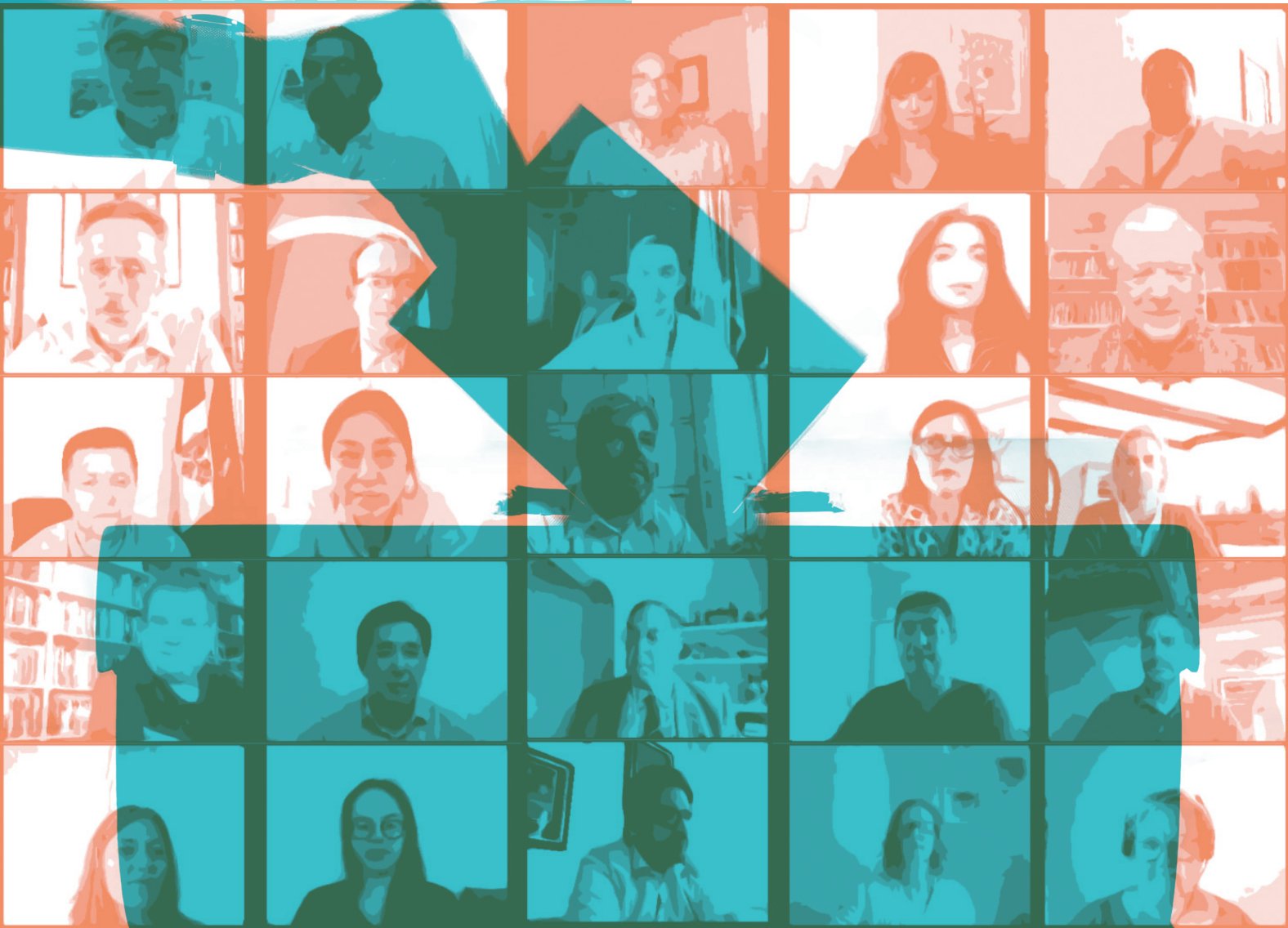


Elections in Europe

2020 / volume 15



Elections and Communications
Elections in Times of Epidemic

In focus: Georgia



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**Dear Readers,**

It is my great honor to introduce you to the 15th edition of 'Elections in Europe' – the annual publication of the Association European Election Officials (ACEEEO). This year, two topics of the issue are 'Elections and Communications - The role of Electoral Management Bodies in conducting and facilitating effective communication' and 'Elections in Times of Epidemic'.

The role of Election Management Body (EMB) in communicating the right message to voters and other electoral stakeholders such as domestic/international observer organizations, electoral subjects and the media, is critically important. Moreover, EMB's right strategy in informing all involved parties in pre-election, election, and post-election periods is increasingly prominent in the smooth conduct of elections.

The Election Administration (EA) should be the first source for all involved parties and voters when it comes to any election-related information which can be achieved by using appropriate communication tools. Different informational channels may support increasing voter participation, boost communication, engage all members of the community, and improve transparency and trust throughout the entire electoral cycle. Networking and passing message to the audience is increasingly important in the times of COVID-19 as this extraordinary situation showed different EMBs across the world how important is coordinated, goal-oriented and well-articulated approach in interaction with voters and other stakeholders.

This year, EMBs are tasked with the mission to conduct elections amid pandemic and comply with all regulations and restrictions imposed by health officials and simultaneously guarantee the transparency of the process and maintain voter trust. To meet international standards as well as comply with regulations is a challenge for any EMB across the world. But with challenges come opportunities and EMBs can make maximum use of online platforms for spreading the message and run campaigns for increasing voter awareness on electoral issues. There are different approaches and paths taken by various election administration when conducting elections in their respective countries but there is no one universal approach that may work for all, each case needs specific take and analysis; therefore, this publication will display several case-studies related to the key topics of this year's conference, why EMBs role in administering elections is particularly important these days, how important is external communication for ensuring informing voters and transparency of the electoral process, what are the challenges prompted by internet or more precisely social media and how to use its benefits.

I hope these exceptional papers will be interesting for all readers to boost their knowledge in 'the Role of Electoral Management Bodies in conducting and facilitating effective communication' and 'Elections in Times of Epidemic'.

Tamar Zhvania

President of the ACEEEO

Chairperson of Central Election Commission of Georgia

**Dear Reader,**

You are reading the 15th annual edition of the *Election in Europe (EiE)*, which is issued by the Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO), this year only in online format.

In the long (29-year-old) history of ACEEEO it happened only once that we had to cancel the Executive Board meeting and a 'mini-conference'. It was in 2010, when due to the Icelandic volcano eruption, we were not able to travel Chisinau, Moldova. Now, ten years later we had to move the activities of the Association to a digital platform due to the COVID-19. Let me first thank the Presidency-in-office, the Georgian Central Election Commission for their contributions to organizing the Association's meetings and the Annual Conference in an online format.

This pandemic has totally changed our lives everywhere. In the election world, the election officials have faced brand new challenges. Now we have learned some new categories of elections, like the election that simply "did not take place", in Poland. In this edition we gave an overview about the outcomes of our online seminars about the effect of the pandemic to elections.

In these days, communication is even more important than before. I recommend you the excellent related articles in this edition. During our conference, we are focusing on the external and internal communication issues of the EMBs, and we have a chance to discuss the new threat, the disinformation as well.

Furthermore, in this edition the ACEEEO community commemorates István Zsuffa, who helped the work of the organization in the past 20 years, and suddenly passed away in the beginning of 2020.

The pandemic, the disinformation, the incremental influence to interfere with the election processes – all give new challenges to election officials, who are always in the front line to defend democracy. The ACEEEO continues to support the election officials in order to guarantee our common mission: ensuring free and fair elections.

Enjoy the reading!

Zsolt Szolnoki
Secretary General

Effective EMB Communication, Disinformation and Cross-Regional Collaboration

Dr. Beata Martin-Rozumilowicz

Director for Europe and Eurasia – IFES

Daria Azarjew

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Introduction

Over the last half-decade, the importance of more effective election management body (EMB) communication has come starkly to the fore.

This is especially in context of foreign influence operations in a variety of countries and the impact that mis/disinformation has had on the ability of EMBs to put forward credible, evidence-based information. But it has also meant that they have had to increasingly take into account the proclivity of their voting publics to absorb this information in a manner that increases the integrity of electoral processes, rather than undermining public confidence in them.

Key in this relationship has been the building of cross-regional collaboration to better understand the problem at hand, but also to share emerging good practice examples to be able to respond to such problems in a more cohesive and forward-leaning manner. This has involved the introduction of platforms and fora in which EMBs can discuss emerging challenges in this space, talk to other practitioners, but also exchange perspectives with civil society actors and social media companies that are active in this space in order to be able to better mitigate the risks that this new environment holds.

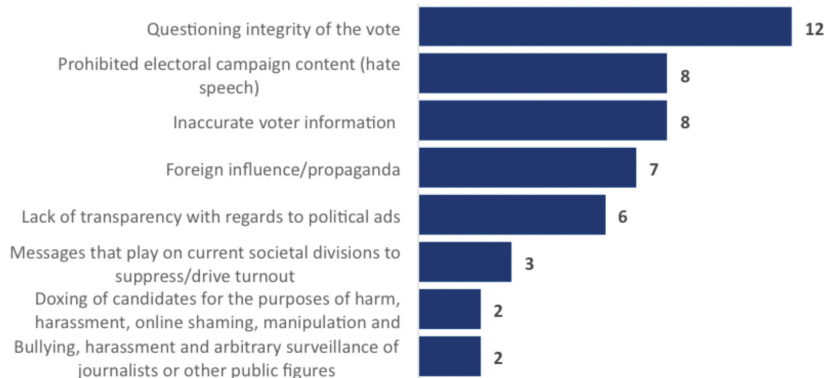
But it also opens the space for novel possibilities of interacting with voting populations in new and innovative ways; ways that allow for the wider and more accurate dispersal of truth-based information as an anecdote to the various disinformation campaigns that currently abound. With new and innovative thinking, perhaps it's possible now to imagine a future position in which voters are better informed, more nuanced in their ability to take in and understand information, and a more robust discourse around elections than has heretofore been possible. This paper seeks to explore these various angles and offer some possible avenues for further thinking and future implementation.

questions of how this context is generated, distributed, and propagated.¹ Yet less attention has been paid to the impact of these types of categorizations in electoral context and even less to the impact and response to the issue among electoral management bodies. Tentative steps have been taken by organizations such as IFES to better understanding this angle of the problem.²

But as well as understanding the issue theoretically, IFES has also attempted to create a community of good practice to better grasp this issue and to be able to respond in a more informed manner. In May 2020, IFES launched its Social Media, Electoral Integrity and Disinformation Working Group (SMEID) and held its inaugural event in an online format due to the already rampant global COVID-19 pandemic; 48 election officials from 13 EMBs around the region took part in the initial launch.

From that, a more robust co-operation is in the process of developing, which will hopefully lead to a sustainable platform for addressing these issues in the European and

Figure 1: "What are some of the main problems/challenges your institution faces with regards to dis/misinformation in your role in the electoral process?" (n=17)



Eurasian context. Following the initial meeting, IFES conducted a comprehensive survey to better understand the problem as it currently stands and the concerns of EMBs in this year of several important elections across the region. The results of this survey are presented in the next section.

What are the Issues?

Most expert discussions currently revolve around definitional issues of mis/disinformation, as well as around

1 See Howard (2020), *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracies from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

2 See Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity: IFES Working Paper, August 2019 and Preserving Electoral Integrity During an Infodemic: IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series, June 2020.

The EMB Perspective: An Analysis of Survey Results

In order to better understand the problems pertaining, IFES conducted the survey from 20-27 July 2020. Eight EMBs from across the region responded. The results of the research offer interesting insights on how significant of a challenge disinformation is to EMBs. It also helps identify what steps are currently being taken by these institutions to build public trust in the process.

The results offer clarity as to what aspects are the most important for EMBs in this area, but also underscore the shortcomings in terms of institutional capacity, tools and strategic coordination. As a whole, EMBs largely agreed that dis/misinformation significantly impacts their ability to conduct electoral process effectively and credibly. The results also underline that dealing with mis/disinformation and developing more effective communication strategies is a key area of concern.

Key Mis/Disinformation Challenges

When asked to highlight the biggest challenges their institutions face with regards to mis / disinformation, 70 percent of EMBs highlighted the integrity of the vote being questioned as a principal threat. Among other key challenges, respondents indicated inaccurate voter information, hate speech, as well as the presence of foreign influence and propaganda. Notably, these mirrored concerns that the majority of EMBs emphasized surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, noting how the pandemic has served to exacerbate the impacts of these persistent obstacles to electoral integrity. The pandemic un-

safeguarding information integrity, coordination with civil society and other state agencies, as well as research and social media monitoring, among other things. Despite this, all respondents commented that while these initiatives are potentially helpful in combating disinformation, they feel their institutions are either currently lacking capacity or are uncertain as to how to act on them.

Building Responsive Infrastructures

These insights suggest that while EMBs in the region are largely in agreement on the degree to which disinformation poses a threat to electoral integrity, they also feel ill-equipped to address this challenge without the appropriate skills, resources and regulatory frameworks in place.

Overall, the survey research indicates that institutions feel only somewhat prepared to respond to a crisis involving disinformation during an election in their country. When asked to evaluate their institution's capacity to respond to a disinformation attack on a scale of 1 to 10, results pointed to an average score of 6.41, suggesting that while EMBs are reasonably confident in their institution's role, their ability to face disinformation threats needs to be strengthened.

In this regard, EMBs highlighted several areas of concern which further emphasizes the importance of building the capacity of electoral institutions in addressing the challenge of disinformation. EMBs included a lack of proper skills and capacity to track, analyze, and anticipate a disinformation attack as well as their ability to effectively respond to one among their primary concerns. EMBs also stressed a lack of appropriate legal / regulatory frameworks in place, as well as a lack of sufficient resources for the proper implementation of existing legal / regulatory frameworks.

EMBs indicated that a lack of coordination with other relevant stakeholders also poses a challenge to their institution's ability to effectively address disinformation. These insights suggest that without the proper institutional capacity in place, the global community will not be able to build the necessary infrastructure to combat disinformation and foreign interference in the digital age.

This framework must be accompanied by the appropriate tools and services necessary to empower EMBs' capacity in safeguarding electoral integrity. Among these initiatives, EMBs

highlighted the importance of developing a communications strategy accompanied by strategic and crisis planning. These efforts would need to be complemented by effective cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs) and other electoral stakeholders in addition to social media tracking in concert with social media partners such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

A promising, albeit embryonic, resource set in this area are social media monitoring tools and early warning systems which, if properly applied, can be leveraged to anticipate, pre-empt and counter disinformation campaigns. Although only three election officials remarked that they are familiar

Figure 2: "What activities is your institution planning or considering for the future to support information integrity around elections?" (n=17)



doubtedly presents unique challenges, not the least of which is the troubling arrival of the 'infodemic' phenomenon. The infodemic provides a fertile information exchange landscape for malign actors to exploit the pandemic's fear component; a longtime tactic used in both traditional and digital media for disinformation attacks. This key challenge underscores the need for EMBs to become adaptable to increasingly fluid conditions.

Looking forward, respondents highlighted a variety of activities their institution will be undertaking to support information integrity around elections, including proactive communication and voter education strategies dedicated to

with tools and applications such as BrandWatch and Crowd-Tangle, these were noted as helpful, suggesting that greater knowledge-sharing may aid in empowering other institutions in this space.

Conclusions

From the analysis above, it is clear that there is widespread concern amongst EMBs that online mis / disinformation significantly impacts their ability to manage electoral processes credibly and effectively. As such, their ability to counter mis / disinformation is a key priority both for them, as well as for the wider democratic community. Within this area, the integrity of the vote, the ability to maintain accurate voter information, hate speech, foreign influence and propaganda remain key challenges for EMBs in this space. In this area, the development of explicit and comprehensive communication strategies will be crucial.

In the current environment, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges presented to EMBs by online disinformation. More specifically, this concerns the movement from direct to online communication, what information can be spread online through non-reliable websites, a lack of access for many to the internet, and perceptions that the pandemic will change how elections are held.

EMBs are only somewhat prepared to respond to crisis situations involving disinformation during an election in their country. While they feel reasonably confident in their institution's role when it comes to dealing with disinformation, this could and should be strengthened. Among the skills that EMBs highlight as missing are: a lack of skills / capacity to

track, analyze, and anticipate disinformation attack; a lack of skills / capacity to respond effectively to disinformation attack; a lack of legal / regulatory framework; a lack of coordination with other relevant stakeholders; and a lack of sufficient resources for proper implementation of the legal / regulatory framework.

EMBs believe that improved practices and tools from social media companies would enable them to better address the challenge of disinformation surrounding the electoral process. Among some of the policies, services, and tools that social media and technology companies could offer include: working with EMBs and public health authorities to disseminate trusted public health information and voter education; empowering the research community to monitor online disinformation through privacy-compliant access to the platforms' data; strategic planning and coordination with EMBs ahead of elections; and becoming more accessible and effective in enforcing the community standards when users or institutions report illegal content or disinformation.

In all of these spaces and across the Europe and Eurasia region, IFES continues to work with EMB partners to identify innovative solutions to the questions posed. Many of these efforts are currently ongoing ahead of key elections across the region scheduled this autumn. As such, they represent significant progress in moving discussions and solutions forward in this space, but much more important work remains to be done in the future. As this issue is bound to continue shaping democratic processes in the region in the coming months and years, responding to it cooperatively will be vital to ensuring electoral integrity thrives in the face of these emerging challenges.

Covid-19 as an Accelerator for Information Operations in Elections

Peter Wolf

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In the 1960s, the Canadian professor Marshall McLuhan coined the term *global village*¹ to refer to the interconnectedness of the planet that came along with advances in communications

that allowed information to reach all corners of the world in real-time.

In 2020, the World Health Organization introduced the term *infodemic*² to describe the huge volume of information,

creates the need for election managers to develop new strategies and responses to a range of online challenges.

In the current world landscape, an increasing and free flow of information is a necessity and competitive advantage. However, social media and online platforms have converted parts of the global information streams from an asset to a weapon of asymmetric warfare. On the online battlefield the vast majority of citizens are waking up in a war that they do not understand and does not even belong to them. In this confrontation, well-crafted propaganda can undermine democracy, opaquely tilt level political playing fields,

change the faith of nations, and potentially impact the world order.

We know the essential role of free, independent and reliable media to maintain a healthy democratic environment³ in the context of an information ecosystem that is constantly and intensively polluted. While traditional media such as TV, radio and newspapers remain an important source of information, we see falls in advertising revenue leaving these outlets under-resourced and we can see these outlets drowned out by less reliable online information sources.

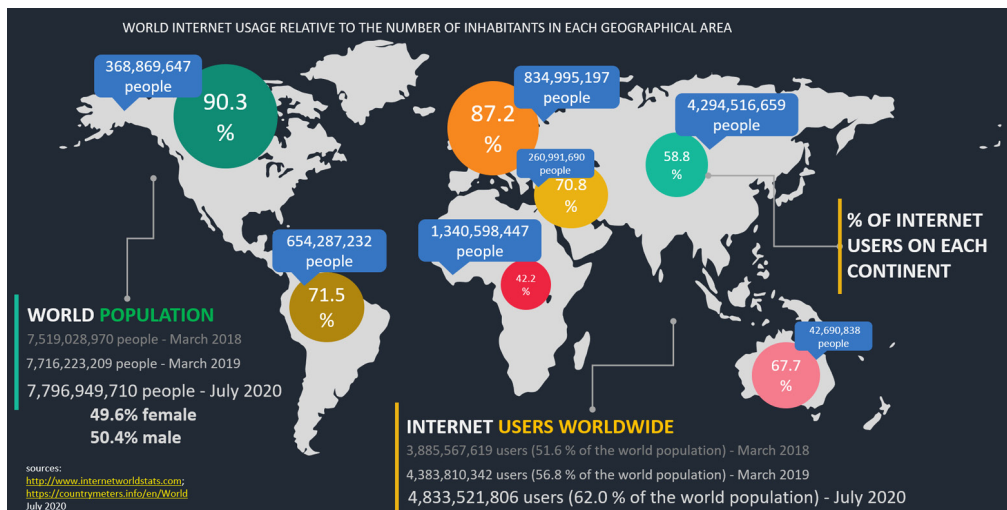


Figure 1. Internet penetration in 2020: The Covid-19 pandemic moves economic, political and social activities online and creates pressures to reduce the remaining digital divide fast and further grow the global village.

often misleading, disseminated in the context of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

As this infodemic sweeps through the global village it acts as an accelerator for information operations in elections and

1 A phrase with predominantly negative connotations used by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, written in 1961 and first published in Canada, Toronto University Press, 1962.

2 "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic" stated the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus during a meeting with foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, in February. United Nations, *UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis*, 31 March 2020, <<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-e2%80%98infodemic%2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>>, accessed 24 August 2020

Cyber threats and cyber-enabled information operations

The 2016 US presidential elections alongside the 'Brexit' referendum on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) brought these dynamics to global public attention. This led to an international debate on elections security with cyber-security and disinformation as central topics.

While in 2016 the US specifically experienced a seamless mix of hacking attacks and information operations, it soon became clear that a distinction between technological cyber threats and

3 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2019>>, accessed 31 August 2020

cyber-enabled information operations is essential for properly addressing both of them. Tackling each involves different resources in terms of strategy, human expertise and means.

For preventing hacking attacks and consolidating technical cybersecurity in elections, interagency collaboration has proven to be essential, and there are already many promising global examples⁴ of election administrators working together with other national authorities and government bodies on measures such as information sharing,

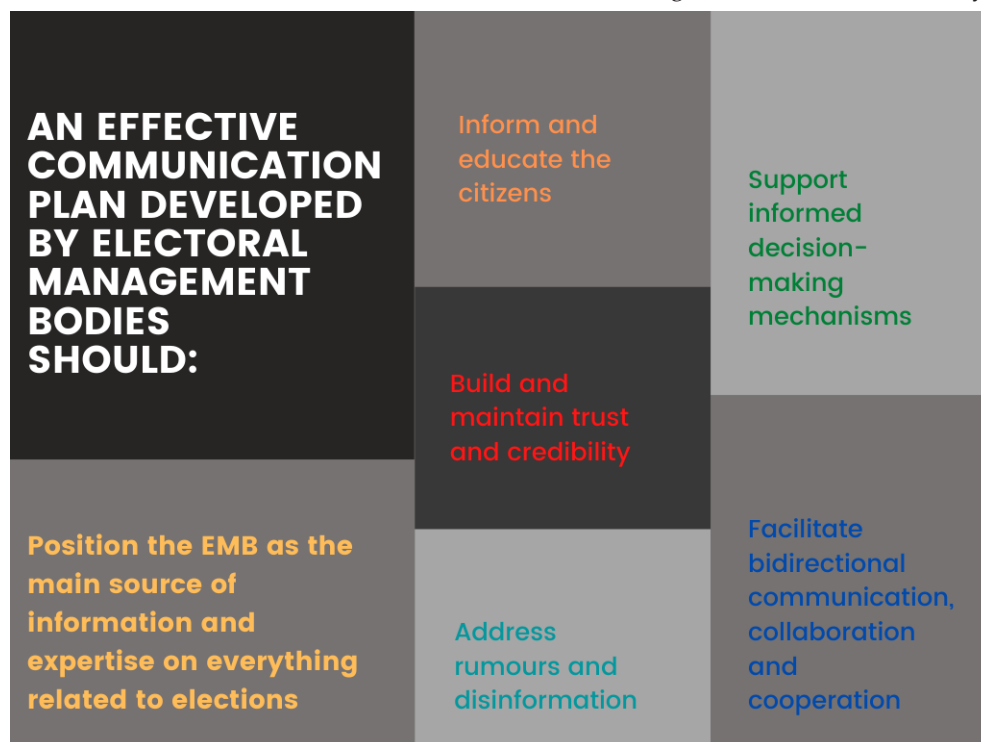


Figure 2. EMBs should adapt their communication plans to the emerging challenges

exchange of experiences, scenario planning and emergency response.

When it comes to securing a level electoral playing field and shielding democracy against online information operations arguably less progress has been made. Not least due to the need to carefully design any measures such that they do not endanger freedom of speech and due to the difficulty of distinguishing genuine political actors and legitimate online activity from foreign interference and other rogue actors. Caught in-between are citizens whose awareness and online literacy is falling behind the rapid developments in this area.

Also here a collaborative approach involving electoral management bodies, regulators, online platforms and civil society has been identified as a useful starting point. But much more needs to be done to achieve a better understanding of the magnitude of this problem, its impact on democracy and counter measures that are effective without being a threat to democracy themselves.

Adding the Covid-19 to the mix

With many elections postponed and others held in special conditions⁵, the COVID-19 pandemic created new entry points for information operations. It further amplified the impact of disinformation campaigns on a public that hardly built a limited level of resilience against this threat. This creates an increasingly favourable ground for malicious actors to escalate the already existing polarization by correlating it with the fear of the new disease, fears about permanently losing fundamental rights and liberties, and worries about the economic impact of the pandemic.

As scientific research only makes slow progress compared to the speed with which the new disease spreads, citizens are exposed to an overabundance of information that is not only contradictory but also manipulated at unprecedented levels. Processing the sheer amount of this content is very difficult and can increase the distrust against institutions and experts.

The immediate health risk of participating in elections associated with the COVID-19 outbreak puts even more pressure on the electorate's decision-making capacity, and one of the most undesirable consequences is abstention.

The impact on electoral contestants ...

The benefits of the online communication channels for voters, parties, candidates and EMBs are undeniable. They provide a favourable framework for public and participative debates, encouraging participatory citizenship. Candidates seeking to closely control their message may experience online media as a challenge, but by large political competitors recognize its huge potential for rallying support for their electoral campaigns, especially in times of pandemic, when in-person interaction has been limited.

With this online media and especially social media have become a dominant arena for public communications and the majority of the politicians understood that they have to use its features as primary means of engaging the electorate.

However, electoral contestants face the risk of losing an important part of the electoral capital by being slandered, suffering major image and credibility damage as a result of denigration campaigns based on false information.

4 van de Staak, S and Wolf, P (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019), *Cybersecurity in Elections, Models of Interagency Collaboration*, <<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/cybersecurity-in-elections-models-of-interagency-collaboration.pdf>>, accessed 23 August 2020

5 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Global overview: The impact of COVID-19 on elections*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>, accessed 25 August 2020

... and some conclusions for EMBs

For EMBs, challenges related to the infodemic can be identified across the entire electoral cycle. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of external and domestic bad actors could be on generating confusion on electoral procedures, given the last moment changes implemented as part of the measures to contain the spread of the virus. Hence, it is of critical importance that EMBs consolidate a trust-based relation with voters and other stakeholders, and make sure they remain regarded as a primary, reliable source. This can be achieved by:

- Understanding technical cyber security issues and cyber-enabled online information operations as two distinct challenges, each requiring distinct resources and countermeasures. What both cyber-related threats have in common is that related responsibilities are commonly shared between multiple agencies. As each agency may only have expertise for one piece of the puzzle and many grey areas exist, inter-agency collaboration becomes essential for effective responses.
- Utilizing the new online environment, and particularly social media as platforms for informing and educating the voters on how to exercise their democratic rights in times of pandemic safely. EMBs have to develop skills and strategies for disseminating their messages on promoting free, fair and transparent electoral processes and for navigating through the informational smog without becoming another one of its victims.

- Expecting the trend towards political online advertising to get further accelerated by the pandemic and the need for meaningful regulation and oversight to increase. This will in turn make it ever more important for EMBs to cooperate with other agencies, including specifically telecom, media, and advertising regulators. It will also create the need for EMBs to build their capacities in this area and utilize opportunities to exchange experiences⁶ with their peers regionally and globally.
- Acknowledging that despite all efforts that may be undertaken there is no such thing as immunity against manipulation of the information space though disinformation. Although there is no panacea for this multifaceted issue and the solution is composed of various correlated measures that all have something in common: education (for institutions and citizens alike).

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⁶ <https://www.idea.int/news-media/events/online-political-advertising-and-microtargeting-latest-evolutions>, accessed 31 August 2020

The 21th century paradigms related to communication of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova with young voters

Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova



Technology and globalization era comes along with a range of challenges and effects on the ways of communication within the society, but also brings some benefits. Developing the cyberspace and the global Internet network served as a precondition for information to dominate and

influence both the virtual and real arena.

From the beginning of the 90s, several studies and researches on the use of the Internet, as a tool for political and socio-cultural communication, occurred. Utopians believe that Internet could change political life by creating direct democracies, implementing electronic voting and other electoral technologies. Moreover, online communication could play a crucial role in the domestic and foreign policy of the state, as it would allow relevant information to be provided to numerous people, with minimal costs. On the other hand, sceptics consider the Internet an auxiliary communication tool, arguing that the decisive impact of communication can be obtained only offline.

Changes that have taken place since the mid-1990s until now on the Internet as a communication tool by switching from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 prove migration trends of communication in the online space. Thus, if Web 1.0 was characterized by a predominance of unidirectional communication, intended only for presenting information in virtual space, then, in Web 2.0, we see the possibility of a bidirectional communication process, and Web 3.0 involves an individual approach, based on person's behaviour and interests, by using smart technologies and artificial intelligence. The political technology consultant, Dick Morris, argues that new modern technologies do not change the essence of conventional political institutions, they only give new energy for activating citizens through the Internet, and the mere transmission of information to a target group is not enough, it must get involved in an attractive activity. Thus, communication with voters through the Internet must not only call for the final act of voting, but also promote an informed and conscious vote, developing the civic spirit in the process of learning democracy throughout life.

Due to advanced technologies, communication in the 'Electronic Century' has virtually removed distances and allows you to find the information you want or contact someone just with a click, free or for a fee. Virtual communication is convenient and has many obvious advantages: digital speed; simplicity in language; geographical non-limitation;

information accessibility in different fields; more intense communication between people who know each other or not in everyday life as well as the possibility to continue or to stop virtual communication with certain people.

On the other hand, virtual communication has disadvantages. Some of them relate to the lack of trust in the person with whom the communication takes place and not



knowing the identity of the interlocutor. Others relate to the impossibility of perceiving sincerity and honesty of the interlocutor, impossibility of perceiving nonverbal messages and gestures, presence of illusions regarding the appreciation of the other, distortions are much more common, and realism and responsibility are much lower. As this type of communication remains a selective communication channel, which cannot have a major influence on the behaviour of the voter or current policy, comparing advantages/disadvantages in perspective of offline communication is necessary. According to James Borg, a body language consultant, human communication consists of 93% body language and paralinguistic signs, while only 7% consists of words. Thus, body language communicates much more information and helps to create a positive emotional climate between both parties, which calls on collaboration and creates credibility and trust in the communication process through methods and techniques of persuasion, leadership and involvement. Another advantage of face-to-face communication is the reduction of the risk of misunderstanding information compared to email or telephone communication. On the other hand, the precious face-to-face communication does not guarantee that the entire audience listens and this disadvantage might be generated by fatigue, exhaustion, lack of interest, complemented by frustration with how the person speaks, thinks or shows through the tendency to compare the self with the others.

At the same time, these above-mentioned aspects are also difficult to prevent or avoid in online communication. It is therefore important to establish particularities of different groups of voters in the communication process in order to identify the right channels for transmitting information, according to mass consciousness, age peculiarities, needs, expectations and possibilities of assimilating information.

Online presence of CEC is very important since trends are constantly changing, and the Internet is gaining momentum, thus becoming a norm. Communicating on virtual platforms, the institution provides for information on the official pages www.cec.md, www.voteaza.md, as well as on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and other platforms. When launching the new and improved versions of the above-mentioned web pages, in 2018, a range of modern technologies and applications were used to facilitate browsing and accessibility, ensuring better data security. Informative materials placed on the web page and used in information campaigns (guides, posters, etc.) were drawn up in Romanian and translated into the language of national minorities. In addition, two information brochures were prepared in the audio version and the easy-to-read version (dedicated to people with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties). Moreover, videos are dubbed into Russian (which has the status of an interethnic language of communication) and are accompanied by translation into sign language.

To engage young people in electoral processes largely and to mitigate the phenomenon of absenteeism by effectively promoting offline communication, over the last two years CEC has launched and conducted a series of civic and electoral education activities. Such activities aimed to get participants acquainted with electoral procedures, promoting informed and conscious voting among young people, and raising their awareness of the importance of the elective positions.

Analysing the relevant communication component related to electoral knowledge of young people, we could take stock of both training activities and actions that involve the presentation and development of certain talents, skills or hobbies. Thus, we manage to combine several components,

which help us better achieve our goals - competition, creating information/motivation products from the perspective of the target group, education and information, motivating participants that their product will be used to inform/educate voters.

INNOVOTER is an IT electoral creative laboratory for young people. At the first edition in 2018, participants identified ideas and solutions for presenting voter turnout and election results, according to the new mixed electoral system. At the second edition of InnoVoter, young people had the mission to create an interface for displaying data on the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns. Other events where young people showed their creativity on electoral issues was **Filmmakers** - participants were trained by professionals in the field of video production and elections in order to prepare personalized and innovative motivational spots for the elections. During **VotART** creative workshop, young people with drawing or graphic illustration skills took the responsibility to create motivational posters for the general local elections of 20 October 2019.

Preparing and motivating representatives of different political organisations to get involved in electoral processes was possible through two editions of the **National Youth Forum** organised in 2018 and 2019. The participants worked for 3 days in a row to organise a simulation of Election Day as truthful as possible. The distribution in groups was random, so that each workshop include young people from different political parties. Depending on the group they represented (political parties, electoral bodies, civil society), young people created political parties, registered their candidates, prepared and carried out electoral campaign, participated in public debates, acted as members of electoral bodies, observers, media or ordinary active citizens.

From motivational speeches to scientific studies and research has evolved the third edition of 'CCET Open Talks' Conference, organised by the Center for Continuous Electoral Training (CCET) under the Central Electoral Commission. Young researchers from the universities from the Republic of Moldova have conducted studies on citizen participation in electoral processes. The youth research addressed topics

such as: the referendum - an instrument of participatory democracy, the influence of the mixed electoral system on the involvement in politics of young people in Moldova, the role of civil society organisations in increasing civic education and electoral participation of citizens, and the accessibility in the electoral process, a defining issue in expressing the right to vote.

Civic education is also achieved through **public lessons** conducted in educational institutions across the country and the **Open Doors Day** activity within the Central Electoral Commission and the Center for Continuous Electoral Training. Such activities can be organised on request, throughout the year or during annual events – *Young Voter's Day*, *Interna-*





tional Election Day, International Democracy Day, Diaspora Days etc. The main communicated topics refer to the electoral system, procedures, rights, responsibilities and ways of getting involved in elections, presentation of the system of electoral bodies. The question/answer session is also organised and informative materials are distributed.

Election week in schools was a pilot exercise that aimed to inform students (most of them were first time voters) about their rights and obligations as voters, about the principles and values of democratic elections, but also on the importance of participating in elections.

Door-to-door information campaign is carried out by volunteers disseminating information at the students' place of residence, within university campuses.

'Elections on road' mobile communication campaign was a large-scale action, which helped CEC members and officials communicated face-to-face with citizens and separately with young people in approx. half of the territorial-administrative units of the Republic of Moldova. This exercise aimed to strengthen the relationship between the electoral management body and citizens, as well as facilitating direct and close communication on new changes to the electoral code, the importance of participation in elections and the role of electoral staff and local leaders in organising elections.

#eHUB discussion platform, launched by CCET in 2017, has positioned itself as an effective communication tool on various topics, bringing together national and international electoral experts and representatives of various electoral subjects, but also young students. The events are broadcast online, which significantly increases the audience.

The partnership established between CCET and the *Association of Librarians* of the Republic of Moldova resulted in 70 librarians in 40 local-

ities participating in BRIDGE seminars. The main purpose was to give librarians the opportunity to be acquainted with modern methods of civic education and information that can be used in their daily activities, to turn the library into an electoral information centre.

Applying an analytical and interactive learning methodology that allows participants to use new knowledge on principles of democracy and political participation in a much broader context. Learning methods through playing have ensured a high interest from young people to get involved, to learn and to compete. *Electoral quizzes and debates* are organised at the regional level, culminating with a national stage.

Following the civic education activities or after electoral period ends, face-to-face, online or telephone questionnaires/public opinion polls are organised. The polls focus on several aspects related to the appreciation of the information campaign, the public's perception of access to voting, public opinion on online voting, citizens' perception of CEC and CCET and public confidence in these institutions and electoral process, citizens' opinion of electoral violations. The detailed analysis of the polls allows for a more efficient planning and adaptation of CEC and CCET actions in the field of communication with the public.

Although CEC and CCET make a consolidated and continuous effort to educate and inform young people, their involvement in the socio-political life of the country is lower than the citizens of other age groups. The phenomenon of absenteeism is characteristic for all states with a democratic regime. But in case of countries going through a transition to democratisation, it represents a form of passive protest of citizens against the government that did not meet their electoral expectations. In this way, voters express their distrust in the political class, but also in the government, therefore



the data received from the electoral authorities, which are impartial and apolitical, are viewed with scepticism and distrust.

Comparing the turnout of young people in the last national elections, we note that 8.5% out of 1,453,013 voters who participated in the Parliamentary Elections of 24 February 2019 were aged between 18 and 25, and 25.7% - aged between 26 and 40. In the General Local Elections of 20 October 2019, 6.9% of the total number of 1,173,834 voters who cast their vote were young people aged between 18 and 25, and 23.2% - aged between 26 and 40.

In addition, in the 2019 Parliamentary Elections, out of 326,422 voters included in the voters list aged between 18 and 25, 37.8% have voted and out of 941,144 people included in the voters list aged between 26 and 40, 39.7% have votes. In the General Local Elections, 313,659 young people aged 18-25 were included in the electoral lists, of which 25.8% cast their vote, and out of 935,396 people aged 26-40 – voted 29.1%.

Actions of communication, information and education of citizens in an active and participatory spirit is a mission assumed by the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova in the process of promoting good governance. However, in order for things not to be misinterpreted and suspicious, a total synergy must be created between all actors involved in electoral processes, public authorities, media, civil society, political parties, government/ opposition and the informed voter.

Given the new global COVID-19 challenges that the 21st century civilization is going through, we are drawn into reviewing the communication agenda achieved through classical methods and showing more flexibility and engagement in the development of digital communication technologies at its maximum. The computer, the television and the Internet are extraordinary tools when are being used in moderation and for personal development. The Internet, whose importance and use is often disputed, must become a tool through which messages inspire confidence and evoke emotions to motivate the public to take action and be informed.

The century of communication and technology brings a flow of information that has no borders, being intensely promoted in the online space through posts, video messages, images, and blogs with different topics. Modern technologies offer accessibility 24 hours a day, including offline events (conferences, round tables, forums, etc.), as well as various informative materials such as posters, banners, flyers, vid-

eo spots, etc. At the same time, online information is difficult to control, thus influencing the formation of public opinion directly or indirectly. Therefore, enhanced efforts must be made to prevent and combat misinformation and/or false/ inaccurate information. A virtual space is to be created, where the values and principles of democracy connect the desire of citizens to implement advanced electoral practices and to get actively involved in the social and political life of the country.



Elections and Communications - The role of Electoral Management Bodies in conducting and facilitating effective communication

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Communication of electoral management bodies with voters has become the part of contemporary institutional culture. Also, communication is indispensable as an instrument which contributes that public perceive elections as credible. Electoral commissions are largely responsible for public perception of electoral process, but also for creating general picture of overall electoral environment, also in periods when elections are not held. Providing citizens with relevant information, besides being desirable, has been prescribed in relevant international instruments and national legislation as an obligatory behavior. Apart from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, there is a very explicit provision in International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states : “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and thoughts of any kind, regardless of frontiers, whether orally, in writing, in print or in the form of art, or by any other means of your choice.”¹

The obligation to provide information refers to electoral bodies as well as to other public institutions. This right has been further developed both in national legislations and other regulations and also by providing conditions that would allow that this right becomes practically enforceable. The High Representative’s comment which refers partially on this issue, states: “Freedom of expression, assembly and association are essential conditions for the effective exercise of the right to vote and must be fully protected. Positive measures should be taken to overcome specific difficulties, such as illiteracy, language barriers, poverty, or impediments to freedom of movement which prevent persons entitled to vote from exercising their rights effectively. Information and materials about voting should be available in minority languages... The free communication of information and ideas about public and political issues between citizens, candidates and elected representatives is essential. This implies a free press and other media able to comment on public issues without censorship or restraint and to inform public opinion.”²

In addition to the obligations which are prescribed by international regulations and national instruments, communication itself is very useful and productive to electoral bodies, given their role in the electoral process. Through regular communication, the election authorities are able to present the transparency and accountability of their work, as well as to explain the decision-making process that may be considered controversial by the public in sensitive political moments. In defining the communication policy, the external and internal aspects of exercising this competence can be distinguished.

The external aspect concerns the relationship of the election administration with the stakeholders. First of all, this refers to communication with voters, candidates, political enti-



ties, NGOs, Parliament etc. In that way, electoral authorities are strengthening the legitimacy of the whole electoral process because transparency is a prerequisite for achieving the desired electoral credibility. It is clear that election administration bodies cannot be held accountable or in control of the correctness of all aspects of the election process, but their role is indispensable to the integrity of electoral legitimacy. “Building up credibility is a major challenge for electoral authorities. Elections should not only be democratic, but should also appear to be democratic. In other words, credibility presents a dual challenge: one that is fact-based and administrative, and one that is political, public relations and image-related. Credibility is a complex matter, as it cannot be legislated, demanded or defined. It is a combination of what

¹ Article 19 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

² Adopted by the Committee at its 1510th meeting (57th session) on 12 July 1996.

we see and what we believe; in other words, it is the combination of transparency and trust. Transparency is extremely important and in high demand when there is a lack of trust in the system. Transparency does not create trust, but rather substitutes for it. People can evaluate and judge that which they can see, and transparency provides tangible, empirical evidence for evaluation.”³

When it comes to the internal aspect of communication, it implies that the election administration bodies build an internal structure that will meet the required needs. It refers first of all to human resources that are in the possession of public relations knowledge and skills. EMB should certainly engage spokesperson who will communicate with the public, but also develop an entire system of efficient flow of information within the institution itself. This communication must be two-sided and range from EMB members to the Secretariat and vice versa. Only in this way all relevant information can be properly processed.

As communication becomes an increasingly important tool in conducting the electoral process, so does the position of public relations departments become a more priority issue. Such a public relations department should have a significant position within the institution, and it is recommended that the most responsible public relations person has a significant hierarchical position in order to be able to communicate on a daily basis with members of the commission as well as experts from other institutions, and also with representatives of other top-level stakeholders.⁴ When it comes to the skills and also the powers that person should possess, the following is stated: „This requires excellent communication and diplomacy skills as well as the ability to think strategically by communication directors and staff. It also requires the communications department to have regular access to all EMB departments, including operations, and to be included in senior-level deliberations. Although the head of communications will have limited decision making powers outside of his or her department, the director will need to be well informed on the workings of the institution and any issues in the electoral process so that he or she can deal with it with the media. Typically, the director of communications is responsible for all of the work of the communications department. The director may serve as the spokesperson for the EMB and represent it in public events and in the media for everyday affairs. The director should also be a senior officer in the EMB. The director’s responsibilities also include leading the strategic development, implementation and management of the organization’s internal and external communication strategies.”⁵

In addition to establishing an internal structure with adequate human resources, the electoral bodies must also make certain analyzes or strategies to determine adequate means for achieving the set goals. It is primarily about defining adequate communication channels. Many EMB present their activities with traditional communication tools such as



radio, television, newspapers, brochures, manuals, conferences, round tables, etc. Each of these communication tools brings certain advantages and disadvantages when it comes to the reach they can have on public opinion. For this reason, it is important that the electoral bodies determine in their analyzes the priorities and objectives, but also the groups to which the message is intended. One communication channel does not exclude another, but it is possible to determine the most effective way to send a message in a particular context.

In line with the general changes in technological development, many commissions worldwide decided to be present on social networks. The advantage of social networks is having direct contact with the electorate and stakeholders, as well as communicating with stakeholders in real time. Social media also provide true mutual communication since followers are able to contact the election authorities directly, ask questions and get answers. In this way, one of the primary goals is achieved - the legitimacy of the electoral process. Also listening the needs of the electorate, can activate auto-corrective mechanism which can be useful for institutional work evaluation. That ultimately leads to an improvement in the efficiency and professionalism of the electoral bodies.

Engaging new audiences seems like one of the appropriate goals that can be achieved by using social media. International IDEA’s global survey of EMBs showed “that interactive communication platforms help EMBs reach a wider audience and convey information to specific social groups which they may not have been able to access previously. Social media can play a vital role in communicating with a wide and diverse population and can assist an EMB to better understand the needs of various demographics within

3 Strengthening Electoral Processes and Systems throughout the Hemisphere: The Role of the Media in Electoral Campaigns and the Relationship Between Electoral Management Bodies and Political Parties Second Inter-American Electoral Training Seminar, 51

4 Media and Elections, A Guide for electoral practitioners, United Nations Development Program, 60

5 Ibid.

an electorate and the ways in which cross sections of society participate in elections and engage with politics in general. Many EMBs have identified youth, minorities and women as members of the electorate who may be less engaged with electoral and political processes but who can be reached through effective use of social media platforms.”⁶ In addition to this goal, the use of social networks can help to perceive the electoral authority as transparent and professional, which is of particular importance for the accountability of an EMB.⁷

Using social networks to genuinely communicate with voters who have the ability to respond to published content leads to confidence building in the electoral process and strengthening its legitimacy. However, the use of social networks carries certain challenges and risks, and each EMB should carefully analyze the possible consequences that this may entail, as well as to have a protocol and exit strategy to avoid any arbitrariness. It is almost an unprecedented and never definitive list of possible risks that may arise, but most commonly mentioned are those that concern: The legal framework and internal procedures; negative posts, the spread of misinformation, using social media in conflict and post-conflict contexts, unauthorized or fake sites and active social media platforms.⁸

However, more and more electoral bodies are opting to use social networks regardless of the risks involved. However, the benefits of transparency and accessibility seem to outweigh the risks. However, the importance of this issue is also demonstrated by the Report adopted by the Venice Commission on Digital Technologies and Elections, which states: “The internet-based services have enriched and diversified news sources, facilitating individuals’ access to information and their decisions on the most crucial matters in democracy, notably on the choice of their legislature. However, at the same time, information disorder – misinformation, disinformation and malinformation – may distort the communication ecosystem to the point where voters may be seriously encumbered in their decisions by misleading, manipulative and false information designed to influence their votes. This environment potentially undermines the exercise of the right to free elections and creates considerable risks to the functioning of a democratic system.”⁹ However, considering all the risks and ways of acting in the case of unwanted behavior is a necessary part of the planning of any election administration body that seriously and systematically wants to access its existence on social networks.

Electoral authorities exercise their primary role by organizing elections and conducting all those actions that ensure that elections are performed in accordance with legal regulations. However, it cannot be overlooked that election commissions are only one of the actors in the electoral process, and that its activity must be viewed in a broader context.

Electoral authorities are not only executors of administrative electoral procedures, but their role in the social mosaic is much more significant. In this regard, Michael Bratton points out: “While elections and democracy are not synonymous, elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments, but as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation”.¹⁰

In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary that the electoral bodies constantly revise their own procedures in order to contribute, together with other actors, to enhancing the integrity and credibility of the electoral process. Given the constantly changing circumstances that are taking place, communication on all relevant electoral issues remains one of the key instruments for deepening the legitimacy of the electoral process.

⁶ Social Media, A Practical Guide for Electoral Management Bodies, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IDEA, 2014

⁷ International IDEA 2006a, 223

⁸ Social Media, A Practical Guide for Electoral Management Bodies, A Practical Guide for Electoral Management Bodies, Ibid. 31

⁹ Joint report of the Venice Commission and of the Directorate of information society and action against crime, Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 119th Plenary Session, June 2019.

¹⁰ Bratton, Michael, “Second Elections in Africa”. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(3), 1998, 52

Elections in the Time of Covid-19

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Covid-19 threatens global public health and democracy. The new normal is that there is no normal. Credibility is essential for gaining public support to effectively fight Covid-19. It is also vital for organizing elections during a pandemic. Credibility can easily be

lost if leaders and governments fail to act responsibly.

The lack of transparency and the phenomenon of fake news threaten public health and election integrity. At the outset of the pandemic, the Chinese Government was not transparent about the seriousness of the virus. Physicians in China who discovered the virus were silenced like Dr. Li Wenliang, who was one of the first doctors who identified the virus and who tried to alert the world. He was reprimanded by authorities in Wuhan and sadly died after treating Covid-19 patients.

Transparency and effective communications are essential to gain public cooperation to mitigate Covid-19. In 2020, Election Management Bodies (EMBs) have relied on transparency and communications while organizing safe, credible, and secure elections.

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has identified 86 countries with elections this year. Of these, 64 countries have postponed elections. On August 15, 2020, New Zealand became the latest to postpone parliamentary elections which will now be held in October. Some of the countries postponing elections this year include Bolivia, France, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, and Singapore. Other countries like Israel and South Korea proceeded with scheduled parliamentary elections. Israel's elections took place on March 2nd before Covid-19 had hit the country. South Korea proceeded with parliamentary elections and developed Covid-19 mitigation protocols.

For the most part, election officials have performed well during the pandemic. Fake news and false information undermine elections. Gaining public credibility requires transparency and accurate communications to set the record straight. EMBs should regularly inform stakeholders such as voters, the media, political parties, public officials, and civil society.

A Council of Europe white paper entitled, *Elections and Covid-19*, wrote "Free and fair elections are the very foundation of our democracy, not some ritual which can be suspended when convenient."

France held the first round of municipal elections on March 15, 2020, with Covid-19 mitigation procedures that included temperature checks, face masks, hand sanitizers, and social distancing. Only 45% of the French electorate participated in the first round. Rising Covid-19 cases caused postponement of the second round to June 28th with voters having the option to vote in-person or by proxy. Voter turnout for the second round was 40%.

South Korea experienced one of the earliest outbreaks of Covid-19. With an effective testing and contact tracing system, South Korea effectively controlled the spread of the virus. Polls showed that the public gave the government high marks for their handling of the pandemic. This encouraged the country's National Election Commission (NEC) to proceed with scheduled parliamentary elections on April 15th.

The NEC devised a Covid-19 protocol for voters and poll workers on election day that included temperature checks, face masks, disposable gloves, and hand sanitizers. Even Covid-19 patients were able to vote from home or hospital. To ensure transparency, the NEC provided live coverage of the vote count. Voter turnout was 66% and South Korea showed how safe and credible elections are possible during a pandemic.

The Polish presidential election was postponed from May 10, 2020 to June 28th and the runoff until July 12th. Elections were organized by Poland's National Election Commission. Like France and South Korea, the NEC adopted Covid-19 mitigation procedures. On election day, voters and poll workers were instructed to socially distance, wear face masks, use hand sanitizers, and check temperatures. The NEC offered the option to vote in-person or vote by mail. Turnout for the first round on June 28th was 64% and was 68% for the second round.

In late July, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced postponement of legislative council elections until 2021. The official reason was for safety concerns due to Covid-19. Recent polls suggest that the true reason was to avoid embarrassing China because pro-democracy parties were expected to win legislative elections in a landslide.

On November 3, 2020, the USA will hold presidential and congressional elections. The USA currently leads the world in numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths. The virus has impacted the lives of all Americans and has strained the US healthcare system with almost 6 million Covid-19 cases and nearly 200,000 deaths.

At the outset of the virus, the US Government was slow to respond to Covid-19 and lacked hospital beds, ventilators, personal protective equipment, medical personnel, and tests. Job losses have impacted the economy and 48 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits in July.

The US Government's credibility is being undermined by its lack of transparency, slow response, and conflicting communications. This credibility gap is impacting the November elections. The US President's unsubstantiated attacks on the integrity of elections in the USA undermines election credibility. His attacks on postal voting, combined with recent changes the US Postal Service, are creating chaos that threaten voting in November.

Elections in the USA are administered by 25,000 state and local election administrators. Significant improvements in

election administration have been achieved in the past 20 years. In 2002, the US Government increased funding for upgrading voting equipment. The federal government also created the Election Assistance Commission to provide guidance and support to state and local election officials.

Professional associations like the National Association of Secretaries of State, National Association of State Election Directors, and the International Association of Government Officials promote professional election administration. These organizations encourage information sharing on all aspects of elections including Covid-19 mitigation.

In the USA, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends several Covid-19 mitigation steps for the November election. These include postal voting, early voting, dedicated voting centers, and procedures to keep voters and poll workers safe.

In 2020, 13 American states postponed presidential primaries in response to Covid-19. Many states have expanded postal voting to reduce the risk to voters and poll workers. For the November election, 34 states offer “no excuse” postal voting. Another 8 states permit “with excuse” absentee voting by mail, with Covid-19 considered a legitimate excuse. Six states allow postal voting by voters who cite an excuse, but Covid-19 is not considered a legitimate excuse.

Public health professionals are working with election officials to develop voter information to provide for safe elections. The American Public Health Association with counterpart organizations have launched an on-line guide called *Healthy Voting* that offers information on how to vote safely. (<https://www.healthyvoting.org>)

For election day, all polling stations should follow CDC recommended guidelines including temperature checks, regular cleaning of voting equipment, hand sanitizers, face masks, social distancing, and adequate ventilation. In addition to increased postal voting, states have expanded early voting, and some have dedicated voting centers. To facilitate postal voting, there will be more ballot drop boxes adjacent to city or county election offices to avoid delays with the US mail.

Covid-19 impacts the ability of candidates and political parties to campaign. Because of restrictions on public gatherings, political parties and candidates are relying on video conferencing, social media, and traditional media to communicate. This year both US political party conventions used remote video conferencing.

The Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) in Warsaw raised concerns about the need for “authentic campaigns” to give voters the chance to make well-informed choices. ODHIR has highlighted that Covid-19 may give incumbents an advantage because they have more media access than their opponents.

International election observation is also adjusting to Covid-19. David Carrol of the Carter Center recently said that “Our knowledge of what election observers are able to do

is evolving as our knowledge of the virus evolves.” The Organization of American States (OAS) had to adapt during a recent election observation mission to the Dominican Republic. The OAS team adopted protocols to safely observe the Dominican presidential election on July 5th and other international observers did the same.

To safeguard election integrity during pandemics, natural disasters and conflicts, an effective and transparent communication strategy is necessary. EMBs should communicate via conventional news media and social media. For future elections, EMBs might consider alternate voting methods such as postal ballots and internet voting to enhance voter participation.

Information sharing by EMBs is essential to effectively deal with Covid-19 for future elections. A comparative review of the 2020 elections by organizations such as ACEEEO, IFES, and International IDEA would be a valuable resource for dealing with future pandemics.

Elections are under threat by the virus. To ensure that democracy does not become a victim of Covid-19, voters must stand up for their rights. EMBs must take extraordinary measures to ensure that every vote counts. The right to vote is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and must always be safeguarded.

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Russian experience in organizing voting in the context of pandemic

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Российский опыт организации голосования в условиях пандемии

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The Nationwide Vote on Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation was scheduled for 22 April 2020 by the Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation. On 14 March the Law of the Russian Federation on Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted, which gave the system of election commissions the authority to prepare and conduct Nationwide Vote.

From that moment on, the consistent preparation for the voting day has started. However, due to the deterioration of the epidemiological situation in the context of the spread of coronavirus infection, the CEC of Russia, by its Resolution of 27 March, suspended key procedures related to the organization of voting. But even during the period of self-isolation, the system of election commissions continued to coordinate work remotely, which, taking into account the appointment of the voting date for 1 July, allowed for an adequate pace of preparation.

In these unprecedented conditions, the main priority of the organization of voting has become the safety of life and health of all voting participants and members of election commissions. For this purpose, when developing the new Order, all the challenges and requirements dictated by the dynamics of the epidemiological situation in the country were analyzed. The foreign experience of conducting voting in the context of a pandemic was carefully studied. As a result, the entire system of election commissions focused on risk prevention measures.

In this regard, together with Rospotrebnadzor, the CEC of Russia developed recommendations for election commissions in order to prevent the risk of spreading infectious diseases and methodological materials for conducting voting taking into account the epidemiological situation.

In particular, they provided for testing of all members of election commissions and for provision of personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, sanitizers) for all voting participants and persons present at polling stations (volunteers, observers, media representatives). Every polling station was also equipped with temperature control, regularly treated with disinfection means, and voter flows were divided at the exit and entrance according to special markings.

At the same time, the system of election commissions could not lose sight of such a goal as ensuring the reliability and legitimacy of the voting results. Its achievement was

Общероссийское голосование по вопросу одобрения изменений в Конституцию Российской Федерации Указом Президента Российской Федерации было назначено на 22 апреля 2020 года. 14 марта был принят Закон Российской Федерации о поправке к Конституции Российской Федерации, которым полномочия по подготовке и проведению общероссийского голосования были возложены на систему избирательных комиссий.

С этого момента началась последовательная подготовка ко дню голосования. Однако в связи с ухудшением эпидемиологической ситуации в условиях распространения коронавирусной инфекции ЦИК России своим Постановлением от 27 марта приостановила ключевые процедуры, связанные с организацией голосования. Но даже в период самоизоляции система избирательных комиссий продолжала координировать работу в дистанционном режиме, которая с учетом назначения даты голосования на 1 июля позволила обеспечить адекватные темпы подготовки.

В этих беспрецедентных условиях главным приоритетом организации голосования стала сохранность жизни и здоровья всех участников голосования и членов избирательных комиссий. Для этого при разработке нового Порядка были проанализированы все вызовы и требования, диктуемые динамикой эпидемиологической ситуации в стране. Внимательно был изучен зарубежный опыт проведения голосования в условиях пандемии. В результате акцент в работе всей системы избирательных комиссий был сделан именно на мерах профилактики рисков.

В этой связи совместно с Роспотребнадзором ЦИК России были разработаны рекомендации для избирательных комиссий в целях профилактики риска распространения инфекционных заболеваний и методические материалы по проведению голосования с учетом эпидемиологической обстановки.

В частности, ими были предусмотрены тестирование всех членов избирательных комиссий и обеспечение средствами индивидуальной защиты (масками, перчатками, санитайзерами) всех участников голосования и лиц, находящихся на участках (волонтеров, наблюдателей, представителей СМИ). На каждом участке также предусматривались температурный контроль, регулярная санитарная обработка, разведение потоков голосующих на выход и на вход благодаря специально нанесенной разметке.

possible only by creating convenient and accessible conditions for citizens, maximum openness and transparency of all procedures, ensuring full-scale public control with the mandatory presence of observers during all forms of voting.

In comparison with the usual practice and taking into account the specifics of the epidemiological situation, the CEC of Russia has expanded and diversified the algorithms for Nationwide Vote. Their main tasks were to ensure the maximum dispersion of voting participants in time and space, and to observe the principle of non-contact in the information and preparatory work and the voting procedure.

In particular, it was planned to hold voting in the days before 1 July. However, this new electoral practice should not be considered early voting, as there are differences. Citizens could come to the polling station and make their choice within 6 days before 1 July, i.e. from 25 June to 30 June. Commissions worked in accordance with the recommendations developed by Rosptrebnadzor, observers and media representatives were present at polling stations, and the secrecy of vote and transparency of procedures were ensured. This way, it was possible to separate citizens in time to avoid large crowds of people at the sites.

For the same purpose, for the first time, the practice of voting outside the premises during these 6 days was implemented in grounds around buildings, as well as in localities where there are no polling stations.

Commissions also significantly expanded the possibility of voting at home for people with limited mobility. At the same time, a contactless procedure for such voting was provided. The commission went to organize voting at home, accompanied by observers. The voting participant was given a set that included a ballot paper, a home voting application form, a protective mask, gloves, and a pen. Members of the commission and observers observed a sanitary distance during voting. The citizen filled out the ballot at home, signed the application for voting outside the premises for the received ballot, then put the ballot in a portable voting box, and the application – in a special compartment, and put it all outside for the members of the commission.

The «Mobile voter» mechanism, which was successfully tested earlier in several election cycles, once again allowed our citizens to vote regardless of their place of residence. If a voting participant could not vote at the place of registration for personal reasons from 25 June to 1 July 2020, then, having previously submitted an application for voting at the place of location, they were able to exercise their constitutional right at any convenient polling station in any region of Russia.

For the first time, an experiment was conducted on remote electronic voting. Residents of two regions of Russia – Moscow and the Nizhny Novgorod region – were able to vote remotely. To do this, citizens had to have a confirmed account on the Unified portal of state and municipal services (functions) or a standard account on the portal MOS.RU (for residents of Moscow). The only requirement to cast your vote remotely was to submit an application, get confirmation and vote from 25 to 30 July without leaving your home on the portal 2020og.ru. The security and secrecy of voting was provided by the use of blockchain technology. 93.02% of the applicants used this form of voting. This is an impressive result for us, which opens up great prospects for the development of new electoral technologies.

При этом система избирательных комиссий не могла упустить из виду такую цель как обеспечение достоверности и легитимности итогов голосования. Ее достижение было возможно только созданием удобных и доступных условий для голосования граждан, максимальной открытости и прозрачности всех его процедур, обеспечением полномасштабного общественного контроля с обязательным присутствием наблюдателей при проведении всех форм голосования.

По сравнению с обычной практикой и учитывая специфику эпидемиологической обстановки, ЦИК России расширила и разнообразила алгоритмы общероссийского голосования. Их главными задачами стали: обеспечение максимального рассредоточения участников голосования во времени и пространстве и соблюдение принципа бесконтактности в информационно-подготовительной работе и процедуре проведения голосования.

В частности, было предусмотрено проведение голосования и в дни до 1 июля. Однако эту новую электоральную практику не следует считать досрочным голосованием, так как есть свои отличия. Граждане в течение 6 дней до 1 июля, то есть с 25 июня до 30 июня могли прийти на участок для голосования и сделать свой выбор. Комиссии работали с учетом разработанных Росптрбнадзором рекомендаций, на участках для голосования присутствовали наблюдатели и представители СМИ, обеспечивалась тайна голосования и прозрачность процедур. Таким образом удалось развести во времени потоки граждан, чтобы избежать большого скопления людей на участках.

С этой же целью впервые была реализована и практика голосования в эти 6 дней вне помещения на придомовых территориях, а также в населенных пунктах, в которых отсутствуют участки для голосования.

Комиссиями также были значительно расширены возможности голосования на дому для маломобильных граждан. При этом обеспечивалась бесконтактная процедура такого голосования. Комиссия выезжала для организации голосования на дому в обязательном сопровождении наблюдателей. Участнику голосования передавался комплект, который включал в себя бюллетень, бланк заявления о голосовании на дому, защитную маску, перчатки, авторучку. Члены комиссии и наблюдатели во время голосования соблюдали санитарную дистанцию. Гражданин заполнял бюллетень дома, расписывался в заявлении о голосовании вне помещения за полученный бюллетень, затем опускал бюллетень в переносной ящик для голосования, а заявление – в специальный отсек, и выставлял все это наружу для членов комиссии.

Механизм «Мобильный избиратель», успешно ранее апробированный за несколько избирательных циклов, вновь позволил нашим гражданам проголосовать вне зависимости от места жительства. Если с 25 июня по 1 июля 2020 года участник голосования не мог по личным причинам проголосовать по месту регистрации, то, предварительно подав заявление о голосовании по месту нахождения, он получал возможность реализовать свое конституционное право на любом удобном участке в любом регионе России.

Впервые был проведен эксперимент по дистанционному электронному голосованию. Проголосовать дистан-



In the context of a complex epidemiological situation, the CEC of Russia decided to abandon house-to-house rounds in order to avoid additional concerns and creation of risks for the health of citizens. To exclude the possibility of physical contacts, the commissions focused on contactless ways to inform citizens about voting. These are videos on television and on the Internet, outdoor advertising (posters, memos), information clusters on the Internet, our website-aggregator Конституция2020.рф, the website of the CEC of Russia, the Information and reference center of the CEC of Russia.

An important step in ensuring transparency and openness in the preparation and conduct of the Nationwide Vote on Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation was the signing of agreements between the CEC of Russia and the Public chamber of the Russian Federation, the Commissioner for human rights in the Russian Federation on 17 June 2020.

More than 1,600 public organizations, 36 NGOs and 18 political parties have signed agreements with the Public chamber of the Russian Federation to participate in monitoring of the Nationwide Vote. As a result, the maximum transparency of the process was achieved during the Nationwide Vote – 526 thousand observers conducted total monitoring in all regions and of all types of voting, and video surveillance was used in 80 of the 85 regions. There was a tremendous amount of work behind this impressive result!

The CEC of Russia, together with the Association of volunteer centers, also conducted fruitful information work during the preparation and conduct of the Nationwide Vote. A large-scale information campaign of the all-Russian volunteer corps «Constitution Volunteers» was held in all regions of Russia from 15 June to 1 July 2020. More than a hundred thousand people took part in this unprecedented project. Volunteers told everyone in detail about the essence of the proposed amendments to the main law of the country and the features of the upcoming vote at three thousand information points located in public places.

In a difficult epidemiological situation, the CEC of Russia sought to ensure that all citizens had the opportunity to express their will in the form they preferred. A wide range of voting opportunities was offered for this purpose. The existence of several possible electoral procedures is itself a confirmation of the democratic nature of the Nationwide Vote, a concentrated expression of direct democracy.

The vote was held in an unprecedented public environment: 11 thousand journalists represented 2.5 thousand different media outlets, including the world's leading publications. Video surveillance was organized in 81 regions of the country. The absolute majority out of more than 600,000 appeals received by the «hotline» of the CEC of Russia were of a reference nature – «how and where can I vote?» Only 120 appeals were considered as signals of possible violations at the stage before the vote, and they were all sent to regional leaders and law enforcement agencies to respond.

The system of entering protocols from all polling stations has reached an unprecedented speed! There has never been such a rapid introduction of protocols in Federal-level campaigns in Russia.

More than a million members of election commissions, observers, media representatives, law enforcement officers were at the polling stations and completed the multi-day

ционно получили возможность жители двух регионов России – Москвы и Нижегородской области. Для этого граждане должны были иметь подтвержденную учетную запись на Едином портале государственных и муниципальных услуг (функций) (ЕПГУ) или стандартную учетную запись на портале MOS.RU (для жителей Москвы). Все, что требовалось, чтобы отдать свой голос дистанционно – это подать заявление, получить подтверждение и с 25 по 30 июля проголосовать, не выходя из дома на портале 2020og.ru. Безопасность и тайна голосования обеспечивалась использованием технологии блокчейн. Этой формой голосования воспользовались 93,02 % подавших заявки. Это впечатляющий для нас результат, открывающий большие перспективы развития новых избирательных технологий.

В условиях сложной эпидемиологической ситуации ЦИК России приняла решение отказаться от подомовых обходов, чтобы не вызывать дополнительные опасения и не создавать риски для здоровья граждан. Чтобы исключить возможность физических контактов, комиссии сделали акцент на бесконтактные способы информирования граждан о голосовании. Это ролики на телевидении и в Интернете, наружная реклама (плакаты, памятки), информационные кластеры в сети Интернет, наш сайт-агрегатор Конституция2020.рф, сайт ЦИК России, Информационно-справочный центр ЦИК России.

Важным шагом в обеспечении прозрачности и открытости подготовки и проведения общероссийского голосования по вопросу одобрения изменений в Конституцию Российской Федерации стало подписание 17 июня 2020 года соглашений ЦИК России с Общественной палатой Российской Федерации, Уполномоченным по правам человека в Российской Федерации.

Соглашения с Общественной палатой Российской Федерации об участии в наблюдении за ходом общероссийского голосования подписали более 1600 общественных организаций, 36 НКО и 18 политических партий. В результате в ходе общероссийского голосования была достигнута максимальная прозрачность процесса – 526 тысяч наблюдателей вели тотальное наблюдение во всех регионах и за всеми видами голосования, в 80 из 85 регионов применялось видеонаблюдение. За этим впечатляющим результатом стояла колоссальная работа!

ЦИК России совместно с Ассоциацией волонтерских центров также в период подготовки и проведения общероссийского голосования вели плодотворную информационную работу. С 15 июня по 1 июля 2020 года во всех регионах России прошла масштабная информационная кампания всероссийского добровольческого корпуса «Волонтеры Конституции». Более ста тысяч человек приняли участие в этом беспрецедентном проекте. На трех тысячах информационных точек, расположенных в общественных местах, волонтеры подробно рассказывали всем желающим о сути предлагаемых поправок в главный закон страны и особенностях предстоящего голосования.

В сложной эпидемиологической ситуации ЦИК России стремилась, чтобы у всех граждан была возможность выразить свою волю в той форме, которую они предпочли, для этого был предложен широкий спектр возможностей для голосования. Само по себе наличие несколь-

process of all-Russian vote, each fulfilling their important and sensitive historical mission.

109 190 337 citizens were included in the lists of voters. 74 215 555 voting participants came to the polling stations, that is 67,97 percent. 57 747 288 citizens of the Russian Federation answered «Yes» to the question put to the Nationwide Vote: «Do you approve the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation?», which is 77.92 percent of those who took part in the Nationwide Vote.

ких возможных избирательных процедур – это и есть подтверждение демократичного характера общероссийского голосования, концентрированное выражение прямой демократии.

Голосование прошло в условиях беспрецедентной публичности: 11 тысяч журналистов представляли 2,5 тысячи разного рода средств массовой информации, включая ведущие мировые издания. В 81 регионе страны было организовано видеонаблюдение. Из более чем 600 тысяч обращений, которые поступили в ЦИК России на «горячую линию», абсолютное большинство носили справочный характер – как и где можно проголосовать? Только 120 обращений были расценены как сигналы о возможных нарушениях на этапе до голосования, и они все были направлены и руководителям регионов, и в правоохранительные органы для реагирования.

Система введения протоколов со всех участков для голосования достигла беспрецедентной скорости! Такого оперативного ввода протоколов в кампаниях федерального уровня в России еще не было.

Более миллиона членов избирательных комиссий, наблюдателей, представителей средств массовой информации, сотрудников правоохранительных органов находились на участках и завершали многодневный процесс общероссийского голосования, выполняя каждый свою важную и ответственную историческую миссию.

В списки участников голосования были включены 109190 337 граждан. На участки пришли 74 215 555 участников голосования, ил 67,97 процента. На вынесенный на общероссийское голосование вопрос «Вы одобряете изменения в Конституцию Российской Федерации?» ответили «Да» 57747288 граждан Российской Федерации, что составляет 77,92 процента от лиц, принявших участие в общероссийском голосовании.

Series of Online Symposiums and Recommendations on Elections in Times of Epidemic

ACEEEO Secretariat



The world was shaken suddenly and unexpectedly as the COVID-19 virus went worldwide causing grave economic and health consequences, affecting our daily lives as well as the political systems we live in. As to this latter, elections had to be adapted to this new setting, however, in the lack of precedents and universally applicable good practices, international dialogue was needed more than ever. We are proud that in such a hard situation the ACEEEO-community gathered and discussed the issue in a meaningful way, highlighting the most important considerations. We are grateful for our members and all the election-officials, who engaged in this discussion, nevertheless, as we highlighted in our Recommendations, the fight against the virus is far from over, so the most important is "is to keep an eye open and engage in the international discussion as much as it is possible."

1. The three Online Symposiums

To facilitate a meaningful discussion, the ACEEEO Secretariat with the support of CEC Georgia organized a series of online symposiums, to which all interested were welcome. The numbers show that there was a real demand for a robust conversation; 237 participants attended the three symposiums, 17 speakers shared their insights on countries from all over the globe, ranging from South Korea, through Poland to the U.S. Thanks to the number of participants, speakers and countries discussed, valuable considerations were brought up, and the effects of the virus could have been discussed both in a general way, highlighting the theoretical challenges, and in a country-specific way, examining in details how different countries handled the situation.

As to the general/theoretical level, it was highlighted at the First Online Symposium¹ that as it is shown by the diverse reactions by countries whether to hold or postpone elections, there is no single good solution, as there are competing considerations on both sides. On the one hand, periodic elections are the cornerstone of democracy, key means of political accountability, and fundamental rights are involved in the process – rights that may be violated if elections are postponed. On the other hand, the basic goal of a polity is to keep its member safe, and this may not prevail if elections are held. Moreover, legitimacy of the elections may be questioned due to low voter-turnout, and, if the organization of elections requires the modification of electoral legislation, then the stability of the regulation may come into question. Also, at the third Online Symposium² general remarks have been made

by Ingrid Bicu (National Expert, International IDEA) as to how to communicate in these challenging circumstances. An ideal communication was described as including trust building; positioning EMBs as the sole source of information; involving citizen education; addressing rumors and misinformation; and facilitating bidirectional communications.

These dilemmas were brought up in the discussion of specific countries. A recurring theme of the series was the Polish elections, where elections were supposed to be held 10 May. As Krystof Lorenz (Head of the Department, National Electoral Office of Poland), who presented the Polish situation to the community during the series, presenting in all of the symposiums, noted in the first Symposium only a few days before the elections the legal and other infrastructure related to among others postal voting was under construction, creating a highly difficult, if not impossible situation with regard to organizing the elections. This situation was criticized by Wojciech Hermeliński (Former Chairman of the National Election Commission, Former Judge of the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland), and Alexander Shlyk (Head of the Election Department, OSCE/ODIHR) as well.³ This led to a very strange elections, where polling stations remained closed, however, fortunately, the first round of the presidential elections held 28 June went smoothly, as Mr. Lorenz noted at the Third Symposium.⁴ The Polish case underlines that electoral legislation needs to be amended in a timely manner, involving all the relevant stakeholders in order to avoid situations that may harm the perception of elections as legitimate institutions.

Apart from the Polish case the community discussed other countries that have held elections. Such was South-Korea that was discussed in the First Symposium and that held successful election amidst the virus, 15 April. As it was underlined, safe conduct and high turnout should be regarded as a success, and there is much to learn from the South Korean experience, however, this success may not be easily adopted to other context, therefore when drawing insights from the said election, countries should carefully evaluate their own context – capacity to contain the spread of the virus; previously existing absentee voting system; availability of resources; political environment; civic duty and multilateral cooperation. The community also kept an eye on the U.S. events during the First and the Second Symposium.⁵ There postal- and absentee voting are in the center of the debate, and preparations were and are taking place in the U.S. that involve the cooperation of members of the nationally decentralized electoral administration. Fi-

³ See OSCE/ODIHR's opinion on the Polish Draft Act: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/3/450856.pdf>

⁴ Taking place at 2 July, the summary of the Third Symposium is available here: <https://aceeeo.org/en/events/third-online-symposium-elections-times-epidemic>

⁵ The Second Symposium took place at 4 June, 2020, a summary is available at: <https://aceeeo.org/en/events/second-online-symposium-elections-times-epidemic>

¹ Taking place at 5 May, 2020. The summary of the First Symposium is available here: <https://aceeeo.org/en/events/online-symposium-elections-times-epidemic>

² Taking place at 2 July, the summary of the Third Symposium is available here: <https://aceeeo.org/en/events/third-online-symposium-elections-times-epidemic>

nally, at the Second Symposium the participants had the chance to listen to presentations on the Croatian, Serbian and Ukrainian case, providing valuable insights on the constitutional/legal background of holding or postponing elections in times of epidemic.

2. Recommendations

Based on the above-mentioned discussions and the analysis of the documents of our partner organizations, the Secretariat drafted a Recommendations addressing the topic of elections in times of epidemic.

ACEEEO Recommendations – Elections in the ACEEEO region in times of Covid-19

I. Constant dialogue – Reviewing Interim Recommendations

The Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO) reacted to the COVID-19 crisis in a timely manner; we published our interim recommendations 9 April 2020. Our aim was to – based on the research of our partners – to give an overview of the situation, and to provide some interim guidelines that may be of help for EMBs. Since 9 April ACEEEO has organized three online symposiums, dealing with the topic of elections in times of COVID-19, touching upon experiences from Poland, South Korea, Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine and the U.S. with the participation of electoral experts and representatives of EMBs and international organizations.

Based on the experiences of these three events, as well as on the internal discussion within ACEEEO, we have reviewed and updated our recommendations. It is to be noted, however, that the pandemic is ongoing, as well as our dialogue, therefore reviews in the future might be necessary.

II. Elections in the ACEEEO region in times of COVID-19

Since the COVID-19 pandemic went worldwide, the ACEEEO community has been heavily affected by the virus. Certain countries decided to postpone elections, others introduced special measures in the conduct of elections. As our primary goal is to promote the institutionalization and professionalization of democratic procedures in the ACEEEO region, it is our mission to facilitate a meaningful discussion on elections in times of epidemic and provide alternatives, when it is needed. The current document brings up some of the most important considerations.

Nevertheless, it is a sad truth that the Covid-19 will be among us for some time, and that means that a continuous discussion is needed – today's good practices may be outdated tomorrow. Thus, the most important recommendation is to keep an eye open and engage in the international discussion as much as it is possible.

1. Key challenges

The main dilemma is whether to hold or to postpone elections during the epidemic. Neither of these options is exclu-

sively accepted or rejected; as of 31 August 2020, at least 70 countries and territories decided to postpone the elections, whereas at least 56 countries chose to hold elections.¹ This means that there is no general agreement whether elections should or should not be held in times of epidemic.

This is due to the fact that there are valid arguments on both sides. Postponing elections involves the risk that the postponement may be politically motivated and abused to prolong undemocratically the mandate of the incumbents. Moreover, in times of emergency the political process may be an important check on the executive. Furthermore, as International IDEA put it, 'elections are the opportunity for citizens to either reconfirm, or remove and replace, an elected representative or government. A decision to postpone an election suspends political rights, and as such undermines the social contract between a government and its citizens.'²

On the other side, holding elections may involve considerable risks. One of the most important risks is the low turnout. On the one hand low voter turnout in itself causes the decrease of legitimacy. On the other hand, as the epidemic is more dangerous to the elderly, the low turnout may be at the same time discriminative, thus distorting the results. Furthermore, as in person abroad voting may be impossible under the host country's emergency laws, those staying abroad but eligible to vote are also discriminated. Moreover, low turnout is not only present among the voters, but among poll workers as well. Technical and organizational difficulties are also caused by the virus. Technical and other organizational staff may be also reluctant to be present personally. A further risk is that elections may exacerbate the spread of the virus, and thus may imply health hazard. Moreover, as the International IDEA pointed out, elections 'might divert human and material resources from more urgent, potentially lifesaving activities.'³

Country-examples might be useful to prove that it is not impossible to hold elections in times of epidemic. In South Korea successful elections were held 15 April. As Antonio Spinelli noted in the First ACEEEO Online Symposium, the

1 International IDEA: Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections, accessible at: <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections> (last download: 2020.08.31.).

2 International IDEA: Elections during COVID-19: Considerations on how to proceed with caution, accessible at: <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/elections-during-covid-19-considerations-how-proceed-caution> (last download: 2020.08.31.).

3 International IDEA footnote 3.

safe conduct and high turnout should be regarded as a success, and there is much to learn from the South Korean experience, however, this success may not be easily adopted to other context, therefore when drawing insights from the said election, countries should carefully evaluate their own context – capacity to contain the spread of the virus; previously existing absentee voting system; availability of resources; political environment; civic duty and multilateral cooperation.⁴

2. Key considerations

In case it is decided to hold elections, there are some key considerations that need to be addressed during the planning and executing phase.

First of all, a strong cooperation is needed between epidemiologist and election professionals. As IFES president and CEO Anthony Banbury pointed out, ‘elections are possible in dangerous public health conditions if election officials cooperate with health, security, and other key authorities.’⁵

The voting process needs to be designed in a way that takes into consideration the most up-to-date knowledge on the virus. Continuous exchange of knowledge is needed, and the process should be designed to be flexible in case new information arises on the virus. This involves the constant monitoring of the international multilogue.

Health routines should be included in the process, and voters and other participants of the process need to receive concise and up to date information on these routines. It needs to be made sure that voters and other participants, especially polling workers are equipped to carry out the health routines.

Special voting methods, such as internet- or postal voting may help a higher voter turnout. However, these methods need sufficient legal and other infrastructural prerequisites. As IFES white paper pointed out, internet voting should be assessed in at least five parameters: cost, participation, efficiency, trust and security.⁶ Moreover, as these methods may require changes well within the one-year-freezing period recommended by the Venice Commission,⁷ it is of utmost importance that all relevant stakeholders are invited to give feedback on the changes to the electoral legislation.

Furthermore, epidemic related fake-news should be effectively reduced. In times of epidemic the trust of the society is fragile, and fake-news may have bigger impact than in ordinary times.

Lastly, the arrangements before the elections should be made in a timely manner. The Polish example shows that if relevant stakeholders are left out,⁸ then an ambiguous situa-

tion may arise, in which even a few days before the elections it is impossible to tell what is going to happen.

3. Recommendations

Based on the above mentioned, the ACEEEO considers the following recommendations:

- Decision-makers in the electoral field should weigh-up carefully the dangers and risks of holding or postponing elections. All relevant stakeholders should be included in the process and given the necessary information.
- All relevant stakeholders of the electoral process need to constantly monitor the international scientific and electoral dialogue.
- The constitutional and legislative background should give clear answers as to the legal possibilities of postponing elections.
- Interim elections may serve as ‘pilot elections’ so when the general elections are held the new measures have been applied in practice.
- In case elections are held:
 - Special attention needs to be paid to upholding the voter turnout, especially with regard to those groups that are limited the most in accessing the ballot.
 - Special voting arrangements should be introduced only if the necessary infrastructural prerequisites are met, and the process should take into consideration the factors of cost, participation, efficiency, trust and security.
 - Special health routines and protocols needs to be adopted.
 - Voters and other participants of the process needs to receive concise and up to date information. They should be encouraged to acquire information from authenticated sources such as EMB platforms.
 - Fake news should be effectively combated.
 - If change of the electoral legislation is needed, all relevant stakeholders should be involved in a meaningful debate.
 - It needs to be made that voters who are in isolation or quarantine are allowed to vote in a safe manner.
 - Broadening of the possibilities of absentee voting should be considered.
 - It should be ensured that no relevant stakeholder questions the results afterwards.
- In case elections are postponed:
 - All relevant stakeholders, especially the public should be informed on the legal basis of, and reasons for postponing the elections.
 - Public authorities and politicians need to give explicit commitment that postponed elections are held as soon as possible.
 - EMBs and election professionals should use the delay to design epidemic protocol, in case the situation lasts longer than expected, and elections cannot be postponed any further.

As the situation is constantly changing, we invite the ACEEEO community to make suggestions to these observations and recommendations.

4 International IDEA’s paper on the South Korean elections is available at: <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/managing-elections-under-covid-19-pandemic-republic-korea-crucial-test?lang=en>

5 See at: <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-elections-and-covid-19-what-we-learned-from-ebola-96903> (last download: 2020.08.28.).

6 https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/considerations_on_internet_voting_an_overview_for_electoral_decision-makers.pdf

7 See Venice Commission: Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters section II. 2.

8 See OSCE-ODIHR’s legal opinion on the Polish Draft Act, accessible at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/3/450856.pdf>

Preventing Elections Interference

We are committed to securing our platforms, providing transparency and empowering people to vote.

Elections have changed and so has Facebook. Since 2016 we've tripled the size of our teams working on safety and security to include more than 35,000 people, and we've created dedicated elections-specific task forces

to monitor our platforms leading up to each and every election. We've also made significant improvements to reduce the spread of misinformation and provide more transparency and control around political ads.



PREVENTING INTERFERENCE IN ELECTIONS

We have advanced security operations to take down manipulation campaigns and identify emerging threats.



FIGHTING MISINFORMATION

Together with our third party fact-checking partners, we help prevent the spread of misinformation and provide additional context so people can make informed decisions.



INCREASING TRANSPARENCY

We provide an industry-leading level of transparency around political advertising and pages so you can see who is trying to influence your vote.



EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO VOTE

Voting is one of the most powerful ways to make your voice heard, so we are creating products to ensure people have access to accurate information about how to register to vote ahead of elections and how to vote on election day.

In Focus: Georgia

Introduction

Georgia is a country in the Caucasus region of Eurasia. Georgia is located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, in particular, in the Caucasus. To the west it is bordered by the Black Sea, to the north – the Russian Federation, to the south-east – Azerbaijan, to the south – Armenia and Turkey. Georgia covers a territory of 69,700 sq. km and its approximate population is about 3.718 million.

Ethnic groups (2002 census) in Georgia comprise: Georgians - 83.8%, Azeris - 6.5%, Armenians - 5.7%, Russians - 1.5%. State **language** is Georgian while in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia Georgian and Abkhazian.

Georgia is a unitary parliamentary republic, with the government elected through a representative democracy. President of Georgia is the head of state and commander-in-chief while Prime Minister of Georgia is the head of the Government.

Georgia was one of the first Soviet republics to take steps towards independence. By the 1980s, an independence movement was established and grew, leading to Georgia's secession from the Soviet Union in April 1991. Elections held on 28 October 1990 put an end to Soviet Georgia.

After collapse of Soviet Union, in 1991 Georgia announced independence. That time, after 90s, there were conflicts in two regions of Georgia, in Abkhazia and Samachablo (the South Ossetia). For that period the ethnic problems were named as the reason for the conflict, though later on it was proved that the party of conflict was neither Abkhazia, nor Tskhinvali region (the South Ossetia), but Russia, supporting separatism in the region.

In August, 2008 Russia attacked Georgia again and occupied upper Abkhazia and former South Ossetia territories



being under jurisdiction of Georgia. Currently, Russia is called as an occupant in the official documentation of various international organizations and other state. Currently, 20% of Georgian territory is occupied.

When it comes to Georgia's cooperation on international level, Georgia is a member of various international organizations since regaining the independence, namely, the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the World Trade Organization, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Community of Democratic Choice, the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank.

Most recently, on 2 October 2006, Georgia and the European Union signed a joint statement on the agreed text of the Georgia–European Union Action Plan within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In June 2014, the EU and Georgia signed an Association Agreement, which entered into force on 1 July 2016. On 13 December 2016, EU and Georgia reached the agreement on visa liberalisation for Georgian citizens. On 27 February 2017, the Council adopted a regulation on visa liberalisation for Georgians travelling to the EU for a period of stay of 90 days in any 180-day period.

Administrative Division

Georgia is divided into 9 regions, 1 capital city, and 2 autonomous republics. These in turn are subdivided into 64 municipalities and 5 self-governing cities.

Georgia contains two official autonomous regions, of which one has declared independence. Officially autonomous within Georgia, the de facto independent



region of Abkhazia declared independence in 1999. In addition, Tskhinvali region not officially autonomous has also declared independence.

Election Administration

The Election Administration of Georgia is an administrative body, which, within its authority, is independent from other state bodies and operates in accordance with the legislation of Georgia. The election administration organizes the elections of the President of Georgia, Parliament of Georgia, municipal representative body - Sakrebulo, municipal executive body - mayor elections, referendum and plebiscite.

The supreme body of the Election Administration of Georgia is the Central Election Commission (CEC), which within its authority directs and controls election commissions at all levels and ensures uniform application of the election legislation throughout the territory of Georgia. The Election Administration of Georgia is composed of: CEC and its apparatus; SEC and its apparatus; District Election Commissions; Precinct Election Commissions.

CEC - The supreme body of Election Administration of Georgia is the CEC, which, within its authority, manages and controls all levels of election commissions. The CEC is composed of a Chairperson and 11 members. The CEC Chairperson simultaneously is a member of the CEC. The Parliament of Georgia elects five members of the CEC, on the recommendation of the President of Georgia, while political unions appoint six members as set by the rule of the Organic law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia". The term of office of the CEC Chairperson and CEC members appointed by the Parliament is five years. The organization and conduction of fair, credible, transparent elections is ensured by CEC's Secretariat, which, with help of its structural units, carries out organizational, legal and technical support of election administration and support to the CEC.

SEC - The Supreme Election Commission of Autonomous Republic of Adjara (SEC) ensures holding of elections of Supreme Council of Autonomous Republic of Adjara, and, within its authority, ensures uniform application of electoral legislation on the whole territory of Adjara.

District Election Commission - is a permanent territorial body of the Electoral Administration of Georgia, which in the Election district, within its power ensures the conduct of

elections, referendum, and plebiscite, oversees the process of implementation of the electoral legislation of Georgia, and ensures its uniform application. There are total of 76 DEC in Georgia. A DEC is composed of 12 members; the CEC elects five members for five year-term, while, during the election period, political unions appoint six members and the CEC elects one additional member as set by the rule of the Organic law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia".

Precinct Election Commission - is a temporary territorial body of the Electoral Administration of Georgia, which, within its power, ensures the conduct of elections, referendum, and plebiscite in an electoral precinct, implementation of the electoral legislation of Georgia, compliance of the procedures under the electoral legislation of Georgia during polling, exercise and protection of the rights of voters, representatives, and observers guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia and Electoral Code. There are around 3,700 PECs created during electoral period in Georgia. A PEC is composed of 12 members; the upper election commission elects six members while political unions appoint six members as set by the rule of the Organic law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia".

Vision, Mission, Values of Election Administration

Vision of Election Administration, as of an open, competent and reliable institution is to ensure the development and fortification of the democratic electoral process.

Mission of Election Administration is to support the development of electoral culture, provide equally accessible, effective, innovative services to voters and other electoral stakeholders and conduct secure electoral processes in accordance with the international standards of credibility.

For the successful implementation of the mission, the Election Administration expresses its corporate commitment to the following values:

Independence

We act only on the basis of the law and take decisions independently from the parties involved in the elections

Impartiality

We make objective and law-based decisions with respect to all parties





Transparency

We provide openness, publicity and access to information for the public

Responsibility and accountability

We are the institution responsible for its actions and in addition to the institutions defined by the legislation, regularly reports to the public

Professional credibility and ethics

We manage the electoral process by competent and decent election officials facilitating to the credibility of the electoral process

Innovation and service orientation approach

We adopt innovations in the electoral processes based on the changing needs and deliver quality-oriented service to parties involved

Inclusiveness and gender equality

We provide for the creation of equal environment for everyone and take gender aspects into consideration in all our activities

Proactivity and involvement

We collaborate with all electoral stakeholders to ensure credible, democratic elections



Elections and Electoral System

Parliamentary Elections of Georgia

Regular elections of the Parliament of Georgia shall be held in last Saturday of October of the calendar year during which the term of authority of the Parliament expires. The President of Georgia shall call the date of the elections no later than 60 days before the elections.

The Parliament of Georgia shall be elected for a 4 year-term. Any citizen of Georgia with the right to suffrage, who has attained the age of 25 and who has resided in Georgia for at least 10 years may be elected as a Member of Parliament of Georgia. A person sentenced to imprisonment by a court ruling may not be elected as a member of parliament.

The Parliament elected in the next parliamentary elections of Georgia shall consist of 120 members elected by the proportional system and 30 members elected by the majoritarian system.

A candidate for membership of Parliament, who receives more votes than others cast in elections shall be considered elected in the majoritarian election district. The number of votes recorded on invalid ballot papers shall not be included in the number of votes cast in the election.

As a result of Parliamentary Elections of Georgia held by proportional system, the mandates will be distributed among those political parties who will receive at least 1 percent of the actual votes cast in the election, and among election blocs of those political parties whose percentage represents multiplication of 1 percent of actual votes by the number of political parties in the electoral bloc.

Presidential Elections of Georgia

The President of Georgia shall be elected by the Election Panel on the basis of without-debate voting, by open ballot, for a term of five years. The same person may be elected as President of Georgia for only twice. The date of regular elections of the President of Georgia shall be fixed by the Parliament of Georgia 60 days before Election Day. If the date of elections of the President of Georgia coincides with the month of elections of the Parliament of Georgia or with the previous month, the elections of the President of Georgia shall be held within 45 days after the first meeting of newly elected Parlia-

ment is held. Any citizen of Georgia, with the right to vote, who has attained the age of 40, and who has lived in Georgia for at least 15 years, may be elected as President of Georgia.

Municipal Elections

Elections of Municipality Representative Body – Sakrebulo shall be held after 3 full years from the relevant last elections, in October of the 4th year. Elections shall be called by the President of Georgia, by cosigning of the Prime-Minister of Georgia, before 60 days to the expiry of the term of authority of Sakrebulo.

A Georgian citizen having attained the age of 21 by the polling day and lived in Georgia for at least five years, may be elected as a member of Representative Body of the Municipality - Sakrebulo.

Elections of Municipality Representative Body – Sakrebulo shall be conducted on the basis of the proportional electoral system and the majoritarian electoral system.

Elections of the Mayor

The Mayor of the Self-governing City and the Mayor of Self-governing Community is elected every 4 years. Elections

shall be called by the President of Georgia, by cosigning of the Prime-Minister of Georgia, before the 60 days to the expiry of the term of authority of Mayor.

A Georgian citizen having attained the age of 25, lived in Georgia for at least five years and having electoral suffrage may be elected as a member of the Mayor of the Self-governing City/Community.

A candidate shall be considered elected in the election of the Mayor, who has received more than 50% of votes cast by voters participating in the elections. The number of votes recorded on invalid ballot papers shall not be included in the number of votes cast in the election.

Elections of the Supreme Council of Autonomous Republic of Adjara

Regular elections of the Supreme Council of Autonomous Republic of Adjara shall be held in last Saturday of October of the calendar year during which the term of authority of the Supreme Council is expired. The President of Georgia shall call the date of elections of the Supreme Council by cosigning of Prime-minister of Georgia.

Any citizen of Georgia with the right to vote who has attained the age of 25 prior to or on the day of elections can be elected as a member of the Supreme Council of Autonomous Republic of Adjara and who resided in Georgia at least five years. A person sentenced to imprisonment by a court ruling may not be elected as a member of the Supreme Council.

The Supreme Council consists of 18 deputies elected by the proportional system and 3 deputies elected by the majoritarian system elected for 4 years by Georgian citizens with the right to vote registered on the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara on the basis of universal, free, equal and direct suffrage.

A majoritarian candidate who receives more than half of the votes cast in elections, shall be considered elected in the majoritarian election district. The number of votes recorded on invalid ballot papers shall not be included in the number of votes cast in the election.

Under the proportional electoral system, the mandates of the members of the Supreme Council will be distributed to those electoral subjects who have received at least 5 percent

of the actual votes cast in elections. The number of votes recorded on invalid ballot papers shall not be included in the number of votes cast in the election.

Referendum - Referendum is a nation-wide polling to decide issues of particular significance for the state, which is conducted on the whole territory of Georgia.

A referendum shall be called by the President of Georgia by a decree, which requires the cosigning of the Prime-Minister of Georgia, except for the cases, when the referendum is called upon the request of the Government of Georgia.

The President of Georgia shall call a referendum upon the request of the Parliament of Georgia, Government of Georgia, or not less than 200 000 voters, within 30 days of the receipt of the request to appoint a referendum.

Referendum cannot be held:

- For adoption or abolishing a law;
- For amnesty or pardon;
- On ratification of international agreements or denunciation;
- On issue, which restrains the fundamental constitutional rights of individual;

Referendum issue shall be deemed to be positively resolved in case more than half of the referendum participants have voted in its favor. The number of votes recorded on invalid ballot papers shall not be included in the number of votes cast in the referendum.

The decision made as a result of the referendum shall be enforced from the date of its publication; it shall have a legal force and is final. The results of a referendum have a direct force.

A decision made as a result of the referendum can be changed or abolished only by holding another referendum. The results of a referendum can be announced invalid by the procedures defined by the Law of the Constitutional Court of Georgia. Prime Minister of Georgia shall call the plebiscite.

Plebiscite - Plebiscite is a nation-wide polling by secret ballot for identifying the opinion of voters or part of voters concerning especially important national issues, results of which are of recommendatory character for the public authorities; Prime-minister of Georgia appoints the plebiscite.



In memoriam dr. István Zsuffa

FORMER PROGRAM DIRECTOR, ACEEEO



István graduated as a lawyer from Eötvös Loránd University, and worked more than 30 years in the Hungarian public administration. He was deputy-undersecretary, undersecretary for administration at the Ministry of the Interior for eight years, and for a short time undersecretary for administration at the Prime Minister's Office. Before and after retiring he worked as a legal and administrative expert of Hungarian, or European Union related projects. He believed in the traditional values of public administration: in the rule of law, serving the public good, rigorousness, honesty. He helped ACEEEO from the beginning: he supported the establishment of the organization, and after finishing his service at the public administration participated actively in the work of ACEEEO. With his advices he supported constantly the work of the Secretary, he contributed as an expert to the realization of many of our projects, he participated actively at our annual conferences. He was a great storyteller: through his anecdotes he drew a vivid and accurate picture of the Hungarian public administration of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, and of the starting period of ACEEEO. He surely continues telling his stories to his former university classmates, to dr. Ferenc Köllner and dr. Pál Kara.