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(CDDG)**

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Strasbourg and by videoconference

DIVISION OF ELECTIONS AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

DEVELOPMENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN 2021

Secretariat Memorandum
prepared by the
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Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy

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1. Introduction

At its meeting of 13 April 2021, the GR-DEM held an exchange of views on "Elections during the Covid-19 crisis: the role of civil society organisations". The Chair concluded *inter alia* that **"Standards and guidelines of the Council of Europe and OSCE/ODIHR in the field of election and civil participation continue to be of crucial importance during the crisis. The Council of Europe should continue to examine good practice of engaging citizens in decision making, inside and outside the voting booths. Complementary to this, it would be useful to monitor, in cooperation between national/local authorities and civil society, how the very relevant Council of Europe Recommendations on elections and civil participation are actually implemented on the ground. Moreover, it would be of importance to examine the role of participatory democracy in its member States"**.

The 2021 Report by the Secretary General indicates a **"worrisome downward trend of the electoral turnout at times when public confidence in the electoral process is falling, resulting in an increase in public protest and violence. A strong response from states is needed,** pursues the Secretary General, **and new forms of participation should be encouraged, following Council of Europe standards and best practice, to bridge the gap between voter expectations and policies"**.

The Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy¹ is actively working in these two areas of intervention: electoral support and support to enhance civil participation in political decision making, which are crucial in strengthening democracy in the member States.

2. Intervention of the Division

The Division provides technical and practical assistance to national, regional and local authorities in the Council of Europe's member states to find adequate responses to their expectations and needs in both intervention areas of elections and participatory democracy. In 2021, it has increased its means within its two pillars and complemented them with a rapid response element to tackle emerging concerns expressed by electoral authorities.

The following chapters aim to give a quick general understanding of the *modus operandi* of the Division – its overall aims, the expectations of its stakeholders and the means which are put into place to address them.

¹ The Division is composed of 21 staff in total, 8 of them work in the headquarters (of whom 3 remunerated from the Ordinary Budget) and 13 in the Field Offices (all remunerated from extra-budgetary sources). General activities are financed by the ordinary budget, cooperation activities are financed in the framework of relevant provisions in the Action Plans, by voluntary contributions.

Electoral support

Aims: One of the overall aims of the Division is to contribute to restore and building citizen's trust and engagement in the electoral process - a process in which tangible impacts are undeniably hard to measure. However, by specific cooperation activities, the Division, through its cooperation projects in the field, accompanies electoral management bodies (EMBs) throughout all phases of the electoral cycle. A broad variety of activities provide electoral actors currently in four member States - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine - with specific responses to requirements expressed either in the respective Action Plans or in Recommendations made by the election observation and monitoring missions carried out by the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. They also complement, whenever necessary, the work of the Venice Commission. For instance, if the Venice Commission is carrying out long-term legal training for EMB's, the Division provides complementary technical and practical assistance.

The main target groups of the projects are Election Management Bodies (EMBs), such as Central Election Commissions (CEC's), Electoral Boards or Departments of Elections, Electoral training centres, concerned departments of Ministries or even State Audit instances. In complement, the Division strives to promote and to enhance the work of civil society in this respect, by supporting NGOs to conduct effective election observations by giving them a voice within the electoral processes and by facilitating dialogue and cooperation with different stakeholders involved. Civil society organisations play an important role in election observation, as watchdogs and as awareness raisers during the electoral process. The Division also promotes the participation of groups which are often under-represented in elections, such as women, first-time voters, and minorities.

Expectations and needs of the EMBs vary in countries but many concerns are common, such as : - the relation between EMBs and the media, with the aim to reach a healthier relation, to tackle disinformation, manipulation or to carry out fact-checking; - the lack of women at different levels of the electoral process and in political life in general; - the integration of vulnerable and underrepresented groups into the electoral process by providing them with information on their electoral rights; - the understanding of voting right protection of minorities or diaspora; - the mobilisation of first-time voters in a context of low voter turnout and lack of trust in politics, politicians and elected representatives, just to name a few. Expectations evolve in an unpredictable political landscape, therefore a close connexion between the Field Offices and EMBs is needed to adapt the means to the needs.

The **means** put in place by the Division consist of providing peer-to-peer exchanges and reviews, expert advices as well as technical and operational support for election administration; capacity building and training at domestic level; promotion of good practice or the assistance with the implementation of legal provisions or guidelines produced by the Venice Commission. The Division also produces public awareness campaign material, videos and radio spots, toolkits for voter education and training material for the election administration. Furthermore, it organises trainings for different institutions involved in the electoral processes, supports domestic election observer organisations and contributes to the holding of post-election conferences, steering group meetings and the preparation of Action Plans.

Enhancing participatory mechanisms

Aim: The Division is already running, through its Field Offices in Ukraine and Georgia, cooperation projects to strengthen participatory democracy through the promotion of Council of Europe standards and the introduction of innovative tools. Both projects aim to foster dialogue and cooperation between public authorities and civil society in decision-making processes both at national and local levels.

Considering the increasing awareness that citizen participation is necessary for any vibrant democracy, the Division, since the second trimester 2021, has stepped up its activities concerning participatory democracy and preparations for further projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Moldova are in progress. Furthermore, the Division is currently strengthening the position of the Council of Europe in relevant international networks, while internally strengthening the coordination with other entities in the headquarters, in particular those working on Human Rights protection and the development of civil society.

To enhance effective and transparent engagement of citizens in political decision making, which finally also results in decisions that reflect the citizens' will, it is still relevant in all Council of Europe member States to raise awareness about Council of Europe standards and to build theoretical and practical knowledge on participative and deliberative democracy tools and mechanisms. To this end, the Division has developed - based on the experience of the project in Ukraine - an "Academy on Civil Participation", which aims to build capacities of public authorities and civil society. The Academy was implemented in the second semester 2021 in Bosnia Herzegovina and on national (online) and regional level in Georgia. It is planned to be rolled out broadly in 2022 in several Council of Europe member States, as well as in Morocco.

To inspire and promote innovative approaches and practices for effective citizens' engagement, the Division develops, jointly with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of INGOs, is currently developing the online platform BePART, to share good practice examples of civil participation in Council of Europe member States. The platform will be launched in March 2022.

Expectations are high among citizens and authorities to reach a better understanding of the societal and political landscapes in which civil participation is evolving and of the real impact of participatory and deliberative democracy mechanisms on political decisions - decisions which directly concern and affect living conditions of the citizens, and which often contrast with the promises made during electoral campaigns.

To contribute to a better understanding of the criteria and dynamics which make civil participation mechanisms effective, transparent and sustainable, a systematisation of good practice examples is needed as well as an analysis of the "Does and Don'ts" when introducing participatory initiatives, in particular, deliberative initiatives, like the increasingly popular Citizens Assemblies, Panels or Juries. Such work should possibly be resulting in the elaboration of standards and definitions allowing to bridge a regulative gap, as participatory democracy mechanisms are not anchored yet sufficiently in national Constitutions as it is the case for representative democracy.

The **means** put in place by the Division consist, as a first step, of raising awareness on Civil Participation ad well and building capacities. Through training of public authorities and civil society representatives, basic aspects and concepts of civil participation are discussed and questioned: How can participatory democracy work in complement to representative democracy? Which governance level – national, regional or local - should be addressed to engage citizens most effectively? Who is the motor in the process of existing initiatives? Who exactly are the participating actors – the individual citizen or the NGOs, and at which level of participation?

The Division also supports municipalities, public institutions and ministries to introduce participatory mechanisms to develop policies on gender equality, inclusion or youth. It further assists, through legal and technical assistance, local authorities in urban participatory planning or participatory initiatives related to environmental issues.

Recently, the Division has started a groundwork overview on civil participation by drawing a picture of the current situation and developments in member states, completed by an inventory of examples of deliberative initiatives (as a specific form and highest level of participation), currently in use in Europe and at international level. This inventory should feed into the Working Group of the CDDG on new forms of deliberative democracy.

Complementarity between electoral support and participatory mechanisms

Low voter turnout is visible in all member States, but studies suggest that the engagement and participation of citizens in political decision making at different levels and regarding different topics are on the raise, be it online or face-to-face. These dynamics of participation in the decision-making process need to be enhanced. It also needs to be ensured that they are effective and transparent, and awareness needs to be created among elected officials and civil society that these dynamics are valuable complements to representative democracy which is expressed through elections.

The aim of the Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy is to support these dynamics and to strengthen the links which potentially exist between these democratic expressions, leading to an environment in which trust of citizens in public institutions is reinstated and their interest and will to participate in elections increased through the effective engagement of citizens in political life, that guarantees that political decisions reflect the will and the need of the citizens, and proves the citizens that their voices are heard and their opinions are taking into account.

At the same time, the more the electoral processes are professionally managed and conducted in a transparent and inclusive way, the more trust citizens will regain in the election results and, consequently, in the legitimacy and actions of their elected representatives.

In this way, civil participation and participation in elections complement each other and reinforce representative democracy.

Cooperation with the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG)

The CDDG is steering the Council of Europe's intergovernmental work in the field of democracy and governance and advising the Committee of Ministers in its field of competence. It is *inter alia* instructed to "provide guidance to and input into the co-operation activities aimed at enhancing civil participation and providing support to member States in the electoral field". This provides a solid basis for further cooperation.

The CDDG, in this respect, provides orientation and guidance to the Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy and the Division may feed back to the CDDG with practical input and experience from the cooperation projects.

At the 14th Plenary meeting of the CDDG (29 and 30 November 2021) it was proposed that the Division increases its support to the CDDG in 2022 concerning the Committee's task to review the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5 on standards for electronic voting and to contribute to the Report on new forms of deliberative democracy, with a view to complementing Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)4 on the participation of citizens in local public life as well as the 2017 Guidelines on civil participation in decision-making and taking into account its own work on e-democracy. The Division on Elections and Participatory Democracy is currently preparing a report on deliberative democracy which could serve as a basis for the CDDG's work.

3. Reports from Field Offices - 2021 activities: trends, impacts and changes

Six projects are currently carried out through the project teams in the Field Offices: four in the area of electoral support and two in the area of civil participation. The reports below show a selected part of the activities carried out, indicating how they were able to impact on a specific situation or identified trend and how, after all, they could contribute in 2021 to a more general aim: to achieve positive change.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Project: "Support to more integral and inclusive electoral process in Bosnia and Herzegovina"

- The strategic cooperation and continuous dialogue with the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEC) has been strengthened in a difficult political climate caused by disagreements on further constitutional and electoral reform. The Project however managed to facilitate dialogue among electoral stakeholders and supported possible electoral reform towards a better alignment with European standards and compliance with ECHR judgments. The capacity-building activities provided to the CEC increased their efficiency and transparency, strengthening their capacity to administer elections in line with international standards.
- The Project succeeded to enhance the capacity of the election administration at all levels through the implementation of education seminars and training of trainers. A unified curriculum has been developed in line with relevant international standards and good practice, produced in cooperation between the Council of Europe and the CEC experts, for the quality education and certification of future trainers from all Municipal Election Commissions (approximately 150). These newly certified trainers will then be in charge of the training of members in the over 5.500 polling station commissions (PSCs) in the whole country.

- The capacities of leading media in Bosnia and Herzegovina to carry out professional and independent monitoring of electoral process has been increased. Working closely with the CEC, Council of Europe experts and the media, an educational project has been designed for the leading media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on professional and independent monitoring of electoral processes to familiarise media professionals with the most important aspects of electoral processes and electoral legislation. The programme resulted in the certification of 60 representatives of the 30 leading media organisations in the country, and the impact of this activity in the way the media are covering the issues related to the election, the work of the CEC, its challenges and constraints, has already been noted by the CEC and several stakeholders.
- Following PACE resolution on “Promoting Parliament free of sexism and sexual harassment”¹², the Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy has produced a follow-up study on “Violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, presenting recommendations on how to promote women’s participation in political life and leadership roles and how to regularly gather and publish data on violence against women.
- In order to promote the representation of under-represented categories of voters and enhance their participation in democratic decision-making processes, a comprehensive baseline study on “Civil participation in decision-making process in Bosnia and Herzegovina” has been produced and largely distributed to relevant institutions and organisations.
- In December 2021, a post-election conference “Lessons learned and challenges” was organised jointly by the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Council of Europe following the 15 November 2020 Local Elections and Local Elections in the City of Mostar. The Conference brought together almost 200 participants representing the 143 municipal/city election commissions and legislative bodies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, election experts, representatives of the international community and NGOs. It resulted in important conclusions and recommendations agreed upon by all of the almost 200 participants.
- On the basis of the above-mentioned achievements, and in view to follow up and further increase the electoral assistance during an important forthcoming year for Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the General elections due to take place in October 2022 in the context of the electoral reform, the Division has prepared a follow up project, which will take over from the current one, ending on 31 December 2021.

Georgia

Project “Strengthening Participatory Democracy and Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia”

- This new project, launched in December 2020, has the particularity to be jointly implemented by the Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy, with a focus on participatory democracy and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, with a focus on Human Rights. It is financed by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA).

² Assembly debate on 9 April 2019 - see Doc. 14843, report of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, rapporteur: Ms Thorhildur Sunna Evarsdóttir). Text adopted by the Assembly on 9 April 2019 (13th Sitting). See also Recommendation 2152 (2019).

- Its aim is to raise awareness of citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs) and public authorities on the importance and benefits of participatory mechanisms, complementary to other democratic pillars, such as elections. It also provides policy and legal expertise as well as technical support to local authorities and CSOs interested to engage citizens in their community in the political decision-taking, through new innovative mechanisms and tools.
- The project team, operational since mid-August 2021, has started the implementation phase with a series of consultations with key stakeholders, including public authorities at central and local levels, civil society organisations, experts and international organisations implementing projects on civil participation in Georgia. The consultations started the setup of a network of stakeholders within the country.
- For the purpose of reaching the outcomes of the project, a needs assessment on the participatory frameworks at local level in Georgia was conducted and a pool of local experts was recruited. The translation of Council of Europe key documents (CM REC (2018)4 and Guidelines on Civil Participation, as well as training materials in local language is in process.
- As the main focus of the project is the local level, an additional challenge has been posed by the local elections which took place on 2 October 2021 in Georgia. Taking into account the procedures and timing of elections as well as post-election political climate, still an Academy on Civil Participation on national level and two on regional level were implemented, with approximately 150 participants from public authorities and CSO. An international Winter School on Civil Participation was organized in Tbilisi in December 2021, to foster peer-to-peer learning, networking and development of cross border activities.

Georgia

Project “Supporting Transparency, Inclusiveness and Integrity of Electoral Practice and Process in Georgia”

- The platforms established by the Project facilitated dialogue among electoral stakeholders and supported ongoing electoral reform towards a better alignment with European standards and practices. A package of recent changes to electoral legislation was adopted on 28 June 2021 by the Parliament of Georgia. The high-level expertise contained in it contributed to a tangible policy change in the fields of electoral dispute resolution and digital solutions in electoral processes.
- The efficiency of the work of the State Audit Office’s (SAO) Political Financial Monitoring Department has been improved and qualification of the Department’s staff has increased through their participation in systematic capacity development activities. The transparency of campaigns and political finances have been increased and the general public has been provided with a better access to information through newly introduced digital solutions.
- The competences of election officials at all levels of the election administration have been enhanced through training courses and cascade trainings. Among them, an online training course on tackling the misuse of administrative resources during electoral processes, developed in 2020, which continues to prove its efficiency. Shortly after the launching, more than 18.000 civil servants have registered, and nearly 16.000 have successfully completed the course.

- Gender equality and women's political empowerment have been promoted and vulnerable groups as well as youth have been provided with more comprehensive information on their electoral rights. Their engagement in electoral processes has been strengthened after public voter education campaigns and the "get out the vote" initiatives. As a follow-up of the Participatory Gender Audit, first in its nature and conducted for the election administration, policy and strategic planning operates in a more efficient way to mainstream gender and intersectionality perspectives in the work of the institution and among electoral stakeholders.
- Electoral jurisprudence has been strengthened and domestic practices have been better aligned with the Council of Europe's acquis and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, through introduced permanent training courses on electoral dispute resolution at the High School of Justice of Georgia. To date, up to 100 judges all over Georgia and 20 Court personnel have successfully completed the course.
- Newly developed toolkits empowered electoral stakeholders to tackle the misuse of administrative resources in electoral processes and counter hate speech in electoral campaigns.
- The project, which started on January 2020, will continue assisting Georgian Authorities and electoral stakeholders during the entire year 2022.

Republic of Moldova

Project "Improving electoral Practice in the Republic of Moldova", Phase II

- In March 2021, when the project started, the following problems were identified: first, the mandate of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) came to its end and the new composition of the CEC appointed in September 2020 was still not completed; second, the Council of Europe tools (like the one on "Monitoring of Media Coverage of Elections") needed additional input to be implemented by the National Audiovisual Council, the CEC and the media; third, the newly elected Members of Parliament, Government officials and the new members of the CEC needed to familiarise with the Project activities.
- To address these and other related needs, the project swiftly organised information and training activities, seminars and webinars for election officials and observers, the development of policy papers, analysis and compendia, and the use of existing Council of Europe toolkits.
- Several seminars allowed to bring together different stakeholders, such as members of the CEC, different ministries and civil society representatives, for instance through a session on alternative voting mechanisms, or a post-election review conference, online courses on the "Misuse of Administrative Resources in Electoral Processes". In May 2021, 70 administrative judges and electoral staff completed a course on Electoral Dispute Resolution based on the ECtHR case law, roundtables were organised during the electoral campaign on "Combating the Misuse of Administrative Resources in Electoral Campaign" and "Combating Hate Speech in the Republic of Moldova". In the context of the snap Parliamentary elections of 11 July 2021, two electoral spots for Moldovan Diaspora voters residing on the left bank of the Dniester were produced and disseminated online and on TV channels.

- It is important to note that the number of women elected as Member of Parliament in the 11 July 2021 early parliamentary elections has reached the highest number ever registered in the Republic of Moldova: 41 for 101 seats. This positive change could be linked to the number of activities and awareness raising carried out in the previous project phase (starting in April 2018), promoting the participation of women in politics and elections, eventually leading to the introduction of gender quotas in August 2019.
- For the first time, Moldovan Authorities have been provided with analytical documents on elections: a comprehensive analysis indicating the level of implementation and/or non-implementation of the recommendations and proposals issued by the International Election Observation Missions and the Venice Commission's opinions on the amendments to the electoral legislation and legislation on political financing of the Republic of Moldova between 2014-2021 and a study on the mapping of obstacles and conditions for the improvement of cooperation/communication between CEC and political parties, women, the youth, civil society or media.
- An analysis of the existing legal framework and practices concerning electoral dispute complaints resolution in the Republic of Moldova was conducted and will serve as a basis for further steps to improve both the electoral legislation and the electoral processes. In parallel, a "Democracy Café" – a platform for discussions and analysis of opportunities to inspire the informed participation of young people in electoral processes has been created. Activities were also inspired by the Council of Europe toolkit "Vote outside the box", piloted in the regional elections in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATU Gagauzia).
- Some tangible impacts of these processes were that the number of trained people, including members of the electoral management bodies (trained through E-learning platforms of the Centre for Continuous Electoral Training) has increased, and so has the number of judges applying the Council of Europe standards and the ECtHR case law in the electoral field.
- In general terms, it can be argued that the capacities of the electoral management bodies to ensure the sustainability in the development of their professional and technical skills have been strengthened. Important steps were made towards a better inclusiveness and transparency of electoral processes and towards the promotion of good standards in the field of electoral law and practice. The project will pursue achieving the goals assigned and assist the Moldovan Authorities and electoral stakeholders until end of February 2023.

Ukraine

Project: "Strengthening civil participation in democratic decision-making process in Ukraine"

- The project aims to support public authorities in Ukraine in setting up effective, inclusive, and sustainable legal and practical frameworks for civic engagement and participation, reinforcing democratic institutions and supporting representative democracy, especially, at the time of COVID-19 crisis. Its work is based on and targets three main pillars, required for effective participatory democracy: i) enabling legal frameworks and environment; ii) increased awareness and capacity of public authorities, active citizens and CSOs; iii) inclusive participatory policy dialogue. Apart from extensive online work, support and activities, field missions ensured the engagement and commitment of pilot public authorities and partners and achieved the results mentioned below.

- Support has been provided to 23 local authorities in integrating the Council of Europe democratic standards into municipal regulations and legal frameworks, creating opportunities and new accessible mechanisms for civic engagement and participation.
- The processes put in place (remote online expert legal support, effective communication with and engagement of the stakeholders, increased attention and visibility), triggered rapid results within the first year of the implementation of the project: 6 municipalities adopted a statute of territorial community and full-package regulatory frameworks for participation; 3 municipalities adopted and piloted a mechanism for urban public space planning and citizen engagement; 8 municipalities introduced an innovative participation tool – School Participatory Budgeting (School PB)
- The average data across pilot municipalities shows that more than 80% of school students participate in the voting process. This can be acknowledged as a direct result of the trainings provided by the CoE project – 300 school students increased their awareness and knowledge of School PB). Two municipalities (Sumy and Kamianske) were inspired by and implemented independently the CoE Toolkit on School PB. School participatory budgeting raises youth awareness of the importance of participation in elections. Innovative capacity building methodologies (UChange game-based training) tailored and adapted to online working modality triggered rapid results.
- To make legal frameworks and regulations work, local officials received mentoring (online and offline) and capacity building support to bear effectively the duty to engage civil society in the decision-making process. 44 representatives of public authorities and 94 civil society representatives received tailored and capacity building support, empowering them to design and execute participatory process around public space planning – as a concrete example: the decisions on the reconstruction of the avenue in Stryi, the central square in Chernivtsi and the public building in Khmelnytskyi were based on interests, preferences of all social groups and stakeholders, including those seldom-heard, silenced and vulnerable. Innovative participation mechanisms helped public authorities to increase correlation between their decisions and citizens preferences and to include seldom heard and vulnerable persons in public consultations around public spaces reconstruction.
- At the time of COVID-19, new innovative hybrid (online and offline) engagement practices and methodologies are vital to ensuring sustainable policy dialogue, tackling challenges related to COVID-19 environment. CivicLabs helped public authorities to effectively engage with the public in the decision-making, especially around difficult policies, conflict situations, environment and communities and to increase trust and respect between public authorities and public. As a result, 10 policies or decisions were formulated based on the results on the Council of Europe's CivicLab workshops/support, which consists in an innovative engagement (online/offline) deliberative methodology.

Ukraine

Project "Supporting the transparency, inclusiveness and integrity of electoral practice in Ukraine"

- In 2021, the project continued providing its support to national electoral stakeholders in view of improving the existing legal framework and electoral processes in line with the European standards and good practices. Particularly, in cooperation with the CEC and other partners, the Project facilitated the discussion of the main lessons learned upon the results of 2020 local elections for more than 300 representatives of election administration, executive and legislative branches of power, judiciary, political parties, media community, upon which recommendations on further improvement of electoral legislation and practice on local elections in Ukraine were developed. The discussion, as well as the drafting of the recommendations were based on findings, conclusions, and recommendations made by international election observation missions of Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and OSCE/ODIHR.
- The Project has also commissioned a comparative study on decentralised election management practice in Europe to make it available to the CEC for the purpose of further establishment of its regional and territorial offices and elaboration of necessary by-laws.
- In the context of digital technologies mainstreaming, the Project ensured maintenance of the online awareness-raising platform about elections "CEC: prosvita", as well as the production of online training course on election observation for domestic observers (CSOs, political parties). In this way, the capacity of the Central Election Commission to communicate with different target groups like young voters, civil society representatives, political parties, was strengthened.
- As noted by international observers, the gender quota appears to have worked reasonably well during the 2020 local elections³. However, it was also noted that the original gender balance was not necessarily reflected in the final lists of candidates on the election day. Thus, within the framework of the Project, a study on the national courts' practice on application of the gender quota at 2020 local elections was conducted. 139 judgements and decisions were analysed, main challenges and issues were identified, presented to and discussed with more than 200 representatives of the national judiciary; all this with the view to be used for the purpose of developing uniform court practice with respect to application of gender quota during future electoral cycles, as well as for improving the gender quota enforcement mechanisms in electoral legislation.
- By the end of the year and in cooperation with the Poltava oblast council, it is planned to pilot⁴ the Council of Europe toolkit "Participation of young women and girls from disadvantaged groups in political and public decision-making processes at local level". Upon the results of the pilot implementation, respective methodological and training materials will be developed and made available to other local communities wishing to increase the engagement of young women and girls from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups to local decision making and community life.

³ For example, the representation of women in city councils increased from 18.1 % to 30.2 %, and in oblast councils from 15 % to 27 %.

⁴ In cooperation with the Council of Europe project "Strengthening civil participation in democratic decision making in Ukraine"

- On an ongoing basis, the Project continues to ensure the availability of Ukrainian translations of the Council of Europe standards and recommendations as regards gender equality acquis, political participation of people with disabilities, and ECtHR case-law on electoral matters.
- A new project has been prepared by the Division to pursue the work done, and will start in January 2022, in order to reinforce the important achievements and progress made, to continue the assistance provided to the Ukrainian CEC and electoral stakeholders, and further strengthen transparency, inclusiveness and integrity of electoral practice in Ukraine.

4. Rapid response activities

To complement its activities carried out by the Project teams in the Field Offices, the Division has launched a rapid response system in order to react efficiently and in its sphere of competence to new or unforeseeable developments requested by EMBs and to provide assistance by expert consultancies in line with Council of Europe priorities and provisions. These activities are not meant to be one-off events, they aim to be carried out and followed up in cooperation with other Council of Europe entities or outside stakeholders. They further aim, especially in those countries which are not part of the Division's cooperation activities, to build a basis for a possible future role the Division may play in the field and thus to enlarge its cooperation activities beyond the four target countries.

- In Albania, prior to the 2021 Parliamentary Elections, the Division implemented a national-wide awareness-raising campaign for first-time voters and prisoners, ultimately reaching out around 107.000 young voters and 2.600 inmates and personnel and supported the CEC with advices on secure data management of New Voting Technologies, in co-operation with the Council of Europe's Data protection Division. As follow-up of the elections, a post-electoral support to the CEC was launched in accompanying the elaboration of a new strategic plan for the CEC and providing expertise on potential IT solutions to improve the management of key electoral processes in the view of the next electoral cycles. To this end, a 2-days retreat for the CEC was organised with international consultants and CoE's representatives in Korce, Albania.
- In Georgia, a pilot project with Tbilisi City Hall on civil participation was implemented to engage citizens in the planning of public spaces (in particular Vera Park) via forming a Citizen's Coordination Platform consisting of civil servants and citizens. The project provided trainings for platform members as well as technical support for the functioning of the platform.
- In the Republic of Moldova, following the request from the Division's local partners to support citizen election observation in the polling stations abroad, in the context of the 2021 early Parliamentary election, an observation mission was put in place with the support of the NGO Promo-Lex. Specific trainings were organised in the context of the elections in the Autonomous Territorial Unit Gagauzia.
- In Ukraine, a wide study on political participation and on ensuring electoral rights of national minorities was settled with the Framework Convention on National Minorities' Secretariat.

5. Inter-Secretariat activities

The Division has also implemented several activities in cooperation with other entities within the Organisation, allowing to reinforce cooperation between those who are involved in a way or another in activities concerning electoral support and civil participation.

- Three toolkits have been elaborated for electoral stakeholders on “Countering misuse of administrative resources in electoral process” in collaboration with the Venice Commission, and on “Gender Equality - Balanced Political Participation and Representation” in liaison with the Gender Equality Division, and on “Participation of young women and girls from disadvantaged groups in political and public decision-making processes at local level” in the context of the Ukraine cooperation projects.
- Preparations have been launched in Ukraine, in cooperation with the Venice Commission, for an assessment study of the quality of regulation of elections and referendums, as well as the effectiveness of this legislation.
- On 13 April 2021, the Division prepared, in cooperation with other Divisions, an exchange of views of the GR-DEM with representatives of the civil society on “Elections during the COVID-19 crisis: the role of civil society organisations”.
- The online compendium BePART to share good practice examples on civil participation is currently being developed jointly by Congress, CONFERENCE OF INGOS and the Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy (see below)
- Within the frame of the projects implemented by the Division, several activities (conferences, seminars, roundtables and workshops) have been organised, and conducted, jointly with Secretariat colleagues from the Council of Europe’s Gender, Minorities and No Hate Speech departments.
- A Toolkit on “Countering Hate Speech during Electoral Processes” for the use of Election Management bodies is being elaborated in collaboration with colleagues from the “No Hate Speech” Division.

6. Communication

Internal

The Division has stimulated the setting up of a “Who’s who in Elections”, a tool which lists all Council of Europe work carried out in relation to elections, across all phases of the electoral cycle (pre-electoral period, electoral period and post-electoral period) including the names and contact details of the colleagues responsible for it. The aim is to reveal the complexity, complementarity and impact of the Council of Europe’s work in this field, to ensure a smooth coordination between the different internal actors and to provide an easily accessible information to the outside. Two inter-secretariat meetings have already taken place and during the last one, participants agreed to have a common communication on 3 February 2022 for the Global Election Day.

A similar process has been put in motion in relation to Civil participation. Preparations are underway to establish a “Who’s who in Civil Participation”, after a first general inhouse research on what “civil participation” means for different Council of Europe entities working on this topic, and on how future work carried out by the Division can be complementary to existing projects and programmes.

External

The Division continues to run its online Compendium of Electoral Data, called **ElecData**, which produces interactive maps and graphics on various subjects related to election matters, such as the analysis of the conduct, trends concerning turnout, the representation of women in national parliaments or the frequency of parliamentary elections. It also provides links to Election Observation Mission reports and the recommendations adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress. The online tool mainly targets EMBs, civil society, academia and media. An expert has been contracted in October 2021 to carry out a study taking into account other existing databases, to make recommendations on how to further expand the current tool. ElecData aims to become a collaborative tool within the Council of Europe’s entities working on electoral matters, as since 2020, the Annual Report of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe presents some of the findings of the online tool. In a later stage, the data could be used to build its own report on “electoral affairs” as a regular following of the representative democracy in Europe.

In the field of civil participation, the Division is currently developing, in cooperation with CONFERENCE OF INGOS, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Institute for International Sociology of Gorizia (ISIG) the online Forum BePART, which offers practitioners from public institutions and civil society the opportunity to share good practice examples and lessons learned of civil participation projects implemented across Council of Europe member states. The BePART Forum aims to promote and to support civil participation in decision-making at local level as an important democratic pillar by providing structured information, contacts and the space for peer to peer exchange on successfully implemented activities. It has recently entered in the pilot phase of collecting data from at least 15 Council of Europe Member States through an online survey and will be officially launched in March 2022.

7. Links to relevant websites

Elections

Website

[Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy’s website on elections](#)

Projects

Bosnia and Herzegovina: [Support to more integral and inclusive electoral processes](#) (2020-2021)

Georgia: [Supporting Transparency, Inclusiveness and Integrity of Electoral Practice and Process](#) (2020-2023)

Republic of Moldova: [Improving electoral practice](#) (2021-2024)

Ukraine: [Supporting the transparency, inclusiveness, and integrity of electoral practice in Ukraine – Phase II \(2018-2022\)](#)

Other activities in specific countries

Albania: [Activities to support the conduct of elections](#)

Participatory Democracy

Website

[Participatory democracy's website](#)

Projects

Georgia: [Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at local level \(2020-2023\)](#)

Ukraine: [Strengthening civil participation in democratic decision making \(2018-2021\)](#)