Special Voting Arrangements in Europe: Postal, Early and Mobile Voting

Webinar series report, November 2020

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1. Introduction

Special voting arrangements (SVAs) are designed to expand voting opportunities to individuals who are otherwise not able to vote and thus to facilitate the principle of universal suffrage. Additionally, tailored safeguards that protect the equality, secrecy and transparency of the vote and the integrity of the counting process are vital for successfully implementing these SVAs.

Over the past few decades, countries across Europe and around the globe have been increasingly adopting SVAs—particularly postal, early and mobile forms of voting. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated their use throughout the year 2020.

What are the SVAs that are most commonly used across Europe? How do various SVAs work to supplement the voting in polling stations on election day? What can we learn from past lessons to implement SVAs with integrity? How can SVAs be scaled up and applied to elections in a short time frame? What challenges do their application and adaptation in a limited time frame entail? To respond to these questions facing electoral management bodies (EMBs) and electoral assistance organizations, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO) convened a series of online webinars on postal, early and mobile forms of voting. The webinars, which took place from 27 October to 17 November 2020, brought together representatives of EMBs and election experts from electoral assistance organizations. The webinars facilitated an exchange of views between experts in a small, closed discussion format to ensure open communication and allow for critical reflection. Around 50 representatives from EMBs and international electoral assistance organizations participated in each webinar. This report summarizes key insights and reflections from each of the three webinars.

2. The pandemic's impact on election schedules and voter turnout

Recent elections held during the COVID-19 pandemic provide evidence of the important role played by SVAs in the safe conduct of elections—at times even facilitating higher voter turnout. At the onset of the pandemic, many EMBs postponed elections. Now, however, fewer EMBs are postponing elections (see Figure 1), as countries increasingly apply risk-mitigating strategies, including the use of SVAs to hold safe elections.

As the evidence suggests, electoral schedules were significantly disrupted across Europe in the first half of the year, especially in countries where nationwide votes were scheduled to take place. Examples of nationwide polls that took place after a significant delay are parliamentary elections in North Macedonia, parliamentary elections in Serbia, the presidential election in Poland and the second round of municipal elections in France.

Across Europe, 26 electoral processes were postponed, 10 of which were nationwide elections or regional elections in federal states. The others were local government elections or by-elections for a limited number of mandates or referendums.

The data collected since the start of the pandemic suggests that countries generally opted to postpone elections planned for April and May, while fewer postponements were observed between June and October. The effect seen so far suggests that countries are learning and adjusting their electoral processes rather than opting for postponements. This dynamic may change, however, based on the intensity of subsequent waves of the virus around the globe.

Figure 1. The pandemic's impact on the scheduling of elections
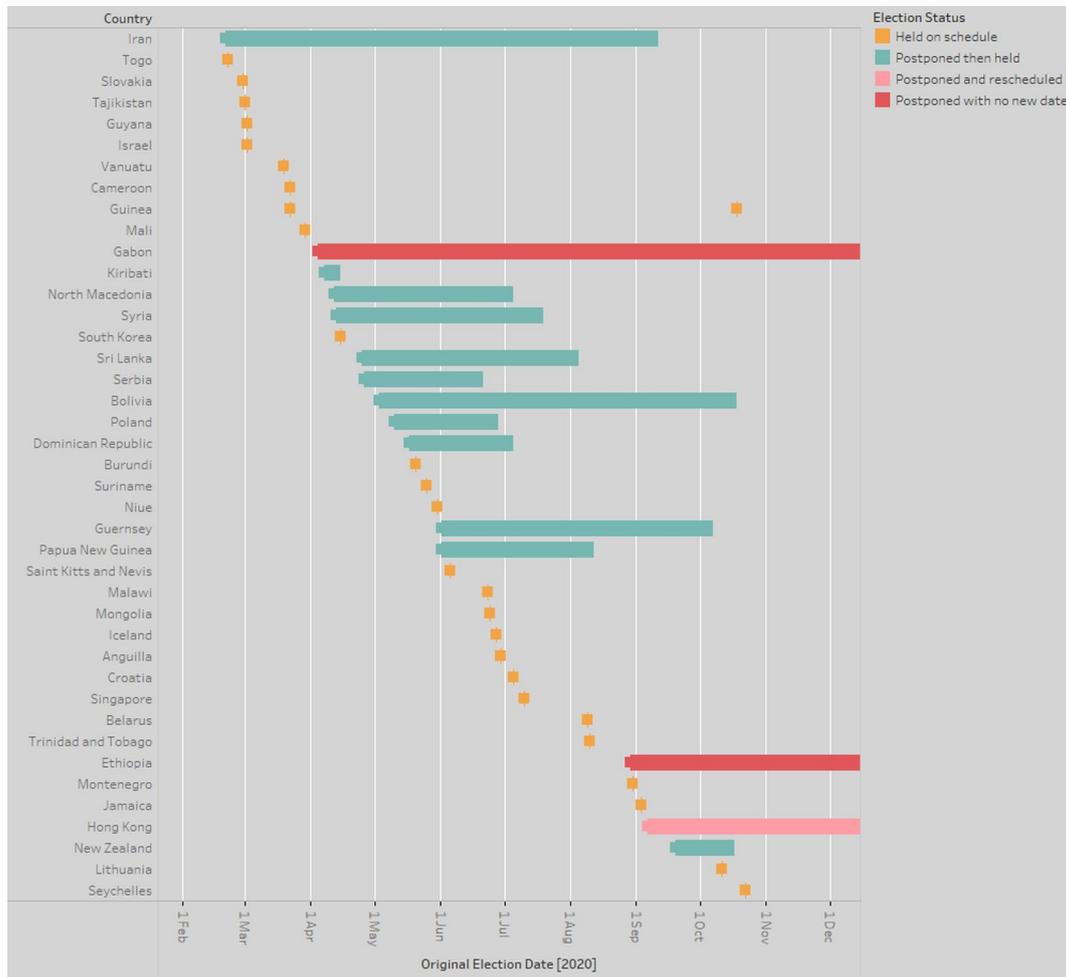
Source: International IDEA. Based on 'Global Overview of COVID-19 Impact on Elections', 18 March 2020, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>, accessed 20 December 2020.

A comparison of the turnout numbers for elections held in 2020 with earlier elections shows a decrease globally, albeit with some notable exceptions (see Figure 2). Particular factors affecting turnout in 2020 include the timing of elections and the stage of the pandemic, the social and political context, and available SVAs—particularly the availability of postal and early voting, with the number of postal votes doubling in several recent elections. Where available, SVAs have been more widely used compared with elections in the past. The South Korean elections held on 15 April 2020 give us a prime example of the possibility of holding elections during a pandemic. The voter turnout was 66 per cent, the highest recorded in the country since 1992, and 41 per cent of all votes were cast through SVAs. Elections in the United States also registered a record turnout, with over 99 million (out of nearly 160 million) voters casting their vote prior to election day; one-third of these cast their ballots through in-person early voting and the other two-thirds through postal voting.

Figure 2. Voter turnout trends in elections held amid the COVID-19 pandemic
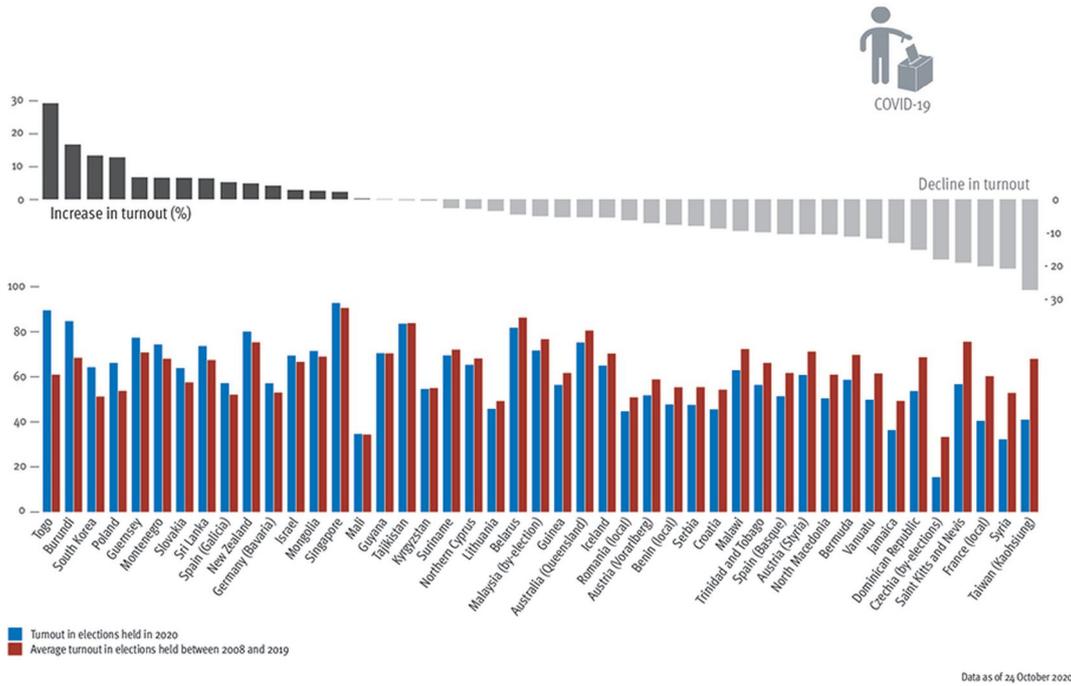
Note: The data includes voter turnout levels from both national and subnational elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: International IDEA. Based on International IDEA's Voter Turnout Database, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>, accessed 20 December 2020, and unpublished research.

3. Special voting arrangements: general considerations

Instituting SVAs necessarily involves a trade-off: expanding the opportunity to vote to those who may not otherwise be able to vote and the risks that they involve in relation to the key principles underpinning democratic elections, including the secrecy of the vote, the observability of elections, the stability of electoral law, etc. There are several advantages of in-person voting, which by and large remains the gold standard in elections across the globe: it takes place in a controlled environment, it protects secrecy, and it allows for robust oversight by relevant stakeholders.

It is important to consider SVAs in the broader political and legal context in which elections take place. When introducing or scaling up SVAs, countries must consider infrastructural needs, enhanced costs and the need for specially tailored safeguards to ensure the integrity of the process and public trust.

The ability of voters to benefit from SVAs cannot be assumed to outweigh or mitigate broader integrity concerns of a more fundamental nature. In fact, improperly implemented SVAs have the potential to further aggravate these concerns.

Every country has a unique context and will therefore need to determine its needs and related SVAs and vital safeguards. These may not be exactly the same in different countries and may even differ between the national and regional levels of the same country. Furthermore, while SVAs that are implemented during the pandemic may be expected to be temporary, they may well endure after the pandemic.

The impartiality of the institution leading the introduction and implementation of SVAs matters. If this institution is trusted and independent, then it will be easier to introduce SVAs that will also be trusted.

Voter education should be a constant priority and needs adequate investment on an ongoing basis. Informing voters in time about the opportunities that SVAs afford them, about application and voting procedures and about the safeguards against fraud is essential both for increasing the likelihood that voters will consider using these voting methods and for enhancing voter confidence in the integrity of the process. Moreover, communication within the electoral management system is needed, especially when new methods are introduced.

In case of an unforeseeable emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, some changes involving the introduction or expansion of SVAs are needed, even though the introduction of such changes may cause tension in terms of the required stability of electoral legislation. Therefore, any introduction and modification should take place in a timely manner, with the involvement of the relevant stakeholders.

4. Postal voting

Postal voting is broadly defined as measures that allow voters to submit their ballot by physical post to the election administration. While postal voting is in principle early voting, it differs from in-person early voting in that the physical ballot can be submitted remotely by the voters themselves. Currently, 13 countries in Europe provide postal voting opportunities to voters (Figure 3).

Postal voting inherently involves trade-offs between the accessibility of the vote on the one hand and the secrecy and the security of the vote on the other.

Figure 3. Availability of postal voting in Europe, October 2020

Source: Heinmaa, A. E., 'Special voting arrangements (SVAs) in Europe: In-country postal, early, mobile and proxy arrangements in individual countries', International IDEA, Feature story, 19 October 2020, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/special-voting-arrangements-svas-europe-country-postal-early-mobile-and-proxy>, accessed 20 December 2020.

In some contexts, postal voting has been found to be the most convenient form of voting (Armbruster and Pautsch 2019). However, in granting the voter this flexibility, the risks related to voter identification and the physical transport of the vote are more acute. To ensure the success of postal voting, it is essential that voter identification and authentication are carried out in a reliable manner, that the secrecy of the vote is maintained throughout the process and that the ballot transfer and count are secure and conducted in a timely manner. Countries that have been successful in integrating postal voting implemented it over a longer period of time and used different iterations of the process, which fostered greater public trust in the process. Where trust has not been built up, or where postal voting is introduced in a rushed fashion, it may create a deficit of public trust in the election results. While evidence of the impact of postal voting on turnout is mixed, there is a consensus around the fact that postal voting increases accessibility, an important feature amid the considerations of the COVID-19 crisis (Lupiáñez-Villanueva and Devaux 2018).

The following considerations are applicable to postal voting:

- Postal voting should always be an additional option to in-person voting. The latter must always be available as an option for voters who are not interested in voting by post or who are unable or unwilling to use SVAs. Voters have unequal means and access to information or might be disadvantaged in other ways. There also may be voters who are unable to receive ballots at home, who may feel unsafe or who may be unable to freely cast their ballot from home.

- The most significant risks related to postal voting arise from the key feature of this form of voting: that the voting takes place in an uncontrolled environment and therefore lacks oversight by election administrators and observers. If not implemented with sufficient safeguards, these conditions may contribute to situations that endanger the fundamental principles underpinning free and fair elections, such as the secrecy and security of the ballot and the freedom of the vote. These may include increased opportunities for identity theft and impersonation, vote selling, family voting, etc.

- The country's postal service must be reliable to ensure that voters have enough time to receive, complete and return their ballots. Protocols should specify the time frame in which voters must post their ballot.

- EMBs must be able to verify that each voter exercises their right to vote only once, which is often done by checking ballots against who has already voted, as recorded on voter lists.

- Many countries provide return envelopes to voters, thus making postal voting free of costs for voters.

- The secrecy of the ballot is usually maintained by requiring that a posted ballot and other materials such as voter authentication statements are enclosed separately in a postal package.

- Ballots must be properly secured prior to counting. If improperly managed, there is a higher likelihood of lost, late or rejected ballots. Additional and clear protocols must be put in place regulating where and how completed ballots must be stored and counted.

- A lack of clarity and inadequate implementation of procedures can threaten the perception of the legitimacy of elections. However, by putting in place excessive or burdensome procedures and checks to verify voters' identity and to maintain secrecy in postal voting, EMBs run the risk of fewer voters registering or casting their ballots

correctly. Targeted voter education on postal voting can help increase the likelihood that voters will register and cast their ballots correctly, therefore helping to decrease the number of lost or rejected ballots.

4.1. Practical experiences and lessons

Switzerland

Electoral registers in Switzerland are decentralized, with communes or cantons responsible for their management. Persons eligible to vote are registered ex officio. Switzerland currently has multiple operational voting methods: early, postal and in-person voting at a polling station. Online voting is currently unavailable, although the country has been running trials of this voting method for years. The Federal Council has commissioned the Federal Chancellery, in cooperation with cantons and scientific experts, to redesign online voting trials, with a report due by the end of 2020.

The development of postal voting in Switzerland occurred gradually through federalism. Over time—in elections between 1950 at the cantonal level and 1967 at the federal level, in 1978 at the cantonal level and 1994 at the federal level—postal voting went from being available on request to a restricted group of persons to being available to all citizens without an obligation to justify their choice. Postal voting is regulated by the Federal Act on Political Rights, which dictates that cantons must provide a simple procedure for postal voting that guarantees verification of eligibility, secrecy, the counting of all votes and prevention of abuses. Voters receive the relevant documents at least three—but no more than four—weeks before election day. The documents may be sent earlier to voters abroad. Casting a vote involves a multiple-envelope system to preserve secrecy, and voter education is supported through the use of an explanatory booklet, additional information on governmental websites and a mobile application.

In Switzerland's experience, safeguards for postal voting have been effectively applied at the organizational, legal and societal levels. Organizationally, Switzerland applies a decentralized voting process and allows cantons to regulate aspects for the provisions of dual control, observation and plausibility checks. Legally, Switzerland guarantees the right of appeal and applies legal penalties in the event of electoral fraud or breaches of the secrecy of the vote. Societally, Switzerland's electoral administration and society both have long-term and frequent experience with postal voting, which has contributed to a high level of trust in postal voting as such and trust in the integrity of the process.

While postal voting accounts for more than 90 per cent of votes cast in Switzerland, in-person voting remains an important feature of the system. During the COVID-19 crisis, there were calls to suspend in-person voting and to hold all-postal elections instead, but the federal authorities considered it more important to maintain the right to vote in person. Ultimately, Switzerland has managed to secure postal voting in a way that is trustworthy, as a result of long-term experience, and accessible to everyone, by means of a step-by-step introduction.

Poland

The Polish experience with postal voting spans the past decade. Postal voting was first introduced in 2011, and it was available only to voters with disabilities and voters abroad. In 2014 the right to vote by post was extended to all voters for national elections only. In 2018 voting by post was again restricted in national elections to voters with disabilities and voters abroad.

Poland's presidential election was scheduled for 10 May 2020. On 31 March 2020 an amendment to the Electoral Code was passed that made postal voting available to those aged

60 or above and for voters quarantined or isolated due to an infectious disease. The general rules of postal voting are that an application must be submitted no later than 15 days before election day (5 days for quarantine or isolated voters), ballots must be delivered to voters no later than 6 days before voting day (and the voter must confirm receipt with their signature), the standard two-envelope and authentication statement method is used, and votes are delivered to polling stations.

On 6 April, however, a draft law was introduced in parliament that would have made postal voting the only option available for all voters. Due to the short period of time and extraordinary conditions, the law proposed that ballots would be delivered by Poczta Polska, the national post office, and put into voters' mailboxes, without a confirmation of receipt, no later than one day before election day. Notably, this made the national post office, and not the National Electoral Commission (NEC), responsible for the preparation of voting and meant that the former was entitled to obtain voters' personal data from state registers. Following a protracted negotiation, and in response to domestic and international criticism, the upper house rejected the proposed law, which was then replaced by new, improved legislation.

Since the voting could not be organized on 10 May, a new election date was set for 28 June, and the second Special Act on the Presidential Election in 2020 was passed on 2 June 2020. This act made postal voting available in addition to in-person voting. A decision of the NEC made postal voting obligatory for communities in Poland with a high number of COVID-19 cases. Citizens living outside the country could vote in person or by post depending on decisions taken by the host countries. The act made the NEC solely responsible for ballots and set the deadline for postal voting application submissions at 12 days before voting day (5 days for quarantine or isolated voters, and 15 days for voters abroad). Ballots were to be delivered to voters no later than five days before voting day for domestic voters, and six days for voters abroad. With the independent NEC once again responsible for voter data and ballots, public opinion surrounding the second act was more favourable. However, the deadlines were too tight to guarantee delivery of ballots, especially from abroad. The NEC still considers the implementation of the act a success: out of a total of 20.6 million votes cast, ballots were sent to approximately 700,000 voters, and around 660,000 of them were returned, most of them from abroad.

Both of the above acts have now expired. As per Poland's Electoral Code, postal voting is available only for voters 60 and older and for quarantined or isolated voters. These measures may not be acceptable in the case of continued health concerns during elections. The Polish case illustrates two important lessons to consider in instituting SVAs. Firstly, SVAs are not just a technical matter but also a political matter. Changes in the motivation of the political leadership will have an impact on what electoral rules are passed. Moreover, if relevant stakeholders, such as opposition parties, are left out of the process, then the integrity of the SVAs may be questioned. Secondly, it is not just the content of the rules on SVAs that is important; who introduces the rules and who is responsible for enforcing them are also important. If the driver of reform is trusted, the people will be more supportive.

United Kingdom

Voters in the UK have three options with which to vote: in person at a local polling station on election day, by post in the weeks before polling day or by proxy either in person or by post. Voting in person is still the most common option.

Applications for postal voting must be submitted by 17:00 eleven working days before election day. The application can cover a particular election or referendum, be valid over a specific period of time or be a permanent postal vote. Voters are required to fill in a form and send it to their Electoral Registration Office by post; as an alternative, a scan of their ballot can be submitted by email. The UK Government is currently exploring the possibility of

introducing a completely online version of this process ahead of elections scheduled for May 2021. Voters are also required to provide their date of birth and their signature, which are checked upon receipt of the ballot to confirm the voter's identity. If someone has indicated that they wish to vote by post, they can no longer receive an in-person ballot at a polling station—though they can deliver their completed postal ballot to the polling station themselves.

The uptake in postal voting among citizens has steadily increased over the past 10 years, but it varies regionally. Postal voters also tend to show higher turnout than in-person voters, with in-person turnout since 2010 hovering between 62 and 66 per cent; and postal voting, between 83 and 86 per cent. When the system was first introduced in 2001, no particular integrity mechanisms were included, opening the system up to the possibility of fraud and damaging public trust in postal voting.

Changes were introduced in 2006 to address these shortcomings by requiring that voters provide their date of birth and signature. If a voter's signature or date of birth is missing or does not match the information on record, the ballot is rejected and is not included in the count. The Electoral Commission has made, and continues to make, great efforts in voter education to keep rejected postal ballots to a minimum, which is reflected in the already low and declining percentage of rejected ballots, from 3.8 per cent in 2010 to 2.2 per cent in 2019. High levels of satisfaction are reported by those who use the postal voting system, and it cannot be concluded whether rejected ballots were the result of intentional fraud or simple mistakes. More recent efforts to enhance electoral integrity include the Crime Stoppers hotline, as the Electoral Commission has tried to raise awareness of voter pressure and to encourage people to report incidents of voter pressure for investigation.

The Electoral Commission conducted research with the public in Scotland in response to a request from the Scottish Government in relation to postal voting under the COVID-19 pandemic. The research revealed that 77 per cent of respondents indicated that they would feel safe voting in person at a polling place with appropriate hygiene measures and physical distancing in place, but 17 per cent indicated that they would feel unsafe. Moreover, 20 per cent of those who generally vote at a polling place said that they would prefer to vote by post if an election were to take place now. Furthermore, 98 per cent of those who currently vote by post said they wanted to continue to do so. Based on these figures, the commission estimates that approximately 350,000 more people in Scotland may choose to vote by post. This research is invaluable to voting preparations, as it helps to establish what needs to be done to ensure that the conduct of elections is successful.

There are a number of practical challenges associated with conducting elections during a pandemic. Communications are doubly important to ensure that voters understand the safety measures in place at polling stations and the different options available to cast their ballot. Pressure on local election services stemming from an increase in applications for postal voting could be another challenge. In response, the Electoral Commission is encouraging those who wish to vote by post to apply early. The Commission also provided a range of resources for local authorities to use to help them engage with residents, including guidance templates and social media messaging. Local authorities have a short window of time to produce and issue postal ballot packages for the May 2021 election, as there is a limited number of printers available.

The UK case illustrates the importance of communication, both with local authorities and with voters. Communication with voters is a two-way street: voters can become more knowledgeable of their options and what is required of them, while the Commission can better understand what is needed from them and can adjust its preparations in order to ensure successful elections. Working with local authorities can help to enhance communication with voters, as messages and postal voting packages can be tailored to local contexts to reduce confusion and rejected ballots.

4.2. Reflections from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR)

The OSCE/ODIHR highlighted the following pointers about postal voting:

- Increasing the universality of suffrage is the end goal of SVAs but achieving this goal cannot come at the expense of other aspects of the electoral process. The introduction of any SVA will result in additional legal challenges to maintaining the electoral process, with three main considerations for postal voting—the management of the process, the postal voting period and timelines, and the equality of opportunity regardless of method.

- In organizing postal voting, EMBs rely on the postal service and possibly on local authorities. It is paramount that EMBs avoid overreliance on actors that do not fall under the control of the EMB, and that might instead be under the control of individuals who serve private or political interests. Therefore, the EMB must remain in charge and must ultimately be responsible for the success of elections.

- The postal voting period will depend on which groups have access to postal voting, with longer timelines necessary for rural locations and addresses abroad. An additional consideration in setting deadlines is the campaign. If candidates start to explain their policy positions only two weeks before polling day, for example, voters voting by post may not be able to make an informed choice if they are required to submit their ballot early. Elections are often conducted in two rounds, with the time between rounds so short that it is difficult or even impossible to reach out to voters who may want to vote by post.

- People need to be afforded the same opportunities to vote whether they vote by mail or in person. For example, if a voter spoils their ballot at a polling station, it is often possible to get a new one. This opportunity may not be available for postal ballots, or postal ballots may be delivered too late to send back, and so it is a good practice to ensure that postal voters can still vote at polling stations, as long as safeguards to prevent double voting are in place.

- Voter lists should be updated regularly, and they should be accessible for verification to ensure no double voting takes place.

- EMBs must make efforts in terms of voter education and outreach over a prolonged period of time. The approach taken must be clear, with transparent explanations of how election bodies operate. For example, all citizens should be informed about how educational materials are inserted into postal voting packages, and they should be assured that these packages do not contain campaign materials.

- The end goal of these considerations is public trust in the entire electoral process, not just in the specific voting methods employed. EMBs need to be cautious and careful, and they need to start preparing for elections far in advance. SVAs can therefore be put in place and communicated in a way that builds public trust. It is a matter not only of taking sufficient time to complete the process but of acting as a proactive service provider for the public.

- We are seeing politicians increasingly willing to experiment with new voting methods in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, if these methods are

implemented in a rushed manner that is open to political pressure, they can damage the electoral process and perceptions of electoral integrity. EMBs may feel pushed into a corner as governments ask them to introduce SVAs virtually overnight.

- An engaged civil society is instrumental here, as citizen observers who can watch the process, understand its technicalities and represent citizens are helpful to developing new SVAs. EMBs must be tactful in rejecting any potential political pressure. They can do this by explaining which aspects of the electoral process need to be balanced and by allowing politicians to make such decisions, effectively relieving themselves of the burden of carrying out the necessary balancing act.

- Important considerations for all key types of SVAs are shared in the OSCE/ODIHR's recent publication on alternative voting methods and arrangements. It is available at the OSCE/ODIHR website: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/466794>.

5. Early voting

Early voting at a polling station is defined as an in-person opportunity for submitting one's vote at a polling station before election day. Accordingly, this form of voting differs procedurally from other forms of early voting that take place outside polling stations (such as postal voting, e-voting or mobile voting). Currently, 14 European countries provide opportunities for early voting at polling stations (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Availability of early voting at polling stations, October 2020
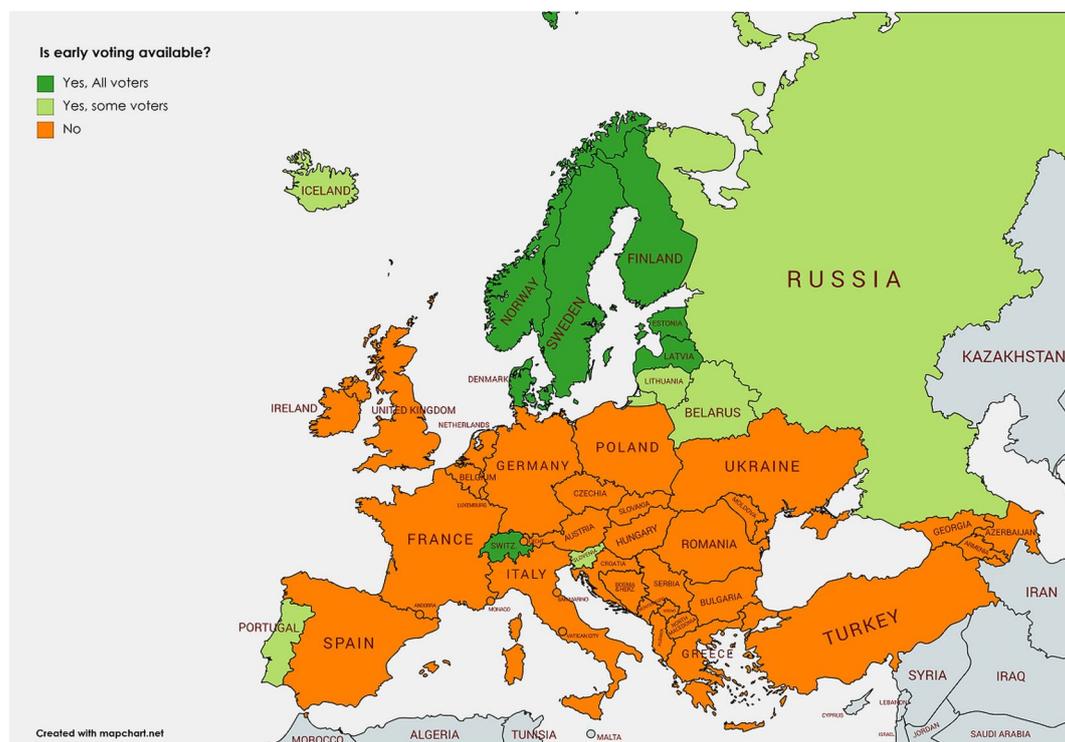
Source: Heinmaa, A. E., 'Special voting arrangements (SVAs) in Europe: In-country postal, early, mobile and proxy arrangements in individual countries', International IDEA, Feature story, 19 October 2020, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/special-voting-arrangements-svas-europe-country-postal-early-mobile-and-proxy>, accessed 20 December 2020.

Benefits of early voting include voting periods that last longer than just one day, increased ballot security and a reduction of volume of voters on election day. On the other hand, in

some cases, voters may cast their ballot well before election day, thus practically shortening (or even eliminating) the campaign period. Early voting may or may not require a voter to register beforehand. Importantly, eligibility for early voting differs greatly across Europe, with some countries providing this option to all voters without a particular justification necessary to qualify for early voting, while others provide this right only to those who meet specific criteria. Early voting may be offered to voters only at the polling station at which they are registered or in addition at an early polling station in any other electoral district. The latter option allows voters to vote even if they are not present in their electoral district on election day. Since early voting takes place in a supervised environment, it is easier to protect the secrecy and integrity of the vote.

The following considerations are applicable to early voting:

- Enhanced integrity measures are an important and common feature across SVAs and should be incorporated into early-voting provisions.

- Existing voting traditions in different countries affect the implementation of early voting, and gradual implementation with a commitment to the transparency of the process and voter education can lead to more trust in the process and increased turnout over time.

- Fair and equitable eligibility criteria are vital aspects of an effective early-voting process. Countries should weigh maintaining equality of opportunity for the vote in determining the eligibility requirements for early voting.

- Registration methods matter. An easier or more difficult registration process can affect whether a voter opts for early voting.

- Access and physical locations of polling stations are important. In deciding the modalities of these elements, countries should consider, for example, existing flows of movement around available locations and transportation options.

- The timing and duration of the availability of early voting vis-à-vis other electoral processes should be considered. Examples of potential factors include the length of the electoral campaign, candidate registration deadlines and multi-round elections.

- The security of ballots and other election materials must be upheld. This component requires consideration of where cast ballots are stored and what measures are taken to ensure the secrecy of votes.

5.1. Practical experiences and lessons

Lithuania

Lithuania offers in-country voters early, postal and mobile voting options. Elections are organized and supervised by the Central Election Commission (CEC), the constituency electoral committees and polling district committees. The CEC determines the procedure for early voting and how the counting of ballot papers is carried out. Each constituency electoral committee organizes early voting between 08:00 and 20:00 on the last Wednesday and Thursday before election day. To distribute voter materials, the chair of polling district commissions is accompanied by no fewer than two members of electoral committees, who may not be proposed by the same political party. The process is supervised by the chair and members of the constituency electoral committee.

Beginning on 16 March 2020, freedom of movement in Lithuania was temporarily restricted, and other special conditions were introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the 2020 Lithuanian parliamentary elections (11 and 25 October 2020), a CEC decision

was made to extend early voting by two days and voting times by one hour, with voting taking place between Monday and Thursday from 07:00 to 20:00. The decision also increased the number of early polling stations from 60 to 70 and instituted additional hygiene measures. The decision recommended that seniors vote between the hours of 07:00 and 09:00, and voters were asked not to bring children with them to polling stations. Voters were permitted to vote at any polling station irrespective of their residence and registered polling station.

Another change to early voting methods was the addition of drive-in polling stations for those in quarantine, in which voters could simply deposit their votes into ballot boxes from the safety of their car. Any infected citizens under self-isolation orders had the right to leave their homes to vote at these special stations. However, citizens who had tested positive for COVID-19 were not permitted to vote at drive-in stations; instead, mobile at-home voting was offered. This option was not offered on election day.

For voters abroad, 46 diplomatic missions were open for early in-person voting. As a result, 98 per cent of out-of-country votes were cast by mail. Overall turnout for the first round of the election was 47 per cent. Some 11.4 per cent of voters cast ballots during early in-person voting, compared with 3.5 per cent in previous elections.

The Lithuanian case shows the importance of finding new places for people to vote. The drive-in voting solution was a success and was viewed positively by most citizens, but it required the foresight of creating an exception for people in self-isolation to have the right to leave their place of isolation. There are also ongoing discussions on what changes implemented for these elections will be adopted on a permanent basis, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there is room for improvement.

Slovenia

The legal framework in Slovenia prescribes that voters who will be absent on election day may vote early, but no earlier than five days and no later than two days before election day. Early voting is held at a special polling station set up at the headquarters of the district electoral commission and is supervised by the electoral board appointed by the district electoral commission. The State Election Commission (SEC) establishes uniform standards for the protection of ballot boxes and other election materials.

The early-voting period takes place on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday preceding election day. Polling stations are open from 07:00 to 19:00, and voting procedures are the same as on election day. The electoral board must use a different ballot box for each day, and the ballot boxes must be sealed and protected after the close of voting each day of early voting.

Voters may vote early only at the district electoral commission in the area where they are registered as permanent residents. Voters do not need to register for early voting. The SEC publishes on its website a list of the addresses of polling stations where early voting is available. Slovenia has not encountered problems with this method; voters are generally sufficiently aware of the opportunity to vote early and where and when to do it.

Turnout in early voting is low, and the majority of voters continue to vote on election day. Parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2018 recorded early turnout of 3.90 per cent and 3.10 per cent, respectively, and presidential elections in 2012 and 2017 recorded early turnout of 1.36 per cent and 1.65 per cent, respectively. Early voting may be extended to more days preceding election day, but with the low turnout the current configuration is deemed sufficient.

The Slovenian case shows the effective inclusion of early-voting measures that are administered in the same way as on election day and that require no registration or notification to the EMB. Voters need to identify themselves with a valid identification document upon arrival at an early polling station. On election day, the same electoral roll is

used as in early voting. The most difficult part of organizing early voting is making sure that all early voters are properly marked on the electoral roll for election day in order to prevent double voting. Compared with the normal procedures, the financial impact of early voting in Slovenia is relatively small, at an estimated EUR 50,000.

Finland

Finland has two special voting methods—early and mobile—with early voting accounting for about half of all votes. Use of early voting has increased over time, with 50.7 per cent of votes cast in the last parliamentary elections before election day. Election day is always a Sunday, and this is assumed in setting the early-voting periods. Early voting and other SVAs are not available everywhere—some locations are too remote with too few voters to make them available. Voters may cast their vote at any early voting station either in the country or abroad.

Finland has had a centralized election information system since the 1990s, and most places using early voting also use this system. It contains a centralized list of voters, and it gives every voter a unique identifier that can be used to determine whether an individual has voted. The system also contains a centralized list of polling stations and early polling stations. There is a single ballot form for the entire country, and it is used for all types of voting in elections. All candidate lists are available at all early voting stations. This system allows voters to cast early votes at any one of the early voting stations. Ballots are mailed inside two envelopes—a secrecy envelope for the ballot and an outer envelope with voters' information—to voters' home municipality, where they are counted.

Early voting takes place between the 11th and 5th day preceding election day[1] and is organized by municipalities. Early polling stations are set up in locations where there are typically large numbers of people, such as shopping malls, city centres and the Helsinki airport. All municipalities are required to have at least one early polling station, but most have more, and the locations and opening times are available to all. Additional mobile stations are set up on buses and ships. Most early voting stations use the electoral management system to print a form that accompanies votes that are mailed to a voter's home municipality. Votes are recorded when they are cast and are verified when they arrive at a voter's home municipality.

Finland's experience with early voting reveals a number of benefits for the holding of elections during a pandemic. The system features long early-voting times and a broad choice of where to vote, which helps reduce the flow of people inside polling stations and allows people to cast their vote at locations they would be visiting anyway. There is considerable flexibility built into the system for early voting: polling stations, for example, may be set up outdoors, and opening times are set by the municipality within the time frame allowed by law.

Portugal

Prior to 2018, early voting was limited and available only in certain situations. To take part in early voting, voters were required to register and submit justification before casting their vote in the presence of municipal staff. This procedure created the perception that early voting was accessible, but only under very strict circumstances and after voters completed certain bureaucratic procedures. Limitations on early voting were also motivated by logistical concerns of ensuring that the system was equipped to handle large numbers of individuals requesting early votes. While turnout in early voting had already been gradually rising, there was a sharp rise when bureaucratic hurdles were removed by electoral reforms in 2018.

A new system was put in practice for the 2019 European Parliament elections. Voters could register for early voting by mail or online from Monday to Thursday and they could then cast their early vote that Sunday, one week before election day. Voters could vote early

without providing any justification, and they could vote anywhere in the country, regardless of the district where they were registered, with a centralized system keeping track of who had already voted.

Portugal made early voting available to even more voters in 2020. The country held regional elections in October that went smoothly and allowed the country to test the reaction of its citizens to the new procedures. One of Portugal's autonomous regions presented a challenge, as its electoral law did not provide for early voting. As a result, both the regional and national parliaments had to pass amendments. The changes went smoothly, and the laws were amended in time to be implemented for election day.

The October elections gave Portugal the chance to further refine and amplify its early-voting measures, with early voting becoming increasingly popular. People can register for early voting from Monday to Thursday one week before election day. Municipalities met the challenge of organizing early voting, with the exact number of voters becoming clear only two days before elections, despite a constant flow of information from the centralized registration. Early voting was also accessible to people in penitentiaries or in hospitals; in such cases, the president of the municipality visited the location and collected the ballots.

Portugal has identified room for improvement in different areas prior to presidential elections to be held in January 2021, with several proposals already approved by the parliament. The aim is to extend early voting to every municipality, as experiences with recent elections have exposed accessibility issues. Before the 2018 reforms, early votes could be carried out in each of the 308 municipalities. After 2018, early voting was only offered in district capitals and the islands, with more than 20 locations available, creating difficulties in terms of transport, particularly for rural areas. While the 2018 reform expanded the number of people who could vote early, it also reduced access outside of urban areas. The 2020 reform is expected to overcome this issue and to make early voting more accessible. As voters become more familiar with the procedures involved in early voting, it will become important to extend it.

The Portuguese case illustrates the fact that early voting can grow in popularity as people become more familiar with it. By instituting the principle that voters should be able to vote in advance—with no justification required—early voting is quickly becoming a true alternative to voting on election day. With smoother logistics, voting will become easier, potentially increasing turnout and decreasing the pressure of election day.

5.2. Reflections from the OSCE/ODIHR

The OSCE/ODIHR highlighted the following pointers about early voting:

- There are several principles that are particularly affected and therefore warrant special attention in instituting early voting—universal suffrage, equal suffrage, free voting, secrecy of suffrage, and transparency and accountability. While the trend in many countries is moving towards early voting for everyone, contributing to the equality of the vote, there are many others that allow it only for specific categories of voters. It is important for countries to consider whether such limitations sufficiently maintain equal voting opportunities, especially in light of the pandemic.

- Countries are reminded to give careful consideration to setting voting hours that give ample opportunity for individuals to vote.

- Well-designed early voting needs to balance a sufficient early-voting period with other components of the electoral process. For example, voting early limits campaign

opportunities for parties and may also conflict with deadlines for candidate registration.

- The availability of early voting locations is based on a combination of the number of polling stations that can be reasonably maintained and on accessibility needs.

- EMBs need to ensure that voter lists are constantly updated to safeguard against multiple voting.

- Practices such as organized transportation of voters by means of transport associated with electoral contestants/candidates may raise suspicions of undue influence on voters.

- Ensuring that voters receive sufficient information about all aspects of the process, especially while it is being newly developed, is fundamental in order to avoid a lack of trust in the system.

- The electoral officials organizing early voting need to carefully consider measures necessary for the safe storage of sensitive materials, including where documents are stored.

- Conducting elections through various SVAs, particularly early voting, requires that special measures be taken to uphold the transparency of the electoral process, such as enabling unimpeded election observation. A very long early-voting period, among other factors, may necessitate changes in the accreditation of observers.

- Early voting requires significant added costs that need to be absorbed by the budget.

Endnotes

1. Early voting takes place during the same period as voting from home and institutions such as prisons and hospitals. Additionally, voting on ships is available from 18 to 8 days before the election; postal voting, from 90 to 2 days; and voting abroad, from 11 to 8 days.

6. Mobile voting

Mobile voting can broadly be defined as a process where members of the election administration take a mobile ballot box to a voter either at home or at an institution where the person is located. This method is different from special polling stations, as it involves the transportation of a ballot box at the request of a single voter. In contrast with this form of voting, setting up a special polling station usually requires a threshold of voters and involves the establishment of a controlled environment to act as a polling station at a residential institution such as a hospital, nursing home or prison. Overall, there are 29 countries in Europe providing opportunities for mobile voting (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Availability of mobile voting, October 2020
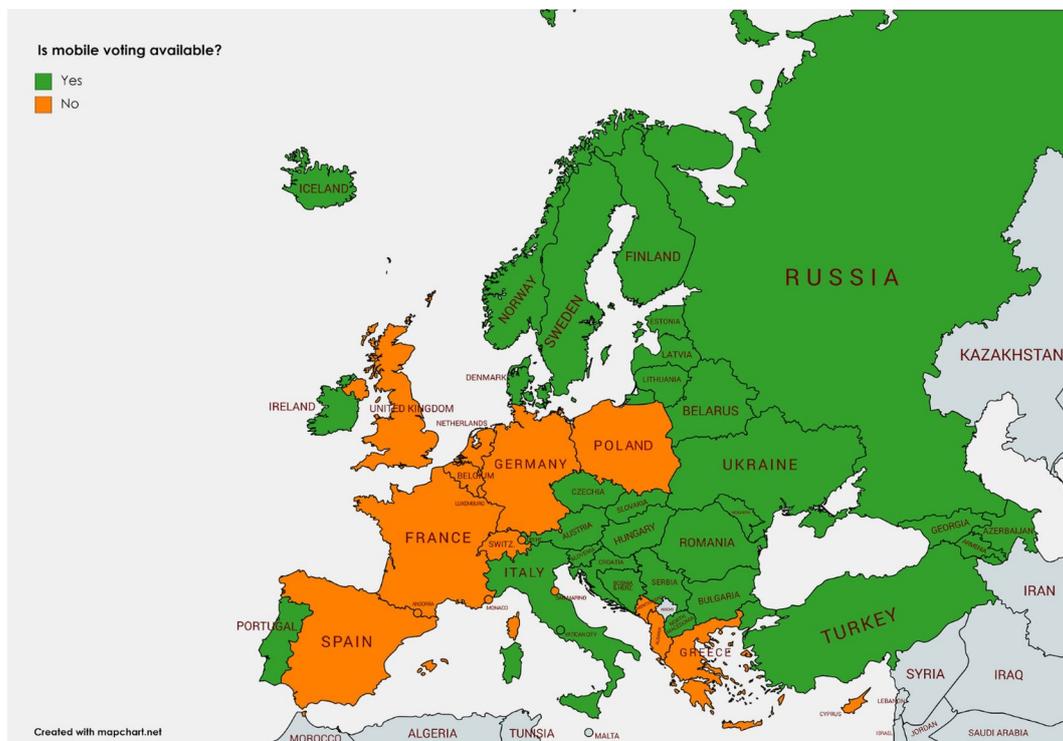
Source: Heinmaa, A. E., 'Special voting arrangements (SVAs) in Europe: In-country postal, early, mobile and proxy arrangements in individual countries', International IDEA, Feature story, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/special-voting-arrangements-svas-europe-country-postal-early-mobile-and-proxy>, accessed 20 December 2020.

There are no countries in Europe that allow all voters to freely request mobile voting, and voters usually must apply with a valid reason to vote through mobile voting; identification is checked at the time of voting, and the voter receives and casts their ballot at the same time (Lupiáñez-Villanueva and Devaux 2018). The vote is placed and kept in the special ballot box, which is returned to the relevant polling station, where the ballots inside are usually mixed and counted with the regular votes. While mobile voting can help increase accessibility of the vote for individuals who would otherwise be unable to vote, maintaining secrecy of the vote and ensuring that votes are cast without coercion are of greater concern with this method (Lupiáñez-Villanueva and Devaux 2018).

There are three different types of mobile voting that are most commonly found:

1. Election officials associated with a voter's polling station make prearranged visits to dwellings and hospitals in the area to allow residents to vote.

2. Provisions on voting day allow election staff to bring voting materials to voters outside of the voting centre but unable to enter the residence (curbside voting).

3. Special voting station staff make visits to remote locations where the population is too mobile or too scattered or the distances are too vast for normal polling stations to be effective.

The following considerations are applicable to mobile voting:

- Eligibility rules are one of the most vital considerations in mobile voting, as they have an impact on the universality and equality of suffrage. Criteria should be robust, but also flexible enough to take into account the different reasons for which people may request mobile voting.

- Attention should be paid to deadlines to allow citizens enough time to request mobile voting in unexpected or emergency circumstances. EMBs should pay heed to the scalability of measures. All applicants should be able to be served even in the event of a surge of last-minute requests.

- EMBs should actively engage in voter education practices that ensure that people are aware of who is eligible and what documentation is required.

- The freedom of the vote must be safeguarded. Procedures should be designed so that the possible need for assistance is accommodated without permitting undue influence to occur.

- The design of the oversight of the mobile ballot box should serve to maximize the integrity and trust in the mobile voting process. This process should include allowing for two or more electoral commission staff to accompany the mobile ballot box, often in the presence of observers, including political party and independent observers, who can attest that no undue influence occurred.

6.1. Practical experiences and lessons

Latvia

Mobile voting is one of two in-country SVAs offered in Latvia, with the other being early voting three days before election day. The main principles for mobile voting are stated in the election laws, and the procedures are detailed in instructions set by the Central Election Commission (CEC). Mobile voting can be used in all elections and referendums and has

been a voting method in Latvia since the parliamentary elections of 1993. However, mobile voter turnout has declined by over half since the 1990s, from 2.62 per cent in 1998 to 1.08 per cent in 2018. Potential explanations for this change are that mobile voting has been decreasing along with a general decrease in overall turnout, that mobile voting is simply less popular than it was before, and that mobile voting is decreasing because of stricter rules for political advertising introduced in 2013. The new rules eliminated previously common methods of campaigning, such as candidate visits in nursing homes and social care houses, and the practice of influencing voters by offering practical benefits, which was widely used as part of pre-election campaigns in the 1990s. The CEC informs voters of the option of mobile voting by informing the heads of institutions where mobile voting may be arranged, as well as by preparing and disseminating information in the media and over the Internet.

Mobile voting is available to voters who are unable to come to a polling station for health reasons, to those who are caring for the ill on election day and to voters in penitentiaries. To facilitate elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, the right to mobile voting was also extended to voters in self-isolation or quarantine. Mobile voting takes place at voters' residences and in care homes, prisons and temporary detention facilities. Mobile voting is organized only if a voter is located within the jurisdiction of the polling station where they are registered to vote. Voters in hospitals during the European Parliament elections are the exception to this rule: they may vote via mobile voting outside of their polling jurisdiction by using a registration envelope, which is then delivered to the relevant polling station. The registration envelope has a similar design to those used for out-of-country postal voting, whereby multiple envelopes are used to ensure the secrecy of the vote. Other voters are not permitted to vote outside of the polling station where they are registered.

To apply for mobile voting, a voter must submit a written application to the polling station commission. Applications are not accepted by telephone. The information required on the application includes the voter's full name and personal identification number, the reason mobile voting is requested, the address at which mobile voting is requested, and the voter's phone number and other contact information. The application may be delivered in person by the voter's proxy, sent via email by the voter or a proxy to the municipality (an electronic signature is required), or submitted through the state portal Latvija.lv (Internet banking authentication or an electronic signature is required).

The mobile voting application for every voter opting for this method must be delivered to the precinct election commission between the fifth day before election day and election day. Requests received after midnight the night before election day will be fulfilled if it is physically possible to do so before the polls close. Upon receipt of an application, the polling station commission checks that the individual is eligible to vote and whether the address of the voter is within the polling station territory. All applications are registered in the electronic journal of the voting process. A letter is sent to the applicant if their application is rejected.

Mobile voting usually takes place on election day. Two members of the polling station commission may accompany the mobile box, or the municipal election commission may set up a separate polling station commission that is tasked with organizing this process. A separate ballot box and voting lists are used, and the mobile ballot box is sealed in the polling station in the presence of other commission members and observers. The number of voting envelopes given to the mobile voting team is recorded.

Observation of mobile voting is allowed, but the voter has the right to refuse observers to enter their property. The chair of the voting station informs the observers of the route the mobile voting team will take. The polling station commission is not obliged to provide transport for observers, and secrecy of the vote should be ensured throughout the observation process.

Upon return to the polling station, the mobile team hands the voting materials over to the chair of the polling station commission. These materials include the ballot box, voter lists,

and any unused and/or damaged voting envelopes and ballot papers. The chair immediately seals the gap in the top of the voting box with a designated safety seal. The number of unused and/or damaged ballots is recorded in the electronic journal of the voting process, and the number of envelopes issued and returned is compared with the number of votes. If a vote did not take place, the reasons for such a situation must be entered in the electronic journal. The electronic journal is accessible and is checked by the high electoral commissioners.

The counting of mobile votes takes place at the polling station in the presence of electoral observers and the media after the close of polls. Mobile votes are counted separately. The number of valid voting envelopes is checked against mobile voting records in terms of both their number and voter signatures. If the numbers are the same and the signatures match, mobile voting envelopes may be added to other valid envelopes and counted together. If the numbers do not match, the votes in the mobile voting box will be counted separately.

The Latvian case represents a long-standing tradition of mobile voting, but one that is not used by many voters. There are few complaints about mobile voting in the country. The complaints that are submitted generally relate to failures to inform or cooperate with observers, the possibility for voter influence to occur in nursing homes and social care institutions in which persons with mental disabilities reside, and the fact that voters can refuse to allow observers to film or take pictures at their home. The availability of mobile voting made it a useful solution for organizing voting during the COVID-19 pandemic for voters in self-isolation or quarantine.

Austria

Austria, despite its small population of nearly nine million inhabitants, is a federal country with a highly decentralized electoral administration. Unlike federal elections, local and regional elections do not fall under the authority of the Interior Ministry and are run entirely by the respective provinces themselves. Therefore, it is important to note that the provisions outlined in this section apply only to federal-level elections.

Voting is generally administered by a two-tier election administration: in one tier are the respective electoral boards, from the federal electoral board at the highest level to the precinct/special electoral boards at the lowest level, and in the second tier are the corresponding administrative units that support the boards at each level. In this way, federal elections are administered by the federal election board and supported by the federal Ministry of the Interior. The work is channelled down through the lower units in a cooperative fashion, making the organization of mobile voting a competency held at the lowest level, the precinct/special electoral boards, which are supported by the administration unit of the relevant municipal office. The organization of mobile voting in Austria is therefore highly decentralized.

The use of SVAs in Austria reaches back nearly 100 years, throughout which time the tradition of multiple voting channels has evolved and has been systematically professionalized and expanded. In 1923, voting cards were issued for the first time. These cards were proof of voters' right to vote and allowed them to vote at any polling station in the country. The year 1949 saw the first round of voting in special precincts, as polling stations were set up in hospitals and prisons. Mobile voting was first introduced in 1984 when so-called flying electoral commissions were permitted. Postal voting abroad became possible in 1990, and in-country postal voting was introduced in 2007. The mobile voting system has been in place for over 40 years and has been very successful, with a high level of awareness and acceptance of special voting measures throughout the Austrian populace.

The voting card received by voters acts as a multifunctional tool, as it can be used for mobile and postal voting, as well as voting outside of one's district. The voting card comes with an envelope that also carries information about the voter—it can be used as a real postal

envelope, or it can serve as proof of one's right to vote in the event that a voter casts their vote from home or at a polling station outside their home precinct. It is a key feature of the card that voters must apply for a voting card first, and then later on they can decide the method they will use to vote. Use of voting cards was popular even before the COVID-19 crisis: in the 2019 National Council (nationwide parliamentary) elections, over one million voting cards were issued for the first time. In comparison, only 829,910 were issued during the 2017 National Council elections.

Voting cards are available upon application at the competent municipality for a voter's place of main residence; they are not issued by the Interior Ministry. The application must be made in person or in written form, such as via email, fax or an online portal. A proxy is not allowed to submit the application; proxies are only permitted to pick up issued voting cards. A reason must be given for the application, though no proof is required. The deadline for submitting an application is two days before election day for an in-person application or four days before election day for written submissions.

Once an application is accepted, the voter will receive voting materials by post or can pick them up at the competent municipality. The materials include the ballot sheet, a voting card printed on a large white envelope and an inner secrecy envelope. As is common in postal voting systems, the double-envelope method helps to maintain the secrecy of the vote. For National Council elections, the ballot sheets differ depending on the regional constituency to which the voter belongs. When voting by post or casting a ballot outside the voter's regional constituency, the inner envelope is beige with a number printed on it that corresponds to the territorial constituency to which the envelope should be delivered. If a vote is cast at a polling station or flying commission within the respective constituency, the inner envelope is blue and is immediately mixed with other votes at the polling station or flying commission so that it cannot be traced.

Legally speaking, special precinct polling stations are no different from regular polling stations. Special precincts are traditionally set up in large hospitals, nursing homes or penitentiaries. Both types of polling stations are composed of a chair, appointed by the mayor, and three assessors, nominated by the parties according to the distribution based on the previous National Council election. In polling stations, electoral witnesses are also allowed to be present, with a maximum of two per campaigning party. In addition, electoral observers may be present throughout the voting process. While the ballot boxes are closed, they are usually not sealed, as prevention of manipulation falls within the mutual remit of the members, and the boxes are immediately emptied after the closing of the polls.

When compared with regular or special precinct polling stations, mobile commissions (or flying commissions) are similar in composition and staffing. The commissions include a chair and three assessors and may also include witnesses and international election observers. At least one flying commission per municipality must be established. The commissions are legally formed but may never go into service if there are no requests for mobile voting on election day. Only those who cannot access polling stations due to their health, age or other mobility factors and people who are detained may apply for a visit by the mobile voting commission, and a voting card is necessary to exercise this right. The ballot box that accompanies the flying commission is immediately returned to the relevant polling station after the end of their tour. Notably, if a voter wishes to exercise this right outside of their home municipality, they must send an application to the municipality that they are currently located in. In this case, the only aspect the home municipality handles is issuing the voting card.

To facilitate universal and equal suffrage in Austria, several additional provisions are included. For the blind or visually impaired, a template for the ballot paper is provided, and numbers instead of names can be filled in to indicate the voter's chosen candidate. Voters with physical or mental disabilities have the right to designate a trusted third party as an

assistant. The right to vote, however, must always be exercised personally—no proxy votes are permitted, and the third party must act as an assistant only. Mobile voting is of particular importance for homebound voters who need assistance, as assistance is prohibited for postal voting. Furthermore, at least one polling station per municipality must be made accessible for those with physical limitations. Finally, it has been possible since 2010 for bedridden and disabled people to establish a subscription for voting cards in future elections.

The Austrian case demonstrates how trust in, and the structure of, SVAs can develop over a long period of time. In particular, Austria managed to establish complementarity between special voting methods, as issued voting cards can be used across different special voting methods, both within and outside of Austria. While the wealth of available methods can raise questions about the need for mobile voting in the first place, many voters still prefer a supervised environment, and this method is also legally important to ensure that people with disabilities have an avenue to vote if they prefer a method other than postal voting.

Croatia

Mobile voting has been in place in Croatia for over 30 years. Mobile voting is conducted according to the Constitution, the electoral legislation and the mandatory instructions that are issued by the State Electoral Commission for a certain set of elections.

Mobile voting is designed for those in Croatia who, due to serious illness or any disability, cannot visit a polling station. The application process is simple, requiring only that the voter or a designated third party directly informs the polling station commission or local electoral commission—which then sends the information to the polling station commission—of the request. Mobile voting is administered by polling station commissions for voters who reside, in principle, within the territorial boundaries of the polling station in question. The polling station commissioner must check that the voter is in the correct register before they can proceed with mobile voting. Requests can be submitted until noon on election day, and later applications on election day will be fulfilled if the polling station has the capacity to do so. However, the polling station commission is only obliged to record that mobile voting was requested and that it was unable to fulfil the request. A special record of fulfilled requests is also kept and noted in the minutes of the polling station commission. Most complaints regarding mobile voting arise from voters the commissions were unable to serve.

In July 2020, Croatia held parliamentary elections under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional hygiene measures were deemed successful, as there was no spread of disease traced to the elections. A combination of mobile and proxy voting was extended to those in self-isolation or quarantining after testing positive. The decision to permit this combination of voting was underpinned by a ruling of the Constitutional Court of Croatia that required that the voting rights of those affected by COVID-19 be secured through the use of SVAs. The possibility to request assistance with voting was extended to those who tested positive for COVID-19 in order to further facilitate safety.

The Croatian case illustrates the use of a simple and a trust-based process of mobile voting, albeit in a context where it has not been used extensively in the past.

Moldova

Moldova held the first round of its presidential election on 1 November, and the second round was held on 15 November. Mobile voting is offered to citizens who are physically unable to go to a polling station, including those in healthcare institutions and prisons. Mobile voting is not available abroad, nor is it available in territories that are currently outside the effective control of the Moldovan authorities. In the recent presidential election, mobile voting was also offered to voters who showed symptoms associated with the coronavirus, who were self-isolating or in quarantine, and who tested positive for COVID-19.

Voters are required to send an application for mobile voting to the polling station that corresponds to their place of residence. The application should be submitted in written form and is accepted from two weeks before election day until 15:00 on election day. Voters are not required to provide any documents proving their incapacity unless they are applying for mobile voting on election day, in which case a medical certificate proving the urgency of the request is required. These rules were also modified for people who suspected they were infected with COVID-19: they were permitted to request mobile voting by phone and did not have to show any medical certificate even on election day.

The Central Electoral Commission prepared for a larger influx of applications this year by recommending that polling stations create two mobile teams instead of one. In the case that only one team could be prepared, they were instructed to visit the elderly and those with disabilities first and to leave the coronavirus-affected voters until the end. Members accompanying the mobile ballot box were equipped with the appropriate hygiene protection, and their equipment and vehicles were disinfected after each visit.

In the first round of voting in 2020, 40,000 voters used mobile voting, and this figure was higher (along with the overall turnout) in the second round, at 45,000 voters, amounting to 2.75 per cent of all votes cast. Two difficulties were identified regarding the use of mobile voting for coronavirus-affected voters. Firstly, requests for mobile ballot boxes in the first round were not valid for the second round, meaning that voters had to request mobile voting a second time. Secondly, mobile ballot teams could only visit voters self-isolating within the territories of their polling district; those who were self-isolating in another district were unable to benefit from this right. A number of such occurrences were recorded.

North Macedonia

Mobile voting in North Macedonia divides the right of mobile voting into different categories based on different types of voters. North Macedonia held parliamentary elections on 15 July 2020.

The State Election Commission (SEC), in cooperation with the competent body, the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions, prepares the special voter lists 30 days before polling day and submits the required paperwork on behalf of the people on those lists. Those serving in prisons across the country vote one day before election day. The process is recorded by the nearest polling board of the relevant commission in the municipality where the voting is taking place. Ballots are delivered to the relevant municipal election commission and are counted together with all the other ballots from that municipality. Some 1,247 people voted using this method in the 2020 elections.

People who are ill or otherwise incapacitated must submit their applications for mobile voting, accompanied by valid medical documentation, at least seven days before the election. These individuals vote one day before election day. The municipal election commission prepares a list of these voters and distributes it to the appropriate polling boards according to the voter's address of residence, who are then obligated to send a representative to these voters' homes. Each ballot is placed in an envelope, which is placed in the mobile ballot box, and then the following day the votes are taken out of the mobile ballot box and placed in the election day ballot box and counted alongside other votes cast. Some 8,325 people voted using this method in the 2020 elections. Individuals under house arrest may also register using this method.

Recent changes to the Electoral Code extended the right to mobile voting to those in nursing homes. Individuals are required to fill out applications themselves to exercise this right. Some 244 voters used this method—mobile voting was arranged for residents of nursing homes in the same way as for prisoners—in the 2020 elections.

The organization of elections during the pandemic created an unusual situation in which the Electoral Code did not provide for voting by citizens self-isolating or placed in

quarantine. Moreover, the parliament was dissolved due to extraordinary circumstances and could not adopt amendments to election legislation. As a result, the elections were postponed from 12 April to 15 July. A significant degree of cooperation was required to create the legal regulations and associated protocols to accommodate coronavirus-affected voters. Those who were in quarantine at home or self-isolating were required to submit their application to the municipal election commission via an authorized person or electronically seven days before election day. The SEC established a new special electoral board for the purposes of mobile voting. The new board could have been one of several that already existed depending on the number of voters in the relevant municipality. The new board comprised three workers who administered the voting, and political parties were entitled to appoint representatives. Voting was conducted according to this method two days before election day, and 711 people voted in 2020 using this method. The new rules were considered a success, and North Macedonia is currently planning for similar processes ahead of mayoral elections in Stip and Plasnica in December.

6.2. Reflections from the OSCE/ODIHR

The OSCE/ODIHR highlighted the following pointers about mobile voting:

- The integrity of the vote is a more relevant and important principle when it comes to mobile voting, especially regarding three factors. Firstly, the freedom of the vote must be protected—that is, the people served by mobile voting must be able to cast their vote freely and without undue pressure. Secondly, the secrecy of the vote must equally be protected, not only in law but also in practice. Thirdly, honest counting should be safeguarded and should be observable.

- Clear information and procedures must be provided regarding who is eligible to vote and how they can exercise this right. Attention should be paid to making sure that groups that are not included do not feel that they have been wrongfully discriminated against or that they have been excluded for political reasons. Voter education about all aspects of the process is key to ensuring that there is public trust in mobile voting.

- Voter lists should be carefully administered to protect against multiple voting. Mobile voting presents unique challenges in this respect, as people may need to exercise this right unexpectedly and at the last minute.

- The list of eligible people and the reasons for which they are permitted to vote via mobile voting must be kept transparent, but also in a fashion that remains mindful of the potential pressure that excessive disclosure can have on voters.

- Secrecy of the vote must be protected in how the results are published. Especially in smaller areas, it may be possible to discern how certain individuals voted if mobile voting results are reported separately.

- Transparency and election observation will be slightly different with mobile voting, as the need to observe the vote must be balanced against a voter's right to privacy in their own home. The OSCE/ODIHR acknowledges that there will be less space for international observers in these contexts, and notes that a balanced selection process for mobile voting teams can increase trust in observation by these individuals.

- Poll workers should be specifically trained to attend to the particular needs of populations using mobile voting.

Conclusion

SVAs are increasingly seen as a useful tool to maximize the equality and universality of the vote. Especially in the context of the pandemic, they are a helpful way to avoid election postponements or lower turnout due to health concerns. SVAs can also enable citizens to cast their vote where they would otherwise be unable. Where available, the use of SVAs has grown significantly in comparison with previous elections. When discussing SVAs, EMBs should consider existing traditions and contexts, infrastructural needs, increased costs and the close link between electoral integrity and public trust., In considering the implementation of newSVAs, EMBs must also remain mindful of the trade-offs between maximizing participation and the potential risks to electoral integrity.

A broad range of options are available to safeguard the integrity of SVAs. As shown through the country practices outlined above, various countries in Europe are implementing a number of important safeguards against maladministration or fraudulent practices. Together with these procedural and substantive safeguards, proactive and targeted voter education is key to the success of SVAs, as it helps ensure that voters understand who is eligible, how they can vote and what protections are in place. Transparency at all stages of the process of implementation can also help to increase voter trust in the process. Finally, it is important to remember that SVAs cannot fix what is already broken. If there are broader concerns with electoral integrity of a more fundamental nature, SVAs cannot be assumed to mitigate them and can in fact aggravate them.

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About the partners

Association of European Election Officials

The Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO), formerly the Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials, was established in 1991. It is a non-governmental organization, an alliance that is independent from political parties and governments. The Association's main objective is to promote the institutionalization and professionalization of democratic procedures and to provide assistance for holding free and fair elections. In order to achieve this mission, the Association supports the operation of permanent election commissions and offices and actively contributes to the establishment of legal standards regarding the requirements for democratic elections. The ACEEEO organizes different meeting points for election professionals, such as conferences and seminars, and it also provides professional assistance and guidance for those who require it. As of 2020 the ACEEEO counts 25 member countries and several member NGOs and maintains good partnership relations with different international organizations in the field of elections.

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<http://idea.int>

Special voting arrangements (SVAs) are designed to expand voting opportunities to individuals who are otherwise not able to vote. Safeguards that protect the equality, secrecy and transparency of the vote are vital for successful implementation of SVAs. Over the past few decades, countries across Europe have been increasingly adopting SVAs—particularly postal, early and mobile forms of voting. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated their use throughout the year 2020.

International IDEA and the Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO) convened a series of online webinars in October and November 2020 on SVAs. This report summarizes key insights and reflections from each of the three webinars.