Strengthening the right to participate: legitimacy and resilience of electoral processes in illiberal political systems and authoritarian regimes

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The European Parliament adopted by 522 votes to 27, with 53 abstentions, a recommendation to the Council and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the strengthening of the right to participate: legitimacy and resilience of electoral processes in illiberal political systems and authoritarian regimes.

Trends of deterioration in their democratic structures

Long-established liberal democracies all around the world are witnessing worrisome trends of deterioration in their democratic structures, leading to democratic backsliding and autocratisation, as exemplified by the rise in illiberalism, decreasing levels of participation in elections, growing disillusionment with mainstream political parties and leadership, and the growth of extremist parties.

The right to participate in genuine elections is obstructed in autocratic and illiberal regimes notably by the creation of legal and administrative barriers preventing the will of the people from being reflected, shrinking space for civil society, voter intimidation and the conducting of fake elections with the goal of entrenching the regimes' power. Such elections are not free, transparent, verifiable, pluralistic or fair, lack real political contestation and place undue restrictions on the right to vote, stand for election and be elected.

Against this background, Parliament addresses the following recommendations to the Council and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:

Awareness of the right to participate in genuine elections

Parliament recommended designing and implementing more decisive and effective EU actions to promote and protect the right to participate, which is a universal human right, as part of a **much broader strategy** on human rights and democracy support. It underlined the intrinsic interconnection between the right to participate in genuine elections and other fundamental freedoms, in particular the freedoms of movement, opinion and expression, assembly and association, as well as the right to be free from discrimination.

Parliament recommended attacking in a systematic and robust manner the attempts by non-EU countries to restrict the enjoyment of the right to participate of minorities, including ethnic and religious minorities, and of youth, women, indigenous groups and other social groups. It is also necessary to engage with non-EU countries to ensure an accessible and enabling environment for persons with disabilities, which allows them to participate in the political and public life of their communities.

EU tools and procedures

Members recommended countering the narrative promoted by autocratic and illiberal regimes and to formulate, in this regard, a **comprehensive EU global strategy** to counter the tools that these regimes use to legitimise elections.

This strategy should go beyond dialogue and statements of concern by the EU and be geared towards improving the standards of democracy and the rule of law in the countries concerned.

Members also made the following recommendations:

- strengthen the link between election observation work and the EU's wider support for human rights and democracy using political, commercial and cooperation tools;

- counter autocratic and illiberal regimes' efforts to create false internal perceptions of the genuineness of their fake elections; pay particular attention to autocratic and illiberal regimes' abuses of information and communication technology and artificial intelligence in relation to election manipulation;

- monitor and denounce the role of private companies that specialise in disinformation campaigns and offer to covertly meddle in elections and manipulate public opinion in non-EU countries;

- recognise the crucial role of civil society in denouncing fake elections and delegitimising them in the eyes of local populations;

- support, throughout the electoral cycle, local election observers;

- mainstream information about genuine elections and people's right to participate in them, including about the right of all minorities to vote, in the context of support for human rights and democratisation in the projects under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance;

- make use of the EU's cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations toolbox to strengthen the right to participate;

- address the right to participate and all other aspects related to electoral integrity in non-EU countries through EU human rights dialogues;

- use the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (the EU Magnitsky Act) for persons responsible for serious breaches of the right to participate and of democratic election standards.

EU actions in international forums

Parliament recommended promoting **close cooperation and coordination** between democratic countries, multilateral institutions, such as the OSCE ODIHR and the Council of Europe, and the organisations that endorsed the UN Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation as a means to counter the legitimisation of fake elections.

The EU is called on to advance the idea of developing **guidelines** on the right to participate in elections in the UN Human Rights Council, with the greater involvement of local civil society organisations; assess the feasibility of further developing and systematising General Comment No 25 to Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to evidence the link between the right to participate and human rights and democracy in order to deal with new challenges, including online disinformation and the rise of authoritarianism.