



EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN 2020 ON THE ORGANIZING AND HOLDING OF ELECTIONS IN POST-SOVIET STATES:

A cross-study among electoral environments
in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan





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INTRODUCTION

Societies across the globe have considerably struggled with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which, in addition to significant public health concerns, has challenged the organizing and holding of elections. As evidenced throughout this study, one of the overarching issues has been conducting elections and ensuring the constitutional right to vote in the midst of the pandemic, while keeping voters safe and minimizing public health risks. Arguably, these are the two aspects which governments and election management bodies (EMBs) have had to ponder the most when conducting electoral processes, seeking a balance between democratic rights and health risks.

The circumstances of the coronavirus have affected all countries, albeit with various rates of infections and number of cases, and the aim of this document is to reflect upon the challenges, risks and solutions implemented while measuring their impact on elections. This study consists of a cross-country analysis focused on four post-soviet countries – Ukraine (25 October Local Elections), Georgia (31 October Parliamentary Elections), Moldova (1 November Presidential Elections) and Kyrgyzstan (4 October Parliamentary Elections) – providing insights from experts of the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO).

ENEMO is an international nongovernmental organization that represents a network of national nongovernmental civic organizations. It consists of 21 leading domestic monitoring organizations from 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia. The research was conducted through data mostly gathered in the framework of the domestic election observations by ENEMO member organizations in the studied countries. Each of the authors were involved in monitoring the elections in their studied country¹.

The first four sections of this study are dedicated to country analyses (case studies), specifically how the pandemic has created considerable difficulties for election management bodies and key electoral stakeholders, and led to country-specific contingency measures for holding elections. The research also highlights the issue of voter inclusiveness, opportunities for voters to make an informed choice, opportunities for campaigning, participation and turnout, and disinformation campaigns linked to the COVID-19 pandemic during elections. The idiosyncrasies of each country are analyzed first, while the fifth section of this study provides a cross-analysis of characteristics of the electoral environments, adopted measures, solutions and their effects. This allows to reflect upon how countries were able to tackle this global issue with similar measures, but also with variations and varying results.

The final section also includes perspectives for future research and recommendations, which could serve as “lessons learned” and contribute to improvements for subsequent electoral cycles.

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¹ENEMO seeks to support the international community's interest in promoting democracy in the region by assessing electoral processes and the political environment and offering accurate and impartial observation reports. ENEMO's international observation missions use international benchmarks and standards for democratic elections to evaluate the electoral process and the host country's legal framework. ENEMO and all its member organizations have endorsed the 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations. Each ENEMO observer signed the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers.

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Work of the election management bodies and public authorities:

Local elections in Ukraine were scheduled for October 25, 2020. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine together with Central Election Commission (CEC) were responsible for developing the measures to contain coronavirus during the electoral process. To develop such measures, the CEC established a working group, which included representatives of Parliament, Ministry of Health Care, National Security and Defense Council, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as representatives of international organisations.

In addition to the epidemiological response principles included for organizing and conducting elections for all actors in the process, the CEC jointly with the Ministry of Health Care set a list of personal protective equipment, whereas the estimates, financing methods, logistics, and the respective by-laws needed to be added and adopted at the level of the Government.

The CEC also initiated legal regulation for certain aspects of the organization and conduct of local elections amidst the pandemic. The Commission approved a special Resolution and provided proposals to be further used as a basis for draft law N^o4117 which was introduced in Parliament. However, the draft law failed to find support in the Ukrainian Parliament in the beginning of September. For this reason, provisions of the Electoral Code were in effect in parallel with the Government's recommendations during the entire election process, and at times even conflicted with each other.

On 14 September 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted a Resolution on requirements for anti-epidemic action. The decision and the list of measures were based on the recommendations drafted by the CEC coordinated working group. However, each successive stage saw issues in implementing these decisions. For instance, in October the CEC had to provide explanations on the organization and conduct of voting, such as at the place of stay of voters with positive COVID-19 tests. The coordination measures were enforced only 9 days before the Election Day.

Financing of these measures was a weak point. Government sessions stated the allocation of sufficient funding from the central budget to local budgets. Instead, local self-governments had to re-direct some of their resources from the special COVID-19 containment fund for the needs of election organization under the pandemic. In fact, the expenses for the regular needs had to be re-allocated for election exigencies. An imbalanced budgeting process and financing of activities resulted in an unequal distribution of resources to provide for the needs on a local level, within their financial capacity.

Formally, the decisions of central authorities were made - and the coordination was only relatively systemic - but it did not include local self-government bodies. As a result, it hampered the enforcement of the Government's decisions, or led to their irregular application. In their reports, OPORA observers stated a better coordinated fulfilment of the Government's Resolution on epidemiological response in big cities and in district centers, rather than in small communities².

Public health and sanitary measures adopted for holding elections

Recommendations of the World Health Organization mostly were taken into account by the Ministry of Health Care for the epidemiological response in Ukraine. Although no CEC resolutions of Government decisions referred to the WHO, the recommendations, explanations, and procedures for the safe voting process were fully in line with the meaning of the recommendations shared by the international organization, or at least did not contradict them.

²For example, Odesa city council allocated from the city budget ab. UAH 1,445 mln, Mykolayiv city council – UAH 2 mln, Zaporizhzhia city council – over UAH 2,2 mln, Khmelnytskyi city council – UAH 209,000, Rubizne town of Luhansk Oblast – UAH 150,000; in Konotop, the city council allocated personal protective equipment for election commission members worth almost UAH 186,000.

The Cabinet of Ministers introduced the following key anti-epidemic measures³:

- To interview persons entering polling stations or election commission premises about any symptoms of the disease and take their body temperature.
- Recommendation for persons with elevated body temperature or respiratory symptoms to avoid visiting polling stations or election commission premises.
- Requirements for the arrangement of polling stations to enable safe voting: 1) places for disinfectants and posted information materials about anti-epidemiological measures; 2) marking at the entrance to the premises and within the voting premises to ensure a minimum 1 meter distance between people, and to inform about the optimal route to proceed to voting; 4) arranging places for centralized collection and further recycling of personal protective means.
- Recommendation on the stay of maximum 3 voters per desk to issue ballots.
- Arranging a separate booth and a separate ballot box for voters with disease symptoms and elevated body temperature.
- A requirement for voters to keep their face masks when voting, with the exception of the request of PEC members to check their identity. Voters were also recommended to use their personal pens during voting.
- Recommendation to citizens staying in self-isolation to vote at the place of their stay, upon applying to the PEC before 8 p.m. on the last Friday before the Election Day.
- Securing a distance between the PEC members (at least 1 meter distance between the fixed seats or the use of transparent screens).
- Disinfecting contact surfaces every 2 hours, wet cleaning of the voting rooms at least once every 4 hours.
- An obligation for election commission members, official observers, and for police officers to keep their face masks on; the PEC members to attend to the voting at the place of stay should wear gloves, face masks (respirators without exhalation valves) and/or face shields.
- Possibility to install additional anti-epidemic measures at special polling stations, and a recommendation to PEC members, to official observers and police officers to take a test within 72 hours before the Election Day, to enable them work at the special polling stations.

The CEC conducted a broad awareness campaign which included, among other elements, videos with social advertising on Ukraine's central channel and materials on the outdoor boards on actions to limit pandemic risks during the vote. On 22 October 2020 (three days before the Election Day), the CEC provided an additional explanation⁴ on the sequence of actions of election commission members if they had persons contracting the disease at the last minute, or on the rules of disposal of personal protective equipment by commission members who had to organize the voting of citizens with signs of COVID-19, at the place of their stay, or at the polling station.

Voter inclusiveness and registration, in particular voters hospitalized, in quarantine or self-isolation

The election legislation in Ukraine foresees the possibility to vote both at the polling station and at the citizens' place of stay, if they are obliged to stay at medical facilities or at their homes. For the election commission to be able to include voters who stayed in self-isolation or had a positive COVID-19 test to vote at the place of their stay, voters were required to submit an application with a medical certificate before 8 p.m. on the last Friday before Election Day. If the in-patient medical facilities had patients entitled to vote for the relevant elections (residing within the respective territorial communities), then special polling stations were established at the medical facilities.

In practice, before the repeated voting (second round) for elections of city mayors in large cities, with 75,000 voters and above, based on the majoritarian system of absolute majority, the CEC had to highlight as inadmissible to disrupt the voting at special polling stations in medical facilities. Incidents took place on October 25, 2020, when voters at special polling stations were dispossessed of their voting rights. In fact, voting failed in certain in-patient facilities as voting organization procedures were disrupted. The cases were not numerous, but they set a precedent.

³Procedures for Anti-Epidemic Measures in Organizing and Conducting Elections approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on 14 September 2020.

⁴Resolution No 409 on certain issues of performing election procedures to organize the preparation and to conduct elections on 25 October 2020, in the circumstances of the growing incidence rates of the acute respiratory disease COVID-19 caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 around Ukraine's territory.

To organize a safe voting at special polling stations established at the in-patient medical facilities and in penitentiary facilities, in pre-trial detention centers, election commission members, official observers, police officers, and other persons providing for the election process and staying within the election commission premises, it was recommended to take a COVID-19 test (PCR), within 72 hours before the Election Day. When organizing the vote at the place of stay of voters, commission members and voters had to keep gloves on, face masks, and/or a face shield. Special polling stations could have additional anti-epidemic measures, in line with the set conditions of stay at the facility hosting a polling station.

Although the procedure was established at the level of the law, the Ministry of Health Care did not set any unified form for a medical certificate to secure a motivated application of citizens to vote at the place of stay due to COVID-19. The CEC requested explanations from the line Ministry. Thereupon, the Ministry of Health Care of Ukraine replied to commissions with a letter, as late as 16 October (9 days before the Election Day).

Therefore, the major issue was timely informing voters about the procedure, aggravated by the lack of a broad awareness campaign. Overall, the total number of voters who voted at the place of stay was not much higher compared to the regular election campaigns taking place before the pandemic.

Opportunities for voters to make an informed choice and campaigning of electoral contestants

Since the electoral law was not adapted to the unprecedented elections under the pandemic, restrictions on running the election campaign were only recommendatory. The government resolution only included a recommendation that during the campaigning activities and events, in setting the campaigning tents, and handing out the campaigning materials, persons directly participating in the activities should use personal protective means, such as respirators or face masks that covered the mouth and nose, to follow sanitary-hygienic and anti-epidemic measures.

During the election campaign, Ukraine had an adaptive quarantine which restricted freedom of movement beyond red zone communities with high infection rates, but there were no restrictions within the settlements or regions. The peculiarity of this election was the smaller number of outside mass campaigning events (concerts, crowded meetings), whereas mass media were used in conventional forms and scales. On the other hand, activity levels of candidates grew tremendously on social media⁵. The trend is rather indicative where the conventional media are still popular and accessible for candidates, while social media are attractive with their lack of regulations.

When it comes to campaigning, a number of issues remain regarding the work of media in Ukraine and access of various stakeholders to them, namely: (1) political bias of the media and the impact of final beneficiaries on the editorial policy; (2) limited material resources of some candidates compared to unlimited funds of others; (3) access to mass media of candidates holding office in public authorities or in local self-government, and covering their current official activities are hardly separated from the pre-election race.

Central and local television channels, printed media and radio were actively sharing information materials on the peculiarities of administering elections under the pandemic, on the innovations of the electoral law in general, and on election systems first applied in Ukraine. However, the exercise of the candidates' rights to be elected was partially restricted because of the disease rates among candidates and national political leaders. After Election Day, three winners of mayoral elections passed away due to COVID-19 induced complications. They enjoyed voters' support, but failed to receive the representative mandate for these tragic reasons.

Media environment, disinformation campaigns, and voter access to information

Cyber interference into the critical infrastructure is less risky during local elections than during national elections, as official information and web resources are relatively decentralized. However, television channels in Ukraine fell under the influence of big business, oligarchs or local elites, which created

⁵OPORA studied the political ads and campaigning on the social media of Facebook and found that in only 44 days, from September, 5, to October, 19, 86,964 promoted political posts were published on Facebook. From June to August, 2020, OPORA detected over 50 parties which spent over USD 281,000 for 8,253 ads. In general, from the start of election campaign on September, 5, to October, 16, OPORA found 6,220 unique pages that shared political ads on the social media of Facebook. Over the monitoring period, political forces and candidates for various positions spent about USD 2.6 mln (about UAH 70 mln) for political ads on Facebook.

preconditions for the partization of the media environment. Up to 40% of Ukraine's citizens keep watching Russian television channels that are often the source of propaganda about Ukrainian political processes and political and civic activists. The number of media in Ukraine is considerably high, and while there is no government censorship, the influence of final beneficiaries has increased over recent years in Ukraine⁶.

A pressing issue to develop critical thinking of citizens still remains. According to the Research & Branding Group, in 2019⁷, 57% Ukrainians have not read a single book. Another survey on the "Citizens' attitude to the mass media and the consumption of various types of media in 2019" conducted by Internews⁸ showed the self-estimated results that 65% of citizens were sure they could differentiate a genuine piece of news from manipulative or fake ones. When the respondents were asked to evaluate the pieces of news, as little as 11% managed to tell them apart.

The peculiarity of this election was the dissemination of information through anonymous Telegram channels. The audiences of some of them reaches up to 500,000 followers, while they can uncontrollably share unreliable information and tamper with public opinion.

In September and October 2020, for seven weeks, a non-governmental organization "Detector Media" monitored (pro)Russian disinformation narratives on national media and in the regional media space of eight regions. They analyzed the online outlets, news of television channels, Telegram channels and Facebook pages that share political news. Experts from "Detector Media" compiled a list of the most widespread disinformation narratives found in the Ukrainian media and relatable to typical messages of Kremlin propaganda. 165 materials were detected that included pro-Russian disinformation narratives; further, the number of identified posts grew from 212 to 282 a week, with a peak which fell on the pre-election week. Over these seven weeks, the organization's national monitoring found 1,641 materials with pro-Russian disinformation narratives⁹. The top 10 topics did not include COVID-19 issues, but were all related to the negative evaluation of the state of Ukraine as an under-state, with rightist radical ideology on a national level, as a puppet country ruled by external Western influence, and claimed they needed closer ties with the Russian Federation to restore the internal interest.

The topic of COVID-19 impact on elections rather had signs of a programme-based political struggle. It resonated with voters, which is why political figures would often enter a political debate through the media on how successful the government was in managing the pandemic response. Pro-Russian political groups raised the topic of the need to use the Russian vaccine "Sputnik" since social interest is above any political or geopolitical confrontation. Because voters could not be divided in terms of their support of political parties and positions on the COVID-19 threats, no clear groups could be distinguished that would share the information with signs of intimidating voters from voting in the elections.

Participation on Election Day and voter turnout

Official statistics systematized by the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine showed that as of 25 October 2020 the recorded number of disease cases a day was 6,088 of infected persons confirmed with PCR testing, and 102 persons deceased. Two weeks after the Election Day, these statistics has grown to 10,842 infected persons and 191 deaths a day. At the same time, from 10 to 24 November, which is also a two-week period, the disease rate grew to 12,287 persons and 188 deaths a day. With the growth rate over the two weeks, with low test rates (35,425 tests taken a day as of 24 November), 30% positive test results are not a convincing growth rate to refer to the polls which took place on 25 October and to further second round mayoral elections in large cities.

⁶The most influential media groups on a national scale in Ukraine and their final beneficiaries are: "StarLightMedia": TV channels "STB", "ICTV", "Novy", "M1", "M2", "Otse" and some radio networks which final beneficiaries are deemed to be Viktor and Olena Pinchuk; "Ukraine' Media Group": the politically influential channels in the group are the "Ukraine", "Ukraine 24" owned by the "System Capital Management" (SCM) owned by an oligarch Rinat Akhmetov; "1+1 Media": it includes 7 television channels, with "1+1" being the most influential among them. The holding is part of the assets of Valeriy Kolomoyskyi who was closest to a new but stable parliamentary group "For the Future" during the local elections; Group of TV channels "112", "ZIK", "NewsONE" is within the range of influence of Viktor Medvedchuk. The channels take a systemic anti-Western position, and they are close to the "Opposition Platform – For Life" party; "Channel 5", "Pramyi" TV channel, "Espresso" channel – media resources close to Petro Poroshenko that take the niche in a political range closest to the "European Solidarity"; "Inter Media Group" is owned by three co-owners (different shares): Dmytro Firtash, Serhiy Lovochkin, and Svitlana Pluzhnikova. 29% of the "Inter" channel used to be owned by the "Pervyi Channel" in the RF, and it is currently the closest to the "Opposition Platform – For Life" political party.

⁷<https://pershyj.com/p-57-ukrayintsiv-ne-prochitali-zhodnoyi-knigi-u-2019-rotsi-40825>

⁸<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Oi2Edv15SrK4hS-D2KoxoKkamCarUX7f/view>

⁹22% of the total number were aired or published on the website of the television channel "112 Ukraine", 20% — aired or posted on the website of ZIK, 19% — on a website of "Strana.ua", 14% — aired or posted on the website of a TV channel NewsOne, 9% — on a website of "Vesta", 8% — aired by the "Inter" channel or on a website of podrobnosti.ua, 6% — on a website of Vadym Rabinovych MigNews. Virtually all of them are owned by a pro-Russian or loyal to the Russian Federation media group.

Overall, the turnout of voters at local elections was not high. According to the CEC, on 25 October, polling stations were attended by 36.88% of voters, while 5 years before that number was 46.5%. Between the first and the second voting rounds in 2020, and in 2015, the recorded decrease of voter turnout was only 10%. According to the “Reyting”¹⁰ sociological group, citizens who did not show up for the elections reported the following causes: 20% mentioned their health condition, 19% did not live at the registration address, 15% were busy with other things on Election Day, 14% did not know who to vote for. 12% of respondents were not interested in elections, 10% did not vote because of the coronavirus epidemic. 4% did not have elections in their towns/villages, and another 4% were not included on the voter rolls. The sociological company running and presenting the survey findings stated that the “health condition” group and the “coronavirus epidemic” group should be combined. Therefore, according to their estimates, some 30% did not turn up for the elections either directly or indirectly because of COVID-19. At the same time, the difference in the voter turnout at the “pre-Covid” local elections in 2020 was as little as 10%.

OPORA compared the data on the problem with the quorum at the morning sessions of polling station commissions in different years. On 25 October 2020, certain quorum-related issues at the morning sessions of election commissions before the start of voting were identified at 1.44% of polling stations. To compare, in 2015, these issues were not observed at all. It may be assumed that quorum-related issues were partially caused by the pandemic, but they did not have any systemic effect on the operations of election administration bodies.

Conclusions:

1. Financing of COVID-19 prevention measures was a major issue. Lack of coordination resulted in unequal distribution of resources, while measures were enforced only 9 days before Election Day.
2. Recommendations of the WHO were mostly taken into account in the anti-epidemic measures. The CEC conducted a broad awareness campaign explaining the measures. However, the awareness campaign was lackluster when it comes to specific procedures on voting at the place of stay for voters in quarantine or hospitalized.
3. A number of incidents took place on Election Day in which some voters were deprived of their right to vote, in particular in-patient facilities where voting procedures were disrupted. The cases were not numerous, but set a precedent.
4. The peculiarity of this election was the smaller number of outdoor mass campaigning events, whereas mass media were used in conventional forms and scales. On the other hand, activity levels of candidates grew tremendously on social media – a trend indicative of conventional media still being popular and accessible for candidates, while social media are attractive with their lack of regulations.
5. Central and local television channels, printed media and radio broadcasted information materials on the peculiarities of holding these elections. Citizens were able to obtain information on the new electoral system and measures enforced. The lack of campaign visibility in terms of outdoor events was compensated by campaigning on social media and access of candidates to conventional media. However, the exercise of candidates’ rights to stand for election were partially restricted due to the disease rates among candidates and national political leaders.
6. Pro-Russian disinformation narratives remain a significant issue in Ukraine, although its visibility was less centralized due to the local nature of these elections. Messaging applications such as Telegram continue to increase in popularity as a means to spread these narratives.
7. Voter turnout was significantly lower than in previous local elections (held in 2015). According to survey data, some 30% of voters did not show up for the elections either directly or indirectly due to COVID-19.

¹⁰http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/rezultaty_elektoralno-povedencheskogo_issledovaniya_v_den_vyborov.html Audience: population of Ukraine over 18 years of age in all regions, except for the temporary occupied territories of Crimea and Donbass. Sample frame: 9,947 respondents, including 1,200 interviewed respondents: CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) on the basis of the random sample of mobile telephone numbers – interviewing those who DID NOT VOTE at the elections. Non-sampling error: within 2.8%.

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Work of the election management bodies and public authorities

On 31 October 2020, citizens of Georgia headed to polling stations to elect members of the parliament, despite the increasing cases of COVID-19 infections. Several months before the parliamentary elections, the mixed electoral system was significantly modified after long-lasting debates, protests and negotiations¹¹. According to the newly approved mixed electoral system, 120 members of the parliament were to be elected from closed party lists and 30 MPs from single-mandate (majoritarian) districts.

The official pre-election campaign for the 2020 Parliamentary Elections began on 1 September, sixty days prior to the Election Day, and became more intense as the Election Day drew closer. The pre-election campaign, as well as the preparations for the Election Day, were significantly affected in a negative manner by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic and the respective challenges brought about by the outbreak¹². In order to counter the social and economic challenges of the pandemic, the central and local governments implemented various social policies. During the implementation of the policies, the line between the ruling party and central/local governments was blurred contrary to international commitments¹³. Furthermore, because of COVID-19 a large number of political parties refrained from traditional mass-scale pre-election activities, while other parties continued to conduct mass events. This created an imbalanced and unfair pre-election environment¹⁴. It should be mentioned however that pandemic-related restrictions imposed by the Government of Georgia did not apply to the pre-election campaign activities.

Before the start of the pre-election campaign, the number of COVID-19 infected or isolated individuals was rather low, as the government of Georgia declared a state of emergency¹⁵ with strict state policy on isolation from 21 March to 23 May and maintained some restrictions over the summer months. On 28 January, the government established an Interagency Coordination Council as the main decision-making body on issues pertaining to the coronavirus. The Council consists of representatives of the government, members of parliament, representatives of the administration of the president of Georgia and medical representatives including head and deputy¹⁶ head of the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC). The establishment of a multisector council and close cooperation of medical and state institutions effectively restrained the first wave of the COVID-19 infection. As a result of the above-mentioned efforts, Georgia was among the epidemiologically safest countries during the first wave of the pandemic.

However, the outbreak started to raise dramatically in the beginning of September due to the summer season and high mobility of domestic tourism. Despite this fact, the Election Administration of Georgia met all legal deadlines established by the electoral legislation and operated according to the election calendar.¹⁷

¹¹Joint statement of NGOs on passing of constitutional amendments: available at: <https://bit.ly/2X13LsP>;

¹²Joint assessment of the pre-election environment of the 2020 parliamentary elections (ISFED; TIG; GCJE): available at: <https://bit.ly/3rJoGyS>;

¹³Paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵"Measures implemented by the government of Georgia against COVID-19 report": https://stopcov.ge/Content/files/COVID_RESPONSE_REPORT_ENG.pdf

¹⁶The deputy head of NCDC is the head of Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research: <https://ncdc.ge/Handlers/GetFile.ashx?ID=d8d25a85-1dea-4dab-bdbe-e995ae333f1b>

¹⁷The schedule of events for the 31 October 2020 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia: <https://bit.ly/356oIN8>

Public health and sanitary measures

On 18 September, the Central Election Commission adopted a Decree¹⁸ establishing certain election measures and sanitary and hygiene requirements of the voting day. The Decree was developed based on internationally recognized recommendations as well as the consultations of experts and epidemiologists with the Election Administration¹⁹. The document established special preconditions for entering or leaving and being present in polling stations on Election Day as follows:

The main sanitary and hygiene requirements for the polling facilities:

- A disinfection barrier (collective protection means) placed at the entrance of polling stations;
- A hand treatment solution containing at least 70% alcohol required for hand disinfection to be placed at the entrance of polling stations;
- information on preventive measures against the spread of the virus posted in a visible place in PEC buildings;
- Proper handling, cleaning/disinfection of frequently touched surfaces (including door handles, desks, etc.) in polling stations ensured every three hours, and according to the level of contamination; periodically, several times a day, natural ventilation of polling stations;
- A sealed container for disposable wipes or other hygienic waste used by all persons entitled to be present placed in polling stations;
- A ballot booth and the entrance for a voter, left open on one side and the open side directed towards the wall of the polling station in such a way as not to violate the principle of secrecy of voting;
- A container for pens used by voters placed in polling stations, in which a voter should place the pen used by him/her after voting;
- On polling day, polling stations provided with cleaners who must be equipped with PPE (personal protective equipment);
- Prior to the opening of polling stations and the completion of summarizing polling results, the polling station should be cleaned and treated with a disinfection solution.

The main sanitary and hygiene requirements for polling workers, and authorized individuals to be at a polling stations:

- A person entitled to be present in a polling station should not be admitted to the polling station without a face mask and treating of the hands with the disinfectant solution;
- A person entitled to be present in a polling station should not be admitted to the polling station without the check of temperature, except for voters;
- Precinct election commission members should be provided with face masks, protective face shields and disposable gloves;
- The PEC members transporting the mobile ballot box and the observers, during the voting with the mobile ballot box, must be equipped with and use a face mask, face shield, disposable gloves and hand disinfectant solution;
- The counting officers must be placed at tables so that they do not face each other;
- Other authorized persons must be placed two meters away from the counting officers in such a way that they can observe the process of counting and sorting ballot papers.

The main sanitary and hygiene requirements for voters:

- Voters provided with a pen for individual use. After voting, the voter must place the pen in a special container for pens;

¹⁸Decree No 38/2020, adopted by the CEC "On Establishing Certain Election Measures and Sanitary and Hygiene Requirements for the Polling Day of the 31 October 2020 Regular Parliamentary Elections of Georgia / By-Elections of the Municipality Representative Body Sakrebulo / Extraordinary Elections of Mayors for the Purpose of Preventing the Spread of Infection Caused by the Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) (COVID-19)" available online: <https://cesko.ge/res/docs/dadg38ing.pdf>

¹⁹Minutes of the meeting of the CEC; №28/2020; 18.09.2020; Page #8; <https://cesko.ge/res/docs/okmi28.pdf>

- The member of PEC assigned to regulate the flow of voters must ensure the keeping of safe distance between voters (if possible); not allow more than two voters to be present at the registration table and instruct voters to go to registration desks designated for the alphabetical letter corresponding to the first letters of their surnames enlisted in the list of voters;
- After placing the special envelope in the ballot box, when a voter leaves the polling station, the exit must be provided with means for the treatment of hands with disinfectant solution;
- A voter is obliged to wear a face mask. The voter is required to remove the face mask twice for a short time at the precinct, to be identified, and to perform procedures prescribed by law. If the voter does not remove the face mask, the voter will not be provided with ballot paper/ballot papers.

Thermal screening:

Voters were not obliged to go through thermal screening. The temperature measurement was obligatory for the other authorized persons entering the polling stations in the case of fever - 37 ° C or more than 37 ° C, in which case that person was subject to a temperature recheck (at 5-minute intervals). In case the person had fever after repeated measurement, the person was not to be admitted to the polling station.

Despite the drastic rising COVID-19 infection a few weeks prior to Election Day the Election Administration with consultation of healthcare authorities and other stakeholders effectively managed to establish relevant safety guidelines.

Voter inclusiveness and registration

As the infection rate saw a considerable rise, it became clear that the election administration should set up special precinct election commissions and carry out particular activities to ensure the right to vote of the voters placed in medical institutions/facilities for COVID-19 patients and in isolation (quarantined in special facilities, or self-isolation at home). A Decree was adopted by the CEC following consultations with political parties, civil society, international organizations only 12 days prior to the Election Day, which called into question the issue of ensuring timely public awareness and due participation of voters in self-isolation²⁰. Another significant issue was the limited deadline provided to voters in self-isolation to register on the list for mobile voting²¹.

According to the Decree, the persons placed in medical institutions infected with COVID-19 were included in a special list, while voters in quarantine, self-isolation or self-treatment at home whose data was officially recorded by the relevant medical entities had an opportunity to address the CEC call center, and request to be included in the special list for homebound voting from 24 October to 26 October 22:00. p.m. The deadline was further extended twice until 28 October. In total, 10,845 voters were included in special list as of October 30; among them 7,150 were placed in medical institutions and quarantine facilities while the number of self-isolated voters was 3,695.

The CEC also established 127 special polling stations in each municipality within boundaries of district election commissions responsible for ensuring voting rights of voters placed in medical facilities and isolation through mobile voting²².

Despite the flow of COVID-19 cases and short timeframe for registration given to isolated voters, overall the CEC efficiently managed to ensure voter inclusion and right to vote regardless health status.

Opportunities for voters to make an informed choice and campaigning

The election administration conducted an information campaign to inform voters through media and social media platforms, as well as through sending out SMS notice to those whose contact information had been recorded by relevant medical entities. Moreover, according to the CEC, information flyers were delivered to the voters placed in quarantine and medical facilities²³. Despite the informational campaign conducted by the election administration, the main challenge for the voters willing to register in the special voter list was the short timeframe given to register.

²⁰Decree #45/2020 adopted by the CEC on October 19; <https://cesko.ge/geo/list/show/121687-dadgenileba-45/2020-19102020>

²¹Joint assessment of the pre-election environment of the 2020 parliamentary elections (ISFED; TIG; GCJE): available at: <https://bit.ly/3rJoGyS>;

²²Transparency International Georgia, "Remarks on the Resolution of the CEC" 22 October, 2020; <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/remarks-resolution-cec>

The CEC conducted voter education campaigns through different types of media outlets as well as social media platforms²⁴ mostly about voting procedures and safety measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the importance of the secrecy of voting. Positively, information was also provided in ethnic minority languages²⁵. Overall the CEC carried out extensive information campaigns and made an effort to promote participation and to inform voters about safety guidelines on Election Day.

Media environment, disinformation campaigns, and voter access to information

TV broadcasters remain the main source of information in Georgia. During the election period, media was overall pluralistic but extremely polarized as was the case in previous years. Although the media environment has drastically changed following the decision of the European Court of Human Rights on the Rustavi 2 TV case and the processes unfolding at *Ajara TV* since July 2019²⁶.

In Georgia, along with traditional means, social networks and primarily Facebook is used by domestic and foreign actors with political goals for influencing public opinion or spreading disinformation. Political divisions and polarization is often exploited by domestic actors for discrediting campaigns. Organized information operations illustrate that anonymous actors behind them are using disinformation messages formulated in advance, aiming to trigger sharply negative societal reaction and flare up antagonistic feelings toward opponents, civil society activists and media organizations²⁷.

Ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, smear campaigns carried out by anonymous Facebook pages were very intense. This was illustrated by the coordinated behavior²⁸ of pages operating for discreditation purposes, manifested in their orderly, organized and damaging information campaigns. Various tactics were used for discrediting purposes including openly discrediting Facebook pages, false media pages, and false supporting pages which aimed to mislead voters and influence their behaviors. It should be noted that organized discrediting campaigns were used against the opposition as well as the ruling party/authorities²⁹.

Aside from the pages that aim to influence voter behavior, these narratives represented not only the reflection of internal political processes, but also a purposeful disinformation and propaganda exercise/campaign, directed towards the incitement of irrational fears, anti-western and anti-liberal, xenophobic and homophobic sentiments. Pages spreading value-based divisive narratives were actively involved in the pre-election campaign in favor of pro-Russian political actors. In addition to anti-Western and anti-liberal messages, openly pro-Russian narratives were also spread. A majority of messages were based on nationalist and religious motives, in order for them to be more acceptable for Facebook users and avoid any suspicions about possible harmful intentions³⁰.

Narratives and propaganda methods of these Facebook pages are identical to those used by the Kremlin in various European countries. In particular, tactics employed by these pages resonate with Kremlin's efforts to spread divisive narratives that contain conspiracy theories in Western society.

One of such networks, and the largest identified by ISFED, was taken down by Facebook several days prior to the Election Day. This was a self-proclaimed alternative media source "Alt – info" network, which posted primarily about news and political events in Georgia, on EU and Russian politics, parliamentary elections, political figures, and criticized other local media, as well as liberal politicians, immigrants, minorities and LGBTQ communities. According to Facebook, some of this activity included posting hate speech³¹.

²³The CEC approved special lists of voters in isolation: <https://bit.ly/38QaJGK>

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵For example, the part of the informational campaign through the social media conducted by the CEC can be found on Facebook Ads Library available at: https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=GE&view_all_page_id=285100957669

²⁶Information for ethnic minorities: <https://cesko.ge/eng/list/show/120578-informatsia-etnikuri-umtsiresobebistvis-2020>

²⁶"Evaluation of the Pre-Election Environment for the 2020 Parliamentary Elections" Chapter – Media Environment; Page #13-16; <https://bit.ly/3o8A3y1>

²⁷First Interim Report of Social Media Monitoring of 2020 Parliamentary Elections; <https://bit.ly/2MoZ2PH>

²⁸Existence of organized networks engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook in Georgia were officially confirmed three times over the recent months. In December 2019, in April and October 2020, Facebook removed from its platforms a total of 1,361 accounts operating in Georgia. Majority of these accounts represented an inauthentic network connected to the Georgian Dream (GD), while some were connected to the United National Movement (UNM). In addition, Facebook also removed coordinated accounts connected to a Kremlin news-agency News Front, focused on the Georgian audience.

²⁹Second Interim Report of Social Media Monitoring of 2020 Parliamentary Elections; <https://bit.ly/2X4IFLp>

³⁰Ibid

³¹"October 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report" November 5, 2020 <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/11/october-2020-cib-report/>

The growing number of coronavirus cases during the election period further increased the risk posed by organized discrediting campaigns to democratic processes. On one hand, due to reduced mobility, individuals spent more time on social media. The practice of social distancing has encouraged political parties and candidates to rely more on media for campaigning purposes, with social media becoming one of the main communication channels with voters. On the other hand, amid confusion caused by the pandemic and modified social behaviors, citizens have become more vulnerable to different conspiratorial messages and disinformation spread through social media.

Participation on Election Day and voter turnout

On 31 October 2020, the final voter turnout was 56.11%³², which is higher than the 2016 parliamentary election when the turnout was 51.63 %³³. During the Election Day, ISFED election observers submitted some 13 complaints related to violations of COVID-19 regulations that were mostly technical in nature. Positively, according to the PVT results carried out by ISFED, COVID-19 regulations were upheld at a majority of polling stations.

However, the number of COVID-19 confirmed cases sharply increased in October-November as it was predicted by medical authorities back in the summer. On 8 November, civil activists and opposition figures who considered the results of the parliamentary elections illegitimate staged a large-scale protest in front of the parliament of Georgia. The protest continued in front of the CEC where law enforcement forces used water cannons against protesters without proper notice. Several civil society organizations considered the use of water cannons unjustified.

Following the protest rallies, on 9 November, the Government of Georgia imposed restrictions of freedom of movement from 22:00 – 5:00 following morning, in seven big cities. Accordingly, being at public places during noted times or relocation both by vehicle or by foot was prohibited. The restriction was extended to include the pre-election campaign of the second round of elections³⁴.

Conclusions:

1. With regard to the implementation of COVID-19 related policies and welfare policies, the line between the ruling party and central/local governments was blurred contrary to international commitments
2. Due to COVID-19, a considerable number of political parties refrained from traditional mass-scale pre-election activities, while other parties continued to conduct mass events, which led to an imbalanced and unfair pre-election environment.
3. Despite the significant increase in COVID-19 infection a few weeks prior to Election Day, the Election Administration with consultation of healthcare authorities and other stakeholders effectively managed to establish relevant safety guidelines.
4. COVID-19 regulations were upheld at a majority of polling stations observed. However, the number of COVID-19 confirmed cases sharply increased in October-November as it was predicted by medical authorities back in the summer.
5. Despite the flow of COVID-19 cases and short timeframe for registration given to isolated voters, overall the CEC efficiently managed to ensure voter inclusion and right to vote regardless health status. In general, the CEC carried out extensive information campaigns and took steps to promote participation by informing voters about safety guidelines on Election Day.
6. The growing number of coronavirus cases during the election period has further increased discreditation campaigns and the risk posed to democratic processes. This risk is also increased due to individuals spending more time on social media due to mobility restrictions caused by COVID-19 measures. Amid confusion caused by the pandemic and modified social behaviors, citizens have become more vulnerable to different conspiratorial messages and disinformation spread through social media.

³²Turnout statistic 2020: <https://cesko.ge/res/docs/2020110718080120.00.1.pdf>

³³Turnout statistic 2016: <https://cesko.ge/res/docs/monaciletaaqtivobaing.pdf>

³⁴Statement by GDI, ISFED, HRC and TIG regarding an introduction of the curfew order: <https://bit.ly/2MxbUDH>

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Work of the election management bodies and public authorities

In the Republic of Moldova, the permanent authority that coordinates the activity of all electoral bodies in order to prepare and hold elections is the Central Electoral Commission (CEC)³⁵. During the presidential election of 1 November 2020, which took place under pandemic circumstances, the CEC managed two tiers of lower-level electoral bodies: 36 electoral constituency councils (ECC) and 2,143 electoral offices of polling stations (EOPS), where at least 19,613 people were working³⁶.

Election management bodies generally organized elections efficiently and in line with legal deadlines. The CEC meetings took place in a mixed format. Isolated cases of COVID-19 infection among electoral officials occurred in electoral bodies of all levels, though they did not decisively affect the conduct of the election. However, Promo-LEX observers highlighted the poor compliance of electoral officials with protective measures during their work up to the Election Day. For instance, before the second round of elections, only 38% of visited polling stations were taking visitors' temperature³⁷.

The authority responsible for coordinating health protection and promotion at national level during the pandemic is the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission (NEPHC). The decisions adopted by the NEPHC were published rapidly in Romanian and Russian on the respective webpage of the authority³⁸. The work and decisions of the NEPHC are coordinated with responsible persons from the World Health Organization (WHO)³⁹, and are binding on all public and private institutions. Failure to comply with NEPHC decisions leads to contraventional liability⁴⁰.

As a result of the coordinated actions of the CEC and the NEPHC, in order to regulate the organization of elections during the pandemic, the CEC developed (and the NEPHC approved) the *Guidelines on COVID-19 prevention measures during the election period*⁴¹. The document was approved on 12 August 2020, prior to the beginning of the election period. The Guidelines were adopted in violation of the legal provisions regarding the conduct of public consultations. Because of this, even though it essentially complied with international standards and best practices in the field, the content of the Guidelines at the time of adoption was confusing in several cases⁴², which affected the certainty of electoral procedures, including the training of observers.

In order to clarify these confusions, the text of the Instruction was amended on 13 October 2020 by the NEPHC Decision No 3⁴³. The main amendments concerned the provision of a free mask, on the account of the state, for voters that arrived at the polling station without having one; establishing clear rules for exercising the right to vote in case of voters that come to the electoral body having clinical symptoms of COVID-19; as well as the mechanism to ensure the right to vote for voters in self-isolation.

³⁵Electoral code of the Republic of Moldova. No 1381-XIII of 21 November 1997, Articles 14-26.

³⁶Report on the results of the Moldova Presidential Election of 1 November 2020. Approved by the Decision of the Central Electoral Commission No 4519 of 23 November 2020, p. 16.

³⁷Report no. 7. Promo-LEX Observation Mission of the Presidential Election in the Republic of Moldova of 1 (15) November 2020, p.14.

³⁸Information on Coronavirus. Government of the Republic of Moldova.

³⁹Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova. Report on COVID-19 response measures (January – May 2020), p. 3-8.

⁴⁰Contravention Code of the Republic of Moldova, Article 761

⁴¹Instruction on Organisation and Conduct of Elections by Central Electoral Commission Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

⁴²Opinion of the Promo-LEX Association on the disregard of the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission for the public consultation initiated by the Central Electoral Commission with respect to organizing elections amidst a pandemic.

⁴³Decision No 34 of 13 October 2020. National Extraordinary Public Health Commission.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (MFAEI) played a special role in organizing the election across the borders of Moldova. The authority ensured the communication between the CEC and authorities of the host countries where polling stations were opened, including communication about the restrictive measures set by those countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public health and sanitary measures adopted for holding elections

The Guidelines on COVID-19 prevention measures during the election period were developed and approved in order to optimize and standardize the enforcement of electoral procedures related to the organization and conduct of elections amidst the pandemic. The Guidelines separately regulated the protection measures for voters, electoral officials and candidates. There were also separate protection measures approved for the stages of the electoral process: election period, Election Day and post-election-day period. The regulations covered mainly the work of electoral bodies, and covered rather insufficiently the campaign activities (electoral meetings, door-to-door activities, etc.).

The provisions that were most relevant for the voting procedure included the following:

- The obligation to observe within the perimeter of the polling station (PS) the rules on social distance and prohibition of meetings with the participation of more than 50 people;
- Arranging the PS premises so as to keep the social distance of 1 meter between electoral officials;
- Taking the temperature of every voter when entering the polling station;
- Placing dispensers with alcohol-based disinfectants at the entrance of the polling station, in a visible and accessible place;
- Granting access to voters at the polling station and electoral bodies office only if wearing a protective mask. Electoral commission members were required to offer each voter a free protective mask on Election Day;
- Exercising the right to vote at the place of stay (domicile or residence) for voters who are in self-isolation (for treatment at home, contacts, people returned from abroad from the red zone and those who already have symptoms of acute respiratory infection);
- During the Election Day, the polling station premises had to be ventilated frequently and, if possible, even ventilated permanently; also the working area and surfaces of the polling station had to be disinfected during the day;
- the maximum number of voters allowed into the polling station at the same time should equal the number of used polling booths (e.g. 2 polling booths – 2 voters present at the same time).

During the election period, Promo-LEX identified only one petition regarding the application of protection measures during the election. It had been filed with the CEC by a party that was not running in the election. The petitioner requested that signature collection for the registration of candidates was stopped because the *Guidelines on COVID-19 prevention measures during the election period* did not contain any legal provisions regarding signature collection amidst a public health emergency. According to the CEC's answer, there was no reason to stop signature collection, because COVID-19 prevention and containment measures during signature collection were detailed in the *Handbook for members of initiative groups supporting candidates for President of the Republic of Moldova*. It should be emphasized that the respective Handbook does not have the status of a regulatory act, being only a recommendation.

After the election, the CEC decided to provide to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection the protective equipment to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection which was purchased and not used during the presidential election⁴⁴.

Although COVID-19 prevention measures were adequate according to the Guidelines, they were not always respected at polling stations as observed by Promo-LEX in the first and second rounds, in particular when it comes to temperature screening and polling station set up to respect mandatory distancing⁴⁵.

⁴⁴CEC Decision No 4535 of 11 December 2020 on providing to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection some protective equipment to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection.

⁴⁵See on this point data provided in Promo-LEX's preliminary findings after Election Day in the second round: <https://promolex.md/19189-misiunea-de-observare-promo-lex-prezinta-rezultatele-preliminare-si-scorul-obtinut-de-candidati-in-cele-608-sectii-de-votare-din-esantio-n/?lang=en>

Voter inclusiveness and registration, in particular voters hospitalized, in quarantine or self-isolation

It was regulated that people with acute respiratory infection symptoms coming to the polling stations by 3 p.m. would not be allowed into the polling station premises, but would be registered on the list of voting at the place of stay (mobile ballot box). At the same time, those who would come to the polling station after 3 p.m., even if they would have the same symptoms, would be provided conditions for voting.

However, for polling stations where there was no mobile ballot box, such as those organized abroad or for voters in the Transnistrian region⁴⁶, access was granted regardless of the voters' health condition or time of coming to the polling station. Promo-LEX found that for some categories of voters, equal chances of access to voting were not ensured.

The situation of voters in self-isolation (for treatment at home, contacts, people returned from abroad from the red zone and those who already have symptoms of acute respiratory infection) was also regulated. They exercised their right to vote at the place of stay, by submitting a request to the election commission responsible for the polling station where the voters are registered as having their domicile/residence.

According to the NEPHC Decision⁴⁷, the election commission members assigned to the mobile ballot box and those who will accompany them required being equipped with protective equipment (masks, gloves, face shields, protective clothing, etc.) and strictly comply with the rules of using such protective equipment. These rules were common conditions for all cases of voting at the place of stay, regardless of whether the voters were in self-isolation or not. According to election observers, these specified rules were mostly observed during the election days.

However, as Promo-LEX noted, these regulations did not take into account the situation when the person is self-isolated in another place than their valid domicile or residence. Respectively, voting at the place of stay in accordance with the Guidelines was not possible because the voter is registered with the main lists of voters of another polling station.

At the same time, in the second round of election (15 November 2020), Promo-LEX observers were informed of at least one case when voters that were hospitalized in the COVID unit did not have the possibility to vote using the mobile ballot box, because doctors refused to request it.

Following the election, electoral bodies did not register any complaints from the voters confirming the impossibility to exercise the right to vote for the particular reason of being infected with COVID-19, or being unable to move around due to the imposed anti-epidemic restrictions.

Opportunities for voters to make an informed choice and campaigning of electoral contestants

The CEC together with the Centre for Continuous Electoral Training (CICDE)⁴⁸ informed voters about the specific aspects of organizing an election under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Information activities were held particularly during the last three weeks of the election campaign. They included: media coverage of four audio/video materials on TV/Radio and online (video, videographic, podcast, memes); CEC members informing voters during TV shows; discussing and informing voters during an information campaign organized by CICDE.

The topics addressed during the information activities covered the anti-COVID-19 measures to be observed on Election Day; requesting the mobile ballot box by voters who received treatment at home or in the hospital; disinfecting the polling stations; observing the measures of physical distancing; and wearing protective masks during indoor meetings with voters⁴⁹.

On one hand, informing voters on the anti-COVID protection rules was generally sufficient. This was done with emphasis on the required steps for voters at the polling station on Election Day. On the other, when it comes to informing candidates about the requirements and limitations of campaign activities, Promo-LEX found a lack of clarity and predictability of the medium and long term conditions.

⁴⁶The Transnistrian Region is a territory of the Republic of Moldova that is not kept under control by the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova. There are about 250,000 registered citizens of the Republic of Moldova in the region who are eligible to vote.

⁴⁷Decision No 24 of 12 August 2020. National Extraordinary Public Health Commission.

⁴⁸CICDE is a public institution founded by the Central Election Commission, which delivers specialised training courses for electoral officials, as well as voter information campaigns.

⁴⁹Voter information on the protection measures during the pandemic was also ensured by the Promo-LEX Association and its partners, including through sub-grants. Video materials were developed and disseminated online, as well as on regional television channels.

In the context of the start of the election campaign, according to Decision No 33 of the NEPHC (28 September 2020) it was allowed to organize one-time mass meetings at the national level (electoral meetings) with the participation of up to 50 people, provided that public health measures were observed and that the organizers draft an epidemiological record list of the event, using the provided model (first name, last name, TIN, telephone number, e-mail address, home address). Meetings could not be organized nearby public institutions, educational institutions, hospitals or other places that bear a high infection risk (in addition, it was mandatory to wear masks for indoor meetings).

From the moment the election campaign started – 1 October 2020 – the NEPHC declared a public health emergency (red code) in most (68%) administrative-territorial units (ATU). The establishment of concrete, tighter, or more relaxed measures was assigned to the Territorial Public Health Commissions (TPHC), which have the right to set, among other things, prohibitions to organize mass meetings.

In theory, various anti-COVID protection measures and conditions⁵⁰ were established in different ATUs, and candidates needed to receive information in due time in order to be able to plan their campaign activities. Promo-LEX found that the organization of public meetings during the election campaign was banned in at least four level-two ATUs (out of 36). However, election observers noticed at least six cases when election candidates held election rallies in those regions and law enforcement bodies did not intervene. Moreover, campaign meetings and car marches held in violation of the 50-people limit were noticed and, again, law enforcement bodies failed to intervene.

In the opinion of Promo-LEX and other non-governmental organisations, by ignoring and violating the anti-COVID-19 measures established by the NEPHC, the election candidates displayed a lack of responsibility towards the voters. By doing this, they promoted a defiant attitude towards the measures undertaken by authorities to fight COVID-19 and raised additional risks of infection spreading among the population⁵¹.

Promo-LEX also emphasized that, prior to the beginning of the election campaign, the CEC did not issue separate clear recommendations to potential candidates or election candidates on how to conduct the signature collection campaign, or the election campaign in line with the conditions imposed by the NEPHC.

According to data from Promo-LEX, candidates did not appeal the restriction measures that the NEPHC or TPHCs established for the election campaign period. Only one appeal was filed during the campaign by a candidate, invoking an alleged infringement of the epidemiological restrictions by another candidate.

However, at the stage of designating and registering candidates, particularly while collecting signatures in support of potential competitors, candidates who failed to collect a sufficient number of signatures filed complaints in court and one of the invoked issues was the pandemic context.

Media environment, disinformation campaigns, and voter access to information

When it comes to the general information environment, according to election observers, with some exceptions, TV and online media had a biased behavior during the election campaign. They covered electoral candidates in an unfair manner, promoting a strong gender imbalance, and did not provide comprehensive information to the public about the electoral process and voting procedures⁵².

Additionally, the abovementioned Decision of the NEPHC and associated restrictions can be assessed as having limited opportunities for campaigning, in particular restricting candidate meetings and public gatherings, which may have affected access to information about candidate platforms.

With respect to the pandemic topic, observers did not notice broad disinformation campaigns on the basis of fake news related to the COVID-19 virus during the presidential election. Respectively, no awareness raising campaigns to inform voters about the dangers of disinformation were noticed either.

The COVID-19 topic was rarely mentioned in candidates' speeches. The media raised the COVID-19 topics in the electoral context mainly with the purpose to inform voters on the measures established for voting on Election Day.

⁵⁰Mostly the conditions were the same, however specific measures were introduced in some level-two ATUs, such as a total ban on public meetings, cessation of public passenger transport, and closure of markets.

⁵¹Statement. Position of the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections on the Presidential elections 2020. p.3.

⁵²Statement. Position of the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections on the Presidential elections 2020. p.2.

Even though a visible disinformation campaign about COVID-19 was not detected by observers, according to opinion polls⁵³ including the ones carried out during the election campaign, citizens mostly skeptical about the existence of the virus. Namely, at least 28% believed that the virus was created artificially by American military forces, and 39% believed that it was created in Chinese laboratories. Over 42% of the respondents to the mentioned survey believed that the virus was created artificially in order to impose mandatory vaccination. Every third Moldovan citizen believed that a treatment for COVID-19 was not necessary, and around 55% of the respondents believed that the virus is not more dangerous than common influenza.

Besides fake and manipulative news about COVID-19 that mostly circulated online, the aforementioned opinions were influenced by seeing electoral candidates and opinion leaders ignore and violate the anti-epidemic restrictions established by health authorities. Moreover, it seems that these opinions could have been reinforced by the tolerant behavior of law enforcement bodies towards the violations that were visible to the general public.

Participation on Election Day and voter turnout

Despite the pandemic context, about 5% more voters participated in the 2020 presidential election compared to the 2016 presidential election. Polling stations were equipped with masks for each voter, disinfectant gel and devices for measuring human body temperature. However, particularly on the day of first round, several electoral officials and voters ignored the protection requirements during the pandemic. According to official statistics, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases increased after the election. However, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of the election on this increase, as it was followed by continuous and roughly uniform increase without certain decisive fluctuations, especially after the second election round.

We would like to highlight that despite holding the presidential election of November 2020 amidst the pandemic, the number of voters did not decrease, but rather increased. Compared to the second round of the 2016 presidential election, where 53.45% of voters cast their ballots, it was 58.22% of voters that participated in the second round of the 2020 presidential election. We would like to underline that the number of people that voted at the polling stations established overseas almost doubled – from 138,720 to 263,177.

On Election Day, Promo-LEX observers reported some isolated cases where citizen's right to vote was violated because of showing COVID-19 symptoms when entering the polling station, or because of the alleged refusal of a hospital to request the mobile ballot box for patients hospitalized in the specialized COVID-19 units.

With respect to providing voters with protective equipment, we would like to reiterate that polling stations were equipped with masks for each voter, disinfectant gel and devices for measuring human body temperature. At the same time, particularly on the day of first round of election, several electoral officials ignored the protection requirements. The reported incidents included: failure to maintain social distance, failure to measure the temperature, presence of voters without masks, and stopping the voting while the premises were being ventilated.

Compared to the first round, Promo-LEX found only two cases⁵⁴ when the entire staff of the election commission was replaced due to some members getting infected, while others went into self-isolation.

According to official statistics, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases increased after the Election Day (first round) held on 1 November 2020. The growth trend also continued after the second round of election held on 15 November 2020. To be precise, the average number of confirmed cases in the two weeks before the election (15-31 October 2020) was 683 per day, while after the Election Day, in the period 3-13 November, the average number of cases was 962 per day. Similarly, after the second round of election (15 November 2020) the ascending trend continued and the average number of cases reported during the 17-30 November period was 1,141 cases per day⁵⁵.

⁵³<https://www.watchdog.md/2020/10/19/sondaj-sociologic-evolutia-perceptiilor-privind-dezinformarea-in-contextul-pandemiei-covid-19-si-preferinta-politice/>

⁵⁴Out of 2,143 offices established all-over the country.

⁵⁵Statistical data. Management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Moldova.

On Election Day, candidates did not file any appeals regarding the violation of protection measures. Regardless, Promo-LEX informed the CEC on the mistakes noticed in the way electoral officials were following the protection rules. The electoral authority sent these notifications to the law enforcement bodies which, during the Election Day, as well as in the subsequent period, approached the managers of the electoral bodies. As a result, in the second round of election compared to the first one, Promo-LEX observers noticed an insignificant number of such incidents.

Regarding voters who were in self-isolation and who requested to vote at the place of stay, we would like to note that their share was about 3-4% of the total number of people who requested to vote using the mobile ballot box. According to the CEC's official data, the number of requests from voters in self-isolation was 1,616 out of 39,919 in the first round, and 836 out of 31,145 requests in the second round.

Conclusions:

1. Despite the delay, public authorities made an effort to ensure the conduct of the election under relatively safe circumstances, both from the regulatory and technical point of view.
2. The pandemic did not affect voter turnout – compared to the previous presidential election, voter turnout increased, especially in the second round.
3. Election observers did not notice any campaign aimed at the disinformation and manipulation of the public opinion. However, the effect of fake news and having candidates and opinion leaders ignore and violate the rules imposed by health authorities in the absence of appropriate punitive response from law enforcement created a general impression among the population that the virus is not dangerous and can be neglected.
4. After the election, especially after the first round, the number of infection cases slightly increased, though it is very unlikely that this increase was determined by the election. Moreover, authorities did not present any formal conclusions to support or deny the above hypothesis.
5. Electoral contestants did not invoke the imposed sanitary measures as a reason to appeal the score they obtained, allegedly having determined and decisively influenced the election campaign from their point of view.

KYRGYZSTAN

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major adjustments in the electoral process in Kyrgyzstan. Firstly, local elections scheduled for 12 April 2020 were postponed due to the introduction of the emergency situation regime in the country as a consequence of the spread of COVID-19. The Central Commission for Elections and Referenda of the Kyrgyz Republic (CEC) faced a difficult task, as parliamentary elections were scheduled for 4 October 2020, and the postponement of local elections was a reason for long discussions on the joint holding of parliamentary and local elections. Subsequently, it was decided to postpone the local elections to 2021 and focus on the parliamentary elections.

The work of election management bodies and state authorities.

In Kyrgyzstan, a Republican Headquarters for Counteracting the Spread of Coronavirus Infection was established. These Headquarters regulated issues related to COVID-19 and included representatives of the Government, the Ministry of Health, and law enforcement agencies. The activity of the Headquarters began in March 2020 and continues to this day.

The electoral process was launched by presidential decree⁵⁶ which also ordered the government to develop procedures to contain the pandemic. On 24 August 2020, the CEC introduced an algorithm for epidemiological protection during the electoral period⁵⁷, which included the following: 1) the work of precinct election commissions; 2) the nomination of candidates for deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh at congresses of political parties; 3) pre-election campaigning; 4) voting outside voting premises; 5) voting day; 6) recommendations to voters.

It should be noted that in its initial stage, this algorithm was not agreed with the Republican Headquarters and was adopted by the CEC independently. As one of the reasons for making such decision, the CEC indicated wanting to accelerate the process in order to "ensure sanitary and epidemiological safety and protecting health of citizens during the preparation and holding elections to the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic". Subsequently, this algorithm was approved by the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic by Order No. 695 dated 7 September, 2020.

The above shows that coordination between the CEC and the Government was rather weak, with some members of the CEC accusing the Government of playing the "ostrich" position and failing to make decisions on algorithms, and where they had to adopt such algorithms themselves. It should also be noted that before the announcement of the elections, the pandemic situation was at its peak, and many parties demanded the cancellation or postponement of the elections including for ethical reasons.

In general, it is impossible to give a satisfactory assessment of the state bodies for their work during the pandemic. It can also be said that the work of the CEC was not of the highest quality either, as the practical implementation of their recommendations was at a low level, and there were a minimum number of imperative decisions on the part of the CEC.

Public health and sanitary measures

Overall, it cannot be stated that the CEC made many decisions in connection with the pandemic. It approved an algorithm of work which prescribed special requirements for the tasks of precinct election commissions, in particular compliance with sanitary and epidemiological measures such as disinfection, observance of social distance, mask regime, use of personal protective equipment by employees; while voters were recommended to resolve any issues related to clarification and correction of data about themselves in voter lists or intention to vote at another electoral address through the *tizme.gov.kg* portal.

⁵⁶Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic "On the appointment of elections of deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic", 2 July 2020.

⁵⁷Decision No.93 approved the "Algorithm of actions to ensure sanitary and epidemiological safety and protection of citizens' health during the period of preparation and holding of elections of deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic on 4 October, 2020".

The algorithm also affected the nomination of candidates to deputies of the *Jogorku Kenesh* at the congresses of political parties. First of all, the CEC recommended to hold congresses of political parties online. In case of holding a congress of a political party offline, the CEC gave the following recommendations: (1) in order to comply with sanitary and epidemiological standards and protect citizens' health, political parties should consider reducing the number of delegates from primary / territorial party branches; and (2) consider holding a congress outside (in the open air). The recommendations were mostly general, such as organizing an entrance filter with temperature measurement and disinfection, observance of social distance, use of sanitizers, compliance with the mask regime, etc.

The above-mentioned algorithm also contained sanitary and epidemiological requirements for mobile voting (outdoor voting) and voting at polling stations (indoor voting). In order to conduct outdoor voting, precinct election commissions received the following recommendations from the CEC: measuring the body temperature of commission members, observers, representatives of candidates, parties and media before leaving for voting outside the voting premises; disinfection of working surfaces and transport for election commission; giving personal protective equipment and shoe covers for precinct election commissions (PEC) members who conduct voting outside premises; availability of sanitizers for PEC members who conduct voting outside premises; provision of disposable gloves and masks to voters who vote outside voting premises free of charge; provision of personal protective equipment to observers, representatives of candidates, political parties and media by their organizations, etc.

There were also a number of requirements for voting on the main day of the election in voting premises, such as organization of an entrance filter with body temperature measurement and disinfection, observance of social distance, use of sanitizers, observance of mask regime, placing information materials in voting premises, conducting explanatory work on the necessity of compliance with the requirements and giving voters personal protective equipment (masks and gloves) at the entrance to a polling station free of charge.

Some recommendations were also provided for the voting process itself, such as disinfection of identification equipment with an alcohol cloth before and after the identification procedure of each voter; disinfection of voting booths and automatic ballot boxes at least twice every 60 minutes; availability of a separate voting booth for voters with COVID-19 symptoms.

In general, the algorithm contained sufficient sanitary and epidemiological measures. However, many of them were never implemented: the measures were adopted and fully complied with international standards, but in practice space was left for the measures not to be applied at all.

Voter inclusiveness and registration

The CEC recommended voters to resolve issues related to clarification, correction of data about themselves in lists of voters, and intention to vote at another electoral address (Form 2) through the state portal of voters "TIZME" (<https://tizme.gov.kg/>). The state portal www.tizme.gov.kg posted a preliminary voters' list where one could clarify his or her information 80 calendar days before the Election Day, i.e., before 16 July 16. These lists were also posted directly at the polling stations. In case of inaccuracies, a voter was offered either to apply to a PEC within the prescribed period or to use the "TIZME" portal. However, it should be noted that not every citizen of Kyrgyzstan has an opportunity to use the above portal, which requires additional equipment for identification in the system. It should also be noted that no instructions were provided for voters who, due to illness caused by COVID-19, did not have the opportunity to clarify or make changes to the voters' lists, so this matter was only generally resolved.

The CEC also recommended that voters who had symptoms of illness, were in contact with ill individuals, or who were in observation and wanted to exercise their active voting right, to apply to the relevant PEC by 2 October for the opportunity to vote outside the polling station and to vote at home on 3 October. If a voter intended to exercise active voting rights on Election Day 4 October at a polling station, it was recommended that the voter visits the polling station after 6 p.m.

Such recommendations by the CEC had no normative grounds, as these actions can be equated to the deprivation of the right to vote. Additionally, these recommendations included only voters who had symptoms of illness, or had contacted sick people, or were in observation. Those who had been hospitalized at that time were not even mentioned by the CEC.

Perhaps this issue could have received a broader reaction, but the situation with registration of a considerable number of voters via Form-2 - i.e. those voting not at their polling station - and possible violations of the electoral law, does not allow us to reliably estimate how many such voters were deprived of their right to vote. Taking into account the above, it can be concluded that most, if not all, voters hospitalized with COVID-19 were deprived of the possibility to vote.

It should also be noted that the Ministry of Health, having approved the algorithm, indicated in its order that it would compile a list of voters who were in hospitals on the day of voting and pass them to the corresponding PECs. According to the information of the CEC, 29,075 people throughout the country applied for voting outside the premises. The CEC noted that an option to vote at home was also given to voters with COVID-19, but only for those who suffered from it in a mild form and were undergoing medical treatment at home.

However, the voting procedure for such persons was not prescribed anywhere, and there are serious concerns on this point regarding the secrecy of voting and observance of sanitary norms. For example, one of the comments of the CEC on this matter was the following: "A voter is obliged to wear a mask and gloves when the PEC representatives arrive. A person cannot invite them inside. A ballot paper must be given over the doorstep". Thus, it can be said that the work on providing voters with an opportunity to vote was carried out at a very basic level, lacking any elaborated provisions.

Opportunities for voters to make an informed choice and campaigning

General information regarding the elections regarding voting procedures and voter education was provided by the CEC in a standard manner, and were not cause for any particular criticism. However, information regarding COVID-19 prevention from the CEC was practically not provided, i.e. the official CEC website contained little information on this.

In some of its press releases however, the CEC did warn about the complicated epidemiological situation in the country, and urged to observe sanitary and epidemiological rules. For campaigning, the CEC provided some recommendations in its algorithm, among which were recommendations to carry out promotional activities through television, radio, audio and video formats and online; offline meetings were recommended to be held outdoors, taking into account the requirement that no mass gatherings should take place; while distribution of campaign materials (booklets, newspapers, CDs, flags, badges, etc.) was recommended to be carried out with the obligatory use of disposable gloves and protective masks.

In case of offline meetings with voters indoors, political parties were obliged to ensure: conducting a preliminary cleaning with detergents and disinfection of the premises where meetings with voters should take place; conducting meetings with small groups in order to avoid mass gatherings; non-contact temperature control of event participants at the entrance of the premises; treatment of hands of participants of the meeting with antiseptic agents at the entrance of the premises; mandatory use of masks, gloves and other personal protective equipment by all participants of an event; observance of social distance between people (at least 1.5-2 meters); in the absence of an artificial ventilation system, mandatory ventilation carried out every 30 minutes for 15 minutes; in the event that the temperature outside is above 18 degrees, to provide constant ventilation of the premises, excluding through ventilation.

A special resource called "TALAPKER" was also created, which contained information about political parties, their programs, lists with information about candidates. The CEC recommended voters to use this resource to obtain information. Regarding the measures taken to limit the possibility for campaigners to hold physical meetings, door-to-door campaigning, events or other traditional/physical means of campaigning, the CEC had little control over this process, as parties successfully used all opportunities of physical meetings with voters where sanitary measures were often not observed. For the most part, the CEC reacted only after an event, leaving preventive measures unattended. Some parties also suspended their campaign activities for the duration of the pandemic, but having not seen support from rival parties, the CEC decided to continue with campaigning. One of the few requirements that political parties tried to comply with was the number of voters present at meetings, but mostly the number of voters exceeded the allowable limit of 50 people.

Mass gatherings at meetings with voters in regions of the country became common. One of these events caused a mass physical altercation among the participation of candidates from two parties. After this incident, the CEC finally required political parties to comply with sanitary norms and cited excerpts from its algorithm of actions. Even after reviewing the incident, no political party received a warning

for violating sanitary norms, although candidates involved in the fight were excluded from the electoral race. Generally, informational support about voting procedures was at a usual level, but there was no information about COVID-19 prevention.

Overall, voters had the opportunity to receive information about the election campaign, although the increased health risks limited outdoor campaigning. This was partly compensated by an increased presence of candidates on social media and carrying out campaigning activities on television, radio, audio and video formats.

Media environment, disinformation campaigns, and voter access to information

In general, the COVID-19 pandemic was used in information campaigns as evidence of the failure of the current authorities and their inability to sufficiently struggle against the virus. No widespread disinformation was observed in the rhetoric of political parties, but at the local level, particularly on social networks, disinformation about the virus was often spread. It cannot be said that such misinformation benefited anyone's campaign.

It remains extremely difficult to fight such misinformation, which remained mostly unrefuted. In some cases, the Republican Headquarters, which also provided information on social networks, refuted some information. At the occasion of one of their briefings, a representative of the Ministry of Health voiced that information from outside sources should not be trusted, as opposed to the trustworthy information provided by the Republican Headquarters. It should be noted that there were neither large disinformation campaigns nor voter awareness campaigns about the dangers of disinformation.

Some pro-governmental parties used the pandemic to score political points, a notable example being the appearance of banners on the streets of Bishkek before the elections with an image of a team of young doctors and the "Biz barbyz" ("We are") slogan installed at the order of the Ismail Matraimov Foundation (the founders of this foundation were active participants in political life, and were going to participate in the elections). After the appearance of these banners, a scandal broke out since medical workers depicted on the banners had not given their permission to use their photos with the logo of the Ismail Matraimov Foundation and this slogan. Also, representatives of a volunteer movement with a name identical to the slogan on the banner also harshly criticized such actions. The work of volunteers during the pandemic, especially at its peak, cannot be overestimated, and this attempt to take credit for their work was the beginning of much criticism towards these politicians, who later became part of one of the parties that caused a popular unrest in Kyrgyzstan in October.

In general, it can be noted that "fake" news and misinformation were not widely covered during the electoral process, but some elements of social exposure and censure were present in social networks similar to previous elections.

Participation on Election Day and voter turnout

The final voter turnout was 1,980,240 voters, which is 56.2% of all those on the voters' lists. In all regions, turnout exceeded 50%, and in Osh city 122,917 people (out of 179,000) voted, which is 68.3%.

The Election Day was marked by huge queues at polling stations and mass transportation of voters registered through Form-2. Due to this there were stampedes and non-compliance with sanitary norms at polling stations, especially in terms of social distance. Mask regime was used for bribing voters, for instance some voters at the entrance to polling stations which were given masks with special markings that could be used to determine which party they were voting for. There was also a case when a polling station was closed for disinfection even though observers warned members of the polling station commission that the polling station could not be closed without sealing the ballot box. Despite this a law enforcement officer and the head of the polling station commission closed the polling station for an hour without sealing the ballot box.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of voters who were unable to vote on the Election Day due to COVID-19, since no official statistics were kept. However, it can be stated that hospitalized voters did not use their right to vote, because no additional polling stations were established in hospitals and voting outside voting premises was possible only at home.

On the day of the voting there were also news that voters with high body temperature were not given an opportunity to vote and were told that voters with high temperature would vote after 6 p.m. The Ombudsman reacted to such news by sending official appeals to the CEC about the violation of constitutional rights of citizens. The CEC took a strict stance in this matter, and did not allow voters with high body temperature to vote together with other citizens. It should also be noted that medical personnel who were in observation and red zone were deprived of the opportunity to vote: this decision was made by the Republican Headquarters and announced by the press center of the Ministry of Health.

During the period from 5-10 October, the number of COVID-19 cases in the country amounted to 1,496. After the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, a popular unrest began, which resulted in the recognition of the results of voting at all polling stations invalid and further resignation of the President of the country. Due to this, many complaints were not considered and remained unaddressed.

Conclusions:

1. Coordination between the CEC and the Government was rather weak, with some members of the CEC accusing the Government of failing to take the appropriate decisions to address the pandemic risk. On the other hand, the practical implementation of measures by the CEC and their recommendations were minimal: the election administration took very few decisions related to COVID-19.
2. In general, the algorithm approved by the CEC contained sufficient sanitary and epidemiological measures. However, many of them were never implemented. Those measures which were adopted fully complied with international standards, but in practice space was left for the measures not to be applied at all.
3. General information regarding the elections regarding voting procedures and voter education was provided by the CEC in a standard manner, and were not cause for any particular criticism. However, information regarding COVID-19 prevention from the CEC was practically not provided, although the CEC did warn about the complicated epidemiological situation in the country and urged to observe sanitary rules.
4. The possibility to vote from home was provided to voters with COVID-19, but only for those who suffered from it in a mild form and were undergoing medical treatment at home. There are serious concerns on this point regarding the secrecy of voting and observance of sanitary norms, and provisions were insufficiently elaborated.
5. It is difficult to determine the exact number of voters who were unable to vote on the Election Day due to COVID-19, since no official statistics were kept. However, it can be stated that hospitalized voters did not use their right to vote, because no additional polling stations were established in hospitals and voting outside voting premises was possible only at home.
6. "Fake news" and misinformation were not widely present during the electoral process, but some elements of social exposure and censure were present in social networks similar to previous elections.

RESULTS INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

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Methodology

Data collected for this research was obtained from the countries observed, mainly thanks to the work of domestic election observation groups composing the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO). These case studies were led by experts affiliated to ENEMO member organizations (NGOs) in the studied countries: OPORA (Ukraine); ISFED (Georgia); Promo-LEX association (Moldova); and the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society (Kyrgyzstan). This final section provides the conclusions to be drawn from these cross-country case studies, offering perspectives for future research and aiming to enhance the level of understanding of the challenges of holding elections in the midst of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary of findings

As shown throughout this study, the COVID-19 pandemic has considerably challenged the holding of elections, and posed major problems to governments and election management bodies. The four post-soviet countries studied – Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan – were all significantly impacted by the pandemic and associated risks, which were faced by election stakeholders all across the spectrum: governments, health ministries, crisis management cells and councils; election management bodies, not least among which central electoral commissions; electoral contestants, parties and candidates; domestic and international election observation groups; and, of course, voters themselves.

When taking into consideration the pandemic itself as a common variable, cross-country analysis revealed that measures taken by states and electoral authorities vary based on multiple factors, including election management systems; resources, capacities, and budgets; degree of anticipation; but also national political contexts. Predominantly, election management authorities, in particular Central Election Commissions in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan, took steps to ensure active suffrage rights and allowing voters to exercise their constitutional right to vote when pondering health risks. This is correlated to the establishment of multisector councils and close cooperation of medical and state institutions which attempted and overall contributed to restrain the first wave of COVID-19 infection.

However, as evidenced in at least two of the studied cases (Ukraine, Georgia), decisions on the design and implementation of COVID-19 prevention and mitigation strategies came extremely late in the process, only a few days before Election Day. This not only caused confusion among election stakeholders, including contestants and voters, but also held the risk of complete failure to address the issue in time before the polls. Although this was not the case, late decisions and inactions of a number of state actors led to legal uncertainty which could have compromised the electoral process as a whole if left unaddressed. It also left election management bodies responsible (understand, legally and morally liable), in this case CECs, with the burden of compensating inactions and failures of legislative and/or executive bodies in passing and implementing COVID-19 prevention measures.

One of the major findings from this study revealed that authorities in all four countries failed to enhance their approaches to voter education in order to inform voters. Broad information campaigns on COVID-19 preventive measures and procedures were at times lackluster, while uneven application of protective personal equipment (PPE) was the overall norm rather than the exception.

Another trend which seems to emerge from crossing cases is authorities consistently struggling with finding broad consensus over COVID-19 prevention measures and strategies, while these strategies have considerably limited opportunities for campaigning. Due to the pandemic, a large proportion of electoral contestants had to refrain from traditional mass-scale pre-election activities. As a consequence campaigning on social media unanimously increased, seeking to compensate the lack of opportunities to campaign through traditional, physical means.

Although digital means of campaigning increased for lack of standard campaigning activities, cross-country results showed that social media platforms such as Facebook and messaging applications left space for abuse by domestic and foreign actors with political goals for influencing public opinion or spreading disinformation. Political divisions and polarization were often misused for discrediting campaigns and for disinformation attempts, including pro-Russian rhetoric as the cases of Ukraine and Georgia illustrate particularly well.

Contrary to what may have been anticipated, the pandemic in the studied countries did not automatically equate to lower voter turnout. All things held constant, voter participation in the elections was slightly higher than the previous election of the same type in two out of the four countries studied: Georgia (51.94 % in 2016; 56.11 % in 2020) and Moldova (53.45 % in 2016; 55.08 % in 2020); while participation was only slightly lower in Kyrgyzstan (58.89 in 2015; 56.5 % in 2020) and considerably lower in Ukraine (46.62 % in the first round in 2015; 36.8 % in the first round in 2020)⁵⁸.

Although the pandemic did not systematically impact voter turnout, the COVID-19 variable seems hardly separable from other metrics. This reveals an additional point, no less important: the subject can properly be approached only through a multi-layered, multi-factorial analysis, as opposed to seeking to apprehend the issue through a single causal explanation. National political dynamics are no less important than the pandemic context in this regard.

Risks and lessons learned in COVID-19 management and elections

One of the major risks identified through this cross-country analysis is the space left to ruling parties and incumbents for abusing social policies adopted to counteract the effects of COVID-19. As illustrated by the case of elections in Georgia in particular, but also Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan to a lesser extent, the political and even economic capture of social policies by incumbents may have granted an unfair advantage to contestants already holding mandates over other electoral contestants.

Visible disinformation campaigns about COVID-19 were a worldwide phenomenon, ever since the appearance of the virus itself. Media treatment of COVID-19 by dubious sources has at times led to skepticism among public opinions, on aspects as diverse as its origin, its actual lethality, elements of conspiracy theories, etc. The countries studied here are no exception to this trend. This seemed quite prominent in the above case study for Moldova, while countries such as Ukraine and Georgia faced the traditional disinformation campaigns emanating from the Russian Federation targeting the credibility of their statehood, black PR among candidates, and smear attempts negatively affecting the overall fairness of the campaign.

The case studies for Moldova and Kyrgyzstan revealed that voting rights for voters in quarantine, self-isolation or hospitalized individuals were not fully ensured. Opportunities for those categories of voters to exercise their franchise was limited, and it can be concluded that no systemic solution to address this issue has yet been determined. Deprivation of the right to vote is one of the major risks posed by the pandemic, and a challenge which governments and election administrations will need to fully tackle in the near future. Election management bodies should also not forget the crucial importance of voter education and proper communication on the specificities of holding elections in the midst of the pandemic, in particular information on voting procedures and preventive measures at polling stations.

The problem posed by the legality of COVID-19 prevention measures in the framework of holding elections should not be underestimated. Besides very late decisions on these measures in at least two of the countries studied (Ukraine, Moldova), the content of these decisions which are not part of the electoral law but rather policies at the discretion of governments – or worse, election administrations – poses the double issue of legality and legitimacy. Although this could be counteracted by better anticipating future waves of COVID-19 infection for parliaments to enact prevention measures, much work remains to be done in the observed countries regarding introducing provisions related to holding elections during pandemics. Preventive measures, such as streamlining adequate provision of protective personal equipment to all polling stations, also leave space for improvement. The legal certainty which comes as a benefit of properly anticipating measures to be put into place should be an incentive for the legislator, to enshrine solutions within the legal framework well in advance of the electoral cycle.

⁵⁸The turnout in Ukraine could also be due to the fact that elections held were local, which traditionally leads to a lower turnout and overall lower media attention than national elections.

Last but not least, the question of the dangers of COVID-19 to democracy itself remains one of the most pressing issues. Our study has shown that social policies and benefits attributed to the struggle against the pandemic was often recuperated for political use by incumbents, leaving space for abuse and granting them an unfair advantage in the electoral race. Likewise, limitations to traditional campaigning opportunities with the aim of limiting possible infections has affected the visibility of candidates and campaign platforms to some extent. This also limits space for newer parties and candidates, potentially favoring institutionalized parties which already benefit from pre-established visibility and reputation. Positively, this seems to have been mitigated by an increase in campaigning through digital means, namely social networks, showing adaptation by electoral contestants to the pandemic circumstances.

As campaigning has logically increased on social media and online outlets, social platforms and media bear responsibility for the content published, as should public authorities. Attempts at regulating social media however have proved to be a delicate, sensitive and possibly dangerous matter. Legislative bodies and civil society organizations will likely be required to continue exerting caution when legislating or advocating for better regulation of disinformation and defamation in social media. Otherwise, the downhill consequences could be dire with excessive limitations to freedom of expression, diversity of opinion, and even political freedoms. Countries are yet to find an appropriate balance between regulation and freedom on this matter, which remains a challenge for years to come, likely well beyond the pandemic itself.

As mentioned above, contrary to the hypothesis of the pandemic systematically resulting in lower voter turnout, the effects of COVID-19 on voter participation remain to be clearly determined. Nevertheless, limitations and prevention measures hold weight in public opinion regarding the safety of voting and public health concerns, a fact which also should not be underestimated.

Perspectives for future research

Although most countries studied were able to have at least some form of preventive measures to mitigate contagion, if not several, no singular approach seems to have emerged which could be determined as superior to all others. All four countries studied show a similar struggle to optimally meet two apparently contradicting goals: conducting democratic, fair and inclusive elections; while trying, to the best extent possible, to factor in public health concerns and keep voters safe on Election Day.

This is the point of contention and the Gordian knot which governments and election management bodies have struggled with. The intractable problem of voters' health and safety versus actually holding elections (assuming, of course, sufficient political will to *actually hold* elections at their planned date, which was obviously the case in these countries) is a key difficulty which can only lead to compromise and imperfect solutions. To add to this challenge, the low level of understanding of the virus itself due to its novelty and lack of precedent among contemporary generations, including in the medical sphere, means that governments and electoral management bodies are still operating with *imperfect* information at all times.

Beyond the intricacies of the virus itself and numerous unknown factors, it also remains virtually impossible to precisely measure the impact of holding elections on the total number of COVID-19 infections afterwards. It can be reasonably assumed however that broad campaigning activities, especially indoors, as well as voters gathering at polling stations all bear considerable risk of mass contamination. This remains a hypothesis at this point, and additional research should be conducted to determine whether this is the case or not based on aggregated data. Establishing a double blind protocol for this purpose would be highly improbable, but countries with similar demographics, population concentration, comparable infection rates and other variables could be compared to establish whether holding elections in the midst of a COVID-19 outbreak *mechanically* leads to a higher number of cases, all other things being equal. As knowledge of the virus and experience can be expected to logically increase, there is a chance that this type of study could and should be conducted in order not only to better weight the risks, but also to better adapt the solutions.

Finally, governments, election management bodies, electoral contestants and media alike need be wary of the potential democratic consequences of COVID-19 prevention strategies and measures. The risk of disenfranchising a considerable number of voters, let alone alienating entire categories of citizens such as those in medical facilities, quarantine or self-isolation, should not be underestimated. Data from this research shows that several of the countries studied, in particular Moldova and Kyrgyzstan (and Ukraine, to some extent) failed to find adequate solutions for such voters to systematically exercise their

franchise during elections. As a fundamental constitutional right in any democracy, particular attention within the pandemic context needs to be paid to active suffrage rights, for elections to be more inclusive and better mitigate negative effects of the COVID-19 on voter inclusiveness.

Recommendations

Civil society organizations in the studied countries, several of which are ENEMO member organizations working on improving electoral environments and developing more inclusive democracies, have raised concerns regarding COVID-19 and elections. In particular, decisions taken by governments and election management bodies hold the perpetual risk of excluding or disenfranchising voters, affecting the inclusiveness of the elections.

Likewise, state institutions should bear in mind that limiting opportunities for campaigning may affect the capacity of voters to properly inform themselves on campaign platforms and candidates. Although excluding mass-gatherings from the equation seemed a safe approach, consideration could be given to strengthening COVID-19 prevention measures and protective equipment in smaller campaign events. This should be paired with the government and CECs better informing electoral contestants and voters, increased enforcement by the competent authorities, and appears as a more reasonable method rather than opting for complete bans on public campaign events.

Whether governments and election management bodies could have better anticipated the need for these measures is debatable. Contradicting opinions from medical experts regarding whether or not a COVID-19 relapse in the fall was self-evident after the summer 2020 remission, render it difficult to tell whether state institutions should have been ready earlier. Nevertheless, as a lessons learned for the future, epidemiological measures should be taken into consideration well in advance before the electoral cycle, and preferably enacted through legislation in Parliament following broad consultation and a process inclusive of the medical corps, civil society organizations, experts, etc. Governments and legislative bodies should seek strengthened cooperation with these stakeholders, including NGOs in the field of democratic development and governance.

When it comes to the struggle with COVID-19, the importance of transparency at all levels should be highlighted as the rule, not the exception. There is space for civil society organizations to better target their work as watch dogs, and for civil activists to act as whistle blowers: abuse of welfare policies and budgets by incumbents is a matter which requires particular attention, as it not only lays grounds for inequality of opportunity in electoral campaigns; it could also leave many opportunities for abuse of state resources.

Media environments, despite deeper issues unaffected by the COVID-19, remain at a constant risk of being afflicted by disinformation content. This is particularly true of social media and online media content providers. Older trends – such as pro-Russian disinformation and interference – and newer trends – such as those discrediting official mainstream discourses about the virus – can meet to create a general climate of distrust, skepticism, and damage the image of free elections. While over regulation of social media and online outlets is undesirable, as it could lead to excessive encroaching on freedom of speech and other pitfalls, fact checking and media literacy of citizens should be invested in by governments and further advocated by civil society organizations.

The pandemic has significantly challenged the holding of elections, bearing in mind that even before COVID-19, organizing elections has never been a simple feat. As the context evolves, post-soviet countries but also societies in the West will likely need to reflect upon solutions which seem acceptable to them and those which do not. Contrary to the idea that in the midst of a pandemic more leeway should be granted to the state for keeping citizens safe, the principle of holding governments and elected officials accountable has rarely been as important as it is today.

