



MINUTES

Ad-hoc Meeting of the European Cooperation Network on Elections

17 December 2024

Online

*The ad-hoc meeting of the **European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE)** took place online on 17 December 2024. This session was opened and closed by Deputy Director General, Irena Moozova.*

COM welcomed the participants and explained that this ECNE session focused on strengthening coordination, preparedness, and resilience in the face of challenges affecting electoral integrity across the EU, particularly considering upcoming electoral cycles in 2025.

Upcoming: The next meeting of the network is scheduled for 5 and 6 February 2025, focusing on ECNE's way forward during the Commission's 2024-29 mandate (strategic seminar).

Minutes

Opening remarks by Deputy Director-General Irena Moozova (DG JUST)

Deputy Director General Moozova opened the meeting recalling that democracy requires free and pluralistic media, freedom of expression, transparent governance, and inclusive civil society participation. She also emphasized that 2024 has been a pivotal year for European democracies, given the elections to the European Parliament and the large number of national parliamentary, presidential, regional, and local elections, as well as referenda in the Member States. She noted that the Commission will provide an in-depth assessment on the elections to the European Parliament in the forthcoming post-election report, to be published in 2025. She also highlighted the importance of protecting democracy in the shifting information landscape. While the digital space enhances political communication and engagement, it also brings challenges such as disinformation, information manipulation and the lack of transparency in funding and AI-driven interference. She stressed that a proactive approach, which also maintains respect for fundamental rights and democratic values, is therefore crucial. The Deputy Director-General emphasised the relevance of the European Cooperation Network on Elections as an important forum for collaboration in this regard. On the path forward, she explained the need to strengthen operational capacity and improve situational awareness to prevent and address electoral challenges swiftly which also will be one of the key priorities of the 'European Democracy Shield'.

Election Preparedness

Introduction by European Commission (JUST (C4))

COM explained its work on enhancing election integrity which began with the adoption of the 201 Commission Package on free and fair European elections, that included a Recommendation on election cooperation networks, online transparency, cybersecurity, and combating disinformation. This encouraged the establishment of national election cooperation networks providing key oversight functions. Additional Commission initiatives included the 2020 European Democracy Action Plan, the 2021 package on electoral integrity, and the 2023 Defence of Democracy Package. As part of the latter, the 2023 Recommendation on fair, inclusive, and resilient electoral processes focuses on enhancing preparedness for elections across the Union.

DSA and Elections

COM reported that it has initiated formal proceedings against TikTok for a suspected breach of the Digital Services Act (DSA), in relation to TikTok's obligation to properly assess and mitigate systemic risks linked to election integrity, notably in the context of the recent Romanian presidential elections. COM outlined the DSA elections toolkit which also includes tabletop exercises to simulate specific scenarios. The DSA mandates transparency reporting obligations, requiring platforms to clearly outline election-related risk policies in their terms and conditions. COM emphasised its extensive collaboration with DSA authorities, independent regulators in Member States, electoral authorities, media authorities, and CSOs. Additionally, the Working Group on Integrity of the Information Space is developing an elections-specific toolkit for DSA coordinators.

Code of practice on disinformation

COM noted that Code of Practice on Disinformation signatories can cooperate within a flexible framework that allows collaboration between civil society fact-checkers and platforms. The Code is set to evolve further into a Code of Conduct on Disinformation. The European Media Digital Observatory (EDMO) plays a key role in this context by monitoring disinformation, providing situational awareness, issuing early warnings, and sharing debunked information.

European Parliament, Spokesperson's Unit

EP informed that it actively mobilised voters for the 2024 EP elections through a large communication campaign. This was built on cooperation across departments, ensuring preparedness for incidents and maintaining readiness for both cyber and physical threats. Collaboration was extended to fact-checkers, civil society, and other stakeholders, while media grants sought to support media pluralism and address disinformation. The EP also noted that the new special committee on the European Democracy Shield will also focus on fact-finding activities, as it is a non-legislative body.

Cyber Coordination task force

COM reported that the Integrated Political Crisis Response arrangements (IPCR) has been activated in information-sharing mode to monitor election-related situations, particularly through the cybersecurity taskforce, which involves various Commission Services. Significant cyber activity was observed during Moldova's October 2024 elections. COM is also updating the 2017 blueprint on cyber crisis management, further developing it as part of the Preparedness Union Strategy.

Discussion with Member States

SE emphasized preparedness despite no large-scale foreign information manipulation or interference (FIMI) attacks. Preparations for the national election in September 2026 are underway, also involving law enforcement. The Swedish Psychological Defence Authority plays a key role in building capacity and awareness related to FIMI. It also participates in the RAS-network.

NL outlined its resilience-focused approach, which does not differentiate between foreign and domestic interference. Key measures include the website *Isdatechtzo.nl*, election tables discussing risks, webinars, and guidance on responding to deepfakes. Despite several DDoS attacks, no major influence operations were reported in the last elections.

PL referenced global developments and is preparing for elections in 2025.

DE reported on the upcoming Bundestag elections. The Federal Ministry of the Interior is managing the shortened preparation periods. Germany's taskforce, comprising intelligence services and ministry representatives, conducts regular threat analyses, monitors platforms, and informs political actors and the public.

HR highlighted preparations for its 29 December elections. During the June European Parliament elections, HR implemented cybersecurity measures, including improved email security, vulnerability checks on IT systems, and detailed cybersecurity protocols. The HR election authority has collaborated with platforms like TikTok, Meta, and X, requesting prioritisation of official pages, labelling of political ads, removal of disinformation, and suspension of political advertisements upon request.

European Data Protection Board (EDPB)

EDPB presented its structure and mandate, highlighting its role in ensuring consistent application and enforcement of data protection laws across the European Economic Area.

Cybersecurity and Critical Infrastructure: Summary of Questionnaire Findings

COM explained that the 2023 Recommendation on elections outlines specific measures to protect election-related infrastructure and enhance resilience against cyber and hybrid threats. These measures emphasize preparedness, early warning, risk management, response and recovery capacity, as well as communication and awareness-raising initiatives. Support for these efforts is available through the Joint Election Resilience Mechanism.

Patterns of foreign interference and situational awareness (risks, experiences, methodologies, tools, etc)

Rapid Alert System

EEAS reported that its work on elections is structured around three key pillars: awareness, capacity building, and information sharing. The Rapid Alert System is a network of experts addressing FIMI and disinformation. It has played a crucial role in the lead-up to elections, focusing on dedicated efforts and information sharing. EEAS highlighted a notable increase in FIMI attacks during the 72 hours before the elections to the European Parliament.

The EEAS provided significant support to RO authorities during the recent presidential elections. Updates are regularly shared with colleagues through the Rapid Alert System.

COM also reported that the Commission has maintained internal coordination on disinformation and information manipulation. The focus includes analysing disinformation both online and offline, addressing inauthentic behaviour, troll farms, social media targeting, media literacy initiatives, media freedom, and social media analysis.

The former BE Presidency explained that electoral resilience was a key focus. They emphasized a growing awareness of how social media platforms, like TikTok, can influence election outcomes. The IPCR mechanism was named as a valuable tool, with the Rapid Alert System facilitating information sharing among Member States. They highlighted that elections are inherently cross-sectoral.

Discussion with Member States

RO shared insights on coordination with online social media platforms during the recent presidential elections. RO reportedly established efficient communication channels with platforms like Meta and TikTok during the preparation phases of the presidential and parliamentary elections. While communication with Meta was effective, challenges were noted with TikTok. Meta's systems allowed for detailed tracking of campaign expenditures. RO noted that once content is removed from one platform, it often migrates to another. Additionally, messages are not always focused solely on election topics, complicating oversight. A key challenge remains the jurisdictional limits of national authorities.

LT reported no direct cases of interference during the 2024 EP elections, but investigations uncovered foreign involvement in certain instances. These included a YouTube video featuring a political candidate in an interview with a Belarusian media outlet banned under LT law and listed on the EU sanctions list. Another incident involved official TV debates during the EU elections, where the LT-language debate was translated into Russian, likely using AI. Additionally, bot activities were detected on the accounts of political candidates. During election campaigns, Facebook was the most widely used social media platform, with other social media networks, including TikTok, being less influential.

FR presented the role of 'VIGINUM', a national service established in July 2021, to protect against foreign digital interference. VIGINUM's mandate is defensive, targeting inaccurate, misleading, or false information by foreign state or non-state actors. Its operations rely on a cross-monitoring system that detects and identifies threats at an operational level, reports to authorities, and raises awareness among stakeholders. VIGINUM noted that malicious campaigns had little measurable impact on the elections. They also noted challenges in verifying and measuring information manipulation campaigns.

Joint mechanism for electoral resilience – state of play (JUST (C4))

COM explained that in January 2022, the Commission began implementing the Joint Mechanism for Electoral Resilience, a capacity-building tool aimed at strengthening electoral processes. This mechanism supports the deployment of joint expert teams and facilitates expert exchanges between Member States. To date, RO, LT, HR, and SE have utilised this mechanism. The mechanism has also supported key initiatives, including the preparation of a compendium on e-voting, a guide on good electoral practices for ensuring accessibility for citizens with disabilities, and the organisation of a tabletop exercise on election cybersecurity in November 2023. The mechanism can also be employed to fund visits by Member States' election experts to countries actively negotiating EU accession. However, it is triggered only at the request of a Member State.

AOB

The upcoming ECNE Strategy Seminar, scheduled for 5 & 6 February 2025, will consist of plenary sessions, workshops, and panel discussions. Topics will amongst others cover a broad spectrum, such as inclusivity, foreign interference, election observation recommendations.