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Directorate D: Fundamental rights and Union citizenship

Unit D.3: Union citizenship and Free movement

MINUTES

Fifth Meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections 27 November 2019

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

1. Opening session: Free and fair elections – state of play

Director Moozova welcomed the participants on behalf of the European Commission (COM) at the fifth meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECN), dedicated to sharing further assessments on the conduct of the elections to the European Parliament, and to setting the course for the ECN in the upcoming years.

COM presented some observations on the conduct of the 2019 European Parliament elections, inter alia with regard to the functioning of the national election networks, engagement with third parties, including social media platforms, cyber resilience and data protection. Member States were invited to present their most recent findings related to the 2019 European elections. One Member State raised concerns about cascading incidents happening in the country in the last 12 months, such as false bomb alerts. Several Member States also conveyed that no foreign interference or large-scale disinformation campaigns were detected in the election period, and presented independent research, if available. Additionally, several Member States reported issues with registering authorised fact-checkers with Facebook.

It was suggested to establish a hotline or a permanent call centre at the European level on election day, which can respond quickly if needed. Feedback was shared on a new system introduced in one Member State, which allows citizens to vote in any polling station in the country. Interest was expressed in Commission grants for support to national election networks.

2. Exchange of views with the European Parliament

The European Parliament presented the main conclusions of the post-election Eurobarometer (EB 91.5), stressing the key role played by young voters for increased turnout, the increase in the pro-European stance among citizens, and a higher level of persuasion that voting does lead to change. It was highlighted that in terms of reasons and motivation to vote, respondents mostly mentioned voting as a civic duty, followed by having the habit to vote, being in favour of the EU and making things to change by voting. In all Member States, more respondents voted because they are in favour of the EU than in 2014. Economy

and growth were the most important topic which mobilised voters, followed by combatting climate change.

3. Exchange of views with the Presidency

The Finnish Presidency elaborated on the implementation of its priorities in this specific field, rooted in strengthening the tripod of democracy, fundamental rights and rule of law. The Presidency elaborated on the broad horizontal coordination within the now permanent Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats, and on the first meeting of the EU-US expert-level dialogue on resilience of electoral systems of 26 November.

4. Exchange of views with civil society – election observation

Election-Watch.EU presented the conclusions of the first-ever conducted observation on EU elections. In addition to the main recommendations to continue the initiated electoral reforms and for those reforms to have an inclusive, consultative and participatory process, it was stressed that the network of election observers will be further consolidated. Election-Watch.EU underlined the variety of legal frameworks in place in the EU, with some Member States that do not have an accreditation system for election observers, as elections are open processes, while others have accreditation systems, or some that do not allow election observation. At the same time, it was noted that there should be a discussion on the nature of citizen engagement. For instance, one Member State noted that fake observers have spread information on election fraud in the media, for which reason an accreditation system for observers might be considered.

5. Transparency and disinformation

The discussion covered the work to deliver the measures contained in the election package, as well as in the Action Plan against disinformation in the run up to the European Parliament elections. One Member State presented its new policy against disinformation, focusing on prevention, including by strengthening citizen's resilience and increasing transparency, reinforcing the information position, and response to disinformation.

Member States discussed enhanced synergies with other initiatives related to disinformation, such as the Rapid Alert System. In relation to engagement with social media companies ahead of the elections, several Member States reported having established communication channels. However, significant challenges remain in establishing cooperation with social media platforms.

One third of Member States are considering legislative changes in the electoral context, some of which relate to regulating transparency of online paid political advertising.

5.1. Cyber resilience

Member States have reported few, successfully resolved, minor cyber incidents in relation to the European Parliament elections. In addition to the first table-top exercise organised on April 5th 2019, significant preparations also took place at national level, with approximately two thirds of Member States organizing specific cybersecurity exercises.

COM provided an update on the envisaged workplan of the NIS Cooperation group. One Member State noted that the Compendium on security of election technology presented a useful source. It was highlighted as beneficial to organize ECN meetings back-to-back with dedicated workshops, drawing from the experience of the table top-exercise in April.

5.2. ECN Work programme 2020-2022

The discussions focused on how the network could continue its work to address potential risks and identify solutions, and contribute to building more resilient electoral processes by facilitating the sharing of expertise and best practices among Member States. Member States discussed a comprehensive approach to addressing electoral resilience, while dedicating workshops to issues of particular importance which would include specific experts from national authorities, and at the same time avoiding duplication and ensuring coherence with all relevant initiatives on the EU level, including those related to disinformation.

Specific suggestions regarding future work included discussions on sharing experiences in conducting electoral reforms, particularly in view of the changing and increasingly digital environment; establishing and broadening cooperation with social media platforms; awareness raising, also in relation to third parties such as the media; transparency of political advertising and party financing. The sharing of experience with some neighbouring countries was also mentioned.

COM referred to the forthcoming call for proposals for 2020 under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, with grants envisaged to support the national elections networks.

6. Closing session

The Commission will publish in early 2020 a report on the conduct of the elections to the European Parliament.

Future meetings will be announced in due time.