

Enhancing young voters participation and trust in elections – Moldovan case

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Nowadays, information plays a crucial role in our world, it can help you to achieve your goals, but also it can damage you. In this regards, it is very important to identify and analyze your target groups, to prepare clear and correct messages, to adopt the needed instruments, mechanisms to insure the cooperation and communication with all electoral stakeholders.

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According to Art. 22 of the Electoral Code, Central Electoral Commission has the duty to implement civic education programmes and develop programmes on increasing voters' awareness during the electoral period. Responsible for the implementations of this activities are Communication, Public Relations and Media Department and the Center for Continuous Electoral Training.

Pillar number 1 from the Strategic plan of the CEC for 2020-2023 is called citizens-oriented services and includes such objectives as: Development of accessible, secured and innovative services, Enhancing the integrity and credibility in the electoral process by prevention, monitoring and control and Reducing the distance between voter and electoral bodies through increasing transparency electoral information. The goal of this pillar is providing impeccable electoral services in line with the fundamental values of the CEC.

The Communication concept of the CEC for 2020-2023 includes 5 objectives related to internal and external communication one of which reffers to development of direct communication skills with citizens, regardless of their location, spoken language and other socio-economic features. It includes the following strategic activities that are developed in the annual plans: plenary communication through web pages and social networks by using different multimedia formats; organizing public events to encourage direct communication with citizens; developing a set of informative and promotional materials regarding the institution activity and conducting at least 3 thematic annual campaigns.

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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.

Young voters, especially first time voters, represent one of the main target group of the CEC, as their level of interest for the public life is lower and their level of distrust is higher. They also need special attention, because they don't have developed skills and motivation to engage in electoral process.

On the charts you can see the turnout of voters by age and by gender in the Parliamentary Elections and General Local Elections of 2019 that took place in Moldova. In the bottom row is indicated the percentage share of group of citizens of a particular age out of the total number of voters that have participated in elections. Parallel to each column is calculated the share of voters out of the total number of citizens of a particular age included in the voters' lists. The most underrepresented group are young people.

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To engage young people in electoral processes largely and to mitigate the phenomenon of absenteeism and mistrust by effectively promoting offline communication, over the last two years Central Electoral Commission and Centre for Continuous Electoral Training, with the support of the development partners, have launched and conducted a series of civic and electoral education activities.

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.

Filmmakers is an event where participants have been 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 from 2019, but also had the possibility to learn more about participatory democracy.

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Another initiative where young people showed their creativity on electoral issues is *INNOVOTER* - an IT electoral creative laboratory for young people. At the second edition of InnoVoter from 2019, young people had the mission to create an interface for displaying data on the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns. Insuring the transparency and accountability in terms of political financing has a major role for guaranteeing the trust in elections. Thus, starting with 2020, political parties and candidates from Moldova report directly on the CEC website, and this information can be viewed and analysed by the public in an interactive and user-friendly manner.

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Applying an analytical and interactive learning methodology that allows participants to use new knowledge on the principles of democracy and political participation in a much broader context can be achieved through playing and contest. Such methods ensure 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. The Intellectual Games ‘What? Where? When?’ was held this year by CCET online.

Besides this, every year CEC and CCET launches different types of contests: “The most successful motivational slogan”, “The best motivational poster”, “Democracy in my live essay”, drama contest, vlogging contest etc. These activities are addressed to the High schools and gymnasium pupils. The best works are awarded with diplomas and valuable prizes. The participants’ works are displayed in exhibition, organized in the CEC, parks, airport and other places and published in the civic education and information materials.

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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.

More than 95% of young women and men expressed their willingness to be further involved in other CEC and CICDE activities.

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The partnership established between CCET and the *Association of Librarians* of the Republic of Moldova resulted in 70 librarians participating in BRIDGE seminars organized in 40 localities. The main goal of these trainings was to offer librarians the opportunity to learn modern methods of civic education and information to be used in their daily activities and to transform libraries in community-friendly spaces, information centers where all citizens could find information on electoral processes.

Also, last year, for the first time in the Republic of Moldova, teachers of Civic Education and Education for Society, as well as representatives of the district education divisions attended a training on participation in election processes. The aim was enhancing the knowledge of participants in the field of civic and electoral education; providing innovative teaching methods for topics related to civic education and offering support materials for the conduct of such classes.

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A pilot activity was implemented in 2018 and 2019 in around 80 schools. Under the guidance of the CCET representatives, were organized elections of pupils' councils, based on a pattern similar to the one used in country's parliamentary elections. Pupils had the opportunity to learn basics on how a school election commission should be created, how information campaigns are developed and what are the electoral procedures in the polling station, how is the votes counting process and in the end they elected their new council members for one year of school studying. We also have signed a Mutual Agreement with the Ministry of Education and plan to organize such activities in all the schools from our country.

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Three editions of CICDE Open Talks Conference were organised by the Center for Continuous Electoral Training since 2018. From motivational speeches to scientific studies and research has evolved the third edition of 'CICDE Open Talks'. 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 accessibility in the electoral process, a defining issue in expressing the right to vote."

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Civic education is also achieved through public lessons and activities conducted in educational institutions across the country and the Open Doors Day activity within the CEC and the CCET. Such activities can be organized on request, throughout the year or during annual events – Young Voter's Day, International Election Day etc. If previously we were working mostly with first time voters from universities and high schools, now we hold such activities for the first grades and even in the kindergartens, as we consider that it is easier to educate and create values, attitudes and skills than to

try to change them. We also have notices that kids are more involved and more interested in such events.

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Open doors activity aims to familiarize young people with work and responsibilities of electoral bodies and the various issues related to the electoral process and to make them to be aware of the importance of participating in elections. We organize mock elections, simulation of the CEC meetings, jeopardy game and distribute information/promotional materials. Usually, such events are held within the CEC premises, but we also conduct them outdoor, inside the exhibition halls or in the Parliament Building (for example on the occasion of the International Democracy Day or Diaspora Day).

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Door to door campaigns are conducted usually during electoral period, but also in the period between elections. CEC representatives and volunteers go to the university campuses, airport, railway station, bus station, border crossing points, markets and other places where there is a big concentration of people. Such activities are used to disseminate printed materials, but also offer a great opportunity to interact and to be closer with ordinary citizens, to answer to their questions and to offer useful information.

'Elections on road' is a large-scale mobile communication campaign, which helped CEC members and officials to communicate 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 communication on new changes to the electoral code, the importance of participation in elections of different electoral stakeholders.

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The CEC/CCET have made available a series of communication tools including an Information and Resource Centre for the voters, media, observers and other stakeholders. The Center facilitates the public access to the information on elections and the work of the CEC. It also provides training and communication space for regular people and researchers who are interested in the elections. The center contains a documentary background on multiple media, adapted to the user's needs and specific institution. The CEC information and Resource Centre for citizens has a rich collection of the websites of the major international organizations, electoral institutions in other countries, domestic and foreign central authorities.

Library of CEC/CICDE contains a collection of the handouts/books/resources but also sound archives that help CEC representatives in conducting various seminars, participating in national and international conferences. The main purpose of creating the CEC and CCET library was to collect all materials published by the CEC and CCET, make them available to the large public, but also to engage local researchers in the electoral field.

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Online presence of CEC and CCET is very important since trends are constantly changing, and the Internet is gaining momentum, thus becoming a norm. According to the data from January 2020, the internet penetration in Moldova is 76%. Around 40% of population have at least one account in Social

Media and 35% are Facebook users. The number of mobile connections in Moldova was equivalent to 108% of the total population.

In this regards, CEC and CCET provide information on the official pages www.cec.md, www.voteaza.md, www.cicde.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. We place on web video spots, video events, memos, electronic version of printed materials, myths, infographic materials, cartoons etc. Guides and posters are drawn up in Romanian and translated into the language of national minorities. In addition, we prepare audio version and the easy-to-read version (dedicated to people with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties) information materials. Moreover, videos are dubbed into Russian (which has the status of an interethnic language of communication) and are accompanied by translation into sign language.

In order to enhance the visibility of the events held by CEC and CCET, we ensure live transmission of the majority of our events. Streaming and online events helped us previously to reach especially persons from abroad. Nowadays, due to some restrictions imposed to stop the spread of COVID, this can be one of the safest solution to communicate with people, especially the young generation.

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Educating young citizens in an active and participatory spirit and enhancing their trust in the authorities involved in the organization of elections and in the electoral process generally, is a mission assumed by the CEC and CCET. 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.