

OSCE involvement in the organisation and monitoring of elections

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[Commentator] At the heart of OSCE security thinking is the premise that countries of a certain kind never attack each other: democracies — real democracies, arising from the will of their people, freely expressed in fair elections.

[Christian Strohal] The most visible and most immediate part, the moment of interaction with the voter, and if the voter is disregarded, is becoming cynical, then of course you have the ground for serious unhappiness, for other methods of getting the voice heard.

[Commentator] In November 2003, the Republic of Georgia showed how unstable a flawed democracy can be. National elections had been so blatantly rigged that angry protesters surged into Parliament itself and forced the Government to try again.

Again, in the Ukraine in 2004, the feeling of being robbed of their choice drove thousands upon thousands into the streets for a marathon vigil that led to a re run. In both cases, OSCE experts arrived to broker agreements and to help national authorities clean up and strengthen the election process. Only six weeks after Georgia's uprising, a new poll and a different winner. OSCE observers reported notable progress. In Ukraine, a record size team of nearly 1 400 observers from 44 countries watched another reversal of results. 'Not perfect, but better,' was the OSCE's verdict this time.

[Bruce George] The contrast with 31 October and 21 November was remarkable. There were significant improvements.

[Commentator] So those crises ended peacefully. But the OSCE really wants to avert such crises before they start. By the time these children cast their own vote, having real political choices all across the OSCE countries may be taken for granted. Today, however, some former one party States are still in transition. And, to ease the way, the OSCE studies elections in new democracies and old. It taps hundreds of volunteer observers like John Loewenhardt, Dutch, and Bojana Asanovic, Serbian, here being briefed before Russia's 2003 parliamentary election.

They are working for the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and its assembly of law makers from participating States, all of which are committed to inviting each other to observe their elections. Before the vote, they visit polling places to see 'are they well organised, well equipped, accessible?'

[Commentator] They hear complaints; they take notes. For the political battleground, it's also the scene for a struggle between faith in the system and corrosive cynicism.

[Someone] People don't believe anyone anymore. They all deceive.

[Commentator] Election day: Bojana and John repeat their tour. Access is no problem; they're even invited to watch inmates casting their ballots in the Moscow detention centre. This day's questions: are the voters free of pressure? Is the voting secret? The counting transparent? Are the officials accountable?

[John Loewenhardt] Most of the time, most of the people are doing their best in difficult circumstances.

[Commentator] Meanwhile, another team has been monitoring the media to see if all parties got a fair chance to spread their message. In the end, the OSCE team declares the vote was professionally organised with a commendably inclusive approach, but the ruling party got an unfair share of media coverage. And it never ends there. In all of the dozens of elections it witnesses, the OSCE follows up with advice and technical help.

[Christian Strohal] We are doing a technical job; we are looking at the process. And we measure the process vis à vis commitments, which are the same for all 55 participating States.

[Commentator] The same commitments, the same standards; whether in snowy Moscow or in sunny Florida. OSCE monitors fanned out across America for the 2004 presidential contest. Again, they offered a mixture of praise and criticism. The election mostly met international standards and OSCE commitments, they said, but the team recommended standardising procedures across the States and it called for improvements in voter registration and provision for absentee voters.