

“The Observers Observed”

The Polish Forum of Young Diplomats Commentary

Sławomir Szyszka's commentary on the Foreign Affairs article „The Limits of Election Monitoring – What Independent Observation Can (and Can't) Do”.

On 28th June an article by Susan D. Hyde and Judith G. Kelley on the election monitoring was published at the Foreign Affairs magazine's website. In relation to the forthcoming elections in Tunisia and Egypt, the authors outlined chances and risks connected to election monitoring. They also enumerated basic problems and dilemmas that the international observers have to deal with. These features alone should encourage those who are interested in international relations to read this article. It should be particularly interesting to journalists who give accounts of elections and the work of international observers. It facilitates understanding of both instruments and limitations of independent observation.

Unfortunately, these are about all the qualities of the text. Those who are informed about international relations would not get to know anything new. They would not get any information except for what is commonly known at least since the late 90's. What is more, the authors seem to repeat points made by Thomas Carothers in his famous article “The Observers Observed” published in “Journal of Democracy” in July 1997.

Yet, electoral monitoring, just as every other aspect of our lives, is constantly changing. The observers try to learn from their experience and the mistakes they have made. On the other hand, methods used to manipulate elections are getting more sophisticated. There is a kind of game between those who are observed and those who observe.

The image created in the discussed text is static, but in reality the situation is tangibly progressing. For example, in 2006 the European Commission and the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) initiated new approach to the issues concerning elections and their observation. It is so called “electoral cycle approach”, in which the observers focus on the whole electoral cycle (in some cases even a few

cycles) of a particular country. Such an approach allows to use gathered information effectively and to build more efficient institutions.

The OSCE ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) is also changing. Not only has it moved its headquarters, but it has also been working intensively on new guidebooks for the observers and on addressing relatively new issues such as electronic voting or election campaigns funding.

Another problem presented in the text, excessive concentration of the observers on the election day, is still unresolved, and probably will never be, but a number of institutions have taken certain steps to touch on this issue. It will be clear if we look at the lists of members of monitors planned by the European Commission. Elections in Tunisia are to be attended by 54 long-term observers and 64 short-time observers. For elections in Zambia, enrolment to which was closed on Thursday (14th July), the figures are respectively 24 and 56 people. This example shows that the long-term monitoring of the whole election process is getting increasingly important.

Furthermore, some organizations have recently been sending some specialized missions which monitor only certain aspects of the elections like compiling the lists of voters. Such a situation took place in Bolivia where biometric list of voters was compiled (the Carter Center – 2009) or in Sudan (the European Commission – 2010, the Carter Center – 2009, 2010).

The regulations concerning MEPs participation in the monitors passed by the European Parliament could serve as a kind of commentary to this process. According to these regulations, the European Parliament should observe only these elections which are under the long-term observation of the European Commission or the OSCE. These regulations may be a chance to suppress so called “election tourism”. Two-man monitor of the European Parliament to the Solomon Islands’ parliamentary elections in 2001 may be treated as most visible example of such a practice. The new regulations and said innovations strongly condemn deployment of such monitors, but also implicate that the monitors are getting more and more professional.

The information about “pseudo” monitors sent by Russia is another issue that calls for commentary. Although it may cause a lot of commotion, it seems that the real problem is the unsaid conflict within the OSCE. Its Parliamentary Assembly includes

members from such countries as Belarus or Turkmenistan. The Assembly itself has been a scene for various attempts to overpower the ODIHR.

The conflict has reached a kind of climax during the presidential elections in Ukraine in 2010. The day before the election day Joao Soares, the OSCE parliamentary President proposed involving the observers from the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States into provisional report and post-election OSCE conference. Despite rejection of such a proposal, or because of it, Soares participated in a “rival” conference conducted by the IPA CIS, where he said that stance of the PA OSCE Mission and the IPA CIS Mission is common.

The last and the most important question I would like to relate to is Egypt and its democracy. Information that forthcoming elections in Egypt will be “first democratic elections in this country’s history” is untrue. One could expect such a statement from one of popular newspapers, but not from a respectable magazine.

It is true that democracy in Egypt did not last for a long time. From the first parliamentary elections in 1924, it survived somewhat more than ten years. These years though, are of great significance. However imperfect this democracy was, even taking into account standards of that time, many Egyptians remember it. It is worth for us to remember it too.

To conclude, despite oversimplifications that I enumerated me strongly encourage you to read this article. In a condensed form of two pages it discusses the basic problems that are faced by international observers. Being aware of these problems will enable us to look differently at the reports on the results of monitors, which will be brought to us soon from Russia, Tunisia, Egypt and Poland.

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The article from Foreign Affairs which is being commented on in this publication can be found HERE (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67968/susan-d-hyde-and-judith-g-kelley/the-limits-of-election-monitoring>)

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The Polish Forum of Young Diplomats is an organization of students and graduates of a number of universities from all over the World and particularly Poland. We have defined our careers and common ambitions to be part of the Foreign Service of the Republic of Poland and a stakeholder on international relations stage. The vast majority of over 100 NGO members are already experienced civic campaigners and working for home and international non-governmental organizations as well as state and international institutions. PFYD was created in 2002.

Mission of the association: *Creating and educating future Leaders who, by their activities, will ensure the strong and stable position of Poland in the arena of international politics.*

The Polish Forum of Young Diplomats has a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the “Group Abroad” gathering over 30 of the most active Polish NGOs working abroad.

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