Mimicking Democracy Promotion: How Parallel Observers Undermine OSCE Election Monitoring

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/06/25/mimicking-democracy-promotion-how-parallel-observers-undermine-osce-election-monitoring/

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International election observation has long been a flagship tool to promote liberal ideas of democratic ordering. But what happens when observers no longer agree on what counts as a free and fair election? Drawing on my recent article in the Election Law Journal, this piece contends that parallel election monitoring creates that very situation. I argue that parallel election monitoring does not just compete with established missions – it mimics them, subtly rewriting the rules of legitimacy from within.

Once upon a time, in a Europe unimaginably far away, the Soviet Union and its allies agreed to establish a regional organization to facilitate the liberalization and democratization of their states. Though it seems unlikely today, the organization was granted a large mandate to execute these objectives — this is how the OSCE was born. Ever since the Charter of Paris (1990) established the framework for the practice, the so-called Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR) has conducted over 400 election observation missions to monitor the transition to and consolidation of democracy after the Cold War. Multinational missions encompassing observers from all over Europe, Central Asia, and North America have assessed campaigns, legal frameworks, media landscapes, civil society groups, and election days.

For some time, Western states and the OSCE believed (or wanted to believe) that Russia and others were going through a genuine liberal-democratic transition, as the earlier OSCE electoral mission statements on Russia show (e.g. “the 26 March 2000 election of the President marks further progress for the consolidation of democratic elections“). In fact, the OSCE was certain of their monopoly on election observation legitimacy – a single organization tasked with identifying irregularities and bringing them together in a report that assessed whether voting had met democratic standards. But they were mistaken.

In the 2000s, a new player emerged in the field of international election observation. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional organization of post-Soviet states established under Russian leadership, began observing elections. CIS observers usually claim to use the same methodology as OSCE-ODIHR. As one of my OSCE interviewees described it: “if (OSCE-) ODIHR started, I don’t know, wearing special hats, CIS, on the next mission, would be doing the same”. Importantly, the CIS primarily monitors elections that have already been covered by OSCE missions. Therefore, the starting question of my research was simple: why bother establishing a parallel observation structure when one already exists—and even includes all CIS states?

This brings me to the core of my argument. Based on interviews with election observers and an analysis of preliminary mission statements, I argue that parallel election observation represents a power-political strategy of liberal mimicry. But what is mimicry and how does it work? The concept has been used in the International Relations literature in the context of norm contestation, and it is adjacent to concepts such as imitation, parody, and trickstery. In postcolonial studies, Homi Bhaba argued that mimicry is a form of resistance that draws power from being a “*subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*”

However, the most illustrative use of the term comes from natural sciences. Mimicry is an effective strategy of protecting oneself from predation through superficial resemblance to another species. For example, hoverflies

developed a resemblance to wasps to signal that they can sting. Since they appear more dangerous than they are, they are less likely to be attacked. The essence of mimicry is the appearance of similarity that is not substantiated upon closer inspection. CIS observers may talk the talk of liberal democratization, but do they walk the walk?

Many Western authors have written about “shadow” or “zombie” observers and have largely dismissed them. According to their accounts, they facilitate a “mock-compliance strategy” and are not credible. However, much of this line of research is premised on the dichotomy between professional, impartial OSCE observers and unprofessional, biased CIS observers. In my research, I examined how the two practices differ and how their differences are constructed on an everyday basis. I analyzed the practice as parallel election observation, emphasizing the narrative of pluralization associated with its power-political mechanism.

Examining 16 CIS and OSCE statements on Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Serbia, and Azerbaijan between 2010 and 2023, I found that while the CIS uses similar methods and communication techniques as the OSCE, its election observation model is substantially different. For instance, they are much more likely to praise compliance with the election administration schedule and much less likely to address major shortcomings, fundamental freedoms, or checks and balances. When addressing irregularities, the CIS usually uses a variation of the following phrase: “We have observed a number of technical deficiencies, but they have not affected the overall result.” While they follow a similar format, the conclusions of the two organizations often diverge sharply.

Thirteen interviews with high-level practitioners, including one from the CIS, enriched these findings by providing detailed descriptions of interactions and experiences among institutions. For example, according to several OSCE interviewees, the CIS usually waits for the politically crucial press conference to be announced by the OSCE after election day, just so they can announce their own an hour earlier — presumably to be the first to speak about the elections. Increasingly, OSCE missions are being excluded entirely, leaving CIS as the only voice in the room.

Another crucial difference between OSCE and CIS relates to the legal and methodological reference points used to justify their observations. OSCE observers usually strongly emphasize the organization’s international agreements, such as the Paris Charter and the Copenhagen Document, as well as the International Declaration of Principles for Election Observers and the OSCE Code of Conduct for Observers. They also take national legislation into consideration as long as it does not contradict international standards. The CIS, on the other hand, seems to turn this hierarchy of norms upside down. First and foremost, observers must assess whether elections comply with national legislation; only then should they consider international standards. This reversal of priorities—putting national law above international standards—marks a fundamental departure from the OSCE model.

One of the key reasons why parallel observation works is because it mimics the language of pluralism. It gives the impression of healthy democratic debate—while muddying the waters of legitimacy with alternative truth claims. As my CIS interviewee described it: “The truth is usually somewhere in between – between the extremes.” An anecdote from an OSCE observation practitioner illustrates this particularly well.

In the 2000s, a post-communist head of state met with observer groups after an election. Besides the OSCE and CIS, two NGO-led missions were represented. According to the OSCE observer, the two NGOs were government-friendly and overwhelmingly praised the electoral procedures and the head of state. The CIS participant argued that the mission had encountered some shortcomings that did not affect the overall result. The OSCE representative was the last to speak and outlined a number of serious deficiencies that the mission had encountered, which were incompatible with the principles of free and fair elections. The head of state thanked the observers present, and the door opened for TV cameras and domestic journalists to enter the room. The head of state addressed the audience, claiming that he had just met with the international observer groups and, with the exception of one, all groups were quite satisfied with how the election went. Rather than challenge liberal observation practices head-on, mimicry portrays CIS as part of a pluralist field—offering ‘just another view’ that an audience can choose from.

There is another reason why CIS mimicry works. It draws from the inherent tension of established OSCE practices. Over the last two decades, critical narratives toward liberal democracy promotion have gradually increased. Should Western liberal democrats really be the ones teaching the rest of the world how to govern itself? Clearly, democracy

promotion has been strongly pushed through the foreign policy agendas of Western countries, particularly through the leadership and funding of the United States. Is it democracy promotion or democracy imposition? Where do we draw the line?

The CIS strongly leverages endogenous criticisms of liberal democracy promotion. Critics of Western liberal hegemony might find themselves sympathizing with the decolonial and anti-interventionist narratives associated with CIS observation ("the inadmissibility of a policy of exclusivity, domination, imposition of cultural values alien to peoples, interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states"). Can Western observers, who often do not speak the local language and rely on interpreters, reasonably assess the state of democracy in a country? I asked myself this exact question when I, an Austrian OSCE short-term observer, assessed Kazakh polling stations despite my partner and I not speaking any Kazakh or Russian. CIS' claim to local ownership may not deliver on its promises, but its appeal is rooted in tensions within OSCE practices. In its own depiction of the field, CIS claims to be committed to pluralism, local ownership, and providing a legitimate alternative voice on the international stage. These critiques gain traction when OSCE observers are perceived as out of touch with local realities.

Why should we examine this subtle form of contestation when the world is witnessing much more overt forms of disruption, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Mimicry is a subversive practice that continuously fragments the field responsible for determining the international attribution of legitimacy to elections. This is one of the main ways international actors distinguish between democracies and non-democracies. Determining the fairness and freedom of elections has also been central to domestic resistance movements, as evidenced by the Color Revolutions. Promoting democracy is a key feature of most accounts of the liberal international order in the post-Cold War era. My research shows that contestation does not require a directly visible challenge to the validity of the democratic narrative itself. As the case study of CIS election observation shows, practices of liberal ordering can be gradually undermined from within its own narrative.

Just as the hoverfly mimics the wasp to look more dangerous than it is, the CIS draws its legitimacy from resembling the OSCE and 'talking the talk' of promoting democracy. As elections are short-term events and most audiences pay attention to them only briefly, it might be enough to look like the OSCE after election day when issuing the preliminary statement – at the very moment when the international assessment of electoral truth is constructed. If one regional organization says one thing, and another says something different, then electoral integrity may have just been a mixed bag after all. And who knows what election observers really do anyway? Scholars of International Relations often focus on grand events, potentially overseeing the tacit tactics used to disrupt and fragment established international ordering practices. CIS parallel election observation can be a fruitful case study to illuminate the nuanced logics of contesting liberal international ordering on an everyday basis.

In the theater of international democracy promotion, not all actors follow the liberal-democratic script. Some wear the right costume, speak the right lines, and stand on the right stage—only to perform an entirely different play. The CIS has learned to mimic the OSCE, but it may instrumentalize these performances for very different purposes. The true power of mimicry lies not in open defiance, but in quiet subversion – reinterpreting and rewriting the script line by line, mission by mission, until the audience no longer knows which story to believe.

About the author:

Markus Pollak is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Doctoral School of Political Science at Central European University. His research focuses on liberal international ordering, election observation, democracy promotion, contestation, and international political sociology. He has served on four OSCE election observation missions (United States, Serbia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan). His most recent publication appeared in the*Election Law Journal*.