

SHIFTING PARADIGMS: ELECTION INTERFERENCE AND DEMOCRATIC INTEGRITY IN THE OSCE REGION

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Finland took over the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Chairpersonship on 1 January 2025. Chairperson-in-Office, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Elina Valtonen, in her press release on the occasion of assuming the Chairpersonship, stated that as the Helsinki Final Act marks its 50th anniversary, the OSCE faces an unprecedented need to defend collectively agreed security order. When Russia challenges the foundations of our shared security, the rest of us must stand up for them and stand tall. She also stressed that human rights, democracy, and the rule of law form the foundations of a stable society and that Finland will consistently stress the principles outlined in [the] founding document of the OSCE [and] prioritizes ways to enhance the resilience of OSCE participating States.[1] As per Finlands Programme for OSCE Chairpersonship 2025, the new Chairpersonships main theme will be resilience, and its program will be based on three following guiding principles:

1. Respect the OSCE principles and commitments,
2. Respond to todays challenges, and
3. Prepare the OSCE for the future.[2]

Strengthening democracy and ensuring the rule of law without double standards are among the fundamental principles of OSCE. As stated in the new Chair statement, Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law form the foundations of a stable society. It is a fact that in an environment where the security dimension of OSCE is on the verge of collapse, OSCE has focused on human rights practices, democratization, and the establishment of the rule of law in the recent past. This orientation has developed largely under the leadership and monopoly of the Western Bloc countries, which have a significant majority among the OSCE participating countries. Especially the members of the European Union countries and the EU played a major role in this endeavor. Institutions, such as the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), have been established. It should be noted that some important principles of the Helsinki Final Act, such as the

following principles of sovereign equality and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty and also non-intervention in internal affairs, have been ignored in certain instances in studies conducted on this subject:

> The participating States will respect each other's sovereign equality and individuality as well as all the rights inherent in and encompassed by its sovereignty, including in particular the right of every State to juridical equality, territorial integrity and freedom and political independence. They will also respect each other's right freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic and cultural systems as well as its right.[3]
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> The participating States will refrain from any intervention, direct or indirect, individual or collective, in the internal or external affairs falling within the domestic jurisdiction of another participating State, regardless of their mutual relations.[4]

Recent Developments

It should be noted that the past six months have witnessed various upheavals in he OSCE area, particularly in the Southern Caucasus and Balkans, stemming from democratic elections. In this context, it is useful to touch upon the elections held in Georgia and Romania, where the controversial results that emerged, and especially the confusion that arose due to allegations of foreign interference in the elections. It should be underlined that the allegations of such external intervention are directed particularly at leading OSCE countries such as the US, Russia, France and the UK, as well as the European Union itself.

In Georgia, as we have already examined in our analysis titled Georgia's Crossroads: Stability And Sovereignty, in the lead-up to the October 2024 parliamentary elections, the country experienced heightened political tensions and polarization. The ruling party framed the elections as a choice between peace and war, while the opposition presented them as a decision between Western democracy and Russian authoritarianism. The pre-election period was marked by concerns over democratic backsliding, including the controversial "foreign agents" law, which sparked widespread protests. In the aftermath of the elections, Georgia has been plunged into a deepening political crisis. The four major opposition coalitions rejected the election results, refusing to recognize the new parliament's legitimacy. European Union deepened the crisis by freezing the EU process and has raised questions about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.[5]

As we have previously explained in our analysis The Cycle of Destabilization and Restabilization: Its Impact on Balkan Democracies, unprecedented political turmoil has also emerged ahead of the Romanian presidential elections in December 2024, with the entire electoral process being cancelled after recriminations and intense foreign interference.[6] In both countries, there were allegations of foreign interference in the elections, with the US and leading EU countries on one side and Russia on the other. However, at this point, it would be an impartial comment to state that allegations against certain Western countries have not been taken as seriously as those against Russia.

Thierry Breton's Controversial Statements and Their Implications for Democratic Processes in the OSCE And Eurasia Region

Thierry Breton, a former European Commission member, openly declared that certain OSCE countries, specifically the EU, have interfered in Romanian elections and, if necessary, plan to do so in future German elections.[7] Thierry Breton's statement regarding election interference in Romania and potential interference in Germany has sparked significant controversy and raised concerns about the erosion of democratic norms in the OSCE and Eurasia region. As a former European Commissioner, Breton's words carry weight and affect the perception of democratic processes across Eurasia.

In a televised interview, Breton made a startling claim about the EU's involvement in Romanian elections. He stated, "We did it in Romania, and we will do it if necessary in Germany." This statement suggests a willingness to interfere in national electoral processes, which starkly contrasts the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention in internal affairs that the EU and OSCE purport to uphold.[8]

Breton's comments about Romania were particularly troubling. He referred to canceling the first round of presidential elections in Romania in December, implying that this resulted from EU intervention. Such an admission, if accurate, represents a significant breach of democratic norms and national sovereignty.[9]

Breton's statement regarding Germany was equally concerning. He suggested similar actions might be taken in Germany, saying, "Let's wait and see what happens. Let's keep calm and apply the laws in Europe when they risk being circumvented and when, if not applied, they can lead to interference (in elections)." This statement implies a readiness to interfere in the electoral processes of even major EU member states.[10]

These statements are problematic on multiple levels. Firstly, they undermine the EU's credibility as a champion of democracy. By openly discussing interference in national elections, Breton contradicts the EU's stated commitment to respecting the democratic choices of member states.

Secondly, Breton's words potentially harm the integrity of the USA's, EUs, and Frances election observation status in the OSCE. The OSCE has long been regarded as a neutral arbiter in assessing the fairness of elections across its member states. However, if EU officials are seen as willing to interfere in these processes, it could cast doubt on the impartiality of OSCE observations, particularly in Eastern European countries.

Furthermore, Breton's statements risk exacerbating the divide between Western and Eastern OSCE members. By suggesting that Western institutions can and will intervene in Eurasian elections, these comments reinforce perceptions of a "civilizational divide" and could fuel resentment among OSCE states.

The implications of Breton's statements extend beyond Romania and Germany. They raise questions about the US, EU, and Frances approach to democracy promotion and respect

for national sovereignty across the OSCE region. If such interference is deemed acceptable for Romania and potentially Germany, it sets a dangerous precedent for other OSCE members and Eurasian states.

Hungary's Reaction and the Impact on Democracy in the OSCE Region

Hungary's reaction to Thierry Breton's statements and the broader issue of election interference has been swift and critical. Hungarian officials have long expressed concerns about external meddling in their domestic affairs, mainly from Western OSCE states.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, known for his skepticism towards EU interference, has consistently voiced opposition to external influence in Hungary's democratic processes. During an international press conference, Orbán declared, "We know our role and duties concerning the presidency, but it doesn't mean that Hungary is not going to speak out for its position."[11]

László Toroczkai, leader of the far-right Our Homeland Movement in Hungary, took to social media to voice his concerns. He directly addressed Breton, stating, "Dear Mr. @ThierryBreton, Meta is openly interfering with Hungary's democratic processes and elections. It even bans the description of the Hungarian government's measures. Why don't you act against this?" Toroczkai further elaborated on his concerns, pointing out perceived double standards in the EU's approach to election interference. He highlighted that 10 million USD were allegedly channeled illegally to the Hungarian left for their 2022 election campaign. When the US embassy in Budapest started distributing funding to left-wing media, "elites in Brussels stayed silent." However, the European Commission sued Hungary when Hungary adopted a sovereignty protection law to prevent such interference. [12]

The history of alleged interference in Hungarian elections adds context to these reactions. During previous elections, Orbán's government has accused the EU and other Western actors of attempting to influence the outcome. These claims have resonated with a significant portion of the Hungarian electorate.[13]

Third, the apparent willingness of Western institutions to interfere in elections, as suggested by Breton's comments, could lead to a broader crisis of legitimacy for international election monitoring efforts.

The reactions from Hungary and the potential consequences of Western actions highlight the delicate balance between promoting democratic values and respecting national sovereignty. As the situation evolves, it will be crucial for all actors to navigate these challenges carefully to avoid further erosion of democratic norms in the OSCE and Eurasia region.

Implications and Future Outlook

The Thierry Breton affair represents a significant turning point in the ongoing discourse surrounding election interference within the OSCE region. This incident will likely be just the beginning of a broader examination of democratic processes and international influence in the area. As we look ahead, several key developments warrant close attention.

As AVİM, we would like to state that Türkiye, with its accumulated experience in OSCE work and its proven ability to take an impartial stance on conflicting issues, is one of the countries that can make a positive contribution to stopping this negative trend; both in terms of security and in terms of conducting democratic elections resistant to external interventions.

*Picture: *OSCE*, *Pinterest* and *Kingdom of Belgium Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation*

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