



MINUTES
Seventh Meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections
25 September 2020

The meeting was chaired by Irena Moozova, Director for Equality and Union citizenship in Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, with participation by Commissioner for Justice, Mr Didier Reynders.

1. Opening session

Director Moozova welcomed the participants on behalf of the European Commission (COM) at the seventh meeting of the network.

Commissioner Reynders highlighted that the work undertaken by this network since the beginning of 2019 is a testament of our determination to pursue a common goal of securing free and fair elections in Europe. He stressed that the current challenges encompass both adapting elections to the measures needed to keep citizens safe, and the “infodemic” which came with the pandemic, while the measures necessary to combat the pandemic should not be taken at the expense of protecting democratic values and fundamental rights. The crisis presents itself as an opportunity to innovate ways of engaging citizens in a more participatory democracy, and consider further measures to ensure accessibility to European elections and foster inclusiveness in democratic processes, also of utmost relevance in the context of the upcoming Citizenship report.

2. Experiences, challenges and best practices in the organization of elections in the current context

COM stressed the contribution of the European Network to promoting the effective exercise of EU electoral rights and democratic participation, and in safeguarding free and fair elections and upholding democratic values, with discussions at this meeting to help inform new priorities and actions to be announced in the upcoming Citizenship report. The COVID crisis has yet again demonstrated the importance of our democratic institutions and raised some immediate practical challenges where exchange of best practices and arrangements linked to elections can be beneficial.

On the impact of COVID-19 on free and fair elections, Election Watch presented the main takeaways from the rapid assessment conducted in April. Election Watch plans to conduct research on a select number of elections under the conditions of Covid-19 across Europe for the period of one year.

Member States shared a broad range of good practices and observations. In cooperation with public health authorities, there is a variety of potential issues to be considered in the COVID-19 context, including on setting up polling stations, ensuring social distancing while counting ballots, deciding on how to use pens for casting votes, etc. Member States shared in particular guidelines for recently conducted or upcoming elections, noting for instance specific provisions for social welfare institutions, practices in remote voting, submission of candidate lists electronically, and voting options for those infected or in quarantine. It was noted that the holding of elections in the current context must strike a balance between protecting the right to vote and addressing health concerns.

3. Short information points

The European Data Protection Board presented the Guidelines on the targeting of social media users. EEAS provided an update on the work of the Rapid Alert System. COM elaborated on the assessment of the Code of Practice published on 10 September.

4. Further measures in support of the effective exercise of EU electoral rights and democratic participation

COM outlined the preparations for the EU Citizenship report. The Report will reflect on the implementation of the rights attached to the status of EU citizenship in the last three years, and will set out future concrete actions to further advance them, including in terms of democratic participation.

On improving the accessibility of European elections, Member States shared a range of good practices. A number of Member States noted that they have devised accessibility checklists. One Member State elaborated an Action Plan to increase accessibility, which also aims at engaging political parties in ensuring access to elections and information. Many facilitations for citizens to vote exist across Member States, including in terms of postal voting, voting by proxy, provision for specific transportation on election day, early voting periods, and accessible polling stations.

On the issue of access to information in the context of the next European Parliament elections, one Member State welcomed the idea to establish a helpdesk to support the exercise of electoral rights. Two Member States noted the importance of complementarity of such a helpdesk with national level communication channels. The network will further exchange views on this matter.

On disinformation, it was noted that more transparency is needed to ensure resilience of citizens. Involvement of civil society needs to be ensured.

5. AOB

In closing, future meetings of the network were mentioned. As already announced in the Commission's report on the conduct of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, a joint session of the European Cooperation Network on Elections and the Expert group on electoral matters is envisaged by the end of 2020. Another meeting should be held in March 2021.