



MINUTES

2nd Strategy Seminar of the European Cooperation Network on Elections

24-25 February 2026

Brussels

The European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE) held its 2nd strategy seminar from 24 to 25 February 2026. COM chaired the meeting, which was attended by a broad audience from ECNE's membership. The first day's sessions also welcomed representatives from Ukraine and Moldova.

Day 1: Opening session

COM Director-General Ana Gallego highlighted the priorities of the European Democracy Shield and presented ECNE's plans in this context to intensify exchanges on critical topics, with new working groups being established on the use of AI in electoral processes, safety in politics, political campaigning and election integrity.

Safety in politics

Discussions revolved around the preparation of a dedicated guide of best practices under the European Democracy Shield, focusing on the protection of political actors, particularly women and local politicians, from violence, threats, and online harassment. The work will feed into a Commission recommendation and support capacity-building, data collection, and voluntary commitments from key stakeholders. Existing EU legislative instruments, such as the Digital Services Act, and the AI Act, were highlighted, along with national initiatives like action plans, codes of conduct, and threat assessment tools.

EL emphasised the need for a coordinated EU response to identify patterns and share best practices, particularly regarding online harassment targeting women. SI noted that while physical violence is rare, online hostilities have increased and highlighted the importance of a continuum between online and offline threats. They shared manuals on safety according to the DSA and cybersecurity for candidates. LU mentioned voluntary agreements among political parties to avoid insults and fake news, though enforcement remains limited. IE reported research indicating some abuse of parliamentarians and political candidates, mostly online, and highlighted a task force on safe participation. AT and FI observed increasing hate speech in social media but no significant physical violence. NL noted threats mainly online during local elections. EE and BE stressed the

need for data collection and an inclusive approach, particularly for LGBTQ and women. **RO** and **UA** discussed the criminalisation of threats. **FR** presented the state legal protection for politicians, including reimbursement for security expenses. **SI** and **MT** proposed limiting the publication of personal data, such as home addresses, to enhance safety.

MD highlighted the ineffectiveness of codes of conduct without enforcement mechanisms. **SK**, **CZ**, **HU**, and **SE** noted that safety in politics is primarily a law enforcement issue, with coordination between election authorities and police. **PT** mentioned a separate entity dealing with political party issues, while **LT** emphasised the deterrent effect of political violence on female politicians. **DE** introduced a single contact point for coordinating responses to threats, and **IE** referenced a fund for candidates to enhance home security. **FI** and **UA** stressed the importance of victim support and awareness-raising among police. **PT** and **SE** highlighted the broader issue of disinformation and polarisation affecting political participation.

Political campaigning/funding

Participants highlighted challenges and solutions related to the transparency and accountability of political funding, including campaign financing, in light of the European Democracy Shield. **SI** and **SK** noted difficulties in regulating third-party involvement in campaigns and balancing transparency with freedom of speech. **HR**, **UA**, and **MD** stressed that the use of foreign funds and cryptocurrencies can obscure financial flows, making detection and enforcement challenging. **LT**, **FI** and **MT** reported difficulties in tracing illicit funding, including cash donations and covert payments. **HR**, **EE** and **PL** pointed to fragmented oversight, insufficient communication between authorities, and limited political support for reforms.

IE, **SK** and **MD** observed that the rise of influencer marketing, digital fundraising, and synthetic media complicates transparency and enforcement. **IE** and **SK** highlighted that organic content by influencers often blurs the line between paid political advertising and free expression. **MD**, **CZ** and **RO** reported that the anonymity of crypto transactions hampers tracking and regulating political funding. **NL** called for updated regulatory frameworks. **IE** mentioned that a review was currently being undertaken of its national legislative framework on political financing and donations.

LT, **SK** and **MD** stressed the need for regular information sharing among competent authorities, joint investigations, and interinstitutional collaboration to detect and deter illicit funding. **PT** and **FI** advocated stricter rules on foreign funding, and better oversight of digital campaigning. **FR** and **LT** recommended leveraging tools such as the DSA and trackfin systems to monitor financial anomalies and ensure compliance. **PT** and **MT** supported proactive measures to prevent disinformation and covert funding before they escalate.

AI in elections

Participants discussed both the risks of harmful AI applications, such as deepfakes and disinformation, and the potential benefits of AI for improving election efficiency, voter engagement, and regulatory compliance.

MD reported deepfakes of electoral officials and AI-generated social media comments during the last elections, highlighting the difficulty of enforcing sanctions and ensuring transparency on spending platforms like TikTok. **PT** emphasised the urgency of regulating harmful AI content, noting that fast takedowns and prosecutions often come too late, especially outside election periods. **EE** and **LT** stressed the importance of legal clarity to prevent AI misuse from undermining public trust. **LT**'s Electoral Code explicitly prohibits disinformation and non-authentic behaviour.

SK and **AT** expressed concerns about AI-generated inaccuracies ('hallucinations') in chatbots,. **UA** highlighted the threat of AI-driven disinformation from foreign actors, particularly deepfake propaganda, and the need for decentralised AI systems to assess public officials' declarations.

SE, **PT**, **LT** and **HR** have developed or plan to deploy AI-powered chatbots to provide voters with accurate information on voting procedures, candidate details, and election laws. **SE**'s chatbot will be tested internally before being made available to municipalities and voters.

EE uses AI to analyse legal rulings and streamline casework, while **LT** employs AI to monitor financial transactions related to political funding. **HR** is developing a public-facing chatbot to answer voter queries based on official website content.

SE collaborates with AI developers to prioritise accurate election information, while **RO** published a guide on preventing and combatting voter disinformation, which includes a chapter on AI-driven perception manipulation.

FI expressed interest in using AI for media literacy initiatives and **IE** mentioned the need to consider its impact on research/data analysis., **EL** proposed a three-pillar approach for the AI working group, focusing on legal frameworks, risk prevention, and threat response.

AI Office noted that the EU AI Act provisions on labelling obligations take effect in August, with a code of conduct and high-risk system guidelines forthcoming.

Electoral integrity

Discussions focused on the Commission's initiative to create a repository of common references and standards for electoral processes, building on existing work within the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE). The repository aims to centralise best practices, international standards, EU law, and practical tools to support electoral

integrity, resilience, and transparency. The repository should serve multiple purposes, including knowledge management, awareness-raising, planning, and learning for election officials, policymakers, and the public. Priority topics should include voting rights and inclusiveness, preparedness and crisis protocols, AI in elections, funding in politics and transparency, cooperation mechanisms and international observation standards, risk management and emergency response strategies.

FI highlighted its dual role in supporting both electoral authorities and policy development, while **IE** emphasised the need for public engagement and trust-building mechanisms. **SK** cautioned against forced harmonisation, stressing the importance of respecting national voting traditions.

SI and **EL** proposed a layered approach, with separate sections for practitioners, the public, and stakeholders. **SE** suggested a focus on first-time voters and young citizens, while **AT** noted the need for easy-to-understand language for non-experts. **FI** recommended using visual aids and infographics.

BE suggested including relevant figures in elections, such as the number of women candidates. **SI** would like to introduce links to fact-checkers and complaint mechanisms of very large online platforms.

Among the best practices that could be reflected in the repository, participants mentioned **IE**'s post-election polling station reports (good practices and lessons learned), **SE**'s checklists and first-time voter materials, **AT**'s call centre and FAQ website, **BG** real-time vote recording for transparency and **PT**'s webinars for young voters.

Keynote speech

Commissioner Michael McGrath (European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection) highlighted the importance of democracy and the challenges it faces in the current geopolitical landscape. He also presented the European Democracy Shield, a comprehensive initiative aimed at safeguarding and promoting democracy across the Union. **Commissioner Michael McGrath** stressed that a crucial component of this initiative is ECNE, which facilitates valuable exchanges and mutual support among Member States. ECNE will become more operational, building synergies with other work strands, and retain its status of key entry point on electoral matters.

COM will establish a Repository of common references and standards, based on ECNE exchanges and work with ECNE to enhance transparency and accountability in electoral funding. Additionally, **COM** will develop guidance on the responsible use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with ECNE's working group. To ensure safe, equal, inclusive and resilient political engagement, **COM** will also prepare a Guide of best practices and a Recommendation on safety in politics.

Closing session

COM Deputy Director-General Irene Moozova thanked the participants for their contributions and highlighted the importance of their work. She emphasized that COM will continue to work with ECNE to deliver the new actions and priorities announced by the European Democracy Shield.

Day 2: Roundtables on ECNE work programme and working methods

Participants identified the following key priority topics for the joint election resilience mechanism for 2026–2027: artificial intelligence, disinformation, cybersecurity, political funding, voter engagement, and political advertising. Several Member States indicated their intention to use the mechanism soon. There was broad support for short-term visits allowing national experts to witness election processes in other Member States and for extending the mechanism to include experts from candidate countries.

Discussions also revolved around the implementation of effective monitoring mechanisms, early identification of potential issues, and the sharing of information to enhance overall preparedness for elections. Member States actively shared their experiences, challenges encountered, and best practices in managing election-related incidents. Key outcomes from the meeting included the recognition of the need to establish common interests and thresholds for sharing information on such incidents. Additionally, the meeting underscored the benefits of sharing post-election reports, lessons learned, and experiences related to incident monitoring, and explored the potential for creating a taxonomy to categorise incidents, such as cyber-attacks, in specific areas. To facilitate information sharing, the value of having a moderator on ECNE’s collaborative space was also acknowledged.

Participants agreed that continuous engagement with other entities, as currently conducted, is highly relevant. This includes collaboration with international organisations, civil society, academia, and EU bodies and institutions. These exchanges complement the core discussions between Member States, which remain ECNE’s primary added value. Participants also noted the value of both practical exchanges, like tabletop exercises, and theoretically framed discussions, such as the conceptual analysis of specific electoral topics.

National approaches to election observation, the regulation of exit polls, and the potential for standardising election monitoring practices were also discussed. Several Member States proposed developing methodologies for analysing poll influence and comparing transparency practices across the EU. Some Member States reported challenges with observer requests and highlighted the need for accreditation to ensure accountability.