

Training electoral stakeholders – the need for a specialized body of electoral experts: Romania’s experience

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe we can all agree that elections are huge, complex and costly events than cannot be organized and conducted without a large number of people whom should be fully aware of their responsibilities in the electoral process.

As we all know these people are accountable to the law, whether they are permanent or temporary staff. This is why they need to know and understand the legislation, the working practices and the new technology or processes introduced.

In this context, training them in the areas mentioned is essential for a good organization and conduct of any electoral process.

As electoral administrators we are faced with immense operational tasks in often challenging political environments. Solid professional knowledge and skills are required to manage electoral processes effectively, especially since the international community is introducing global standards, and examples of best practice for effective and accountable elections management.

The question we all have to answer is how to provide this knowledge and skills in an efficient manner.

This is why, before planning any training in the electoral field, we have to identify the following aspects:

- the people who are in need of electoral training;
- the skills and knowledge that different groups of stakeholders will acquire;
- how to deliver the training to various participants taking into account their preferences and the resources available;
- when and how often training for different groups should be conducted.

Taking all these aspects into consideration I will present the strategies, methods and techniques that the Permanent Electoral Authority employs in terms of training its electoral stakeholders.

1. PEA’s attributions in terms of training electoral stakeholders and how the training programme of the Permanent Electoral Authority was conducted up to now

According to the law one of PEA’s main tasks is training the persons with responsibilities in elections.

Depending on each type of stakeholders, we provide electoral training not only when elections are organized and conducted, but also in the period between elections.

Some of our training programmes have a permanent character, and others have a periodic training one.

A. Permanent training for electoral stakeholders

Electoral training with a permanent character is being provided monthly by experts from the PEA’s branches and county offices to mayors, secretaries of administrative-territorial units, public services for accounting of the population at local level and prefect institutions.

The main topics concern the way these institutions fulfill their duties and responsibilities in the electoral field in accordance with the electoral law and PEA’s instructions and decisions.

The evolution of the permanent training increased since the inception of PEA, and it is especially higher in electoral years.

B. Periodic training for electoral stakeholders

In regards to our periodic training programmes, they are designed for the following electoral stakeholders:

- members of the polling stations bureaus, mainly their presidents and vice-presidents;
- authorities and institutions with responsibilities in elections;
- financial trustees of political parties;
- international election observers;
- other EMBs in need of electoral assistance;
- the media.

1. Training formembers of the polling stations bureaus and for authorities and institutions with responsibilities in elections

Mainly all periodic training programmes take place during an electoral process period. In Romania this varies from 60 to 90 days, depending on the type of elections.

The training programme is conducted regularly at national level and is designed for members of the polling stations bureaus, mainly their presidents and vice-presidents, and for the authorities and institutions with responsibilities in elections.

For example, during the elections from 2014, we conducted over six hundred training sessions and we had about ten thousand participants.

The participants were familiarised with the unitary application of the regulatory framework and the specific activities of the electoral processes. We aimed to help them develop the necessary skills for solving any issues that appear in the electoral process.

The technique we use is instructor-led face to face training and the methods include a lecture component, questions and answers sessions and demonstrations and examples on various issues.

For this, we develop and distribute, in print and electronic format, the following training materials:

- a manual regarding the regulations on the electoral process, which includes a detailed guide for electoral officials;
- posters with step-by-step instructions on the main electoral operations that take place in election day;
- flyers with a check-list regarding the electoral operations for every member of the polling station bureau.

Complex by its magnitude, by the teaching and learning methods and materials used, this programme subscribes to the goal of developing an electoral management system in accordance with democratic values.

Another complex training programme we conduct is that for the persons responsible to operate in the Electoral Registry. This programme started at the end of 2012, when there were about ten thousand participants trained in two hundred fifty training sessions.

Due to the length and complexity of these training programmes, there are numerous resources allotted by the PEA. Hence, they have the following characteristics:

- high financial costs;
- a great number of human resources, as they involve all PEA staff;

- various material resources and logistics.

It is very important to highlight that the electoral officials are a very heterogeneous group in terms of education and experience in participating in other electoral processes.

In this context, a two-hour training session with the average of two hundred participants allows a limited accumulation of knowledge and skills. This training model was satisfactory considering the legal framework, but it had to be improved.

Hence, we proposed and advocated during the electoral reform debate the development of a specialized body of electoral officials trained on a permanent basis.

2. *Training the financial trustees of political parties*

Another area of training of the PEA is the one for the financial trustees of the competitors in elections, where we seek to familiarize the participants with the legal requirements regarding funding of competitors and electoral campaigns.

3. *Training programmes designed for the media*

The media is another important stakeholder for which we offer training sessions. These are generally conducted in specific projects, the most recent one being „*Electoral discourse without discrimination*”, developed by PEA in 2014 in partnership with a national NGO and the National Council for Combating Discrimination.

4. *Training international observers*

As I presented our national stakeholders in terms of electoral training, I would now like to bring into focus our international ones.

An important training programme we provide is that for international observers from foreign EMBs for each electoral process.

In 2014, through the project ‘*Support to Building Institutional Capacities of the Electoral Management Bodies and other concerned target groups in the Romanian ODA priority countries*’, PEA in partnership with UNDP and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted two electoral training programmes: one for the European Parliament elections on the topic of ‘*Voter Registration*’ and two others for the presidential ones on the topics: ‘*Financing of political parties*’ and ‘*Women's participation in elections*’.

5. *Training for other EMBs in electoral assistance programmes*

As I mentioned, we have an active interest in helping our international stakeholders and providing electoral assistance by sharing Romania's transitional experience, mainly for MENA countries and Eastern Europe, on the following topics:

- EMB management and operations;
- voter registration, electoral procedures and operations, training etc. ;
- women in elections;
- democratic transitions;
- integrity issues including combating fraud.

2. Permanent training in the context of developing a specialized body of electoral experts and the appearance of a new group of stakeholders due to the introduction of computerisation of polling stations

As I previously stated, we respond to the needs of various stakeholders in terms of providing complex training programmes.

While the majority of our training programmes are successful, our evaluation showed that the one designed for the electoral officials had several issues that needed to be remedied. These were as follows:

- it was organized using a lot of resources, especially financial and material ones;
- due to the electoral legislation that was in place up to 2015 the electoral officials could not form a specialized body, and could not be trained on a permanent basis;
- it did not provide a sufficient timeframe for the participants to better accumulate knowledge and skills, due to the fact that one training session lasted an average of two hours;
- the groups trained were very large which was not conducive to the learning and evaluation processes;
- the participants were a very heterogenic group in terms of education and experience in participating in other electoral processes.

A very clear example for the last issue mentioned, is the distribution of the electoral officials that were appointed for the 2014 presidential elections in terms of education, experience and occupation.

In terms of occupation only 14% of the persons proposed to be appointed electoral officials were those working in the legal field.

Also, 27% of the electoral officials appointed did not have a higher level of education.

Another issue was their experience in other electoral processes. While about 80% participated previously in only one electoral process, 16% were electoral officials for the first time.

Due to all these aspects, we advocated since 2012 for the creation and development of a specialized body of electoral officials trained on a permanent basis. This issue was included in an Electoral Code that we proposed to the legislators.

While this code was not adopted, in the context of the electoral reform started by the legislator at the beginning of 2015, we offered our experience and expertise in drafting the new electoral law.

In this respect we advocated for several major reforms that were introduced in the new electoral law, namely:

1. The creation of a specialized body of electoral officials trained on a permanent basis by PEA's specialized centre for training, namely the Electoral Expert Centre;
2. The computerisation of polling stations.

In regards to the creation of a specialized body of electoral officials, starting from 2016 we will develop and implement a new training programme for electoral officials that will have the following characteristics:

- a larger publicity and involvement of the participants, due to the national public information campaign that will start at the beginning of 2016;
- a continuous character due to the fact that the training sessions will be conducted periodically, not only during the electoral period, but also in between elections;
- it will be more efficient, due to the fact that the groups of participants will be smaller in size (a maximum of 40 participants);

- it will be adaptable to the knowledge level of the participants in terms of curricula and materials developed;
- it will be more complex in terms of training techniques used, due to the fact that besides the instructor-led face to face training there will be an e-learning platform updated on a permanent basis;
- it will provide a better evaluation of the participants, based on our own methodology.

In regards to the computerisation of polling station, it will be implemented for the 2016 electoral process and it will lead to a new group of stakeholders in need of training, namely the computer operators in the polling station.

Conclusions:

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we can all agree that training is a major component required to manage electoral processes effectively.

Our experience showed that the work of an EMB in this context is extensive and complex.

In order to offer professional knowledge and skills to various groups of stakeholders we have to find new solutions to possible training issues and implement them efficiently.

In our experience of over 10 years in training various groups of stakeholders, we have found that without the existence of permanent training programmes it is very difficult to train participants that have different levels of education and experience.

This is why we had to design and advocate a new training model, one where a new specialized body of electoral officials will be trained on a permanent basis using modern training techniques.