

EQUALITY OF VOTERS, EQUALITY OF VOTES: VOTER EQUALITY IN ROMANIA: LOGISTICAL AND LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great honor to be here today.

Before I begin the presentation Voter equality in Romania: logistical and legislative challenges, I must say it was real interesting to learn more about other countries' experiences, challenges and achievements.

During its 10 years of activity, PEA has always expressed its commitment to support the efforts of other countries in organizing free and fair elections by facilitating networking, building synergies and common projects that will promote free and credible elections.

Our goal is for every citizen to recognize the importance that elections have and to fully understand the role that they can have in this process. The involvement of women, persons with disabilities, minorities and youth in elections reflects the mentality, culture and mindset of a nation.

2014 was an important electoral year for both Romania and the Permanent Electoral Authority. We had two general elections – Presidential and for the European Parliament - and also Parliamentary and local by-elections in some constituencies.

Computerization of polling stations

Since 2014, there were some modifications on the election law, like the monitoring system of turnout.

The Permanent Electoral Authority successfully implemented a SMS-based turnout monitoring system at the Presidential elections. For the first time in Romanian electoral history, a real-time turnout for every polling station was provided for 5 different time frames previously announced.

Implementation of the information system of monitoring for the presence at the vote and prevent illegal vote is necessary in selecting and training a number of

approximately 30,000 people to practice as computer operator in addition to those 18.553 voting sections .

Computerized polling stations starting with local elections in 2016 will increase transparency and the speed of the voting process and will prevent attempts at multiple voting and the electoral tourism.

Electoral Bureau of each polling station will have a computer operator. The voter submits its identity card and, if applicable, the document proving residence.

Legislative measures were taken in order to provide to Romanian voters from abroad an effective and easy way to exercise their right to vote. After the Presidential elections, the special Electoral Reform Commission within the Romanian Parliament was re-enacted. The Commission, together with NGOs and other public institutions, including the Permanent Electoral Authority, analyzed various alternatives and identified the best out of country voting system.

Electoral Register

I will present you one of the most important tools for us: the Electoral Register.

The Electoral Register was used for the very first time at the 2014 European Parliament elections. It is a nationwide electronic database holding the identities of all Romanian citizens of voting age and their allocation to polling stations.

The Electoral Register is administered by the Permanent Electoral Authority.

According to the Electoral Register, 18.220.469 Romanian voters were enrolled on Election Day for the European Parliament.

The turnout was 32.44% (5,9 million voters), up by over 5 percent comparing to the 2009 elections, when the turnout was 27.21%.

Voters can verify if they are enrolled in the Electoral Register, if your personal details are correct. The voters are ascribed to the electoral districts and thus the election process streamlining is ensured.

The Electoral Register is based on a modern hardware and software architecture placed in a contained and secure Data Center. The system offers low latencies and high data throughput for users.

Permanently, public officers empowered by mayors continuously updated the Electoral Register. There were provided with the support via e-mail and a Call Center.

According to the new law on the Parliamentary Elections, 208/2015, Romanian citizens domiciled or resident abroad may be enrolled in the Electoral Register starting with 1st of April 2016, and up to the date of expiry of 48 hours from the beginning of the electoral period.

Why is it useful for voters signing up with their home address or residence abroad in the Electoral Register?

- polling stations close to the house
- lower costs for getting to the polling place
- avoid congestion at voting bureaus
- the voters are enrolled in the permanent electoral list
- the voting time is shorter

Partnership with civil society to identify vulnerable groups

1. Persons with disabilities

In Romania there are 700.736 disabled persons, representing 3.5% of Romanian population. In order to better understand the problems faced by these people, PEA has concluded a series of partnerships and meetings with **National Council on Disability, Romanian Blind Association, The League for Promotion and Protection of Rights for persons with Handicap in Romania, National Association of Deaf People in Romania** and NGO's whose activity aims to promote equality for persons with disabilities.

By enclosing a partnership with National Association of Deaf People in Romania, were targeted the following issues:

- Raising awareness regarding voting rights for persons with hearing difficulties;
- Promoting active participation in democratic life for persons with hearing difficulties;

- Actions that aims to improve conditions for exercising the right to vote for persons with hearing impairment to different types of elections organized in Romania;
- Promoting non-discrimination and equal opportunities.

Following the partnership with National Association of Deaf People in Romania, in 2014, PEA identified the opportunity to increase awareness regarding voting rights for people with hearing impairments, in promoting campaigns and voter information on European Parliament elections. In this regard, through the campaign “**AmbassaDOR of European Romania**” the message of awareness regarding the importance of European elections has been translated for the first time in sign language by a representative of the National Association of Deaf People in Romania.

Also, PEA has initiated the project “**Your vote is equal to the others**” that targets persons with locomotive, hearing or visual disability. This project aimed to identify the problems faced by persons with disabilities during electoral processes, both in terms of exercising the right to vote and providing access to information during electoral campaign. In order to achieve the goals of this project meetings were held with representatives of **National Authority for Handicap Persons**, as well as those of **NGO’s** with activities in promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Given the need to establish a legal framework, PEA issued since 2008 a Decision on the condition that must be met by any polling station, which provides easier access for people with disabilities who intend to exercise the right to vote at the polling station as well as installing special access ramps. Also, the same Decision states that in addition to standard cabins, it’s recommended to ensure a voting booth for people with locomotive disabilities, with proper marking and size.

In order to exercise the right to vote, voters that cannot be transported because of illness or disability may vote at home using the special ballot box (mobile ballot box) found in each polling station.

Ensuring non-discriminatory conditions for people with disabilities to exercise their right to vote aims both access in polling stations as well as in buildings in which polling stations operate. Ignoring the right to vote for persons with disabilities represents a serious breach in the mechanism of democracy; therefore PEA has a moral obligation to find legal remedies to facilitate access for persons with disabilities in electoral process.

In addition, PEA was part in a project named "Electoral speeches without discrimination", developed in partnership with E-Civis and National Council for Combating Discrimination in order to issue a warning about social phenomena that hatred instigating speech both online and offline.

Within the project "Election Speeches without discrimination", developed in partnership by the Permanent Electoral Authority and E-Civis Association and the National Council for Combating Discrimination and funded through the NGO Fund (the Norwegian EEA funds Grants) were developed:

- a support course for media professionals on the role of the media in combating hate speech discourse
- Brochure with information on speech instigating hatred and discrimination for electoral competitors participating in the presidential election and campaign staff;
- a comparative study concerning legislation on hate speech and incitement to discrimination in the Member States of the European Union (both in Romanian and English);
- a draft of the legislative proposal on monitoring hate speech through which instigates hatred and discrimination in election campaigns to prevent and combat them.

2. National Minorities

National minorities represent a significant percentage of the Romanian population, 2,069,886, approximately 11% from total population of Romania. Currently, there are 18 officially recognized ethnic minorities in Romania, each represented in Romanian Parliament.

The identity of national minority communities is a fundamental value of our country, recognized and protected by law. The state guarantees the right to free expression of national minorities in political, social, scientific, cultural and economic spheres.

For each election, PEA develops, publishes and distributes brochures with electoral information on both presidents of election polling stations and voters belonging to

national minorities, translated into foreign international languages as well as Hungarian, the Hungarian community representing the largest minority in Romania.

Therefore, PEA has signed a partnership with the Department for Interethnic Relations. The main objective of this agreement is to better inform Romanian citizens belonging to national minorities about voting rights and the right to be elected.

At the European Parliament elections from 25 May 2014, PEA has elaborated in partnership with the Department for Interethnic Relations and European Parliament Information Office in Romania, the "Voter's guide in minority languages". It contains technical information regarding the exercise of voting, translated into 16 languages of national minorities from Romania.

3. Gender Discrimination

Excluding women from information exchange and training opportunities on professional level, financial barriers, the presence of gender stereotypes represents just a few of major impediments to women's participation in politics or elections. Encouraging women's participation in elections is one of the PEA's key-elements on civic education and increase participation in the electoral process. As a result, PEA organized in 2014 two conferences on women's involvement in elections, events that brought together over 300 electoral experts from around the world.

The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of European Elections Officials (ACEEEO) held in Bucharest in 5-6 September 2014, brought together over 200 electoral officials and representatives of prestigious international electoral field. Among presented topics we can mention Participation of women in electoral process and public life; *the role of women in the political life of the country*, as well as their participation in the electoral process; *Representation of women in public life and electoral process* or *Gender in electoral processes*.

The main topic of this conference was the opportunity for women's participation in elections. According to latest results published by OSCE, the proportion of female representation in the OSCE region is about 24.4% in Lower Chambers. However, more

and more countries introduced legal means to increase women's participation in politics such as equal or similar shares. The first step in this area is to identify the laws, policies and discriminatory practices. In this respect, **The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of European Elections Officials** gave all participants the opportunity to become familiar with best practices in this domain.

From 7 to 8 March 2014 was held the international seminar on "**Women's participation in elections**", event that aimed the consolidation of good practice in electoral matter and providing assistance in identifying multidimensional solutions to existing challenges.

This seminar held by PEA followed mainly the exchange of experience and good practices between international experts, designing, developing and implementing solutions and policies to promote women's political participation, strengthening relations between electoral management bodies involved in this event as well as strengthening Romania's position as a supplier of electoral assistance.

In addition, during February-March 2014, PEA conducted the research "**The gender dimension of political life in Romania – interest, involvement, discrimination**" in which two main concepts were used – The level of interest in political domain, as a crucial element in decision making regarding participation in electoral process and registration of active involvement of women in political life. The study consisted in 1045 persons, only women, age over 18 years, coming from different groups in terms of level of education, residence, geographic area or income value. The obtained results formulated the following conclusion: 71% of respondents believe that active involvement of a large number of women in political life would be a suitable solution for significantly improve the political class in Romania.

4. Youth involvement in electoral processes

PEA has developed several projects on informing and educating young people, such as **National Information and Awareness Campaign "Young people Vote – Young people matter"** held in the context of the 2014 European elections, **National Information Campaign „E.U. Votez!"**, the debate "**Youth involvement in electoral process**" and the project **„First Vote"** with participation of representatives of political parties in Parliament, NGOs, teachers, students from National School of Political Science and Public Administration.

Primulvot.ro (firstvote) is a portal launched by PEA in order to outline a space for debate and political-electoral information especially for young persons voting for the first time. Beyond basic information on elections and electoral voting procedures, the portal aims to be a forum for discussion on issues that are or should be included on public agenda with participation of youth. The ultimate goal is to convince young people to participate, knowingly, in decisions affecting them by going to vote.

Following the agreement of partnership with the **Romanian Youth Council**, PEA participated in the National Campaign Information and Awareness "**Young people Vote – Young people matter**" held in the context of the 2014 European elections. The goal of this campaign is to foster active participation of young people in European democratic and national life, in particular by encouraging their participation in elections as properly informed and responsible citizens.

As a conclusion,

The principle of equal voting and voters is a constant concern of the electoral management body in Romania.

The entire activity of the Permanent Electoral Authority is governed by the principle of respect for those encouraged every ballot, to exercise their right to vote.

In this respect, the projects developed by AEP - Electoral Register and computerized polling stations, partnerships with civil society and vulnerable groups have one objective: to ensure voters' democratic framework in which they can freely decide, with the guarantee that on Election Day the equation is mathematically guaranteed: **1 voter = 1 vote**.

Marian Muhulet

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