Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 2636 (2026)[1]

Elections in times of crisis

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that free and fair elections, based on universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage, are the cornerstone of democratic governance and a fundamental requirement under the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5).

2. Crises and the State responses they require can have profound implications for rights and freedoms, as well as for the functioning of democratic institutions. The Covid-19 pandemic, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and, most severely, the full-scale war of aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine have all placed extraordinary pressure on Council of Europe member States, requiring exceptional measures to uphold democratic processes.

3. The Assembly notes that elections today are rarely held in conditions of normalcy. Polarisation, widespread disinformation, foreign interference, cyberattacks, climate-related disruptions and the spillover of conflicts have created a persistent context of risk and vulnerability for electoral processes across Council of Europe member States and globally. These pressures compound wider trends of democratic backsliding, including restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, which are essential for open campaigning and meaningful political competition. Crises should therefore not be seen only as exceptional disruptions but as a structural challenge of our times that requires adaptation and resilience at all phases of the electoral cycle.

4. When elections are scheduled or are held during such crises, the risks to democratic integrity are magnified. Both postponing elections and proceeding under constrained conditions may carry risks for democratic legitimacy. Gaps in the constitutional and legal frameworks governing elections may emerge, and the ability of institutions to respond effectively to extraordinary circumstances may be severely strained.

5. Further, limitations on campaigning, voter turnout, equality of participation and election observation pose challenges to electoral integrity and, ultimately, to the legitimacy of results, which can constitute a major risk for democracies. These conditions underscore the need to further develop frameworks and practices capable of delivering safe, technically sound and credible elections, while safeguarding fundamental rights and ensuring public confidence in electoral processes.

6. The urgent need to update national security concepts and to upgrade electoral security has been highlighted by the Russian Federation's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine and by its hybrid threats across Council of Europe member States.

7. The Assembly recalls the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, endorsed by the heads of State and government of the Council of Europe's member States in May 2023, which express the shared determination to "hold elections... in accordance with international standards and take all appropriate measures against any interference in electoral systems and processes". The Assembly stresses that ensuring credible elections in times of crisis is a central element of this commitment.

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1. *Assembly debate* on 27 January 2026 (4th sitting) (see Doc. 16297, report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, rapporteur: Mr Damien Cottier). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 27 January 2026 (4th sitting).
See also Recommendation 2301 (2026).

8. Building on the 2023 Bern Parliamentary Conference entitled “Elections in times of crisis: challenges and opportunities” and echoing the Council of Europe’s work towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe, the Assembly underlines that safeguarding electoral integrity must be at the heart of efforts to protect and revitalise democracy in Europe.

9. The Council of Europe has long provided a framework for safeguarding the right to free elections. Through the work of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, the activities of the Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and the Council for Democratic Elections, member States have access to a unique and comprehensive body of principles, guidance and monitoring mechanisms relating to the conduct of democratic elections. These instruments, ranging from standard setting to monitoring and technical co-operation across all phases of the electoral process, together form the Council of Europe Electoral Cycle. These instruments protect and promote Europe’s electoral heritage and offer a shared framework for upholding electoral integrity that is as relevant for times of crisis as it is for times of normalcy.

10. As part of its continuing commitment to free and fair elections, the Assembly has observed elections for over forty years. It has integrated electoral co-operation activities with electoral management bodies to support the implementation of recommendations stemming from election observation missions, the Venice Commission and Council of Europe monitoring bodies. The creation in 2025 of the Parliamentary Alliance for Free and Fair Elections constitutes a further step in strengthening the Assembly’s role in meeting the challenges of contemporary election trends.

11. Echoing the call by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for a New Democratic Pact to protect and strengthen democracy in Europe, the Assembly calls for determined efforts to ensure that the lessons learned from electoral processes during recent crises are translated into timely and effective reforms.

12. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly stresses that safeguarding electoral integrity in times of crisis requires a comprehensive approach. This encompasses clear legal and procedural measures to regulate emergencies, operational adaptation and strengthened co-operation among State institutions, enhanced societal resilience to crisis situations and threats of foreign interference, robust and adaptable election observation methodologies, innovation and preparedness for digital and technical challenges, and specific strategies for elections held in prolonged emergencies or post-conflict settings.

13. To ensure legal and institutional preparedness, the Assembly encourages Council of Europe member States to:

13.1. undertake regular and timely assessments of electoral laws, rules and procedures to enhance resilience, agility and adaptability for times of crisis;

13.2. ensure that constitutional and electoral legislation provides clear provisions for the holding of elections during emergencies, including clear and limited criteria for postponement, in line with the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and temporariness;

13.3. provide that decisions to postpone or substantially alter elections require parliamentary approval, preferably with a qualified majority and following a consultation of all relevant stakeholders, in particular political parties, with broad support across the political spectrum. Such decisions should be limited in time and subject to judicial oversight from an independent and impartial court;

13.4. ensure that any emergency-related changes to electoral legislation are consultative and transparent and that they involve all affected stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, media and the wider public;

13.5. avoid late amendments to electoral law and ensure that changes made to adapt to emergency situations are limited in scope, broadly consensual and clearly communicated to the public;

13.6. consider creating a national election co-operation network that brings together the election authorities and relevant administrative and operational services or agencies in areas including security, civil contingencies, cyberdefence and communication.

14. To strengthen operational preparedness and institutional capacity, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:

14.1. undertake comprehensive risk assessments to evaluate the robustness of electoral processes against potential crises and develop contingency plans to address identified vulnerabilities;

14.2. strengthen the independence, capacity and resources of electoral management bodies;

14.3. institutionalise crisis-management processes for electoral management bodies and relevant State bodies, including co-ordinated scenario planning and simulations to safeguard electoral continuity during emergencies;

14.4. adapt voting arrangements to ensure equality of participation in emergency situations;

14.5. guarantee transparency and public trust by developing clear crisis communication strategies by electoral management bodies and other partners.

15. In view of the need for strengthened resilience to counter foreign interference risks that aim to undermine electoral integrity and processes, the Assembly urges Council of Europe member States to:

15.1. develop comprehensive strategies for countering disinformation and malign foreign interference, including via the adoption of whole-of-society approaches to electoral resilience that involve political parties, security agencies, academia, civil society and the media;

15.2. enhance the protection of electoral infrastructure against foreign cyber operations and technical manipulation, including through independent audits, regular stress tests and transparency measures;

15.3. strengthen the capacity to track, analyse and anticipate cyberattacks and develop early-warning capabilities;

15.4. enhance voter education strategies on information integrity – including by promoting fact-checking – and media and information literacy.

16. Affirming that election observation is an integral part of electoral transparency, the Assembly:

16.1. calls on Council of Europe member States to ensure that international observers are able to access elections, even during emergencies, including by extending standing invitations;

16.2. supports the development of a common framework for international election observation that upholds the quality and integrity of observation in times of crisis and that enables rapid methodological adaptation, including remote and hybrid observation;

16.3. calls for the use of adapted and innovative observation methods, such as remote stakeholder meetings and long-term monitoring, without diminishing the overall integrity of observation.

17. Recognising that some crises are not temporary disruptions but prolonged states of emergency with profound implications for democratic governance, the Assembly:

17.1. recalls its Resolution 2605 (2025) “Legal and human rights aspects of the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine” and reaffirms that, in accordance with international democratic standards, elections cannot be held under martial law;

17.2. recalls that the Russian Federation has repeatedly compelled Ukrainian civilians in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine to participate in so-called electoral processes, including the local elections in 2023, and the presidential “election” in 2024. Such practices violate fundamental principles of international law, including the Charter of the United Nations, and further undermine any claim to the legitimacy of these elections;

17.3. calls for continued support to member States affected by conflict or prolonged emergencies, with particular attention to Ukraine, to enable secure, inclusive and credible elections to be conducted in line with European and international standards as soon as conditions permit.

18. As regards its own work, the Assembly should:

18.1. further strengthen the coherence, impact and visibility of its work in the electoral field, relying on its deliberative work, election observation, co-operation and the Parliamentary Alliance for Free and Fair Elections;

18.2. reinforce the Council of Europe Electoral Cycle as a comprehensive tool covering all phases of the electoral process, and promote this tool actively in its activities;

18.3. intensify co-operation with international partners on protecting electoral resilience and integrity in times of crisis, as well as ensuring that election observation methodologies evolve with contemporary electoral practice and current threats, paying particular attention to digitalisation and cybersecurity;

18.4. consider observing national elections and referendums in member States not subject to any form of monitoring to further promote free, fair and transparent electoral processes throughout Europe and ensure the exchange of best practices;

18.5. assess its own election observation methods and procedures, particularly in the light of risks and developments linked to the digitalisation of electoral campaigns and election management;

18.6. actively promote and participate in regular exchanges of views and experience between central electoral commissions of member States and partners, with a particular focus on threats to electoral processes and measures to safeguard their integrity and resilience;

18.7. contribute actively to the ongoing development of the New Democratic Pact for Europe, ensuring that the protection and resilience of electoral processes are central to broader efforts to reinforce Europe’s democratic foundations.