



Harassment of Independent Citizens' Election Observers – Challenges for international Institutions and Civil Society

Citizens' election observation has been developed as a method to contribute to better quality of election processes, to increase transparency of voting procedures and to produce valuable recommendations for the organisation of national elections to the respective national election administrations. By that citizens' election observation has delivered during the last decades an important contribution to increase the number of electoral democracies and to establish better electoral practise worldwide.

Today the majority of states take benefit from citizens' observers' recommendations in their efforts to minimize shortcomings in election administration and to improve the electoral processes. Still we see that a considerable number of states - although formally and by their constitutions ranging as electoral democracies - do not allow genuine free and fair elections. The regimes of such states use elections as an instrument to justify wrongful power. In those countries citizens' election observers are not perceived as an assistance to improve electoral processes but as a threat to the legitimacy of unjustified regimes.

Among the states covered by the network of EPDE (European Platform for Democratic Elections) we have to observe such a situation foremost in Azerbaijan, Belarus and the Russian Federation. Citizens' election observers in those countries face manifold problems:

- on the political level: devaluation of the work of citizens' election observers through the establishment of GONGOs providing fake observation of flawed elections
- on the legal level: restriction of the work of independent citizens' election observers groups through repressive NGO legislation and election legislation

- on the administrative-executive level: persecution of election observers through house searches, legal persecution on the base of fabricated cases (tax evasion, hooliganism)
- on the level of public awareness: defamation of citizens' election observers as foreign agents in state-run mass media, nourishing of hate against alleged "people's enemies" which leads to physical attacks on election observers often through other citizens

These challenges require a systematic and a broad response that should cover all above-mentioned levels. EPDE calls on international institutions as OSCE and Council of Europe, to national governments and to the international civil society to undertake serious efforts to defend the institute of independent citizens' election observation in Europe.

- The German OSCE chairmanship should give priority to the defence of human rights defenders in the OSCE region and thereby give special attention to citizens' election observers. A special rapporteur for human rights defenders/citizens' election observers should be appointed
- OCSE missions should be instructed to assist and defend human rights defenders/citizens' election observers and their families
- International civil society and mass media as well as national parliaments should care for a systematic and public detection of "fake observation" through GONGOs as well as through international election observation missions that are not adhering to international standards and norms of election observation
- Advocacy for a modern and liberal NGO and electoral legislation enabling citizens' election observers to implement their activities
- Legal defence for election observers through qualified lawyers in the case that criminal charges are brought up against them
- Material/financial assistance for those election observers that have to leave their countries for a time in connection with physical threats and legal repressions
- Material/financial assistance for families of imprisoned election observers

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