



Promoting free and fair elections in times of democratic decline

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

The evaluation finds that the OSCE has played a critical and widely trusted role in supporting democratic elections in the OSCE region through independent election observation and demand-driven support for electoral reform processes. While the OSCE has effectively supported various stakeholders, the OSCE’s impact has largely depended on political conditions and incentives for reform in participating States, with the implementation of Election Observation recommendations being moderate and uneven across the OSCE region. The evaluation finds that the OSCE’s effectiveness and the sustainability of results can be further strengthened through a more systematic focus on follow-up, including dedicated attention to inclusion-related issues, and enhanced internal coordination and collaboration among the Office for Democracy and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE’s Field Operations, other OSCE institutions, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA). In addition, the OSCE can further leverage its platforms for dialogue and accountability and improve the OSCE-wide monitoring and reporting on outcomes.

About the evaluation

The evaluation was managed by the OSCE Office of Internal Oversight (OIO) and conducted by external consultants and OIO staff. It assessed how the OSCE — primarily through the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and its field operations — has contributed to the implementation of OSCE commitments on democratic elections, focusing on election observation recommendations and follow-up support to electoral reform processes in participating States. The evaluation assessed the following criteria: coherence, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, and equity. It covered a ten-year period (2013–2023) and included both an OSCE-wide perspective and more in-depth analysis in specific contexts where the OSCE has a field presence. A mixed-methods approach combined desk review, analysis of election observation data, stakeholder interviews, surveys, and six field visits, using triangulation to ensure validity.



KEY FINDINGS

Coherence and effectiveness

The OSCE has a coherent normative and institutional framework for election-related work. Over the period of evaluation, 253 election observation activities were conducted by ODIHR, and 3,814 recommendations were issued, which interviewed stakeholders regarded as credible and useful to guide reforms. While various participating states and electoral management bodies have engaged actively with the OSCE, others have done so minimally. The OSCE's work to follow-up on recommendations is more uneven and under-resourced, with engagement being stronger where dedicated funding and governmental demand exists. Follow-up is most effective when ODIHR's expertise is combined with field operations' local presence, ability to convene stakeholders, and continuous support to reform processes. Internal coordination and collaboration between ODIHR, field operations, and other OSCE actors (such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), and the OSCE PA) exists, but consistency varies and it is often informal, ad hoc, and/or shaped by mandates, capacities, and established working relationships.

Impact, sustainability and equity

The OSCE's work contributed to electoral reform and the broader development of democratic electoral standards across participating States, but widespread and sustained implementation of ODIHR's recommendations has been moderate and varies across the OSCE region, with technical recommendations being more readily implemented than legal and political reforms. Stronger implementation has been seen where both incentives and co-ordinated OSCE support were present. The sustainability of results is constrained by the absence of formal accountability mechanisms within the OSCE and largely depends on national ownership and political commitment of the participating States. In terms of promoting equity, the OSCE contributed to advancing electoral inclusion, but progress across inclusion areas has been uneven: while the OSCE contributed to advancing accessibility for persons with disabilities and civil society engagement, progress on women's political participation has been more gradual and uneven, and inclusion of national minorities remains limited.

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 through 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



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation **concludes** that the OSCE's work on elections has effectively supported relevant actors in various participating States, but the implementation of ODIHR's recommendations remains moderate and uneven across the OSCE region and long-term impact is largely shaped by political will and structural conditions within participating States.

Evaluation **recommendations** highlight opportunities to enhance effectiveness through strengthened internal coordination and co-operation of relevant OSCE actors and bodies, more systematic follow-up on recommendations, targeted initiatives focused on inclusion, better use of OSCE platforms for accountability and dialogue, and enhanced monitoring and reporting on OSCE-wide implementation of recommendations.

