



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

DIRECTORATE-GENERAL JUSTICE and CONSUMERS

Directorate D: Fundamental rights and Union citizenship

Unit D.3: Union citizenship and Free movement

MINUTES

Sixth Meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections 24 June 2020, from 10:30 to 17:00

The meeting was chaired by Irena Moozova, Director for Equality and Union citizenship in Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, with participation by Head of Cabinet Jourová, Renate Nikolay.

1. Opening session

Director Moozova welcomed the participants on behalf of the European Commission (COM) at the sixth meeting of the network. It was noted that the network serves as an indispensable element of the toolkit to ensure free and fair elections, and a valuable forum to exchange practices and learnings, to enhance capability and increase mutual understanding. The Commission remains committed to support Member States through this network and its programme of work.

Director Moozova referred to the webinar on political advertising and micro-targeting, organized in the week of 15 June by the Commission, the Netherlands and International IDEA, as an excellent example of exchanges on relevant topics. The Commission reiterated there is space and need to continue organising such focused seminars.

2. Findings on the Commission's report on the conduct of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament

The Commission presented its report on the conduct of the 2019 elections, adopted on 19 June, outlining the key findings and follow-up measures, in particular those for which a role for the European network is envisaged, such as inclusiveness and equality in democratic participation, improving cooperation with the online platforms, shared capabilities, and exchange of good practices on voting procedures. The report shows that young and first-time voters drove turnout figures to a record high. The 2019 election campaign was the most digital up to-date. A dynamic European debate emerged on a number of topics, showing progress in developing a European political dimension; however, national-specific issues remain key for candidates and voters alike. European citizens expressed increased satisfaction with free and fair elections in the EU, but further work is necessary to protect democracy from foreign interference and manipulation and promote free and fair elections in Europe.

The Commission announced two upcoming policy products, the European Democracy Action Plan and EU Citizenship Report, which are envisaged for adoption by the end of 2020 and invited Member States to contribute to the consultation.

Based on the findings of the report, one Member State pointed out that the European cooperation network on elections could further discuss the elaboration of better indicators concerning turnout of specific groups. Another Member State supported follow-up of the report within the European cooperation network and the expert group on electoral matters, stressing the need to continue to exchange experiences and best practices in the organization of general elections. Setting up of a multi-disciplinary platform in order to tackle the issue of double voting was also mentioned.

3. Approaches to disinformation, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The Commission presented the lessons learned and the actions proposed in the Communication on tackling COVID-19 disinformation (adopted on 10 June), particularly in terms of improving cooperation within the EU, in which the European network plays a valuable role. Cooperation between the EU institutions and Member States is essential to ensure consistency of message and coherence of effort. Cooperation with social media platforms is a key element in developing both a comprehensive assessment of the challenge and an effective response to the infodemic. The analysis contained in this joint Communication and the actions proposed therein will feed into the work on the European Democracy Action Plan.

Member States outlined their approaches to strengthen monitoring of COVID-19 disinformation, including by establishing an inter-ministerial structure and putting together the main disinformation narratives relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. One Member State suggested a regular update of the Action plan against Disinformation.

International IDEA shared the key takeaways from the webinars on online political advertising and micro-targeting held on 15 and 18 June, in which participants agreed that more monitoring is needed and that increasing transparency and coordination is crucial. The Commission presented the Europe Media Monitor, an online tool that helps understanding the narratives, how popular they are and how they are changing over time.

4. Free and fair elections, in an emergency context and beyond

Renate Nikolay, Head of Cabinet of Vice-President Jourová opened the session, referring to the monitoring of emergency measures in Member States and their gradual lifting as the epidemiological situation develops. She stressed the invaluable role that the European network played prior to the European Parliament elections and will continue to play as elections adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic. It will also support the preparation of upcoming policy initiatives, including the European Democracy Action Plan and the Citizenship report.

On the impact of COVID-19 on elections, Member States shared a broad range of good practices and observations, and agreed on the need to keep sharing best practices in the organization of elections in the current context. In cooperation with public health authorities, there is a broad range of potential issues to be considered in the COVID-19 context, including on providing for election observation, setting up polling stations, ensuring social distancing while counting ballots, deciding on how to use pens for casting votes, etc.

It was also noted that particular challenges could arise from the fact that political campaigns will be even more digital than before, due to constraints posed by social distancing measures, which can in itself pose additional risks to the electoral process.

The Commission presented the findings of a study on remote voting solutions. It was noted that building trust and confidence of voters in remote voting solutions is extremely important.

5. The next EU Citizenship report

The Commission presented the results of the Flash Eurobarometer on EU Citizenship and Democracy, which explores Europeans' familiarity with their status as EU citizens and their understanding of the rights conferred by EU citizenship; attitudes towards free movement in the EU and consular support while staying in a non-EU country; their knowledge and opinions on electoral rights; and their views on ways of increasing voter participation in European Parliament elections.

Discussions on the effective exercise of electoral rights and increasing democratic participation will continue also within the European cooperation network on elections.

6. AOB

The Commission announced that the next meeting would be held in the autumn. The format and potential topics of focused seminars and workshops in the upcoming period will be further discussed with the European cooperation network on elections.