: To what degree and how has the OSCE assisted the participating States to enhance citizen and civil society participation, as well as inclusion of women, minorities, youth and persons with disabilities within the electoral systems and processes in the OSCE region?**

✓ **Finding 27:** Implementation of inclusion-related electoral recommendations remains limited and uneven. While progress is more visible for persons with disabilities, gender and minority issues face persistent barriers. Regional disparities and weak uptake to highlight the importance of stronger political will and sustained civil society engagement.

Figure 16 shows the share of ODIHR's inclusion-related electoral recommendations — on gender, persons with disabilities and minorities — as a percentage of all recommendations issued annually between 2013 and 2023. The data indicate that attention to inclusion has fluctuated: gender-related recommendations peaked around 2013 but declined in subsequent years. This pattern partly reflects the fact that earlier recommendations often focused on the introduction of gender quotas or other temporary special measures; as several participating States adopted such measures, the number of recommendations on their introduction decreased.

Attention to persons with disabilities increased steadily after 2017. Minority-related recommendations appeared only sporadically, with several years showing none. This partly reflects the country-specific nature of national minority issues, which tend to arise in some electoral contexts but not others, depending on where ODIHR election observation activities took place in a given year. Overall, the figure illustrates that the degree of focus on inclusion varied over time and across thematic areas.

**FIGURE 16. PROPORTION OF OSCE CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS BY GROUP**



Between 2013 and 2023, the OSCE paid increasing attention to inclusive electoral participation, particularly for women and

persons with disabilities. However, national minorities and non-majority communities received far less attention. Of the 121 inclusion-related recommendations issued between 2013 and 2023 (around 3 per cent of all the recommendations issued) across 46 elections in 11 countries, only 17 per cent were fully or mostly implemented. Thematic trends show inconsistent attention across inclusion areas. Gender-related recommendations peaked in 2013, accounting for 5 per cent of total recommendations, but declined sharply in subsequent years, reaching just over 3 per cent by 2023. Given that gender issues persist across the OSCE region — as recognized by other OSCE studies — this does not imply that the issue is no longer relevant. In contrast, recommendations concerning persons with disabilities showed more consistent focus, especially from 2017. Minority-related issues, however, were addressed only sporadically as standalone recommendations, with some minority-related concerns addresses through broader electoral integrity and participation frameworks. This is a similar situation to gender issues, where challenges also remain, as evident from the HCNM's reporting.

ODIHR's recommendations ranged from legal (59) to practice-based (52) and sub-legal (14) measures. While legal reforms showed the highest rate of full implementation (19 per cent), many remain unaddressed. Practice-based and sub-legal reforms were frequently only partially implemented, with even priority

recommendations often repeated across cycles, reflecting a combination of persistent political resistance, institutional inertia, and the long-term nature of structural inclusion reforms. This signals ongoing resistance or inertia around systemic changes, particularly where reforms threaten entrenched political interests or require sustained institutional investment.

Civil society plays a vital role in promoting inclusion, and many actors regard the OSCE — especially ODIHR — as a credible ally in aspects related to electoral reform. In Albania, collaboration between civil society and the OSCE led to the enforcement of gender quotas, while in some Central Asian countries, joint advocacy promoted more inclusive legal frameworks. Yet challenges remain: participation by civil society actors is often limited to late-stage consultations, engagement with marginalized groups is inconsistent, and restrictive political environments can further impede access. Some civil society actors expressed a desire for earlier and more sustained engagement across the electoral cycle, beyond advisory interactions focussed on reporting and recommendations, seeking more continuous dialogue and facilitation alongside ODIHR's analytical and reporting functions.

In general, the data reveal that inclusion-related recommendations continue to face uneven implementation, reflecting broader issues of limited political will, under-resourced institutions and weak

accountability structures. Without sustained political commitment and more systematic follow-up by national actors, the gap between electoral guidance and actual reform — particularly benefiting women and minorities — will persist.

✓ **Finding 28:** While the OSCE has increased its attention to the political participation of persons with disabilities, implementation of related recommendations remains uneven. Procedural improvements are advancing in several locations, but legal reforms continue to face significant resistance in many contexts.

Between 2013 and 2023, the OSCE has played a notable role in promoting the political participation of persons with disabilities across its participating States. This engagement has manifested through a growing number of targeted recommendations, the development of key resources such as the Handbook on Observing and Promoting the Electoral Participation of Persons with Disabilities and landmark initiatives like the 2023 Dublin Recommendations.<sup>ix</sup> Despite progress, the implementation of recommendations remains inconsistent. Some countries, such as Moldova and Kazakhstan, have introduced accessibility measures like tactile ballots and magnifying glasses. However, broader structural barriers persist in many contexts, including the uneven application of standards and limited electoral materials for communities like the deaf.

The most persistent challenges are legal in nature. Over half of the recommendations required legal changes, with many calling for reforms that would enable individuals under guardianship or with intellectual disabilities to vote. These recommendations have proven particularly difficult to implement, with only a minority fully realized. Nevertheless, significant legal victories — such as Montenegro’s 2020 Constitutional Court decision affirming the voting rights of persons previously deemed legally incapacitated — demonstrate that change is possible with sustained advocacy and institutional support.

Projects specifically aimed at enhancing disability inclusion in elections have increased since 2019. These efforts have included both internationally funded programmes and domestically supported initiatives. While implementation methods varied, all studied jurisdictions engaged in some level of support for persons with disabilities. However, many of these interventions remain limited in scope and duration. Institutional commitment to long-term reforms — such as ongoing training, structural accessibility upgrades and inclusive communication strategies — is uneven and often insufficient to sustain systemic change. As a result, significant disparities remain in how electoral rights are guaranteed for persons with disabilities, underscoring the need for more consistent application of international standards by national authorities.

✓ **Finding 29:** While the OSCE has played a significant role in advancing legal reforms, leadership initiatives and institutional audits to support women’s political participation, persistent structural barriers — such as party gatekeeping, gender-based harassment and weak implementation — continue to limit women’s substantive influence in political life.

Over the evaluation period, the proportion of ODIHR recommendations focused on women’s political participation has declined slightly. This trend should be interpreted with caution. Early recommendations frequently focused on the introduction of gender quotas or other temporary special measures; as several participating States adopted such measures, ODIHR’s recommendations increasingly shifted toward strengthening the effectiveness and implementation of existing frameworks. At the same time, global trends point to growing pressures on women’s political participation and gender equality.<sup>x</sup> In this context while gender remains a consistent theme in electoral assessments, its relative prominence among recommendations has varied alongside other thematic priorities, highlighting the importance of ensuring that gender considerations remain visible amid competing demands in an increasingly polarized policy environment.

At the same time, broader efforts have continued to support gender equality in political processes, including through assistance for

quota reforms and capacity-building initiatives. In South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Organization supported raising gender quotas for political candidates from 33 per cent to 40 per cent and promoted stricter enforcement, leading to Albania’s precedent-setting rejection of non-compliant candidate lists. These reforms have been complemented by women’s leadership programmes and mentorship initiatives that have strengthened women’s visibility and skills, notably in Kyrgyzstan and parts of South-Eastern Europe.

Political parties remain the most frequent targets of OSCE recommendations, reflecting their gatekeeping role. A number of recommendations called on parties to promote women’s participation, improve list positioning and uphold the requirement that women replace female candidates who resign. However, deeply entrenched gender norms, underfunded campaign support and resistance within party structures have limited the effectiveness of issued recommendations in practice.

Harassment, particularly online, emerged as a critical but under-addressed issue within recommendations. Despite its widespread mention during the evaluation interviews, relatively few recommendations directly tackled violence against women in politics as a distinct reform area. One case from Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed that *“a significant barrier for women in politics is violence against women ... in this context, with 60 per cent of surveyed*

*women reporting experiences of harassment, particularly online threats and hate speech”.*

One reason for this gap is that ODIHR EOMs follow international standards when formulating recommendations. In areas where such standards are still evolving — such as online harassment and digital threats — observers have fewer reference points for assessment, making it less likely that such issues are formally captured or recommended for reform. This challenge is further compounded by the lack of clear legal frameworks across participating States and weak enforcement mechanisms, allowing these forms of harassment to persist largely unchecked.

Quotas alone are only a partial solution. In several participating States, women are placed low on candidate lists or pressured to resign post-election, often undermining their influence. This dynamic is evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ODIHR election observation findings from the 2022 elections highlighted that long-standing gender stereotypes and instances of online and intra-party harassment affected women candidates during the campaign, underscoring the challenges of translating quota provisions into meaningful leadership roles. Conversely, Albania and Kyrgyzstan show how targeted OSCE support — like enforcing candidate replacement rules and promoting rural women’s participation — can contribute to more substantive progress.

ODIHR, together with field operations, has strengthened institutional responses through gender audits of electoral bodies and parliaments, identifying key gaps that led to gender action plans and a standardized audit toolkit. However, follow-through remains inconsistent due to resource constraints and varying levels of political and institutional commitment. While the OSCE’s efforts have driven visible progress — particularly in legal frameworks and leadership development — systemic barriers persist. Political resistance, weak enforcement and underfunded gender-mainstreaming mechanisms continue to hinder the translation of reforms into substantive gains in women’s political representation.

✓ **Finding 30:** The OSCE’s efforts were pivotal in fostering civil society engagement, which in turn contributed positively to democratic participation. This support helped reinforce civic involvement and democratic processes across the jurisdictions studied, despite some fluctuations in engagement levels.

Civic engagement and voter education are essential to democratic participation. They help ensure that all citizens — including youth, women, persons with disabilities and minorities — understand their rights and the electoral process, enabling informed choices. By fostering civic awareness, these efforts reduce disenfranchisement and enhance the legitimacy and inclusiveness of elections across the OSCE region.

During the time period covered by the evaluation, a total of 34 ODIHR recommendations related to civic engagement and voter education were issued across 9 out of the 12 jurisdictions, with the majority concentrated in Central Asia. These recommendations highlighted the need for more inclusive, accessible and co-ordinated civic education efforts to support informed and meaningful democratic participation.

In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE supported door-to-door campaigns, community events and the creation of civic education centres that trained thousands of citizens in voting rights. Kosovo and Albania collaborated with the OSCE to develop inclusive education materials and outreach for youth, Roma and persons with disabilities. In Albania, however, civil society representatives also expressed concerns about inconsistent inclusion and limited strategic co-ordination with the OSCE in civic engagement projects.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the OSCE partnered with Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) to run civic campaigns in Mostar and Sarajevo using accessible, interactive media. In Kyrgyzstan, civil society recognized the OSCE as a key provider of voter education support for women, youth and persons with disabilities through school programmes, mentorship and leadership academies. Youth initiatives were also noted in Kyrgyzstan and Montenegro, where OSCE-backed schools for young

parliamentarians introduced students to democratic processes. In Montenegro, persons with disabilities acknowledged ongoing barriers but praised OSCE-led dialogues on accessible voting.

Despite funding limitations and political constraints, one civil society actor in South-Eastern Europe described OSCE civic engagement projects *“as effective vehicles for increasing awareness and enhancing inclusive participation”*. This was echoed by other CSO representatives that were consulted in the evaluation. In several locations, field operations were sometimes the only international actors providing sustained technical and financial election-related support to civil society, especially for organizations representing persons with disabilities, youth and ethnic minorities. As such, OSCE support was not only valued but also considered essential in ensuring continuity and credibility, including in civic education programming where domestic resources and political will were limited.

Stakeholders stressed that these initiatives not only improved electoral understanding among under-represented groups but also helped stakeholders implement, often via bottom-up approaches, core OSCE commitments on democratic elections — particularly those related to equal participation, transparency and inclusive governance.



## 5. Conclusions

**Conclusion 1 – Internal coherence:** The OSCE has partially reinforced its comparative advantage to promote democratic elections and provide targeted assistance through functional, but largely ad hoc co-ordination across executive structures. Collaboration has been uneven, with the most tangible efforts involving ODIHR, selected field operations and engagement with the HCNM and OSCE PA. The intensity of co-ordination has fluctuated over time, shaped by resource constraints, occasional ambiguity over roles and responsibilities, mandate limitations and the COVID-19 pandemic.

ODIHR provides the institutional anchor for the OSCE's election-related efforts, with its recommendations widely regarded as a key benchmark for democratic reform. At the same time, the OSCE's institutional architecture, distributes functions across structures and bodies with distinct mandates. In this context, internal coherence — and the leverage it could generate — depends heavily on effective information-sharing and trust-based working relationships amongst ODIHR, field operations, the RFoM, the HCNM and the OSCE PA. Most stakeholders noted scope for more structured information-sharing and collaboration while recognizing the different roles and responsibilities of the different actors.

The clearest examples of effective co-ordination have emerged where the OSCE has maintained a sustained presence, such as in Albania, Kosovo and Kyrgyzstan. In these jurisdictions, co-ordinated efforts have fostered institutional trust and created effective entry points to advance the OSCE's electoral agenda. Such efforts are reinforced by the OSCE's widely recognized neutrality and adaptability, enabling engagement in politically fluid environments.

Some field operations play a substantial role in electoral follow-up and stakeholder engagement. However, their contributions are shaped less by formalized OSCE-wide co-ordination mechanisms and more by the scope of their mandates, emergent windows of opportunity, unforeseen policy openings and local trust. Overall, the level of internal coherence achieved to date reflects both the OSCE's decentralized design and context-specific operational dynamics, which can make it more challenging to consistently align follow-up, technical assistance and political engagement across diverse operational settings.

*{Derived from findings 1, 2, 3, 5, 6}*

**Conclusion 2 – External coherence:** External coherence has been uneven and highly context-dependent. While some

**participating states and electoral management bodies have engaged actively with the OSCE, others have done so minimally. The strongest and most consistent external co-operation has occurred in South-Eastern Europe, where the EU enlargement process has provided strong incentives for authorities to engage with ODIHR recommendations. Co-operation with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission has also been a key strength, particularly in the legal dimension of electoral reform, while engagement with civil society organisations has contributed mainly in the area of human rights, albeit in an ad hoc manner.**

Overall, external coherence has been driven by opportunity and external incentives rather than by systematic strategic planning or a clear OSCE-wide approach. Within ODIHR's UB Election Programme the majority of resources support the core mandated activities of election observation, including the deploying of NAMs and EOMs. These missions constitute ODIHR's primary mandate and provide independent assessments of electoral processes, identifying areas where improvements are needed.

The long-term impact of these assessments depends in part on the extent to which recommendations are subsequently discussed, supported and implemented by participating States. While follow-up engagement and legal assistance are provided upon request by

pS, more sustained engagement between electoral cycles – including efforts to promote awareness and uptake of recommendations – has varied across contexts. Where existing this has been supported through specific initiatives or extra-budgetary funding such as the EU funded Western Balkans Project.

Where a clear division of labour between ODIHR and field operations has been established, external engagement has been more effective. This has typically involved ODIHR leading on technical and legislative reform, while field operations leveraged their local presence and neutrality to convene dialogue among national stakeholders and donors. Examples from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kyrgyzstan illustrate how such complementary roles can enhance the OSCE credibility and effectiveness as a reform partners.

Despite these positive examples, the OSCE's ability to consistently leverage its relationships with external stakeholders remains limited by fluctuating political will, mandate related constraints, resource imbalances and the absence of a more systematic approach to external engagement. As a result, external coherence – particularly in post-election follow-up and reform implementation – has remained uneven across regions and contexts.

*{Derived from findings 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7}*

**Conclusion 3 – Effectiveness: The OSCE assisted election stakeholders with varying degrees of success across regions through electoral recommendations, institutional strengthening, legal reform support, inclusive participation initiatives and capacity-building. Effectiveness was strongly shaped by the national political context and political will. ODIHR’s technical leadership proved effective across a range of contexts, including in participating States without a field presence. Where field operations were present – and where the evaluation’s primary data collection was concentrated – their sustained engagement often complemented ODIHR’s work by facilitating follow-up, stakeholder access and continuity.**

Between 2013 and 2023, ODIHR, together with selected field operations, played a central role in supporting electoral stakeholders through legal reviews, targeted technical assistance and structured engagement. In Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan and Montenegro, OSCE efforts contributed to progress on issues including, biometric registration, diaspora voting and gender quotas. In other contexts, e.g. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, OSCE engagement supported procedural improvements and civic awareness aligned with OSCE commitments and the Copenhagen Document.

Across regions, OSCE initiatives contributed to the professionalization of election administration, improvements in complaints and appeals processes and advances in inclusion and transparency. Technical assistance enhanced legal and institutional capacity in countries such as Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, while civic education in Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe addressed electoral participation gaps. While challenges persisted – including political resistance and weak media oversight — OSCE support helped strengthen institutional credibility and alignment with international electoral standards.

At the same time, the effectiveness of OSCE engagement, has depended on the extent to which electoral recommendations are supported by sustained dialogue, technical assistance and follow-up supported beyond the electoral cycles. Where such engagement has been maintained – often through field operations or targeted initiatives such as ODIHR’s Western Balkans Project — OSCE has been able to convene regional dialogue, support thematic exchanges and promote awareness of electoral standards. These efforts have helped increase the visibility and uptake of recommendations. However, in contexts where sustained engagement has been more limited, translating electoral recommendations into concrete reforms has proven more challenging.

*{Derived from findings 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21}*

**Conclusion 4 – Progress towards impact: ODIHR’s electoral recommendations, supported by its technical assistance, and where present, complementary engagement by field operations, have contributed meaningfully to electoral reform and to the broader development of democratic electoral standards across participating States. ODIHR recommendations are widely used as authoritative reference points by national stakeholders, civil society and international partners, and have helped shape reform debates and processes. However, the long-term effects of widespread and sustained implementation of election-related commitments across the OSCE region remains uneven and moderate. Ultimately, the depth and durability of impact have been shaped by political will, strategic timing and the availability of context-sensitive follow-up.**

Across participating States where ODIHR deployed election observation activities, more than 3,800 electoral recommendations were issued. While ODIHR’s recommendations serve as authoritative reference points for national authorities, civil society and international partners, the achievement of longer-term outcomes in terms of implementation of recommendations and related electoral reform is more limited and uneven. Uptake has

varied widely across the OSCE region. Progress has been strongest in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe— particularly on technical reforms — often reinforced by the EU accession process, as seen in Kosovo, Moldova and North Macedonia. By contrast, implementation has remained more limited in much of Central Asia, reflecting structural constraints and restricted civic space. Overall, technical and procedural reforms have proven more feasible than legal or politically sensitive reforms, with implementation closely linked to institutional openness and political absorption capacity.

Despite these variations, overall implementation remains limited, with full uptake concentrated in technically bounded areas, while reforms related to legal frameworks, campaign finance and media regulation continue to face persistent resistance. Targeted initiatives such as ODIHR’s Western Balkans Project, illustrate how proactive and resourced follow-up work can strengthen the uptake of recommendations and foster greater national ownership of electoral reforms, particularly when embedded in broader reform incentives.

At the same time, assessing longer-term outcomes at an OSCE-wide level remains constrained by data limitations. A significant share of recommendations has not been formally reassessed, largely because implementation is comprehensively reviewed only when election observation missions return in subsequent electoral

cycles. While tools such as the Electoral Recommendations Database and information from field operations can provide important insights, the absence of a systematic, periodic OSCE wide review of implementation beyond EOMs or other outcome monitoring limits the ability of ODIHR to gain insights in long-term impact.

*{Derived from findings 10, 15,16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21}*

**Conclusion 5 – Sustainability: Despite strong professional commitment and well-developed normative frameworks, the sustainability of OSCE’s electoral support remains constrained by the political — rather than legally binding — nature of OSCE commitments and the absence of formal accountability mechanisms. As a result, sustained national ownership of electoral reform has been uneven and highly depending on domestic political will, institutional capacity and external incentives.**

The OSCE’s platforms for dialogue and reviews — such as the HDIM/WHDC and the PC/HDC — play an important role in reaffirming electoral commitments and facilitating exchange amongst participation States. However, they currently function primarily as voluntary dialogue forums rather than as mechanism for systematic accountability, and there has been no OSCE-wide

reporting to pS on the implementation of ODIHR’s recommendations. While ODIHR’s electoral recommendations are publicly accessible, implementation is typically reviewed only when election observation missions return in subsequent electoral cycles, and only a limited number of participating States have established internal mechanism to track progress. This constrains the OSCE’s ability to address and sustain reform momentum across the region.

Field operations contribute to sustainability through their long-term presence, trusted relationships and capacity to convene national stakeholders. Where mandates allow and co-ordination with ODIHR is strong, they have helped maintain dialogue and support reform actors beyond individual electoral events. Nevertheless, sustainability has remained uneven, shaped by mandate limitations, fragmented follow-up arrangements and constrained resources for post – election engagement.

Overall, the durability of OSCE- electoral support has depended less on the quality or relevance of recommendations than on the presence of enabling political conditions, sustained follow-up capacity and coherent engagement across OSCE executive structures. In the absence of these conditions, progress has tended to be incremental, reversible or confined to technically bounded reforms

*{Derived from findings 1, 2, 3, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26}*

**Conclusion 6 – Gender and human rights: The OSCE has contributed to advancing electoral inclusion, particularly for persons with disabilities, through standard-setting, targeted guidance and engagement with civil society. However, progress across inclusion areas has remained limited and uneven, particularly with regards to women’s political participation and inclusion of national minorities. The translation of inclusion-related commitments into sustained practice has varied widely across contexts.**

Between 2013 and 2023, inclusion-related recommendations accounted for a small share of ODIHR’s electoral recommendations and showed low overall implementation rates. Progress has been most visible in procedural and accessibility-related measures for persons with disabilities, while gender-related reforms and minority inclusion have faced more persistent institutional and political barriers. This pattern reflects broader challenges in addressing reforms that require sustained political commitment, enforcement and structural change.

The OSCE’s work has strengthened normative frameworks, visibility, and in some cases, legal standards — particularly in areas of disability inclusion, where ODIHR’s guidance and follow-up have

helped anchor more systematic attention. Nevertheless, the sustainability of inclusion-reform reforms has depended on national ownership, consistent follow-up and long-term engagement. In the absence of these conditions, progress has tended to be incremental, uneven and vulnerable to reversal.

*{Derived from findings 27, 28, 29, 30}*



## 6. Recommendations

This evaluation presents a set of targeted, actionable recommendations derived from the findings and conclusions, and informed by consultations with key stakeholders.

### **ISSUE 1: Limited co-ordination and collaboration among ODIHR and FOs**

**RECOMMENDATION 1 (ODIHR, Field Operations): Strengthen OSCE-wide co-ordination and co-operation on election-related work, especially with regard to follow-up on ODIHR's recommendations.**

#### **Rationale:**

EOMs provide valuable diagnostics and recommendations that serve as benchmarks for reform. In this context, ODIHR applies various follow-up practices, including dedicated meetings with national authorities and tracking of recommendation implementation during subsequent EOMs. The effectiveness of follow-up depends equally on the engagement of participating States, field operations (where present) and other OSCE institutions, whose mandates and responsibilities differ. In practice, follow-up and co-ordination remain uneven across contexts. While

co-ordination and co-operation requires good will from all sides, ODIHR as the lead institution on OSCE's work on elections is best placed to lead improvement of coordination efforts, in cooperation with other executive structures.

Field operations contribute essential assets to electoral reform processes, including trusted local relationships, political access, technical expertise and a sustained presence. While ODIHR engages field operations through structured procedures for final report presentations and follow-up on electoral recommendations, the level of engagement varies depending on mandate, available resources, political context and emerging opportunities. Clarifying expectations and enhancing communication and joint conceptual work, where appropriate, can improve the internal coherence of the OSCE's work on elections.

#### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Develop guidance reaffirming and operationalizing existing understandings of the possible roles of field operations (within their respective mandates) at key stages of the electoral cycle in line with ODIHR handbooks, including indicative entry points, communication modalities and coordination expectations, and share with Field Operations.

2. Strengthen co-ordination mechanism with field operations, leveraging their long-term presence and institutional memory to contextualize follow-up and identify reform entry points, consistent with their mandates.

**Action points Field Operations (coordinated by the Secretariat's Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC)):**

1. Ensure a focal point is in place for election related work in each Field Operations with a relevant mandate to engage in coordination activities OSCE-wide.
2. Provide platforms for Field Operations to periodically share election related activities and plans with ODIHR, to obtain input from ODIHR on strategic plans related to work on elections, and to facilitate field-to-field knowledge exchange and mutual learning. This can be either integrated into existing or new coordination mechanisms, such as (regional) Heads of Mission meetings, coordination calls, etc.

**ISSUE 2: Lack of systemic approach and limited human and financial resources dedicated to follow-up**

**RECOMMENDATION 2 (ODIHR, in coordination with field operations): Strengthen the systemic approach to follow-up on recommendations and mobilize additional resources and support for follow-up to maximize the sustainability and impact of ODIHR's Election work.**

**Rationale:**

In terms of regular follow-up work, ODIHR presents final EOM reports, engages in follow-up on request, and tracks the implementation of its recommendations, feeding implementation-related data into a publicly accessible database and using the findings to, *inter alia*, inform subsequent EOMs. Field Operations have complemented ODIHR's follow-up efforts, with some playing a substantial role in follow-up and stakeholder engagement.

More systemic and sustained follow-up on recommendations between electoral cycles by the OSCE requires a more proactive and systemic approach and the mobilization of resources where opportunities for reform arise. ODIHR's existing UB Election's programme results framework recognizes follow-up — including engagement with participating States and support for field operations — but limited UB resources have been allocated to this outcome, and in practice, targeted follow-up initiatives have relied on extrabudgetary projects.

Strengthening follow-up capacity requires adequate and predictable resourcing, through sufficient UB staffing and operational budgets, complemented by targeted ExB projects. Given the volume of recommendations issued over successive electoral cycles, more systemic approaches to follow-up engagement would help enhance the sustainability of OSCE's electoral assistance and support participating states in advancing reform processes.

#### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Consider a more proactive and systemic approach towards follow-up - in collaboration with FOs where relevant. Build on existing ODIHR follow-up practices by supporting participating States on their request – in particular electoral management bodies and relevant line ministries – in the development of country-level follow-up frameworks with ODIHR providing methodological guidance and, where present, field operations supporting contextualization, stakeholder consultation and continuity of engagement.
2. Explore options for strengthening internal follow-up capacity and resourcing (UB), and mobilizing additional resources (ExB) for targeted follow-up projects where opportunities for reform and OSCE assistance emerge.
3. Proactively engage external actors and partners in follow-up work where possible and relevant.

#### **ISSUE 3: Limited collaboration among ODIHR and HCNM and RFoM in follow-up**

**RECOMMENDATION 3 (ODIHR, in co-operation with the HCNM and the RFoM): Strengthen institutional co-ordination with the HCNM and the RFoM, within existing mandates, to enhance coherence, cross-fertilization and follow-up.**

#### **Rationale:**

ODIHR maintains a structured co-operation framework with the HCNM and the RFoM, reflected in joint handbooks, policy papers and designated focal points. The HCNM is regularly invited to second experts to ODIHR EOMs, though its engagement is often constrained by limited resources. The RFoM contributes substantively on issues such as media freedom and journalist safety, including through co-authored guidance and joint side events.

While these practices demonstrate a solid foundation, practical engagement is not always systematic across the electoral cycle. There is scope to further systematize co-operation — particularly in contexts where political inclusion and media regulation are critical to electoral credibility. More consistent planning, expanded joint analytical or guidance products and regular information-sharing on

follow-up activities— especially during the post-election phase — could enhance the visibility and uptake of recommendations. While internal co-ordination and co-operation requires good will from all sides, ODIHR as the lead institution on OSCE’s work on elections is best placed to lead coordination efforts in this area.

#### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Building on ODIHR’s central role in election observation and follow-up, agree with the HCNM and the RFoM, on shared priorities and expectation for co-operation across the electoral cycle, with particular attention to engagement during post-election follow-up.
2. Strengthen the use of existing focal points and regular exchanges to ensure cross-institutional expertise is captured systematically and reflected in ODIHR outputs.
3. Strengthen joint capacity-building initiatives targeting staff of relevant executive structures (ODIHR, HCNM, RFoM) — such as a training module and expert exchanges — to deepen mutual understanding of the mandates of various executive structures and to strengthen collaborative approaches to supporting electoral processes.

#### **ISSUE 4: Underutilized potential of the OSCE PA in supporting follow-up**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4 (ODIHR in co-ordination with the OSCE PA): Explore and leverage the OSCE PA’s role in election follow-up activities to promote electoral reforms.**

#### **Rationale:**

While the OSCE PA plays a visible role in EOMs, its (political) potential to support follow-up activities remains underutilized. ODIHR could explore closer collaboration with the OSCE PA — particularly where ODIHR has issued significant legal or political recommendations. Through parliamentary channels, the OSCE PA can enhance visibility, foster legislative dialogue and strengthen national accountability. These efforts would complement ODIHR’s and FOs follow-up role.

#### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Strengthen ODIHR–OSCE PA working level cooperation to work with parliaments to promote electoral reforms in follow up to recommendations.
2. In conjunction with the OSCE PA, explore how national parliaments can be encouraged to formally consider and, where appropriate respond to ODIHR recommendations, to promote accountability and transparency.

## **ISSUE 5: Persistent gaps in the implementation of inclusion-related recommendations**

### **RECOMMENDATION 5 (ODIHR, in co-operation with field operations and the HCNM where relevant): Pilot a structured, voluntary follow-up initiative focused on inclusion-related issues in electoral reform.**

#### **Rationale:**

While ODIHR has developed advanced standards and tools to promote inclusion — particularly in relation to disability participation — progress on gender equality and, to some extent, national minority participation has been limited. Between 2013 and 2023, only 17 per cent of inclusion-related recommendations were fully or mostly implemented. These implementation gaps largely reflect political sensitivity, limited domestic ownership and capacity constraints, rather than a lack of normative guidance.

To demonstrate the OSCE's added value and build momentum, a dedicated pilot initiative could focus specifically on inclusion-related recommendations, testing more structured follow-up approaches that combine ODIHR expertise, the advisory role of the HCMN, engagement by field operations where present, and civil society engagement. Lessons learned from such a pilot could then also

inform broader OSCE-wide practices for sustaining inclusion-related reform.

#### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Launch a pilot follow-up initiative on inclusion-related recommendations (gender, persons with disabilities, minorities) based on reform opportunities and demand from participating States.
2. Use existing ODIHR tools (e.g., handbooks, gender audits, minority participation guidance) as the foundation for the pilot, and facilitate joint ODIHR follow-up frameworks — in collaboration with field operations where present — with civil society and national institutions promoting the implementation of recommendations.
3. Document lessons from the pilot and present them at OSCE forums (PC, WHDC, HDIM) to support peer learning and replication.

## **ISSUE 6: Limited reporting on OSCE-wide implementation of recommendations**

### **RECOMMENDATION 6 (ODIHR): Enhance reporting on OSCE-wide implementation of recommendations to foster transparency and accountability**

### **Rationale:**

The sustainability of OSCE's electoral support remains constrained by the political — rather than legally binding — nature of OSCE commitments and the absence of formal accountability mechanisms. Nevertheless, ODIHR's periodic reporting to the Permanent Council provides an opportunity to provide periodical updates on the OSCE-wide status of implementation of recommendations. In addition, there are other OSCE platforms such as the HDC and the HDIM/WHDC, that can be further utilized to enhance transparency and accountability for the OSCE-wide implementation of ODIHR's electoral recommendations.

### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Use available opportunities, especially yearly reporting to the PC, to periodically present to the participating States aggregated insights into (trends in) the uptake of recommendations within the OSCE-region.
2. Explore with the CiO/Troika the possibility of more structural self-reporting by pS of their progress in implementing electoral recommendations, as well as opportunities for a more structured utilization of OSCE-wide platforms (PC/HDC, HDIM/WHDC) to enhance accountability for the implementation of ODIHR's recommendations.

### **ISSUE 7: Limited results-based management, and monitoring of outcomes of OSCE's work on Elections**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 7 (ODIHR, in coordination with field operations where relevant): Strengthen the results framework and monitoring of outcomes of OSCE's work on elections.**

### **Rationale:**

In the absence of an OSCE-wide results framework, objectives, outcomes and outputs of OSCE's work on elections are defined by relevant executive structures in the context of their Unified Budget proposals, and in complementary ExB project proposals where relevant.

ODIHR has a dedicated Elections programme within the Unified Budget. The intended outcomes, and especially the KPIs, for this programme were found not to be fully aligned with the OSCE's results-based management approach and applicable guidelines. Some intended outcomes included output related information, and KPIs mainly measured activities or outputs, such as missions deployed or reports produced, instead of outcomes (beneficiary level changes).<sup>xi</sup> Election-related work of Field Operations is often integrated into Democratization programmes, and the evaluation team observed uneven monitoring practices, with results not being consolidated at the OSCE-wide level.

In terms of the monitoring of outcomes, ODIHR's public Electoral Recommendations Database provides a wealth of information on the implementation of recommendations, but implementation assessments are only made by ODIHR in subsequent election missions and therefore timely insights in the status of implementation of many of ODIHR's recommendations is limited. The evaluation team did not find any other OSCE-wide monitoring of outcomes (e.g. through self-reporting, or other means), and PBPR/RUR reporting on outcomes of ODIHR's Elections programme was limited in scope and depth. Limited outcome level monitoring limits the OSCE's ability to systematically report on outcomes and to periodically evaluate its election-related work. As a result, this independent evaluation had to depend heavily on primary data collection.

#### **Action points ODIHR:**

1. Ensure the intended outcomes and KPIs of the UB Elections Programme in the next Unified Budget Proposal are aligned with the OSCE's Performance Based Programme Budgeting guidelines, with outcomes and related KPIs reflecting changes ODIHR aims to influence (but that are not within its control) at the level of beneficiaries.
2. Strengthen monitoring practices to ensure both outputs and outcomes of ODIHR's UB Elections programme (and

complementary ExB projects where relevant) are measured and reported on. In this context, explore whether monitoring efforts of FOs and participating States can support OSCE-wide monitoring of outcomes, through voluntary information-sharing, internal consolidation of available data, etc.

3. Consider planning a decentralized evaluation of ODIHR's UB-funded election observation activities (which were not the focus of this thematic evaluation) in line with the OSCE's Evaluation Policy.

## Management response and action plan

Area/Issue	Recommendation	Accept (Yes/No/Partially)	Implementation plan (if not fully accepted, add management's comments)	Implementation date (quarter, year)
<p><b>Limited co-ordination and collaboration among ODIHR and FOs</b></p>	<p><b>1. Strengthen OSCE-wide co-ordination and co-operation on election-related work, especially with regard to follow-up on ODIHR's recommendations.</b></p> <p><b>Action points ODIHR :</b></p> <p>1. Develop guidance reaffirming and operationalizing existing understandings of the possible roles of field operations (within their respective mandates) at key stages of the electoral cycle in line with ODIHR handbooks, including indicative entry points, communication modalities and coordination expectations, and share with Field Operations.</p>	<p>Partially</p>	<p>As ODIHR noted in its comments on the draft recommendations it is not in a position to unilaterally develop guidance for field offices. This must be done in coordination with, and with the support of, the Conflict Prevention Centre. On Action Point 1.1, ODIHR can further elaborate, from its perspective, the points of the electoral cycle that fall within its mandate, as well as those where field operations' input would be particularly valuable.</p> <p>For Action Point 1.2, ODIHR has initiated an annual co-ordination and information sharing meeting with Field Office focal points on elections. The first meeting was held in October 2025 and will be repeated in the coming years. Additionally, ODIHR will explore the option of having periodic online</p>	<p>Q2/2027</p>

	<p>2. Strengthen co-ordination mechanism with field operations, leveraging their long-term presence and institutional memory to contextualize follow-up and identify reform entry points, consistent with their mandates.</p> <p><b><u>Action points Field Operations (coordinated by CPC):</u></b></p> <p>1. Ensure a focal point is in place for election related work in each Field Operations with a relevant mandate to engage in coordination activities OSCE-wide.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>meetings with field operations' election focal points so all can provide updates and ask questions. Further, ODIHR is exploring options to create an email distribution list with field operations to provide quarterly updates on election-related standards, studies, and developments.</p> <p>Finally, ODIHR reiterates that the Election Department consistently informs and meets field operations in the context of Needs Assessment Missions, Election Observation Activities, Follow-up and Mid-term review visits and will continue this well-established practice.</p> <p>- CPC/regional desks can collect, once a year (Q1 of each year), a list of focal points in each FO that is shared with ODIHR, including a CPC focal point on election-related matters.</p> <p>- ODIHR organized and invited all FoPs from the FOs in Eastern Europe and South Eastern Europe (SEE), as well as the CPC, in Oct last year to a focal point meeting. The discussions centred around election related</p>	<p>Q1/2027</p>
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	<p>2. Provide platforms for Field Operations to periodically share election related activities and plans with ODIHR, to obtain input from ODIHR on strategic plans related to work on elections, and to facilitate field-to-field knowledge exchange and mutual learning. This can be either integrated into existing or new coordination mechanisms, such as (regional) Heads of Mission meetings, coordination calls, etc.</p>		<p>activities, priorities due to resources constraints and the need to report on the political implications, also at regional level, of elections support. ODIHR should continue to organize such focal point meetings (CPC ready to participate, pending availability of funds).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Additionally, the CPC invites ODIHR every year to the Annual Heads of Missions meeting (January) and the Regional Heads of Missions meeting in SEE and Central Asia (dates change), where the elections support and ODIHR plans are discussed. These reflection points to co-ordinate inter-institutional work will continue.</li> <li>- The CPC could consider organizing a VTC with HoMs on election-related matters (TBC). It organizes regular VTCs with HoMs (7 in 2025, 1 so far in 2026).</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Lack of systemic approach and limited human and financial resources</b></p>	<p><b>2. Strengthen the systemic approach to follow-up on recommendations and mobilize additional resources and support for follow-up to maximize the sustainability and impact of ODIHR's Election work</b></p>		<p>ODIHR is constantly working to strengthen its efforts not only in observation but also, importantly, in the area of follow-up. ODIHR dedicates Unified Budget resources to support its programmatic Outcome 1.2 aimed at improving election stakeholders' capacity in OSCE participating States to</p>	

<p><b>dedicated to follow-up</b></p>	<p><b>Action points ODIHR:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider a more proactive and systemic approach towards follow-up - in collaboration with FOs where relevant. Build on existing ODIHR follow-up practices by supporting participating States on their request – in particular electoral management bodies and relevant line ministries – in the development of country-level follow-up frameworks with ODIHR providing methodological guidance and, where present, field operations supporting contextualization, stakeholder consultation and continuity of engagement.</li> <li>2. Explore options for strengthening internal follow-up capacity and resourcing (UB), and mobilizing additional resources (ExB) for targeted follow-up projects where opportunities for reform and OSCE assistance emerge.</li> <li>3. Proactively engage external actors and partners in follow-up work where possible and relevant.</li> </ol>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>implement and follow up on ODIHR recommendations, through sustained dialogue, consultation and assistance provided by ODIHR.</p> <p>These resources are also supplemented by Extra-Budgetary funds. While election observation remains the core mandated activity of the ODIHR Elections Department, and its value in informing citizens about their electoral processes and assisting participating States to identify areas for improvement in election processes cannot be overstated - ODIHR will, where resources permit, continue to enhance its follow-up activities and work closely with field operations, in line with their respective mandates and priorities. Further, ODIHR works closely with international and civil society partner organizations working in the area of electoral assistance. In particular, for international partners, ODIHR works closely with the European Union, Council of Europe, IFES, NDI, IRI, and International IDEA in follow-up activities. The electoral follow-up also remains at the focus of the attention of the signatories of the Declaration of</p>	<p>Q4/2027</p>
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			<p>Principles for International Election Observation, of which ODIHR is a convening member.</p> <p>On Action Point 2.2, ODIHR will continue to utilize the UB resources dedicated to follow-up as per the approved budget. To prevent any detracting from its core mandated activity, election observation, for additional resources ODIHR will focus on continuing fundraising efforts for its ExB targeted follow-up activities.</p>	
<p><b>Limited collaboration among ODIHR and HCNM and RFoM in follow-up</b></p>	<p><b>3. Strengthen institutional co-ordination with the HCNM and the RFoM, within existing mandates, to enhance coherence, cross-fertilization and follow-up.</b></p> <p><b><u>Action points ODIHR:</u></b></p> <p>1. Building on ODIHR’s central role in election observation and follow-up, agree with the HCNM and the RFoM, on shared priorities and expectation for co-operation across the electoral cycle, with particular attention to engagement during post-election follow-up.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>ODIHR has well established mechanisms for cooperation with the HCNM and RFoM. With the HCNM, the cooperation is primarily through the contribution of HCNM experts to ODIHR election observation missions where greater attention to the participation of national minorities is warranted. ODIHR also seeks HCNM’s input when developing handbooks and legal opinions relevant to the work of HCNM. Regarding the RFoM, the cooperation takes the form of contributing to the development of each other’s thematic work (guidelines, handbooks, papers) on topics that relate to both institutions’</p>	<p>Q4/2026</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Strengthen the use of existing focal points and regular exchanges to ensure cross-institutional expertise is captured systematically and reflected in ODIHR outputs.</li> <li>3. Strengthen joint capacity-building initiatives targeting staff of relevant executive structures (ODIHR, HCNM, RFoM) — such as a training module and expert exchanges — to deepen mutual understanding of the mandates of various executive structures and to strengthen collaborative approaches to supporting electoral processes.</li> </ol>		<p>mandates, organizing joint events and expert discussions.</p> <p>In its election observation reports, ODIHR comprehensively covers the countries' media landscape, including the environment in which journalists work and the overall respect for media freedom and freedom of expression. This analysis complements its assessment of the legal framework for media in the electoral context, as well as the media monitoring conducted by the Office during observation missions. In looking at the broader media environment, ODIHR Media Experts routinely draw on the statements and analysis of the RFoM and regularly cite related documents in their reports.</p> <p>ODIHR will further strengthen this existing cooperation through more frequent exchanges between relevant team members and discussions on potential follow-up activities. Further, ODIHR will offer informal exchanges that build on those provided to OSCE staff members in the Human Dimension Induction Course for any HCNM or RFoM team members wishing to learn</p>	
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			more about its election work and would equally welcome similar opportunities for its own team members to deepen its understanding of the work of HCNM and RFoM.	
<b>Underutilized potential of the OSCE PA in supporting follow-up</b>	<p><b>4. Explore and leverage the OSCE PA's role in election follow-up activities to promote electoral reforms.</b></p> <p><b>Action points ODIHR:</b></p> <p>1. Strengthen ODIHR–OSCE PA working level cooperation to work with parliaments to promote electoral reforms in follow up to recommendations.</p> <p>2. In conjunction with the OSCE PA, explore how national parliaments can be encouraged to formally consider and, where appropriate respond to ODIHR recommendations, to promote accountability and transparency.</p>	Yes	<p>ODIHR and OSCE PA have a long history of cooperation on election observation. This cooperation has mainly been focused on the joint efforts for short-term observation but has expanded to joint events on relevant election topics and exchanges between ODIHR and OSCE PA members.</p> <p>ODIHR will continue to explore with OSCE PA how their engagement with national parliaments can support ODIHR's efforts to promote election reform.</p>	Q2/2027
<b>Persistent gaps in the implementation of</b>	<b>5. Pilot a structured, voluntary follow-up initiative focused on inclusion-related issues in electoral reform.</b>		ODIHR currently has a targeted follow-up initiative focusing on women's participation, which highlights the related recommendations in its final election	

<p><b>inclusion-related recommendations</b></p>	<p><b>Action points ODIHR:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Launch a pilot follow-up initiative on inclusion-related recommendations (gender, persons with disabilities, minorities) based on reform opportunities and demand from participating States.</li> <li>2. Use existing ODIHR tools (e.g., handbooks, gender audits, minority participation guidance) as the foundation for the pilot, and facilitate joint ODIHR follow-up frameworks — in collaboration with field operations where present — with civil society and national institutions promoting the implementation of recommendations.</li> <li>3. Document lessons from the pilot and present them at OSCE forums (PC, WHDC, HDIM) to support peer learning and replication.</li> </ol>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>observation reports. This activity is currently conducted as part of the ODIHR CHANGE project and builds on the work of the ODIHR Democratization department on women’s participation. Further, ODIHR conducted a comprehensive study examining gender-related electoral recommendations issued between 2010 and June 2025. The analysis explored their evolution, scope, levels of implementation and emerging trends, with a view to strengthening the quality, relevance and impact of future recommendations. The findings will be further discussed within the Elections Department, across the Office, and with OSCE field operations, to inform ongoing work and further enhance ODIHR’s engagement on gender equality in electoral processes.</p> <p>Building on this existing activity, ODIHR will explore opportunities to expand it to other inclusion-related recommendations and to apply it throughout the election cycle, drawing on ODIHR tools on inclusive participation for political parties, state institutions, and election management</p>	<p>Q4/2027</p>
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			bodies. Partnerships with local civil society will remain a key component of these efforts. Regarding the participation of persons with disabilities, ODIHR's election work complements and feeds efforts of the ODIHR Democratization Department including its work with the ODIHR Advisory Panel on the Participation of Person with Disabilities. The Elections Department will continue to contribute to these activities and explore how the Panel and other ODIHR tools can help promote the implementation of inclusion-related recommendations.	
<b>Limited reporting on OSCE-wide implementation of recommendations</b>	<p><b>6. Enhance reporting on OSCE-wide implementation of recommendations to foster transparency and accountability</b></p> <p><b><u>Action points ODIHR:</u></b></p> <p>1. Use available opportunities, especially yearly reporting to the PC, to periodically present to the participating States aggregated insights into (trends in) the uptake of recommendations within the OSCE-region.</p>	Yes	<p>ODIHR utilizes existing mechanisms for reporting to participating States on the progress being made across the OSCE region to improve electoral processes and meet OSCE commitments on democracy. These include the Director's reports to the Permanent Council, the discussions at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting or similar conferences, the Human Dimension Committee (HDC) meetings and the ODIHR Election Seminar for delegations. ODIHR will further explore how to put more</p>	Q1/2027

	<p>2. Explore with the CiO/Troika the possibility of more structural self-reporting by pS of their progress in implementing electoral recommendations, as well as opportunities for a more structured utilization of OSCE-wide platforms (PC/HDC, HDIM/WHDC) to enhance accountability for the implementation of ODIHR's recommendations.</p>		<p>emphasis on the uptake of election recommendations through these exchanges. ODIHR systematically tracks the implementation of election recommendations based on its analysis in the course of a subsequent election process where ODIHR can assess the reform in practice and evaluates how it addressed the recommendation. All resulting information on the implementation of recommendations is available on the ODIHR website: <a href="#">ODIHR electoral recommendations database</a>. On the website, the recommendations can be searched by country or by topic.</p> <p>For Action Point 6.2, as part of its follow-up methodology and as a standing point during the follow-up visits, ODIHR encourages participating States to make voluntary reports to the Permanent Council and Human Dimension Committee on their follow-up to ODIHR electoral recommendations. While ODIHR consistently welcomes and supports such self-reporting by participating States, it notes that this remains voluntary in nature. ODIHR</p>	
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			could potentially discuss with the CiO/Troika/Chair of the HDC various mechanisms for encouraging more self-reporting, while recognizing that any progress on the implementation of this will be contingent on States' willingness to expand their reporting in existing platforms.	
<b>Limited results-based management, and monitoring of outcomes of OSCE's work on Elections</b>	<p><b>7. Strengthen the results framework and monitoring of outcomes of OSCE's work on elections.</b></p> <p><b><u>Action points ODIHR:</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure the intended outcomes and KPIs of the UB Elections Programme in the next Unified Budget Proposal are aligned with the OSCE's Performance Based Programme Budgeting guidelines, with outcomes and related KPIs reflecting changes ODIHR aims to influence (but that are not within its control) at the level of beneficiaries.</li> <li>2. Strengthen monitoring practices to ensure both outputs and outcomes of</li> </ol>	Partially	In relation to 7.1 and the first part of 7.2: ODIHR has systematically strengthened its Results-Based Management (RBM) processes and will continue to do so. ODIHR also maintains a comprehensive monitoring system. While the current framework already supports monitoring of its performance, ODIHR will explore potential opportunities to further refine indicators and their respective monitoring requirements, where appropriate and feasible. In doing so, ODIHR will seek to ensure that indicators remain realistic and proportionate to the Office's practical ability to influence such changes, while further enhancing the use of outcome-level SMART indicators. Any such adjustments will remain aligned with ODIHR's mandate, and in the	7.1 & 7.2 – 2026 – 2027 7.3 - TBD

	<p>ODIHR's UB Elections programme (and complementary ExB projects where relevant) are measured and reported on. In this context, explore whether monitoring efforts of FOs and participating States can support OSCE-wide monitoring of outcomes, through voluntary information-sharing, internal consolidation of available data, etc.</p> <p>3. Consider planning a decentralized evaluation of ODIHR's UB-funded election observation activities (which were not the focus of this thematic evaluation) in line with the OSCE's Evaluation Policy.</p>		<p>case of UB activities, with the agreed outcomes and timeframe as approved by the participating States, as well as the realistic measurability of support provided.</p> <p>In relation to the second part of 7.2:  ODIHR does not accept the point to "explore whether monitoring efforts of FOs and participating States can support OSCE-wide monitoring of outcomes, through voluntary information-sharing, internal consolidation of available data, etc.". ODIHR considers that such an approach would, in practice, amount to a new complex monitoring system. This would require the approval of participating States and could imply formalized reporting lines from FOs to ODIHR, which would not be in line with the existing CRMS framework.</p> <p>In relation to 7.3:  ODIHR acknowledges the recommendation and will consider the potential value and feasibility of a decentralized evaluation of its UB-funded activities, including those implemented by ODIHR's Election Department in the future. This will take place in conjunction with a comprehensive</p>	
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			determination of ODIHR's broader evaluation priorities for other human dimension UB-funded activities. The feasibility and timing of any such evaluation will depend on the availability of human and financial resources, as well as the prioritization of other evaluation needs within ODIHR.	
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## Annex I: List of evaluation findings

**Finding 1:** Ministerial Council decisions have built a coherent OSCE-wide framework that positions ODIHR as a key actor in promoting democratic elections and providing electoral assistance, with complementary roles for other OSCE executive structures and bodies.

**Finding 2:** Co-ordination between ODIHR and field operations on electoral activities varies considerably in practice and is shaped by mandates, timing and contextual constraints

**Finding 3:** The HCNM's contributions to electoral processes — particularly in supporting the inclusion of non-majority communities — are valued by both ODIHR and field operations, but they remain largely informal and unevenly integrated, reflecting the HCNM's mandate, operating modalities and the nature of its engagement with election observation processes.

**Finding 4:** The RFoM brings valued expertise to ODIHR's election work and is actively drawn upon across election observation processes, however collaboration remains largely ad hoc and episodic, limiting the consistent and systematic leveraging of RFOM's expertise.

**Finding 5:** Strengthened co-operation between ODIHR and the OSCE PA has enhanced the political reach of election observation and contributed to civic engagement and democratic participation. However, this co-operation is primary focused on short-term election observation; limiting its potential to support sustained post-election engagement and broader democratic participation outcomes.

**Finding 6:** The OSCE's flexibility in politically sensitive contexts is a significant asset. While ODIHR provides technical expertise on request, field operations adapt by shifting from electoral legal support to technical support, operating discreetly and responding to external stakeholders' emerging needs. This enables continued engagement even when formal reforms are blocked.

**Finding 7:** Electoral authorities across diverse jurisdictions view the OSCE as a credible and supportive partner. While the different roles of ODIHR and field operations are widely recognized, interlocutors pointed to scope for more consistent co-ordination — particularly around post-election engagement — to improve continuity of engagement.

**Finding 8:** EOMs are a central mechanism through which ODIHR supports participating States in assessing their compliance with OSCE electoral commitments and identifying areas for improvement.

**Finding 9:** The OSCE's most effective contributions to electoral reform processes have often occurred where field operations and ODIHR coordinate closely, combining ODIHR's technical expertise with field operations' local presence and knowledge, continuity and trusted relationships.

**Finding 10:** ODIHR's election observation outputs — such as EOM recommendations — are widely recognized by national and international stakeholders interviewed as a primary impartial and credible reference point for electoral reform across the OSCE region.

**Finding 11:** Although ODIHR has a structured approach to follow-up, and follow-up is referenced in 2 out of 3 intended programme outcomes, engagement in practice remains uneven, with overall limited resources dedicated to follow-up. More sustained engagement and progress are evident where dedicated financing and clear demand exists, such as in South Eastern-Europe.

**Finding 12:** ODIHR has played a leading role in providing electoral legal expertise through reviews, informal guidance and dialogue, complemented by the efforts of field operations, which have often convened stakeholders and supported broader reform processes.

**Finding 13:** Efforts to address the role of media in electoral contexts have been primarily constrained by limited regulatory capacity, legislative gaps and insufficient political backing.

**Finding 14:** Implementation of ODIHR recommendations remains uneven across the OSCE region, reflecting political, institutional and temporal factors, with recommendations on legal reforms showing the lowest uptake. However, ODIHR's legal reviews add significant value beyond quantitative evidence on implementation status, shaping reform debates, transparency and civil society advocacy.

**Finding 15:** Implementation of electoral recommendations is higher in South-Eastern Europe, supported by EU accession incentives and the OSCE Western Balkans Project, while Central Asia has faced some structural barriers, though Kyrgyzstan stands out as partial exception.

**Finding 16:** Where co-ordination and targeted support have been stronger — such as through ODIHR's Western Balkans Project and in contexts like Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo and Montenegro — the OSCE's electoral assistance has, in some cases, contributed to the implementation of recommendations and supported reform momentum.

**Finding 17:** OSCE assistance in the 12 jurisdictions studied in more depth contributed to improved implementation of recommendations related to appeal systems and complaint resolution mechanisms, as well as the technical capacity of electoral commissions, reinforcing impartial and inclusive election management.

**Finding 18:** The uptake of recommendations chiefly depends on political will, clarity of recommendations and effective co-ordination between ODIHR, field operations and national institutions.

**Finding 19:** In South-Eastern Europe, electoral recommendations serve as important benchmarks in EU accession processes, valued for their technical rigour and credibility, though implementation varies with political will and institutional priorities.

**Finding 20:** Technical recommendations are more readily implemented, often directly by EMBs, while legal and political reforms face stronger resistance. Timing, sequencing and comprehensive reform strategies emerge as important factors in advancing more complex changes.

**Finding 21:** Uneven implementation of recommendations reflects a combination of factors, with political will emerging as a necessary condition for successful electoral reform beyond the Organization's control, and co-ordination of the follow-up process across OSCE executive structures constituting a contributory factor within the Organization's control.

**Finding 22:** OSCE-wide platforms reinforce participating States' electoral commitments and provide space for dialogue and accountability, but with follow-up being upon invitation/request, progress depends on the national context, and ODIHR has not systematically reported to pS on OSCE-wide implementation of its recommendations.

**Finding 23:** The sustainability of electoral reforms in national contexts is linked to ODIHR's technical follow-up and the facilitative role of field operations, with outcomes strongest where these modalities align with political will and international attention. Where these factors come together, implementation is more likely to take root.

**Finding 24:** The OSCE's soft power, in addition to, the formal follow-up process, particularly its field presence and convening and confidence-building capacity, is an enabling factor in strengthening the sustainability of its election-related work, while administrative procedures and lack of resources, may, in some contexts, hinder sustainable results.

**Finding 25:** National ownership of ODIHR recommendations across South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia is uneven and context-dependent. While broadly seen as relevant, implementation often depends on political will, institutional capacity and alignment with domestic or external reform agendas.

**Finding 26:** The OSCE's convening role is a key strength for sustaining electoral reform efforts, reinforced by its neutrality, field presence and trusted relationships. While this role frequently helps bridge divides in polarized contexts, it is not always leveraged systematically to support longer-term coordination and sustainability of reform processes.

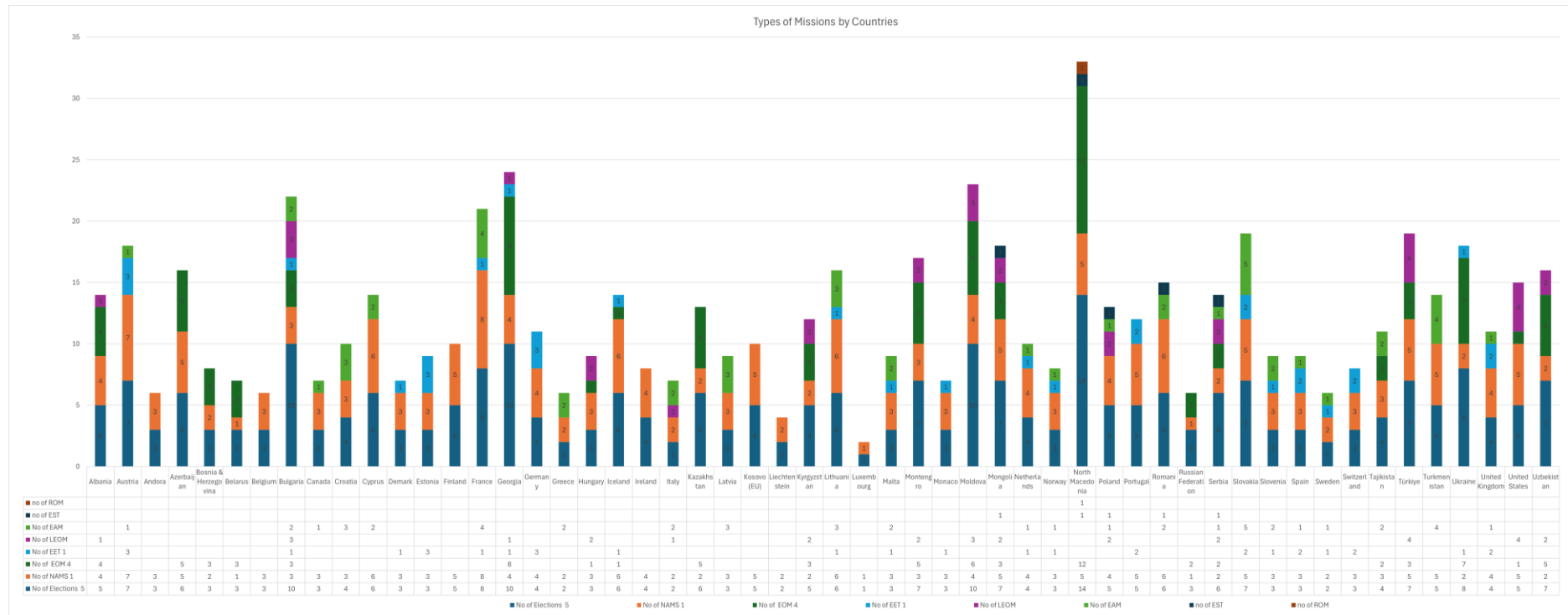
**Finding 27:** Implementation of inclusion-related electoral recommendations remains limited and uneven. While progress is more visible for persons with disabilities, gender and minority issues face persistent barriers. Regional disparities and weak uptake to highlight the importance of stronger political will and sustained civil society engagement.

**Finding 28:** While the OSCE has increased its attention to the political participation of persons with disabilities, implementation of related recommendations remains uneven. Procedural improvements are advancing in several locations, but legal reforms continue to face significant resistance in many contexts.

**Finding 29:** While the OSCE has played a significant role in advancing legal reforms, leadership initiatives and institutional audits to support women's political participation, persistent structural barriers — such as party gatekeeping, gender-based harassment and weak implementation — continue to limit women's substantive influence in political life.

**Finding 30:** The OSCE's efforts were pivotal in fostering civil society engagement, which in turn contributed positively to democratic participation. This support helped reinforce civic involvement and democratic processes across the jurisdictions studied, despite some fluctuations in engagement levels.

## Annex II: Overview of NAMs vs EOMS 2013–2023



## Annex III: Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> 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.
- <sup>ii</sup> Users can search and filter recommendations by country, election year, thematic area and implementation status, allowing stakeholders to track progress on electoral reform across election cycles. Recommendations are categorized across key thematic areas, including electoral administration, legal framework, campaign finance and media, as well as cross-cutting issues such as gender equality, participation of persons with disabilities and the rights of national minorities.
- <sup>iii</sup> OSCE spending on election related activities based on OIO Internal Business Intelligence data on project expenditures with titles including 'elections'.
- <sup>iv</sup> The figures are based on project data extracted from the internal administrative system, including only projects with 'elections' in the title. While ExB project data includes both staff and operational costs, UB project data do not include staff costs. ODIHR's UB Elections programme contained between 16.5 and 15 approved posts over the period of evaluation, with staff costs of EUR 1,5 million in 2023.
- <sup>v</sup> According to its methodology, ODIHR does not conduct a needs assessment mission ahead of a national election if it has been in the country in the previous year to observe or if its most recent needs assessment was conducted in the preceding 12 months.
- <sup>vi</sup> For these three countries, no observation mission was recommended by the needs assessment missions conducted ahead of each national election. (It is not that a full-scale mission was not recommended but that no observation mission was recommended at all.)
- <sup>vii</sup> For more information on ODIHR's work on electoral reform, see <https://projects.osce.org/odihr/support-to-electoral-reforms-in-western-balkans>.
- <sup>viii</sup> ODIHR only assesses the implementation of recommendations in the course of a subsequent election observation activity, when it analyzes legislative or procedural changes as well as implementation in practice during an election process.
- <sup>ix</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Recommendations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to Participate in Political and Public Life in the OSCE Region (Dublin Recommendations)", 1 December 2023, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/dublin-recommendations>.
- <sup>x</sup> See, for example, Ana Carmo, "Gender equality: UN Women calls for political will and accelerated global action", UN News, 15 September 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165849>; Annika Silva-Leander, "Beijing+30: Taking stock of progress on gender equality using the Global State of Democracy Indices", International IDEA, 5 March 2025, <https://www.idea.int/news/beijing30-taking-stock-progress-gender-equality-using-global-state-democracy-indices>; Saskia Brechenmacher, "The New Global Struggle over Gender, Rights, and Family Values", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/06/the-new-global-struggle-over-gender-rights-and-family-values?lang=en>.
- <sup>xi</sup> In this context, outcomes refer to tangible changes on the side of beneficiaries that programmes intend to influence over a period of 3-5 years, and KPIs should provide measures of these outcome level results (see: <https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/2026/02/PBPB.pdf>).