



## **MINUTES**

### **Joint meeting of the European cooperation network on elections and the expert group on electoral matters 28 January**

The meeting was chaired by Director Irena Moozova, Director for Equality and Union citizenship in Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers.

#### **1. Inclusiveness and equality in democratic participation**

Director Moozova welcomed the participants on behalf of the European Commission (COM) at the eighth meeting of the European cooperation network on elections (ECNE), and the first joint one with the expert group on electoral matters. Such a joint meeting allows to exchange expertise between the two groups, and to include collective input into the implementation of the policy actions announced in the Citizenship report and the Democracy action plan. Equally, several Member States in the ECNE have on earlier occasions suggested holding such joint meetings.

COM presented the EU Citizenship report and its main priority areas for the citizenship agenda, with a particular focus on democratic participation. This specifically addressed the announced actions to update the Directives 93/109/EC and 94/80/EC governing rights of mobile EU citizens to vote and stand in European and municipal elections, supporting deliberative democracy as well as election observation.

The conclusions of a study conducted at the request of the PETI Committee on Obstacles to participation in elections and the exercise of voting rights were presented. The study considered legal and constitutional obstacles as well as practical/economic ones, and reflected on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Possible measures to promote accessibility of elections were outlined.

Commissioner Reynders stressed inclusiveness and equal participation as being at the heart of our strategic approach. He highlighted that diversified efforts will be needed to safeguard democratic values and the rule of law culture, especially so as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to put EU citizenship rights to a stern test. Particularly in terms of implementing the actions announced in the EU Citizenship report, he laid out the approach to fostering participation, inclusion and empowerment, noting the benefit from Member States' expertise in supporting the exercise of electoral rights. This also relates to the

update of the relevant Directives on voting rights of mobile EU citizens in municipal and European elections, as part of the comprehensive efforts to ensure broad democratic participation and inclusiveness.

## **2. Supporting broad and inclusive participation of mobile EU citizens in European Parliament elections and in municipal elections**

As set out in the Commission Work Programme 2021, the Commission will propose to update Directives 93/109/EC and 94/80/EC governing rights of mobile EU citizens to vote and stand in European and municipal elections. A discussion was held with Member States on the objectives of updating the Directives, in support of the exercise of electoral rights and the broad and inclusive participation of mobile EU citizens, and taking into account the issues EU mobile citizens face when exercising their European electoral rights, and possible remedies.

Member States exchanged on the identified problems and the proposed solutions to mitigate the risks and clarify relevant provisions to ensure increased participation of mobile EU citizens. This includes for instance the harmonisation of deadlines for the exchange of information on their registration on electoral rolls, the importance of campaigns to raise awareness of mobile EU citizens to register to vote and inform of rights, and addressing the issue of double voting in a comprehensive manner. Some practical issues were also raised such as the impact of outdated data where mobile EU citizens had moved back to their home country in the meantime, the possibility to include additional information on citizens in order to identify them easier, exchanging information on mobile EU citizens whose names have special characters or letters which do not exist in other EU languages. Several Member States noted the issues posed by dual nationality. It was also stressed that changes need to be made quickly in order to be ready for the next EP elections in 2024.

COM outlined the next steps, including in terms of publishing the Inception Impact Assessment. Member States will be invited to provide feedback once published.

## **Meeting of the European cooperation network on elections 29 January 2021**

The meeting was chaired by Director Irena Moozova, Director for Equality and Union citizenship in Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers.

### **1. Exchange of views with Vice-President Jourová**

Vice-President Jourová reiterated the Commission's commitment to protect citizens' rights to free and fair elections, especially in the digital sphere, as recently outlined in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP). In this context, she recalled that the Commission is preparing a legislative proposal on regulating online political advertising and invited the participants to share their views. Vice-President expressed her support for the work done within the Network, calling for even greater cooperation at the EU level. She also highlighted the need to digitalize the way we operate, including in terms of e-voting options.

In an exchange of views, one Member State welcomed the initiatives undertaken by COM and stressed the overarching goal to protect democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights. Another Member State welcomed the fact that Member States were broadly engaged in the preparation of the EDAP, and supported the comprehensive approach to participatory democracy and citizens' empowerment as crucial to building resilient societies. The complementarity of actions on the national and EU level was also noted.

Vice-President Jourová announced further exchanges with Member States as COM proceeds with elaborating the initiatives. She praised the ECNE as a very concrete forum for exchange, addressing specific issues which range from cyber security, disinformation, to transparency and data protection.

### **2. Exchange of views on the European Democracy Action Plan**

COM presented an overview of specific actions announced in the three pillars of the Action Plan. Taking into account the implementation of actions from the EDAP and the Citizenship report, COM outlined the proposed work plan for the network in 2021-2022.

Member States suggested having broader participation of colleagues from relevant national bodies in meetings on specific topics, supported further discussions on cyber security, as well as exchanges on incident reporting systems regarding elections.

COM elaborated on the considerations related to the setting up of a new joint operational mechanism to promote resilient electoral processes, as one of the commitments in the EDAP. In view of the preparation for the legislative initiative on transparency, COM outlined the problem analysis and possible options, which will be further discussed in a dedicated session with the network tentatively to be held in the second half of March. Member States were asked to contribute to the public consultation, which was

launched in the preceding week, supported by a detailed inception impact assessment. One Member State provided an elaborate account of electoral reform on the national level, including the regulation of online paid political advertising.

### **3. Continued exchange of best practices on the arrangements in the organisation of elections, taking into account the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Member States also continued the discussion on ensuring free and fair elections taking into account the challenges posed by the pandemic. Director Moozova noted that we were still facing a delicate balance between protecting the right to vote and addressing health concerns. This is also an opportunity to deepen discussions on considering the options for introducing or expanding remote voting solutions.

International IDEA provided some insights following the webinar series on Special Voting Arrangements, which IDEA and the Association of European Election Officials co-hosted in October-November 2020. It was stressed that incremental expansion of remote voting solutions is the key to success, particularly in terms of building voter confidence. Learning from each other is very important, and more international cooperation can support the beneficial exchange of technical know-how.

Open Evidence presented an update of the Study on Remote Voting from 2018, elaborating on the advantages and potential issues, as well as good practices in implementing remote voting solutions in the COVID-19 context. It was noted that ensuring consensus among stakeholders remains a key precondition.

Member States shared the measures introduced for the holding of elections in the COVID-19 context, including in terms of protective/hygiene measures, as well as postal, proxy, and early voting.

### **4. Closing remarks**

The next session of the network is envisaged in April or May, with an ad hoc exchange on transparency of online political advertising to be held in March. Member States were invited to contribute to the relevant initiatives, including the consultation on the transparency of online political advertising.