

# **Vulnerable voter groups and measures to ensure their participation in local elections during COVID-19**

29 October 2021

It's an honour and privilege to speak to you today.

I started to work in State Electoral Office of Estonia in February 2020, shortly before the arrival of the coronavirus on the European continent. It created a completely new situation in the conducting of elections, and it seemed natural that I, as a newcomer, was given the task to monitor how other countries ensure safety in elections during these times, and to prepare our concept on the matter.

Now I have my first elections behind me. I am excited and grateful for the possibility to share my observations with you.

I am a political scientist, who is used to working with qualitative data. I am used to interview people, to observe and collect stories. Using my background, I would like to tell you two stories or case studies that, in my opinion, characterize the involvement of the most vulnerable voter groups and the measures to ensure their participation in local elections during the spread of coronavirus in Estonia.

When I address the notion “vulnerable voter groups” in my speech, I concentrate on the elderly persons who have special needs that have led them to use the support equipment for day-to-day activities and help, or who are living in twenty-four-hour general care homes.

**Before the first story, I will give you some contextual information on elections in Estonia:**

We had local elections on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October. We have an election week. The election week started on Monday, 11 October. It consisted of six advance voting days and the election day on Sunday. Electronic or online voting is available during the six advance voting days. It is possible to vote at polling stations, at home, at general care homes, hospitals, and detention centres.

We have 79 municipal councils. The number of councillors is 1717. Average councils have 21 members. The largest council is in the capital Tallinn and consists of 79 councillors. We have one million voters. Almost half our municipalities have less than 6000 voters. In the capital, we have 300,000 voters. More than 10,000 candidates ran in the elections. Lists of political parties and electoral coalitions competed, as well as independent candidates.

We had the elections in a time where the risk of coronavirus spread was very high. The government was struggling to increase the vaccination level. There were restrictions on entering public spaces and requirements to wear a mask, keep a reasonable distance and disinfect hands.

There was a rule that voters who had been diagnosed with the coronavirus themselves or who had to stay in self-isolation were not allowed to come to polling places. In such a case, the voter had the opportunity use the option of electronic voting and voting at home.

### **The first story – it is a story about cooperation**

This story began on the first advance voting day, on Monday. It was related to a general care home and concerned 68 elderly people with special needs. The situation arose due to the mistrust of the manager of the care home towards the organizers of election.

I received a letter from one of the municipal secretaries, asking for my rapid intervention. She had three small twenty-four-hour general care homes in her municipality. A manager of one of the care homes was not willing to cooperate. This manager refused to send her a written application for holding the voting, which, according to Estonian electoral law, is the basis for conducting voting in care homes. By doing so he basically denied the entry of the polling station staff who had to collect the votes according to the application.

In Estonia, we have approximately 170 general care homes where assistance is provided to nearly 9000 adults. Around half of these homes belong to local governments; the other half are privately owned, and six belong to the state. This care home belonged to a

private owner and although all of its employees were vaccinated, a coronavirus outbreak was discovered in this institution. The topic was sensitive and strongly under media attention. And the caregivers were under attack as they were publicly accused of causing deaths in the care home.

When I called the manager of this care home, I was ready to get an emotional response. I heard from him that he had divided the elderly into two groups. The healthy were in one part of the house, and in the other part, there were the ill ones. He was afraid of the lack of the caregivers as they were also falling ill. There was a debate on whether to evacuate the whole institution and conducting of elections was the last thing that elderly needed in his opinion.

I managed to convince him that, according to Estonian law on elections, the administration of a care institution had to apply for holding the voting. This is an obligation, not an act of free will, no matter what. We agreed that first he would collect the declarations of the intent to vote from the persons living in the care home. Next, we called the local Health Board official to consult on the matter and asked them to provide high-level protective suits for the polling station staff.

It turned out that half of the residents in this health care institution wanted to exercise their right to vote, and others did not. They had the opportunity to decide on the matter by themselves. This is crucially important, as it is an issue of human rights and dignity.

In close cooperation with the local Health Board official, who was also present during the voting and assisted the polling station staff, we managed to conduct the voting according to all health standards applicable in such a situation and according to all standards of our electoral law as well.

**By this story, I want** to underline how important it is to cooperate closely with the health care authorities during these times. In small countries, it helps to be prepared to use the maximum safety equipment in sensitive environments. There is no reason to believe that elderly people with special needs are not willing to vote, even if

they have been diagnosed with the COVID-19 disease. Although the number of voters in general care homes is low in Estonia, enabling them to use their constitutional right to participate is the reflection of society's level of involvement and respect for human dignity.

### **The second story – it is a story about the changes**

This is a story about the possibility for the elderly to vote at home. At the same time, this is also a story that shows how eager the elderly people could be to use the information technology.

On the day before the election day, on Saturday, I answered a phone call from a man who called on behalf of his 92 years old mother. His mother was a loyal fan of one politician and wanted to participate in the local elections. In two previous elections, his mother had used the possibility to vote at home, as she had difficulties in walking. She did not want to let anybody into her flat this time, because of the coronavirus.

Home voting is one option of voting in Estonia, and it can be used if a voter is unable to vote at a polling place due to their state of health or for some other good reason. Home voting is held in Estonia for three days, starting on Friday, and it is possible to vote at home also during the election day.

We assumed before the elections that elderly would use the home voting a lot more than previously. We re-designed the home voting method to minimize the risks, using Latvia's good practices.

Where possible, the members of the polling station team did not enter the home of the voter. They wore high-level protective masks and gloves. The ballot box and the ballot paper were placed at a sufficient distance at the outer door of the voter's home. Where possible, the voter was identified at a distance at the outer door of their dwelling. The voter placed their completed ballot paper in the ballot box behind their door.

I explained the changes made to the home voting method due the coronavirus. But this was not what the old lady wanted. She wanted to vote electronically, for the first time in her life.

In Estonia, we have had the electronic voting or online voting since 2005. In order to vote electronically, a voter will need a secure computer with an internet connection and an ID-card with a reader, or a mobile-ID.

Unfortunately, there was an obstacle for her to vote electronically. The ID-card of the lady was valid, but her electronic identification certificate (PIN-codes) had expired. She used the ID-card a lot, but she did not use the e-services, so she had not noticed that beforehand. We had just few hours left for electronic voting and ID-card certificates can be renewed at the Police and Border Guard Board in Estonia, but it takes time.

Finally, together with the son and his mother, we opened the online map with the polling stations and started to look for the polling stations nearest to the mother's home. We found a polling station that had been set up in a tent in a parking area and I understood that they agreed that they would go there together, and that made it possible for this old lady to participate.

This story seemed exceptional to me at that time, but when we started to look at the statistics after the election, we found out that the home voting had decreased during these elections compared to previous local elections by 30% and there was a significant growth in the number of electronic voters in the older age groups. In the age group 65 and older, the number of electronic voters increased by half.

**By this story, I wanted to give you** an example how the coronavirus has changed the behavior of the voters in Estonia. It is not so clear any more how people choose between the options to vote, but the participation rate will be higher if there are more options for voting. I also wanted to point out the role of the helpdesk during the elections. At these elections, we opened a free phone line in cooperation with the Emergency Response Centre that made it possible to take time to hear and to consult the people looking for answers, and especially the

elderly asking for help in finding the safe polling stations or in using electronic voting for the first time.

**To summarize,**

The elections can be organised in a way that is safe for everyone even during the high level of coronavirus spread. In my opinion, there are five tools that helped us in Estonia ensure the participation of elderly people with special needs in the elections:

- 1) Cooperation network and trust between election organizers at all levels that allowed the rapid exchange of information about difficult situations
- 2) The legal protection supporting the rights of the elderly living in general care homes that obliges such institutions to hold elections, no matter what
- 3) Close cooperation with the Health Board, which guaranteed immediate consultations and the use of maximum safety equipment where needed
- 4) Different safe options to vote, starting from re-designed home voting at a distance, electronic voting, and polling stations in tents in outdoor areas
- 5) Helpdesk service provided also by a call-center with professional operators, who have time and good communication skills, is more convenient for elderly

The final turnout in local elections in Estonia was 54.7% and this is a small increase compared to the previous local elections before the coronavirus. 46.9% of the votes were cast by electronic means.

I had the opportunity to be a part of the call-centre's team and answer to more than 100 phone-calls and same number of e-mails by myself during the election week. I will never forget my first elections during this coronavirus spread.

Thank you for your attention!