

**Pre Conditions for Democratic Elections:
the Role of the Media in Election Campaigns**

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On 17th and 18th February the Council of Europe – Venice Commission organised in Bucharest a seminar on the pre conditions necessary for guaranteeing democratic, free and genuinely representative elections. The meeting, which took place in the frame of Romanian Presidency of the Council of Minister of the Council of Europe, intended to be a forum of discussion and exchange regarding some key aspects related to electoral processes. In this regard the main assumption is that an election is not only what happens on the election day. Rather, elections are a process whose validity is ensured only through the compliance with some basic conditions: the respect for fundamental rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, equity in the access to the mass media, transparency in campaign financing, impartiality and independence of the election administration, an effective and prompt system for appeal and complaints.

The seminar touched upon a number of areas related to such conditions; in particular, two interventions focussed on the role of the media within the electoral process according to a double perspective.

In this regard, it is important to recall that the Council of Europe has developed an impressive production with regards to media access during election campaigns, both in terms of definition of principles and in terms of jurisprudence. Recommendation No. R (99) 15 represents one of the most complete reference documents in this field:

“The Committee of Ministers, (...) noting the important role of the media in modern societies, especially at the time of elections; stressing that the fundamental principle of editorial independence of the media assumes a special importance in election periods; aware of the need to take account of the significant differences which exist between the print and the broadcast media; underlining that the coverage of elections by the broadcast media should be fair, balanced and impartial; considering that public service broadcasters have a particular responsibility in ensuring in their programmes a fair and thorough coverage of elections which may include the granting of free airtime to political parties and candidates; Recommends that the governments of the member States examine ways of ensuring respect for the principles of fairness, balance and impartiality in the coverage of election campaigns by the media, and consider the adoption of

measures to implement these principles in their domestic law or practice where appropriate and in accordance with constitutional law.”¹

The first paper “Media access as a pre condition for democratic elections” was presented by Professor Herdis Thorgeirsdottir; she adopted a legal approach to illustrate international principles for equal and fair access to the media during the election campaign. International law protecting freedom of speech and right to political participation represents an important tool in the promotion of pluralist and independent media. Professor Thorgeirsdottir pointed out a number of grey areas actually or potentially affecting such an independence while underlining the growing complexity of the threats posed to the media system, particularly those deriving from the political sphere and those emanating from the market and the increasing concentration of media ownership. The presentation also emphasised the importance of investigative journalism in promoting civic awareness and public participation and the need to protect journalists from physical assaults and intimidations.

The second intervention “Methods for media analysis during election observation” addressed methodological problems and issues with regards media observation. More in particular, it aimed at providing an overview of the different techniques used to analyse the media during the election process. The Osservatorio di Pavia has been gaining relevant experience in media analysis at national and international level; in this regard, researchers of the institute have elaborated a reliable and standardised frame to analyse and assess media performances during election campaigns. The paper presented during the seminar intended to illustrate such methods and discuss some crucial issues related to the challenges posed by new technologies and developments in the media global landscape.

The first part of the discussion was dedicated to the methodological tools applied for media analysis during election observation. As a norm, media analysis resort to a multi methodological approach to investigate different aspects of media performances In this regard, the methodologies used can be classified according to three main areas:

¹ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation No. R (99) 15 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States, on Measures Concerning Media Coverage of Election Campaigns (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 9 September 1999 at the 678th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies).

Table 1: methodological outline for media analysis

Area of analysis	Method	Explanation
Legal framework regulating media	Document Analysis	Study of the relevant laws regulating the media system and rules concerning media coverage of the election campaign
Media landscape	Field Research	Study of the media landscape in terms of ownership, freedom of the press, journalistic values through open-ended questionnaires and interviews to media stakeholders
Media monitoring	Content Analysis	Study of the actual media coverage of election contestants through a standardised recording form applied to the content of the media (articles and programmes).

The main assumption underlying this multi method approach is that the election process does not take place in a vacuum; rather, media behavior during the election campaign is the outcome of a series of factors, first and foremost the normative frame regulating the media sector and the conditions under which journalists operate. In this perspective, monitoring media coverage alone is not sufficient to offer an exhaustive explanation and interpretation of the overall media performances and the analysis of the environmental conditions as well as the legal framework represent two crucial sphere of investigation.

The second part of the paper presented by the Osservatorio intended to explore the challenges posed to media analysis by new technologies and developments in the media sector, particularly with regards to trans national channels and the internet. This kind of media, particularly trans border televisions, can become the main vehicle for election related information. As a matter of fact, in many contexts such media constitute one the major resources in terms of political communication. Quite interestingly, any debate on the obligations new media and digital broadcasters should be subject to is still ongoing, leaving wide room for further reflections and discussions on their role and their impact.

For further information on the Council of Europe - Venice Commission
http://www.venice.coe.int/site/main/Elections_Referendums_E.asp
http://www.venice.coe.int/site/dynamics/N_Calendar_ef.asp?L=E