



MINUTES

Sixteenth Meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections

16 January 2023

The sixteenth meeting of the **European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE)** took place on 16 January 2023, chaired by Irena Moozova, Director for Equality and Union Citizenship in the **Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST)**.

1. Welcome by the Director of Equality and Union citizenship. Update on the 2021 Democracy Package proposals, including on political advertising, electoral rights and the mechanism on electoral resilience.

Director Moozova welcomed the participants on behalf of the **European Commission (COM)** at the sixteenth meeting of the **ECNE** and presented the meeting's agenda.

COM provided an update on the state of play regarding the proposals on transparency and targeting of political advertising and the proposals to update the Council directives on the electoral rights of mobile EU citizens. **COM** echoed its aim to adopt them before the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections.

COM outlined the most recent developments regarding the "Joint Mechanism for Electoral Resilience", which aims to promote the exchange of expertise between two or more Member States. **COM** invited Member States interested to use this mechanism and reaffirmed its readiness to support them in organising these exchanges.

SE and **RO** briefly described the exchanges that took place the preceding week and underlined that discussions touched on a series of topical issues, such as the need for intrastate collaboration in dealing with security risks and cyber threats in the frame of electoral administration. Both Member States recognised the importance of the comparative analysis and corresponding deliberations.

2. Update on the compendium of e-voting practices and the guide of good electoral practice addressing electoral participation of citizens with disabilities.

COM reported on the status of the compendium of e-voting practices announced in the European Democracy Action Plan. **COM** clarified that the compendium would list e-voting solutions and ICT practices currently available in the EU and potential risks associated with their use. A first draft of the compendium will be shared with the subgroup created for its preparation and ECNE after January 2023. **COM** invited Member States to share any outstanding information regarding their e-voting solutions and ICT practices by the end of January 2023 so that they can be included in the draft compendium. **COM** also mentioned a study on "E-voting and ICT Practices" currently being conducted by the "Network of Academics on Citizenship", which will complement Member States' contributions and be included in the final compendium. Concerning the guide of good electoral practices addressing the participation of citizens with disabilities: **COM** expounded on the state of play of the said initiative and denoted that the "Network of Academics on Citizenship" is conducting a study on inclusive electoral practices that cover all types of elections with particular

emphasis on measures taken by Member States during the Covid-19 Pandemic. **COM** specified that most Member States shared their practices and renewed its invitation to the remaining Member States to send their outstanding responses to the scoping questions by the end of January 2023. A first draft is set to be shared with the corresponding subgroup and ECNE after the completion of the study.

RO presented a set of actions to promote the electoral participation of citizens with disabilities under its national strategy adopted in 2022. To that end, a comparative study was conducted featuring tools used by other states (EU and non-EU) to increase the electoral participation of citizens with disabilities. The study portrayed modalities, procedures, and technical requirements identified to increase the accessibility of electoral processes to citizens with disabilities before tackling practices implemented in **RO** and recommendations for future improvements (e.g., a proposal on the design of ballot paper to ensure accessibility for visually impaired people). The study was published in **RO**, and a translated version of the latter would eventually be shared with the network.

3. Exchange of recent developments and best practices in electoral matters.

Several **Member States** intervened to present recent developments and best practices adopted in their respective countries to ensure transparent elections and mitigate challenges to full electoral participation.

AT disclosed that its electoral legislation had undergone reforms which will enter into force in January 2024. The said reform package targeted, among other instruments, the processes related to postal voting and mechanisms aimed at increasing the electoral participation of citizens with disabilities. **CZ** raised the importance of a new initiative introduced in its presidential elections allowing voters in Covid-19 isolation to vote from their car (200 voters) using drive-in stations or from home (150 voters) using portable ballot boxes. A voter turnout of 68%, the highest turnout in the **CZ** presidential elections since 2013, was noted. **ES** expounded on a new legal reform (which will enter into force by September 2023) enabling the receipt of voting ballots and documents by all Spaniards living abroad, even those that did not request to vote.

EE underscored a series of legal reforms, among which the most notable is the elimination of campaigning restrictions and the opportunity to change one's vote on Election Day (e-voters could, for instance, cancel their e-vote with a paper ballot on the day of elections). Internet voting has been widely used in **EE** and has been significant in fostering electoral participation. **EE** is currently discussing the possibility of introducing voting through mobile phones and using smart IDs. **EE** also mentioned web training sessions for polling station workers on relevant issues, such as promoting electoral participation for people with disabilities. **FI** sustained the importance of e-learning and tabletop exercises as standard practices to enhance capacity building in electoral administration and highlighted the importance of cybersecurity drills and training to mitigate electoral threats.

COM expressed its gratitude to Member States for their contribution and echoed its call for Member States to continue sharing their electoral practices with the network to include them in the compendium of e-voting practices and the guide of good electoral practice addressing electoral participation of citizens with disabilities.

4. Best practices in election observation: summary of replies to scoping questions by COM.

COM reported on a survey undertaken to capture insights on electoral observation practices used by Member States and recorded a list of best practices. These included a series of recommendations provided by Member States for future elections, shedding light on the importance of refining the technology-governance nexus to improve electoral administration through better integration of ICT and the need to preserve gender equality on all electoral fronts, including electoral observation (e.g., by inviting observer missions to designate representatives from different genders). **COM** also mentioned upcoming funding opportunities for independent election observation under the citizens' engagement and participation strand of the CERV Programme 2023-2024.

5. 2024 European Parliament elections: preparedness and protection of election-related personnel and infrastructure and against cybersecurity incidents.

COM briefly recapped the scope of the European Democracy Action Plan, presented in December 2020, upon which its response was founded to strengthen and nurture democracy in Europe. **COM** explained that the said response would entail protecting election-related personnel and infrastructure and will strive to mitigate cybersecurity incidents.

FI presented the scope and findings of a study conducted to provide a systematic overview of electoral resilience in FI and analyse the impact of different phenomena on electoral administration. The corresponding report examines cooperation between authorities on electoral matters, preparedness plans and risk management processes. Findings disclosed a need for more coherence in risk management and preparedness planning.

COM presented the directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) and the directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the EU (NIS 2 Directive), both of which entered into force on 16 January 2023.

COM inquired about Member States' steps to assist the entities operating infrastructure that is critical to the organisation of elections and increase their resilience, and invited Member States to share their comments in writing.

6. 2024 European Parliament elections: inclusive democratic participation, best practices to support participation in elections of specific groups.

Two representatives from the **European Network of Legal Experts in Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination** presented a report on the promotion of gender balance in political decision-making. The report pertains to 31 countries, including all Member States of the EU, as well as IS, LI, NO and UK. The objective of the report is to provide a comprehensive overview of current international and national legal frameworks, both soft and hard, that pertain to gender balance and representation in political decision-making. The report also aims to identify any obstacles that may impede progress in this area and to underline effective practices that can be implemented to promote gender balance and the participation of women in decision-making. One of the report's four thematic areas of focus is elections. Findings depict that gender quotas are most effective when combined with ranking rules and strict enforcement that essentially mandates the rejection of electoral lists that do not meet gender-balance rules. **EELN** representatives emphasised that while quotas alone may not be sufficient, it is crucial to establish inclusive environments that are, for instance, free from electoral violence. Such environments would encourage greater participation and representation of women in electoral processes.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concurred with observations made by **EELN** representatives regarding the limitations of quotas (e.g., quotas for people with disabilities or national minorities). **ODIHR** acknowledged that quotas alone do not ensure an inclusive electoral environment and that implementation challenges may arise. **ODIHR** noted that there might be instances where provisions for addressing withdrawals, changes to candidate lists, or resignations are not present and recommended that targeted measures be implemented to address gaps and enhance the effectiveness of quotas. **ODIHR** also advocated for funding, campaign support, and inclusive political finance regulations to promote electoral participation and inclusive democracy. **ODIHR** ultimately mentioned the right to information and why it is essential to promote full and effective participation by removing barriers to inclusive and easy access to information (e.g., by providing sign language or collecting data on women's political participation).

HR intervened to introduce one of its pioneering youth engagement projects: "My Vote Counts Too". The latter entails, among other practices, conducting simulations of elections for future young voters at schools. It strives to raise awareness about political participation and show students how the process usually occurs. The initiative, which is still ongoing, was also redeployed to a digital platform during the Covid-19 pandemic: the online webinar currently includes animations to replicate the previous simulations exercise.

7. Discussing the way forward: work plan for 2023-2024.

COM commended the work of the network since 2019, highlighting its dedication and commitment to achieving the shared objective of ensuring free and fair elections within the EU. **COM** briefly recapped all the topics discussed within the network (such as data protection, media regulation and disinformation) and reiterated its gratitude to Member States for their invaluable contributions to ECNE's achievements. **COM** affirmed that with the conclusion of the work plan 2020-2022, the focus should shift to identifying ways for the network to continue its efforts in addressing potential risks, identifying prospective solutions and contributing to the development of resilient electoral processes through the sharing of expertise and best practices among Member States.

COM announced its intentions to continue discussions under the European Democracy Action Plan and the 2021 Democracy Package on topics such as cybersecurity, inclusive participation in elections, e-voting, increasing voter turnout, and establishing common references for good practices, as well as data collection on the participation of mobile EU citizens in municipal and EP elections. **COM** confirmed its commitment to support cooperation between the EU networks and international organisations to build capacity, exchange best practices, address electoral threats and promote high international standards in the use of ICTs. **COM** solicited input from Member States on potential future discussion topics within the network and explored the feasibility of establishing specific subgroups to address these topics. **COM** inquired about the potential utility of providing a discussion paper on specific topics ahead of meetings. **COM** also explored Member States' interest in participating in or hosting mutual learning seminars, which could be financed through the CERV programme.

SE expressed a positive outlook towards the meetings and the relevance of the topics discussed. **SE** also mentioned the possibility of incorporating specific themes into the discussions, such as voting from abroad or postal voting. **AT** acknowledged the value of in-person attendance when deemed necessary but stated that virtual meetings have an advantage when attendance is not possible. **EE** raised concerns about language proficiency limitations for standing in local council and parliament elections and further enquired about the method for implementing these limitations and if such electoral censorship is permissible. **NL** mentioned the importance of discussions targeting accessibility and the developments in the use of ICT in electoral processes.

9. AOB and Closing remarks

COM outlined the scope of the ongoing mapping exercise on foreign financing of political parties and invited Member States to communicate changes in their rules as relevant. **NL** announced that as of January 2023, its legal framework for political party financing had been updated. **SI**, **MT**, **HR** and **CZ** stated that there are no current plans to amend their respective legal frameworks. **RO** specified that its legislative framework is currently under review regarding political advertising and financing of political parties. The draft law aims, among others, to improve financial discipline and increase the transparency of political parties' incomes and expenses. **EE** indicated that external financing of political parties is not allowed under the current law and that no recent changes or plans for changes to the law have been made. **SE** indicated that external financing of political parties is allowed and SE has not changed and does not plan to change the relevant laws. **LT** stated that citizens have a right to donate, including those who live abroad.

COM has scheduled a workshop on March 3, 2023, to review the shared materials on the Crypto tool. In preparation, **COM** solicited Member States to provide the contact information of their newly appointed representatives for the data exchange mechanism.

Director Mozoova closed the meeting and thanked all the participants and speakers for joining. The next meeting of the network is expected to take place in the spring of 2023.