



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL JUSTICE and CONSUMERS

Directorate D: Fundamental rights and Union citizenship
Unit D.3: Union citizenship and Free movement

MINUTES

Third Meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections 4 April 2019, from 09:30 to 17:00

1. Opening session

Director for Equality and Union citizenship Irena Moozova, who chaired the meeting, welcomed the participants on behalf of the European Commission, and stressed that this last meeting of the network before the European elections provides an additional impetus to focus on concrete and practical exchanges on awareness raising campaigns, engagement with social media platforms, and cooperation with civil society.

2. Awareness raising campaigns for citizens, political parties and the media

COM provided an update on recent activities in sensitizing relevant stakeholders, including on addressing national political parties in relation to the implementation of the Recommendation.

Member States presented their national awareness raising campaigns. In one case, the campaign was based on conveying messages that the electoral system is stable, while critical thinking is encouraged and necessary. The campaign, which strongly appeals to democratic values, employs celebrities from various fora to communicate the messages, and has had good response domestically. Another campaign targets disinformation in general, and hence can be used beyond the elections. The campaign focuses on critical reading tips, thus also supporting critical thinking.

A representative of European Parliament gave an update on the EP's awareness raising campaign, which includes tailored messaging on various platforms to combat disinformation, holding presentations and seminars to various groups including journalists and students, and developing a website to raise awareness of EU policies in general (<https://what-europe-does-for-me.eu/>).

Member States also presented information campaigns to increase voter turnout, as well as national consultations on various EU issues. Particular attempts are being made to reach first-time voters and also to reach out to civil society. One Member State reported of establishing a special taskforce to counter foreign influence in elections, as well as of contacts with social media platforms on various levels. Another Member State produced a bilingual website and guidance for elections, and a 24-hour helpline for disinformation.

It was particularly emphasized that these complex issues are being taken very seriously, with polarisation and fake news presenting a threat to our democracies. One Member State informed about the upcoming high level conference which will be dedicated to awareness raising and countering disinformation. Similarly, it was reported that concerning hybrid threats, an inter-ministerial working group has been formed.

EEAS also briefly informed on their awareness raising activities, including visits to various capitals and engaging with journalists. It also mentioned a dedicated website euvsdisinfo.eu.

3. Exchange of views with the Presidency of the Council and the European Parliament

The Romanian Presidency provided an overview of the intensive preparations done in the Council to increase the resilience of electoral systems. A coordinated comprehensive European approach was agreed in the Council Conclusions on securing free and fair elections of 19 February, covering non-legislative actions to among other things increase cyber-resilience, secure cooperation among competent authorities and combat disinformation. Amendment to Regulation 1141/2014 was also noted, as well as conferences organized by the Presidency. The Presidency stressed in particular the importance of a comprehensive approach to the available EU and national instruments and forming effective links between relevant authorities and actors.

A representative of the Cabinet of President of the European Parliament welcomed the strong cooperation achieved on all levels, and emphasised the importance of facing the challenges in a joint effort. He stressed that the EP strongly welcomed the election package, which addresses the multiple challenges to electoral resilience, such as transparency, cyber security, data protection, and online application of offline rules. Especially since there are no uniform rules, cooperation is key.

4. Discussion on the table-top exercise

COM provided additional insights on the exercise to test cyber resilience in the context of European elections taking place on April 5, gathering around 80 representatives from relevant national and EU bodies and testing policies and capabilities against a range of crisis scenarios.

5. Engagement with the Rapid Alert System

EEAS gave a presentation on the technicalities of the Rapid Alert System (RAS) and its interlinkages with the European cooperation network on elections.

In the following discussion COM underlined the need for national election networks to include in its membership the contact point for the RAS, to ensure that the coordination and information sharing is effective. The majority of MS confirmed that this is already the case, while several are in the process of establishing such links. For some Member States, the contact points for the RAS and the European cooperation network on elections are the same.

One Member State provided insights into its contribution to the RAS, which is still in the exploratory phase to identify what works best. It was also reported that there was cooperation with another Member State in countering a disinformation campaign. It was particularly stressed that the context of the network is not only to exchange information, but also to find partners to work together. There are many available tools, and it would be welcome if experience is shared. Another Member State had established a group to help transfer what they receive from the RAS to a wider audience, including non-governmental fact checking and monitoring groups.

6. Involvement of civil society - observation of elections

A representative of OSCE/ODIHR referred to many resources available: reports, support from ODIHR by sharing good practices, legal reviews, or handbooks about key issues. It was also pointed out that ownership and public trust can be positively affected by civil society observations. Election-watch.eu, a network of election observers that originated in Austria in 2013, gave a presentation on their work ensuring independent scrutiny of the voting process by coordinating with civil society observers. A representative of Votewatch Europe gave a presentation on their work and presented the voter information tool <https://yourvotematters.eu/en/>.

5. Role of social media platforms in promoting transparency and awareness raising

During the discussion of the role of the media platforms in implementing the election package recommendations it was stressed that trainings to candidates and parties should be also provided in local languages. Some improvements on the side of social media platforms have been noticed in the recent period. It was pointed out that LinkedIn is not participating in the Code of Practice, although many politicians share content there, with the same applying to Snapchat, where especially young candidates are active.

MS reported on their national engagement with the social media platforms. Most MS have established contact with the media platforms.

6. Role of the networks

The Director-General of DG Justice and Consumers gave an overview of the activities and achievements of the last meetings of the European cooperation network on elections, and in general since the adoption of the election package in September 2018.

One Member State presented in detail how elections are protected, building on a decentralised electoral network where collaboration is very important and has been very successful over the past years at increasing turnout. Another Member State referred to its national cyber-security exercise, and reported that the national network is working so well that already smaller groups have developed working on specific issues.

It was furthermore mentioned that the meetings of the European network formed the basis for the establishment of national networks, where in some cases for the first time all branches of the government are working together to secure elections. Most MS reported that new links and collaborations have been formed between the various actors. It was especially noted that prior to the election package contact had usually been bilateral, but now there were meetings of larger groups bringing authorities from different branches together. Some MS stressed that the national networks should be operational without break, and in relation to all elections held.

The Commission's post-election reporting was briefly discussed and early comments from MS were sought.

5. Data protection and micro-targeting

COM presented on how micro-targeting techniques can be used to interact with and appeal to voters on an individualized basis. Relevant parts of the Commission guidance on the application of Union data protection law in the electoral context were presented. The European Data Protection Board elaborated on the Statement on the use of personal data in the course of political campaigns adopted at its Eighth plenary session on 13 March. It was stressed that organisations which process data have other duties, such as being transparent and to provide sufficient information to those who are being processed. Political parties and candidates must be ready to demonstrate their compliance. Specific consent is the only way to render processing lawful.

6. Closing remarks and AOB

COM reminded about the REC programme grant call still being open until April 11. The next meeting of the network will take place shortly after the elections. Member States were invited to share all the relevant materials.