



## Global Conference 8, 9, 10 November 2023, Brussels

### Peaceful and Inclusive Elections in a Digital Age *Sharing challenges and identifying programmatic solutions*

#### Background

The European Union Foreign Policy Instrument in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme are organizing a Global Conference centred on the theme of the Sustaining Peace during Electoral Processes “SELECT” Project with a focus on Information Integrity and Inclusive Elections in a Digital Age.

Effective electoral administration is necessary but insufficient for achieving credible elections. More fundamental requirements must also be met, such as equitable and meaningful inclusion, broad access to reliable information and freedom of expression by all electoral stakeholders. As information ecosystems continue to be rapidly transformed by new technology, fresh opportunities and obstacles present themselves on the path to credible, inclusive and peaceful elections.

**In the year 2024, more voters are expected to cast ballots than in any year in the past.**<sup>1</sup> This provides an opportunity for inclusive and participatory governance to an unprecedented degree. Nonetheless, as elections inherently lay bare differences within a society, many countries face an increased risk of conflict and violence. The past decade has seen a significant uptick in election-related disputes. Between 2010-2015, elections have triggered violence and tensions and prolonged periods of deadlock, in at least fifteen countries.<sup>2</sup>

The challenges, and opportunities presented by the era of digitalisation have transformed elections in every country. The unlimited reach and access of social media, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the increased use of technology within the delivery of elections play a critical factor in electoral processes. It is (re)shaping the relationship between elected representatives and citizens, which depending on the decisions and judgement of the various actors involved in elections, may strengthen or undermine electoral processes.

E-tools, including internet, social media sites and open data, can facilitate engagement and participation through online consultations and public portals for information sharing.<sup>3</sup> The introduction of ICT in electoral administration, such as electronic voter registration and result transmission systems intended to minimize human errors and to reduce the potential for fraud, may render the process more transparent and accountable.<sup>4</sup> When implemented with consideration for inclusion and context specificity, digital technologies may contribute to more accessible and participatory governance and trust in governance processes. Nonetheless, the risks accompanying these developments require

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<sup>1</sup> Over thirty countries—including, Bangladesh, DRC, EU, India, Mali, Mexico, Tunisia, the United States and United Kingdom will hold national elections. 2024: Elections around the world, 360/Open Summit, Atlantic council, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fpevDx-SAQ&ab\\_channel=AtlanticCouncil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fpevDx-SAQ&ab_channel=AtlanticCouncil)

<sup>2</sup> Supporting Insider Mediation: Strengthening resilience to conflict and turbulence, EU and UNDP, 2015

<sup>3</sup> E-Democracy - Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (coe.int)

<sup>4</sup> [Undp-contents-publications-thematic-workshop-ICT-elections-management-English.pdf \(ec-undp-electoralassistance.org\)](#)



consideration including equal access to digital technologies and the need for responsible use of technologies to ensure safety and security online.<sup>5</sup>

The above challenges in today's reality reflect broader governance challenges, which purely technical electoral fixes cannot solve, but where the deepening of democratic institutions and civic space would enhance accountability, transparency and inclusiveness, with the end goal of sustaining peace.

It is within this context that we are preparing to launch a 2,5-day conference designed to share knowledge, best practices and increase awareness around programmatic options and activities to address prominent challenges in digital-era electoral assistance.

### Conference Objectives

The global conference will be held on the 8, 9 and 10 November 2023 in Brussels, bringing together around 200 participants from Electoral Management Bodies, civil society, academia and regional and international organizations working on issues around elections, participation, inclusion, information integrity, youth, and gender in the frame of conflict prevention and electoral assistance. The conference will have the following objectives:

1. Reflect on the new complexities and opportunities presented to the various electoral actors as they work towards peaceful and inclusive elections in a digital age, with a focus on practitioner experiences, including best practices and lessons learnt.
2. Bring together the communities of practice working on elections, conflict prevention and the topic areas (information integrity, youth and gender) to strengthen existing partnerships and expertise.
3. Raise awareness of the research and programmatic options developed so far, while identifying existing gaps including best practices, lessons learned, programmatic activities and thematic areas to be further explored.

### Expected Outcomes:

1. Gain a deeper understanding of the factors that limit inclusion and contribute to conflict, and effective strategies to aid peaceful and inclusive elections.
2. Share evidence-based programming options, including digital tools, in selected topic areas
3. Enhance collaboration and networking among stakeholders involved in electoral assistance, inclusive governance and/or conflict prevention.

### Preliminary Agenda and Thematic Areas

Each of the 10 substantive sessions will comprise of a panel with moderator and allow for rounds of questions from the audience. The sessions may vary in duration, with shorter kick-off sessions to present the research and longer follow up sessions to discuss challenges and programmatic experiences from the perspective of a range of stakeholders.

A successful panel will highlight concrete practices and activities to prevent violence in electoral contexts, with a focus on programmatic approaches and opportunities that exist throughout the

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<sup>5</sup> Using digital technologies for democracy and peace: Five young leaders' advice to policymakers – Select (sustainingpeace-select.org)



electoral cycle, especially outside of the heated electoral period to create conducive conditions for accepted elections. The sessions will further reflect on the role of different actors in enhancing accountability, transparency and inclusiveness, with the end goal of sustaining peace.

The first thematic focus area will be dedicated to understanding the role that information integrity plays in undermining electoral credibility and triggering conflict and violence around the elections, with the main purpose of **bolstering the design of programming to support the information ecosystem around elections.**

Even though the study of information integrity is a new field with limited definitive answers, the first workstream research identified numerous recommendations for election practitioners with as the guiding principle the need to avoid undue or onerous freedom of expression restrictions. Furthermore, it outlined that a healthy strategy would include a variety of responses attempting to address **three broad categories of interventions**, namely 1) activities aimed at identifying and attempting to counter information pollution/manipulation; 2) activities aimed at building public resilience to information pollution/manipulation and 3) activities or strategies aimed at preventing or deterring the creation of information pollution/manipulation. These insights have informed the design of the conference sessions, where they will be presented, whilst additional input will be sought.

The second area of focus will be dedicated to **identifying approaches aimed at sustaining peace during electoral processes through inclusiveness.** Young people as well as women demonstrate remarkable creativity in their efforts to sustain peace and bridge divides within and between communities. They engage in various roles during elections, such as observers, educators, candidates, civil society representatives, and monitors of electoral-related violence. They utilize innovative campaigns to promote peace messages, raise their voices through digital and offline platforms, and advocate for accountability, inclusion, and transparency. However, women as well as young people, especially young women, also face discrimination and exclusion. The prevailing stereotype of young people as disinterested, passive objects of policy, or troublemakers has limited development programming to motivating them to vote while preventing electoral violence. The conference will look at how to redirect the focus towards recognizing the critical role of the diversity of young people in sustaining peace, aligning with the youth, peace, and security agenda. The conference will also bring in the gender-dimension of electoral violence, to shift the focus to comprehensive, gender-inclusive approaches to sustain peace, which seek to challenge systematic patterns of exclusion and inequality, instead of short-term reactionary approaches.

A details agenda framing each one of the individual sessions organized as part of the 2,5-day conference will be shared shortly. It will focus on discussing and sharing of country-based examples and practical experiences of various stakeholders. We recognize the significance of drawing upon the expertise and insights of Electoral Management Bodies, international organizations and electoral assistance providers, CSOs including youth-led and women's led organizations. The focus on real-life examples and case studies aims to provide concrete illustrations of the challenges and successes encountered in the field of electoral assistance.