



EUROPEAN
PARTNERSHIP FOR
DEMOCRACY



Think AHEAD

Action for a Holistic Electoral Approach for Democracy (AHEAD)





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Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. The need for a more democracy focused electoral cycle approach	5
2. Thinking AHEAD: Upgrading the electoral cycle approach to better support democracy	9
3. How AHEAD works	12
4. Structure and implementation modalities	20
5. Added value: mobilising the EPD community of practice	23
Annex: List of EPD Members	



Executive Summary

The **Action for a Holistic Electoral Approach for Democracy (AHEAD)** is a new approach to electoral support that brings together the unique mix of skills and expertise present within the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) drawn from across the European Union (EU).

AHEAD mobilises this wide range of expertise to provide electoral support in a holistic and innovative manner, starting from the democratic gaps identified by EU election missions, in order to address the contemporary challenges to electoral integrity and democracy. It serves as a basis for discussion with the EU and EU Member States with a view to jointly designing comprehensive and sustainable electoral support programmes, including through a Team Europe approach. AHEAD is informed by conclusions on the EU EOM implementation outlook drawn from a thorough analysis of the status of implementation of recommendations provided by EU Electoral Follow-up Missions (EFMs) and the extensive experience of EPD and its members in the provision of electoral support.

The expansion of electoral support over the last three decades has visibly demonstrated the increasing importance placed on elections by the international community. While electoral support was once seen through the paradigm of democratic transition as the most effective and cost-efficient mechanism to facilitate democratisation worldwide, the 'end of the transition paradigm' underlined how elections and support to electoral processes are an important but insufficient element of democratic development. In many countries, elections are used by authoritarian leaders to portray a veneer of democracy or to slowly undermine democracy by legitimising attacks on democratic and human rights principles, such as the rule of law through victory at the ballot box.

The lessons learnt over the past 20 years of international support have demonstrated that support to credible and transparent elections must be firmly anchored within a broader governance strategy. As **electoral integrity is inherently dependent on public confidence in electoral and political processes**, this strategy should target the long-term capacity of democratic institutions and the effectiveness of political processes beyond mere technical support to electoral processes. In other words, electoral integrity is, at its root, a political issue that requires more than technical solutions.

In this regard, the introduction of the 'electoral cycle approach' in the early 2000s, spearheaded by the European Commission (EC), the United Nations Development Programme and International IDEA, represented a decisive step towards more thorough and consistent planning and implementation of electoral support within the democratic governance framework, rather than as a mere ad hoc reaction to ensuring that electoral events could take place freely and fairly. Yet the practical implementation of the long-term objectives of the electoral cycle approach has usually fallen short of this goal, with the technical electoral component of the support – by its nature more results-oriented – often overtaking other



longer-term and less measurable objectives.¹ While the electoral cycle approach represented a significant improvement in comparison to previous practice, in most cases it has meant that **electoral support remains disconnected from longer-term democracy support strategies and remains rooted in the notion of technical electoral processes.**

This often “disconnected” electoral support struggles to tackle contemporary challenges to electoral processes: such as the autocratisation trend mentioned above, lower voter turnout and disinformation. The global downward dynamics of voter turnout hint at a much more profound fatigue with representative democracy and to falling levels of political trust – both in established democracies and for their younger counterparts. Disinformation and manipulation of voter information dampens participation and degrades trust in electoral processes while undermining confidence in democratic systems more broadly. None of these challenges can be effectively addressed solely through technical support to electoral processes.

In recognition of these limitations, the EU has shown a growing commitment to better connect electoral activities to overall external action.² The EU is doing this most specifically through investing in stronger links between the two main pillars of its electoral support strategy: election observation and electoral assistance. Over the last decade, this has progressively led to a stronger focus on the “follow-up” to recommendations of Election Observation Missions (EOMs) and their use as a basis for EU external action more generally, for example in political dialogue and development cooperation.³ The recent developments in EOM follow-up activities incentivise EU headquarters and EU Delegations to rethink the way that electoral support is interlinked with political and development agendas and programming portfolios.

Since recommendations from election observers are wide ranging, support to their implementation spans beyond electoral assistance programmes and inherently touches upon support to democratic actors that have a stake in the elections – from free media, engaged CSOs, the judiciary, human rights defenders, and other democratic institutions such as political parties and parliaments. However, at present **there is no mechanism on offer to EU Delegations that can help ensure that the link between the different areas of democratic and electoral support is as strong as possible and thereby operationalise electoral follow-up.** This is clearly shown by the difficulties in the implementation of EU EOM recommendations (see the statistical analysis in part 1).

To this end, EPD’s community of practice capitalises on long standing relationships with local and national partners, which are mobilised to implement AHEAD on the ground. EPD members and their local partners are in a unique position to provide a) high quality technical expertise, b) politically astute and informed

1 One of the major stumbling blocks is represented by the practical challenges to achieving the best possible results by concentrating the great bulk of support within the short time frame represented by the ‘election period’. This often conflicts with the objective to achieve sustainable capacity development of electoral stakeholders (a fundamentally long-term and often complex process) and progressively reduce foreign aid dependence. This results in a frequent concentration of donor funding in the 12 months prior to an election for support actions that are often operational in nature, centred on Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and technical aspects of the voting process.

2 See: Communication from the Commission on EU Election Observation and Assistance (2000); Council Conclusion on Democracy (2009, 2019); EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2015-2019); EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024).

3 This becomes apparent by the strengthened focus of EOMs recommendations on political and electoral reform, by more strategic in-country presence, e.g. through the strategic use of EU EOMs return visits, and, finally, by a higher number of Electoral Follow-up Missions (EFMs) deployed.



analysis, and c) effective programme delivery, to support the EU and its Delegations to make the most of electoral support.

In its first section, this paper outlines why democracy supporters should upgrade the electoral cycle approach in order to provide effective democracy support. The second section introduces the approach and is followed by a third chapter that introduces the areas of intervention of AHEAD projects.



1. The need for a more democracy focused electoral cycle approach

The electoral cycle approach has, for a number of years, provided an important programmatic basis for the improved formulation of electoral assistance projects and a clear growth in the EU's ability to deliver effective electoral aid. Nevertheless, the implementation on the ground of cyclical electoral support has also shown several limitations related to the challenges of adjusting already designed programmes to changing political realities as well as to the different timelines needed to support different actors in the wider electoral system.

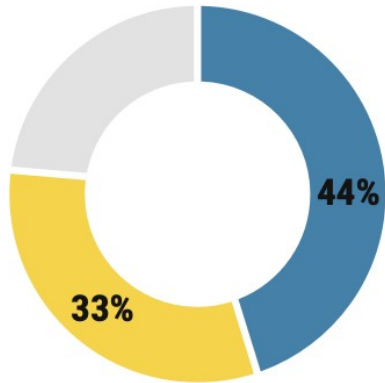
In addition, critics have often pointed to the lack of sustainability of support and the programmatic incompatibilities in the implementation of projects in support of elections that aim at enhancing long-term capacity development through short-term operational support. They have denounced this as a **vicious circle** whereby each successive election has required renewed technical support focused on the delivery of services rather than sustainable democratic change.

To date, the introduction of such a process-focused approach has not solved the difficulties of holistic programming of democratic and electoral assistance at the EU level. As a result, electoral support programmes focus primarily on strengthening electoral administrations, civic and voter education and building sustainable electoral processes.⁴ At the same time, thematic support to democratic actors and processes – such as assistance to free media, active and engaged CSOs, independent judiciary, human rights defenders and democratic institutions – is often poorly linked or totally divorced from the electoral cycle.⁵

The limits of such an approach in terms of democratic change and sustainability is obvious when analysing data on the status of implementation of recommendations provided by EU EFM. To better understand the scope and uptake of EU election observers' recommendations, we have looked at the status of implementation of EOM recommendations provided by 16 EU EFM conducted between 2016 and 2019 (no consolidated status of implementation of recommendations is provided for EFMs conducted between 2012 and 2015). Firstly, we have categorised a total of 507 recommendations per type of change required in order to be implemented, i.e. whether each recommendation requires constitutional or primary legislation change, on the one hand, or an administrative and/or operational change, on the other hand. Secondly, we have classified recommendations along assessment areas as well as the implementation rate for each assessment area. As our dataset focuses on the extent of implementation at the time of the EFM, our evidence may underestimate the rate of implementation, since more ambitious reforms often take several electoral cycles before being implemented.

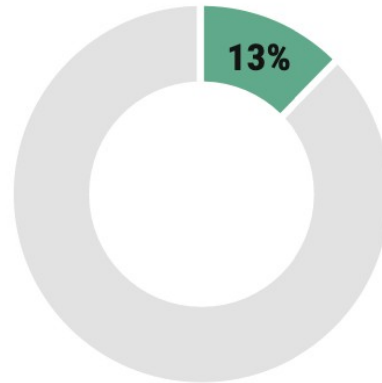
⁴ Evaluation of UNDP Contribution to Strengthening Electoral Systems and Processes (2012). Available [here](#).

⁵ Beyond Election Day. Best Practices for Follow-up to EU Election Observation Missions (2017). Available [here](#).

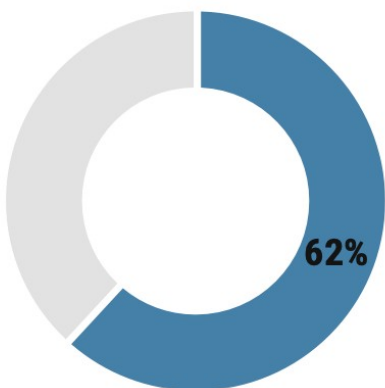


Most recommendations concern:

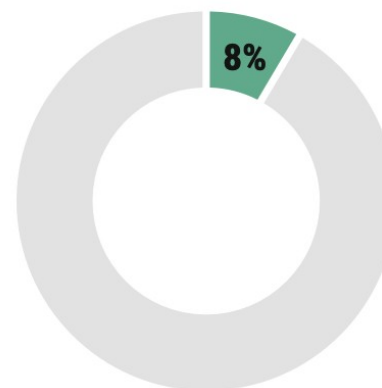
- The political environment & transparency of electoral competition
- Election administration



- % of recommendations that have been fully or partially implemented. The uptake mostly concerns operational changes to the administration of electoral processes and the inclusion of disadvantaged groups.



- Most recommendations require a legal change in order to be implemented, which is typically outside the scope of electoral support programming.



- Of the recommendations of a political nature, only a tiny number have been tackled, pointing at limitations of the cycle approach in going beyond administrative and capacity fixes.



While EU support to democratic elections is not confined to electoral support programmes, this evidence shows **there is a growing need to align and integrate thematic support to democratic actors and processes with the electoral cycle.**

In this regard, the EU is in a unique position to consolidate and enhance the progress achieved through the electoral cycle approach by designing electoral support that recognises the political dimensions of electoral work (such as the critically important political will to actually carry out reforms) and the long-term nature of meaningful electoral and democratic reforms. More and more efforts have been undertaken in the past years by the EU to support comprehensive electoral programmes that considerably integrate thematic support to democratic actors and processes into electoral assistance. Nevertheless, **a new look at the follow-up mechanisms is a key element to move towards electoral support that is more politically informed and long-term in scope.**

The need to operationalise after elections

There are several reasons for why the EU needs to operationalise its current follow-up mechanism in order to ensure more holistic and democracy-centred electoral support:

A. Follow-up work alters domestic incentives for electoral and democratic reform

The deployment of electoral observers or expert teams is a political decision, which partner countries accrue benefits from – be it political legitimacy, governance or electoral assistance, etc. While electoral assistance remains demand-driven, without a more strategic and long-term engagement on the systemic and structural recommendations from observation activities and more rigorous consideration of implementation progress from the EU, the costs of democratic reform will continue outweighing the incentives – and make it too easy for authoritarian regimes to merely address the cosmetic changes to their electoral infrastructure and avoid serious commitment on legislative reforms. After all, research shows that national and international stakeholders perceive that recommendations are an important contribution to setting a country's 'electoral reform agenda',⁶ and can represent an important entry point for local change-makers (see D below).

B. Follow-up encourages alliances between EMBs and national stakeholders that can help uphold more ambitious and meaningful democratic reforms

Reform alternatives and recommendations need to be coordinated and negotiated between a number of national actors. While research shows that integrity gains and recommendations are likely to be implemented when the EMB is independent in practice and has the requisite capacity,⁷ there are clear limits on what electoral institutions alone can achieve. An effective and autonomous EMB will always struggle to advocate for and implement changes that would fundamentally transform the status quo

⁶ Particip GmbH & GOPA Consultants (2017), Evaluation of EU Election Observation Activities. July 2016 – January 2017. Available [here](#).

⁷ Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2020), Understanding and Assessing Electoral Commission Independence: a New framework. Available [here](#).

without the backing of political elites, who are in turn likely to find such a transformation threatening.⁸ In other words, EMBs need allies, or in some contexts, motivators if they are to push forward more ambitious electoral and democratic reforms, and very often they cannot themselves even be the initiators of such reform. Closer coordination and cooperation with stakeholders beyond EMBs will allow the EU to leverage recommendations and promote meaningful changes relating to the overall democratic environment in which elections are held, rather than just contenting itself with improving the technical mechanics of the electoral process.

C. Follow-up facilitates exploring solutions to new integrity challenges and trends not tackled by electoral assistance and traditional electoral cycle support actions

One could also argue that EMBs and EMB-centric approaches to electoral support are ill placed to tackle those integrity challenges originating from the changing societal environment around elections and democracy, such as political polarisation and its violent fallout, online threats, or disinformation operations orchestrated by ruling coalitions to maintain their hold on power. This suggests there is much to be gained by leveraging recommendations and reform efforts through stronger ties with other key electoral stakeholders. Thematic support to media, political parties, parliaments and civil society have most recently been a source of methodological innovation and effective action in tackling challenges to electoral integrity in the digital age. Moreover, as suggested by the analysis of data on the status of implementation of recommendations provided by EU EFM, meaningful reforms require the creation of the political will and this needs to happen through groundwork with political parties, especially through those in Parliament.

D. Elections need to empower local change-makers, thereby fostering locally-owned electoral change processes

Some areas of the electoral process are inherently harder to reform because they effectively challenge the status quo and require the forging of a political will that can be a time-consuming undertaking. Yet cases of surprising success do occur when civil society groups have built cohesive and coherent coalitions, increasing domestic pressure for change.⁹ Even if not implemented across several cycles, a recommendation with particular implications for electoral integrity can still contribute to domestic debates and to the inclusion of certain key issues on the reform agenda. Even when there is no implementation, it is crucial to invest in preparing actors for reform and, when that moment occurs, change can more easily be fostered. In this sense, it makes sense to use elections as an entry point through which local change-makers can be supported and empowered over time to drive meaningful reforms and to accompany the sustainability of potential integrity gains over several electoral cycles.

⁸ Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2020), Learning from Success: The Implementation of Election Observation Recommendations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Available [here](#).

⁹ *ibid.*



2. Thinking AHEAD: Upgrading the electoral cycle approach to better support democracy

AHEAD is a programming approach to follow up on supporting implementation of election observation recommendations and to broaden electoral cycle support actions beyond technical assistance.

AHEAD **capitalises on international and domestic election observation recommendations to support EU Delegations in ensuring that the evidence generated by EOM reports and the spirit of EOM recommendations provides a core component of programming of a new cycle of electoral support.** To do so, it catalyses dialogue with institutional and political forces – beyond technical engagement with EMBs – to devise support actions for a sounder electoral and democratic system. Crucially, AHEAD capitalises on EPD members' **long standing relationships with local and national peers and partners**, who play a central role in the implementation of AHEAD in all instances.

The AHEAD intervention cycle

1. Recommendation Follow-Up (RFU) Assessment for Democratic Opportunities

AHEAD includes a highly practical and context-specific assessment of the implementation outlook of election observation recommendations called a Recommendation Follow-Up (RFU) assessment. It can occur at any time in the electoral cycle but is best planned in the context of or in the immediate aftermath of an EU EOM return visit – a presentation or publication of the assessment report from other domestic and international observer organisations or of an EU EFM – when the electoral process and the spirit of recommendations are still vivid in the minds of local stakeholders. The assessment will include interviews with electoral assistance providers, roundtables and focus groups with national stakeholders on the status of implementation of recommendations, mapping of interests and opportunities for the formation of coalitions for change. The RFU is aimed at translating EU recommendations into practical action points for an enlarged number of stakeholders with a view to facilitating the identification of structural recommendations that require prioritisation. At the same time, the RFU aims at strengthening local ownership of recommendations among key electoral stakeholders.

Due to the likelihood that another circle of renewed technical support focused on the delivery of services rather than sustainable democratic change may start without holistic reflection, any new cycle of electoral support needs to be informed by an honest assessment of the democratic and integrity shortcomings that can be tackled in the short and long term. The assessment will be conducted against the background of the priorities and operational needs of EU Delegations in the area of electoral and democracy support. Ultimately, it will identify the recommendations that can be tackled and should be prioritised within the upcoming electoral cycle or rather across several cycles, and the appropriate entry points to supplement – or create – an EUD's plan for follow-up to recommendations with a comprehensive electoral support

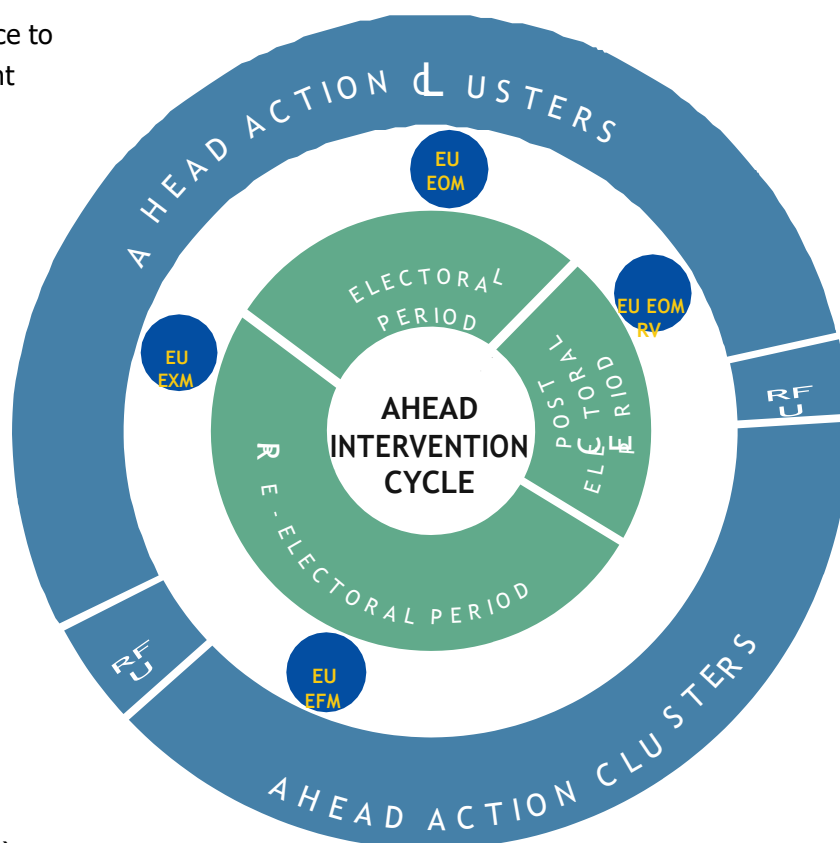


programme.

This RFU can be provided as specific service to an EU Delegation, as a needs-assessment to formulate an electoral support project, or as part of a wider project.¹⁰

2. AHEAD action clusters

A series of comprehensive and complementary support actions to be delivered in the upcoming electoral cycle and / or across several cycles are devised based on the findings of the RFU assessment, EUD priorities in the electoral area and, when existent, the EUD follow-up plan – depending on the electoral cycle phase at the time of launch of AHEAD. The actions are planned in line with the main precepts of the electoral cycle planning tool – i.e., a) the electoral cycle has no fixed starting or ending points, and b) electoral components and stakeholders are interdependent.



The following **4 action clusters** are combined based on the priority recommendations and entry points identified in the RFU assessment, EUD priorities in the electoral area and, when existent, the EUD follow-up plan (see the indicative and non-exhaustive table below):

- » **Election Management** | Foster **professional election management and procedures** by promoting competent and independent EMB that enjoys public confidence and that operates effectively and with transparency. *This support cluster falls in the more traditional arena of electoral assistance and tackles recommendations on electoral administration, voting, counting and tabulation, and voter registration.*
- » **Transparency** | Enhance **competitive and transparent elections** by promoting norms of multiparty competition and a division of power that underpins democracy as a mutual security system among political contenders during and beyond election times, while also setting clear limits to resources and norms of conduct. *This support cluster tackles recommendations on campaign environment, (gendered) electoral violence, candidate selection and registration, campaign finance, media freedom, and electoral disputes.*

¹⁰ A detailed summary of the RFU assessment methodology is available upon request.



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- » **Inclusion** | Promote **inclusive and participatory elections** by removing barriers to universal and equal participation in political processes beyond election day as well as improving public confidence in the credibility and legitimacy of those processes. *This support cluster tackles recommendations on voter education and information, inclusion of underrepresented groups, and participation of civil society and domestic observers.*

 - » **Legal Framework** | Enhance **compliance with global norms** by addressing recommendations that promote a sound legal framework for the conduct of elections in accordance with international standards for democratic electoral processes and guarantees for the exercise of fundamental freedoms and political rights. The legal framework for elections is composed of several sources (the Constitution, the electoral law and other relevant pieces of primary legislation, codes of conduct, etc.) and each source has its own process, challenges but also opportunities for change, where providers of assistance can play a facilitating role and leverage approximation to international standards. *This support cluster tackles recommendations on the legal framework.*



3. How AHEAD works

The RFU Assessment

In order to support EU Delegations to unpack EU EOM or EEM recommendations for democracy and elections programming, the RFU provides an assessment of the implementation outlook of election observation recommendations based on a **context-specific analysis of those recommendations that best fit the particular political situation of a given beneficiary country**. It complements and deepens the reflection on the opportunities for reform and points of contention identified during the EOM return visit and/or EFM by expanding the process of discussing the democratic gaps to a wider group of stakeholders. In doing so, the assessment triggers progressive ownership over the issues raised by EOM/EEM recommendations that Delegations can then support through programming.

The mere consideration of the technical fixes to be introduced in the new electoral cycle does not normally address the structural problems and democracy gaps identified by many observers' recommendations. However, it does offer both EUDs and national authorities a concrete way to orient subsequent democracy support funding on the basis of a comprehensive analysis and a methodical field research.

EPD will offer additional instruments to accompany and assist the work of EUDs with a complementary set of actions that will help address the root political causes of the inequalities and deficiencies observed in a given electoral process. There may be resistance from the national authorities to consider how to address systemic or structural problems concerning fundamental freedoms, but an open exchange with local interlocutors outside of the tensions of the electoral period can reveal many additional avenues and ensure a process of progressive ownership over the issues raised by EOM/EEM recommendations.

EPD believes it is necessary to **discuss and analyse every observation recommendation** (and often the spirit of such recommendations) with the actors on the ground to assess the concrete possibility of success that each recommendation may have and the best way for the EUD to remain engaged in addressing the core issues such recommendations highlight in the medium-to-long term.

The quantity of actors that can be consulted bilaterally over a three-month period between three to six months after elections can provide a large amount of information to analyse and options to be elaborated. A possible way to do this would be through an electronic survey administered to a wide number of stakeholders (between 80 to 100) pre-identified in conjunction with the EUD to collect a wide sample of data on how each actor evaluates the relevance and implementation prospects of recommendations, based also on the perceived halting or facilitating role played by other stakeholders. Once the survey is compiled, storage and digital cross-checking of the collected information will be conducted through a field seminar and/or focus groups. The findings of the RFU assessment are included in a concise report drawing



conclusions on the implementation outlook of recommendations as well as avenues for intervention. It is presented to EU Delegation staff from the political and cooperation sections in the target country and can be **used to devise a comprehensive action to be delivered in the upcoming electoral cycle** and/or across several cycles.

The 4 Action Clusters

The four action clusters of AHEAD can be combined in different ways in order to provide effective democracy support. The below illustrates the breadth of the different issues, challenges and opportunities that the EPD network can address through AHEAD.

1. Professional election management and procedures

As the AHEAD approach centres on the electoral cycle, it is only natural that the first area of support revolves around those actions that target professional election management.

The development of professional electoral administration and sound procedures are key intervening variables in the achievement of a genuine, well-organised and transparent electoral process. The EPD community of practice promotes transparent, professional and effective administration of election process through direct assistance to EMBs and indirect support to enhance dialogue with electoral stakeholders, through the following interventions:

Unpacking legislation and developing standard operating procedures: targeted support to EMBs to develop operationalisation documents for implementation and compliance with the legal framework and the international obligations related to elections that each partner country may have subscribed to.

Strengthening administrative capacity: Assessing EMBs' structural and behavioural independence by facilitating stakeholder meetings and interviews to better understand the public perception of the work of the EMB and ascertain administrative processes that could negatively impact the integrity of the electoral process.

Strengthening operational capacity: Facilitating strategic planning process with EMBs as well as the preparation of ad hoc guidelines and training modules. Strengthening EMBs' emergency communication capacities by developing and establishing an emergency communication protocol to be able to respond quickly and effectively to emergency situations like a technical breach of the electoral management system, outbreaks of violence or social media disinformation campaigns.

Trust-building and cooperation with other electoral stakeholders: establish and facilitate platforms for dialogue and dispute resolution between EMBs and political parties, as well for dialogue and cooperation between EMBs and CSOs (such as domestic observers) and/or EMBs and media covering the electoral campaign, support and mediation to develop codes of conduct.

EPD members have wide expertise in boosting professional election management and procedures. Support actions in this area could include:



- Strengthening EMB operational capacity, training of polling staff and development of virtual or real training rooms for EMBs;
- Assessing EMB structural and behavioural independence;
- Strategic support to EMBs in planning electoral calendar and operational plans;
- Result management applications for EMBs;
- Support EMBs in deploying web servers, archiving applications, knowledge management and inventory tools, and email cybersecurity tools;
- Facilitating dialogue platforms between EMBs and political parties for dispute resolution, CSOs and media for information sharing and trust-building;
- Reviewing and strengthening processes of electoral dispute regulation (including the involvement of courts).

2. Competitive and transparent elections

A conducive campaign environment and a level playing field are prerequisites for democratic contestation. For a fairly contested campaign and a democratic exercise/division of power, it is crucial to shape (and enforce) regulations that protect freedom of expression, assembly and association without discrimination, while setting clear limits to resources – be it administrative, financial, access to media, etc. – and norms of conduct that can skew the playing field during and beyond election time. Promoting a more conducive campaign environment, a level playing field and a democratic culture of contestation well before electoral campaigns are core elements of EPD members' interventions in support of multi-party systems, through the following core areas of support:

Consensus on campaign regulations: As a community of practice with strong expertise in facilitating multi-party and multi-stakeholder dialogues, EPD has a strong track record of facilitating consensus building among political parties, and among parties and oversight bodies on campaign regulations as well as on ad hoc contributions to a fair campaign through codes of conduct.

Campaign finance: From comparative research into the 'cost of politics'¹¹ to facilitating multi-party dialogues on campaign finance regulations, the EPD network has supported electoral stakeholders to reflect on regulations to counter the 'arms race' in election spending and to level the electoral playing field. This expertise is complemented by a capacity to develop digital applications to monitor adherence to campaign regulations and related enforcement actions by the national regulatory body.

Peaceful election environment: Through different settings involving contestants, or contestants and civil society representatives, EPD members have created multi-party mechanisms for preventing electoral violence by empowering political parties individually and jointly to prevent violence from within and among themselves, including through Codes of Conduct and other early warning and conflict mitigation measures. Actions to support peaceful elections also focus on raising awareness on the use of hate speech and inflammatory language and promoting positive measures, but also equipping contestants with skills and knowledge to engage in peaceful political debates online and offline.

Professional and balanced election reporting through support to media and regulatory bodies:

¹¹ <https://www.wfd.org/category/pdf-document/cost-of-politics-documents/>



Empowering media actors to act as reliable relays of information and as watchdogs of democracy is key for a conducive election environment and democratic debate. In addition to providing expertise on regulations for media coverage of contestants, EPD members have a strong track record of providing capacity building to strengthen the editorial and journalistic skills of the media in the treatment of political information and to prepare the media and their editorial staff for election reporting, including by streamlining a conflict-sensitive approach.

Challenges to democratic principles in the online sphere: Some EPD members are leaders in analysing the impact of social media on electoral processes and in developing methodologies for monitoring campaigns in the online sphere. These contributions are a sound base for supporting the creation of monitoring and accountability mechanisms by media and civil society throughout the electoral cycle. Moreover, the EPD network engages on digital platforms' internal/community guidelines on election-related content in an attempt to regulate their activity and promote independent multi-stakeholder mechanisms to provide oversight and guidance on the matter.

Conducting Electoral Political Economy Analysis (EPEA): Some EPD members are leaders in conducting EPEA's on a variety of topics concerning the transparency and competitiveness of electoral processes, aiming to identify major challenges and opportunities as well as the main blockages and potential agents of change to support reform.

The EPD network has wide expertise in promoting norms of multiparty competition. Support actions in this area could include:

- Facilitating consensus-building among political parties and oversight institutions on electoral and campaign requirements, including campaign finance and access to media;
- Multi-party support to build trust among politicians from different parties by providing a neutral space to promote and practice dialogue around specific electoral regulations (campaign finance, access to media, campaign transparency on social media), potential reforms and codes of conduct for election campaigning;
- Ad hoc support to political parties in developing internal party preparedness strategies for possible pre-election or post-election platforms for collaboration or coalitions, with a focus on the mindset of combining competition and cooperation;
- Conducting research on political finance and capitalising on data to initiate multi-party dialogue around specific practices and potential new/improved rules and regulations;
- Conducting EPEA's on topics around transparency and competitiveness;
- Facilitating multi-party platforms for preventing electoral violence by empowering political parties individually and jointly to discuss electoral disputes and complaints, and to make efforts to promote a peaceful campaign through electoral non-violence pledges and codes of conduct;
- Setting up collaborative peace rooms led by civil society to mediate any disputes during electoral cycles or women's situation rooms to provide early warning and rapid responses to violence against women arising before, during and after elections;
- Training media actors on detecting and deconstructing disinformation online including on social networks (verification techniques, creating content to deconstruct fake news, using social networks to share fact-checked news during election seasons);
- Strengthening, through practical training, the editorial and journalistic skills of the media in the



treatment of political information and preparing the media and their editorial staff for coverage of elections;

- Strengthening media ability to ensure accountability of elected candidates during the post-electoral period through fact-checking and development of tools to track progress of government's promises such as "promise trackers";
- Technical and financial support to broadcasting programs that include interactions/debates between newly-elected or potential candidates and citizens and CSOs representatives;
- Strengthening the capabilities of elected representatives in municipalities, enabling them to explain their role and actions, especially through the media;
- ICTs (digital tools such as applications and digital platforms) that compare political programmes in order to help voters to better understand political parties' policies;
- Working with digital companies on their rules/community guidelines on election-related content on their platforms and independent multi-stakeholder mechanisms to provide oversight and guidance on the matter.

3. Inclusive and participatory elections

Diversity is key to building inclusive democracies, and is inextricably linked to the removal of barriers to universal and equal political participation. While such barriers are manifold and often overlap, they can be broadly distinguished into regulations, norms and cultural biases originating at the level of the social or party system on the one hand, and of individual political parties on the other hand. These often include electoral systems and the electoral legal framework, party rules for structuring engagement and candidate selection, and stereotyping and cultural barriers. EPD members have vast expertise in removing barriers to universal and equal participation in political processes during and beyond election day as well as in improving public confidence in the credibility and legitimacy of those processes through targeted support to political parties and civil society, by:

Fostering democratic participation and voter mobilisation: EPD members' work on democratic participation is multi-faceted and relies on a variety of electoral stakeholders, including political parties, future leaders, CSOs and media. Guided by the key principle that "democracy needs democrats", this work includes the forging of democratic and civic orientated political leaders (targeting youth and women in particular) as well as encouraging political parties to expand their mobilization efforts through locally led, issue-based campaigns. Moreover, EPD has a longstanding experience in raising awareness about elections and encouraging voters to cast their votes, including through funding support to CSOs to run innovative awareness-raising actions and to media for content production.

Strengthening the ability of underrepresented groups to 'claim' a seat at the policy-making table: EPD members have a strong track record in promoting a more supportive environment for underrepresented groups to participate in political life through support actions that undermine dynamics of exclusion perpetrated by the informal practices of political parties and public stereotypes. These actions include strengthening the capacity of CSOs and change-makers within political parties to lead awareness-raising and monitoring strategies highlighting underrepresented groups' exclusion and potential contribution to politics. In addition, outreach initiatives and capacity development programs help to cultivate the skills, knowledge, and connections of underrepresented groups that are needed to pursue a political career.



Enhancing elite and party demand for underrepresented groups' candidates: Addressing and debunking the myths about underrepresented groups not being qualified as well as highlighting the gains to the party and the country of their greater political participation is key in addressing the elite demand gap. EPD members' strategies in this area include the promotion of soft targets within political parties, the establishment of underrepresented groups' sections or wings to promote capacity building among potential underrepresented candidates and, more importantly, elites at the party level. Moreover, raising the gender and diversity consciousness of elites – who are usually male – is vital for changing attitudes towards underrepresented groups as potential political candidates and leaders.

Revising biases and regulations that might perpetuate inequalities: EPD members focusing on support to multi-party systems often focus on supporting the revision of the national legal and electoral framework through multi-party dialogue or the creation of women caucuses and networking opportunities. At the same time, through non-partisan but direct work with political parties, members focus on promoting regulations at the party level for greater inclusion, including through assistance to review nomination rules and procedures in a way that ensures inclusivity.

Supporting domestic non-partisan observer groups and leveraging methodological innovations: EPD members' work on election observation focuses on building the capacity of observers and on supporting the improvement of observation methodologies through targeted support to domestic observation groups, international and regional observer groups, as well as party agents. Through members' multi-actor and multi-level engagement in the sphere of election observation, EPD is in a unique position to test and promote methodological innovations, as well as to build and nurture synergies for improving the uptake of EOM recommendations.

Strengthening the evidence base around electoral inclusivity: EPD members focusing on electoral inclusivity will provide targeted assessments of the inclusivity of specific electoral processes through specifically designed thematic observation missions, i.e. around the inclusivity of an electoral process looking beyond the legislative framework, anchoring the topic in the electoral environment with respect to social and traditional media, the electoral campaign as well as political party processes.

Strengthening the dialogue between policy-makers and civil society, namely at the local level, in order to create a positive environment for civil participation and trust toward political institutions before and after the momentum generated by an electoral event.

EPD members have wide expertise in providing targeted support to promote participatory and inclusive elections, with interventions including:

- Providing assistance to political parties in reviewing their party nomination rules as well as to political parties and EMBs in revising registration procedures to steer these processes towards inclusivity;
- Conducting gender audits and devising long-term assistance to political parties to promote meaningful participation of underrepresented groups in party structures and processes;
- Capitalising on gender audits to foster advocacy towards political parties on gender and disability inclusion in party documentation, regulations and manifestos;
- Leading outreach initiatives and capacity development programs to cultivate the skills, knowledge,



and connections of underrepresented groups needed to pursue a political career and to stand for election;

- Support for content production on issues related to underrepresented groups, including gender-related issues, as well as media training to candidates from underrepresented groups;
- Providing capacity building to domestic observer groups, including researching, testing and pioneering methodologies in dynamic areas of assessment such as online campaign, ICTs, campaign finance;
- Supporting domestic observers in building catalogues and databases of EOM recommendations to be also used as a basis of analysis for journalists, stakeholders, and the broader public;
- Facilitating regional exchanges of experiences with the aim of promoting unified methodological observation standards;
- Observing electoral processes focusing on the inclusivity of the process providing an in-depth analysis;
- Empowering CSO actors to mobilise the community, channel the voice of citizens and advocate for their needs and rights by becoming catalysts for participatory democracy;
- Providing training on the different phases of civil participation in the decision-making process (information, consultation, dialogue, partnership) and how they can be best addressed;
- Raising awareness on the key principles of good governance (fair elections, compliance with the rule of law, sound financial management, respect of human rights, etc.) and technical assistance to policy-makers to live up to them.

4. Enhancing compliance with global norms and legal frameworks

The legal framework is expected to provide a sound basis for the conduct of elections in accordance with international standards for democratic electoral processes and international obligations subscribed by the partner countries, and guarantees for the exercise of fundamental freedoms and political rights – including the right to participation, freedom of expression, assembly and association, non-discrimination, etc. The EPD network has vast expertise in promoting the review and improvement of electoral legal frameworks in line with international standards by providing targeted support to parliaments and key parliamentary committees, as well as to political parties and civil society through the following interventions:

Evidence-based research on the electoral and constitutional legal framework: EPD members' electoral expertise is informed by extensive comparative research on electoral system design and legal frameworks, as well as on international obligations and principles for democratic elections.

Holistic legal expertise: whether focused on media-related election legislation, on principles of freedom of expression and access to information, on inclusiveness and equitable political participation, or on campaign finance regulation, EPD members' support the review and scrutiny of primary legislation to provide a sound basis for the conduct of elections, as well as post-legislative scrutiny on specific regulations.

Promoting inclusive electoral reform: it is key for the legal framework to enjoy broad confidence among electoral stakeholders. EPD works with all electoral stakeholders in the promotion of electoral reforms through multi-party and multi-stakeholder dialogue on specific issues of reform, through capacity building support to CSOs and parliamentary committees to advocate for specific reforms, and through equipping the media with skills to provide accurate reporting of electoral reform processes.



The EPD network has a proven track record in implementing global norms promotion support actions, such as:

- Conducting comparative research on electoral system design under specific circumstances (representation of different religious groups, national minorities or underrepresented groups);
- Providing legal review and scrutiny of electoral and constitutional legislation as well as regulations of election management bodies;
- Facilitating exchange between EMBs and members of congress commissions on electoral and political party reform;
- Training political parties and candidates on building up representative structures to monitor large parts of the election cycle;
- Facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues and cross-party cooperation on inclusive electoral reform; Supporting parliamentary committees and CSOs to debate and advocate for legislative changes;
- Supporting media in playing a key role by covering legislative changes and the work of the parliamentary committees in order to provide accurate information to citizens;
- Engaging with media regulatory bodies and supporting them in ensuring that international freedom of expression standards are respected in the context of elections;
- Analysing media-related election legislative proposals and driving advocacy for progressive standards on freedom of expression and elections at international and regional level, including support to special mandates on freedom of expression;
- Managing and supporting media monitoring actions led by CSOs or independent media regulators with developing technical tools and training methodology.

Table: AHEAD action Clusters

	ELECTION MANAGEMENT	TRANSPARENCY	INCLUSION	LEGAL FRAMEWORK
POST ELECTORAL PERIOD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electoral performance evaluation • EMB reform proposals • Professional and systems review & strengthening • Boundary review • Voter register update 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peaceful resolution of disputes • Campaign regulations review • Campaign finance audits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic observation assessment reports & leveraging of recommendations • Reviewing and promoting inclusivity regulations • Media monitoring result and procedures/performance review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electoral & constitutional legal review and reform • Campaign (assembly, participation, expression, and discrimination) • Effective remedy • Finance regulation • Right to stand • Universal suffrage • Transparency & access to information • Women's participation
PRE ELECTORAL PERIOD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing & consolidating standard operation procedures • Operational capacity and training • Voter registration • Candidate registration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electoral codes of conduct • Early warning mechanisms and mitigation measures • Internal party democracy & candidates nomination procedures • Campaign finance review and disclosure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methodological standards and innovations in the field of observation • Accreditation of observers & capacity building • Voter and civic education • Supply and demand for underrepresented groups • Update & promote codes of media ethics 	
ELECTORAL PERIOD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voter & civic education • Voting, counting & tabulation • Complaints & appeals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate nomination • Campaigning (online & offline) • Dispute resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media access • Media & social media monitoring 	



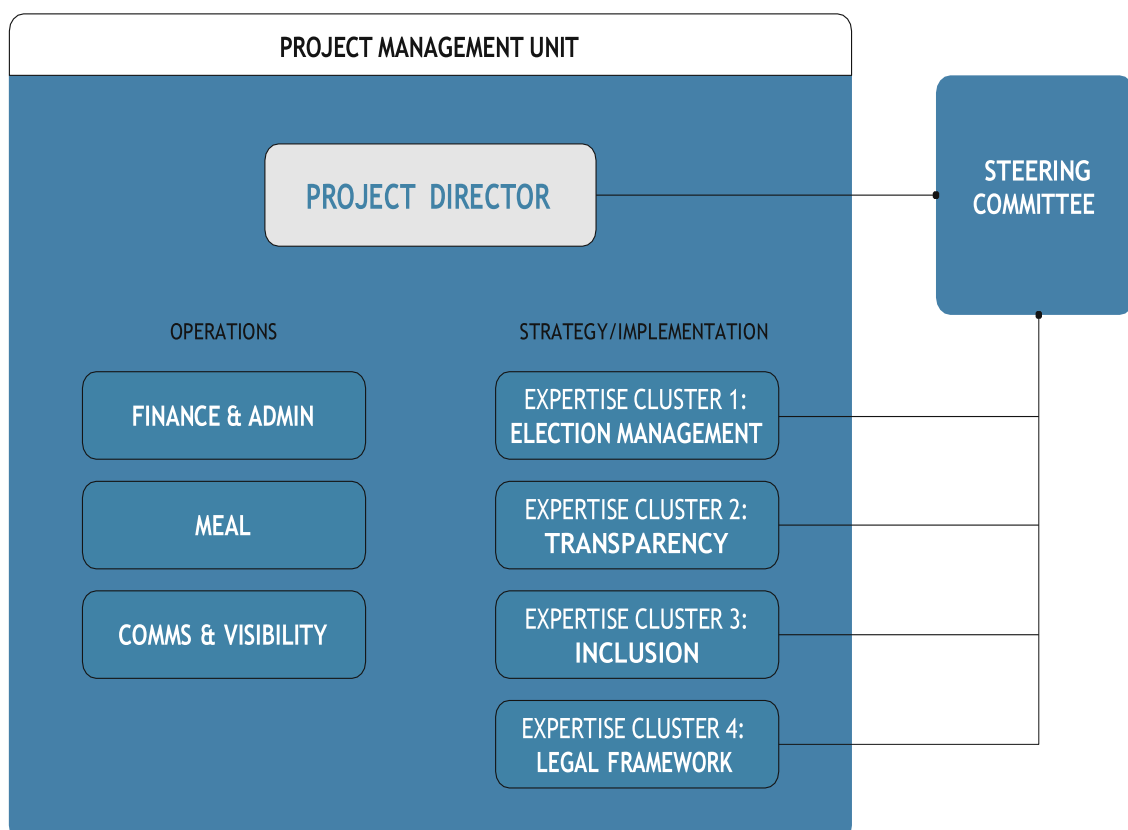
4. Structure and implementation modalities

Project structure

EPD consortium members involved in the project will serve as a guarantee that the support action clusters will be delivered through leading experts and specialists – not generalists. Taken together, the partners will be able to have a 360-degree outlook on the entire project cycle and make sure that the necessary links between action clusters are correctly planned and executed. Moreover, EPD consortium members will closely engage local actors in the delivery of targeted support, in order to transfer knowledge to local organizations and ensure sustainability beyond the AHEAD lifespan.

In order to guarantee fair consideration and respect of all components of a holistic democratic development, AHEAD projects will be coordinated by a project management team and implemented by all specialised EPD member organisations identified as key for AHEAD implementation in a given country.

Joint EPD projects are implemented through a project structure that has a central coordinating body and enables each EPD member to oversee a specific component of the project in line with their expertise. This





project structure is conceived based on lessons learned from the implementation of previous EPD joint democracy support projects and benefits from the expertise of EPD members working together over the past decade around the world.

The whole project is managed and coordinated by a dedicated EPD network management team, which is usually composed of a Project Director, a Finance & Admin team, Comms team and MEAL team. The Project Director chairs a programme Steering Committee and guarantees that all the clusters deliver on their mandates and address the needs of the beneficiaries in a coherent and inclusive manner.

Implementation modalities

AHEAD is envisioned as a grant contract between the EPD community (represented by the lead organisation) and the European Union, benefitting from the fact that the EPD community has extensive expertise implementing EU contracts following EU guidelines. It should be noted that the RFU assessment can be provided through a service contract with an EUD if requested.

AHEAD will work through a set of complementary implementation mechanisms that are oriented towards trust-building as well as mutual interaction & coordination between democratic stakeholders. These modalities include:

1. **Comprehensive & adaptive engagement strategy:** AHEAD develops and follows a comprehensive engagement strategy that ensures interaction with all electoral stakeholders, including those that are traditionally underrepresented. This also guarantees that an AHEAD programme follows a long-term approach when providing short-term/flexible support actions that are identified on a needs basis along the process.
2. **Integrated peer-to-peer support:** The EPD network possesses a varied yet complementary set of expertise (see section below) that allows for targeted peer-to-peer support to a wide range of democracy support actors that have a stake in the electoral process. AHEAD can offer a pool of experts coming from EPD member organisations that can be activated on a needs basis over the course of an AHEAD programme to deliver technical assistance, capacity building, coaching support and peer exchange. AHEAD channels such support to beneficiaries in an integrated logic.
3. **Focus on multi-stakeholder dialogue for policy and institutional change:** AHEAD offers the possibility of a continuous policy dialogue process that addresses policy challenges in the electoral field and on priorities identified in follow-up plans in a multi-stakeholder manner by bringing together different electoral stakeholders (to engage parties, while also bringing in civil society, parliament and EMBs at key moments) and aims to elicit concrete policy commitments and action. It also places high importance on institutional (behavioural) changes among the key stakeholders in the process. The EPD community has managed policy dialogue processes with the EU funding in over 15 countries worldwide using the INSPIRED method.¹²

¹² www.epd.eu/inspired



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4. **Sub-granting:** EPD members are able to provide financial support to third parties (FSTP) in order to achieve the objectives of a given AHEAD project. The EPD community has extensive experience managing FSTP under EU contracts and views it as integral to the ability of programmes to work with a large group of stakeholders. Usually, EPD members will work with local partners through partnerships, but in many instances FTSP can be more effective at creating flexibility and reaching a wider group of partners.
 5. **Research:** The RFU assessment forms the basis of the analysis of the AHEAD approach and this will be complemented by research papers that inform the learning of the project and benefit from the partnerships between the EPD community and the research/academic community.
 6. **Monitoring and evaluation:** For the last 5 years, the EPD community has brought together monitoring and evaluation experts from different democracy support organisations to improve mutual learning and coordination. This grouping will also be able to contribute to supporting the MEAL team of the project and ensure robust follow-up of the different operational modalities based on tried and tested indicators of success.



5. Added value: mobilising the EPD community of practice

AHEAD builds on the unique position of EPD within the democracy support community, bringing together under the same institutional roof organisations that have extensive experience working with all democratic actors with a stake in electoral processes, such as EMB, parliament, government, media, civil society and domestic election observers, political parties, local authorities, youth and women's groups.

EPD members work with these stakeholders at different levels, from individual activists (including those working to advance the rights of vulnerable communities including LGBTI and people with disabilities), journalists and CSO staff, to state officials and elected representatives, as well as from the grassroots level to national political leadership and international fora. In addition, EPD members work with regional and international organisations that monitor electoral processes and leverage the uptake of election observation recommendations at these different levels.

EPD's community of practice is in a unique position to support the EU and its Delegations in operationalising follow-up efforts, thereby capitalising on EOMs as entry points for full electoral cycle programming. EPD added value lies in the network's ability to:

- ◇ Implement cohesive initiatives through a Team Europe approach, as EPD members have long-standing relations with EU Member States, their agencies and embassies across the world and are ideally positioned to implement programming that relies on the principle of working better together;
- ◇ Leverage a comprehensive approach that seeks to improve the overall functioning of the electoral and democratic system by addressing each political actor in a single cohesive initiative;
- ◇ Establish and capitalise on trusted long-term relationships with local electoral stakeholders to identify opportunities and promote democratic change;
- ◇ Understand the incentives and bottlenecks for reform driving each democratic actor;
- ◇ Building alliances for change through pre-established links to peers;
- ◇ Develop genuine collaboration with local partners in those areas of the political process the EU is ill-placed to observe and in empowering local partners to guide electoral reform.



Annex: List of EPD Members

	<p>The European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) is an organisation based in France working to support local democracy and citizen participation at the local level, both in the EU and the European neighbourhood. It does so by bringing together more than 350 members, including local authorities and civil society throughout Europe.</p>
	<p>ARTICLE 19 is an organisation based in London that supports freedom of expression worldwide. It works to ensure that governments have transparency at the heart of their policies and processes, working with civil society, global and regional organisations and the legal system to protect the freedom of expression and the right to information from power-holders and institutions.</p>
	<p>The Catholic University of Portugal (UCP) is a University established in 1967. As a public, non-state and non-profit institution, UCP provides higher education following the principles of academic and scientific excellences, as well as an education based on Christian principles.</p>
	<p>L'Agence française de développement médias (CFI) is the French media development agency, whose mission is to strengthen the role of the media as drivers of sustainable development. As a public operator, CFI works under the authority of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEFA), but initiates projects with different implementation and financial partners, promoting the development of the media in the Global South - sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean and the Levant.</p>

	<p>The Club de Madrid is the world's largest forum for former Heads of State and Government, bringing together over 90 former Presidents and Prime Ministers from 60 countries. It works to support leaders on democratic leadership and governance, and on responding to crisis and post-crisis contexts.</p>
	<p>Political Parties of Finland for Democracy – Demo Finland is a co-operative organisation made up of political parties represented in the Finnish Parliament. It works with parties in developing and new democracies, seeking to make politics in partner countries more programmatic, inclusive and democratic.</p>
	<p>The Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) is an organisation made up of political parties in Denmark, which works to promote the functioning of political parties and democratic institutions around the world. It is a rights-based organisation working through partnerships, with the role of women and youth in decision-making being a key priority.</p>
	<p>Democracy Reporting International (DRI) is a non-profit organisation based in Germany dedicated to supporting democracy worldwide. It aims to strengthen the essential components of democracy, ranging from equal rights and fundamental freedoms for all, over democratic elections to an independent judiciary and free media.</p>
	<p>The EDGE Foundation is a public foundation based in Belgium that promotes democratic institutions and processes, especially through promoting a sustainable and transparent use of technology applications in electoral activities. It focuses on capacity development, research and development, with a specialisation in civic technology and how technology can improve democracy support.</p>



	<p>elbarlament is a peacebuilding and democracy support organisation based in Germany, with a special focus on empowering women and youth. The organisation integrates conflict sensitivity, cultural awareness and intersectionality approaches and works with a wide range of national and international actors.</p>
	<p>Election Watch is an independent, non-partisan civil society organisation, based in Austria, with extended international and citizen-based election observation and electoral assistance expertise. Focusing on European and Austrian elections, the organisation works to strengthen democracy in Europe and European fundamental values.</p>
<p>Europäischer Austausch European Exchange</p>	<p>European Exchange is an organisation based in Germany promoting democracy in Europe and the European neighbourhood, with a special focus on promoting civil society and scrutinizing state action. The organisation is especially focused on Eastern Europe and Ukraine, chairs the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) and has facilitated the building of links between civil society actors across borders.</p>
	<p>The Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) is an organisation focusing on human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Originating as a representative of Dutch society in the Helsinki Process, NHC currently implements projects in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe seeking to strengthen legal protection, improve public policy and to support human rights defenders.</p>
<p>Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy</p>	<p>The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) is an organisation founded by Dutch political parties working with parties of new and developing democracies in more than 20 countries. It seeks to strengthen multiparty democracy and pluralism by impartially assisting parties and seeking to forge inter-party collaboration.</p>

	<p>The Oslo Center is an independent non-profit organisation working in the field of democratization through assisting and supporting democratic institutions. TOC's key strategic thematic areas are Political Representation, Democratic Governance and Inclusion.</p>
	<p>People in Need (PIN) is an organisation in the Czech Republic working on both development projects and the provision of humanitarian assistance. In PIN is active in more than 50 countries around the world and, as part of its development cooperation work, it strengthens civil society and supports human rights around the world.</p>
	<p>The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the leading democracy support organisation in the United Kingdom, specialising in the strengthening of parliamentary democracy. It implements programmes and conducts research on parliamentary democracy and political parties, and recruits and trains British observers to participate in EU Election Observation Missions.</p>



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