

Dear Guests,

I would like to welcome all the participants of this conference and express my gratitude to the organizers!

As Hungary holds the chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, it is my privilege to co-open the 18th European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies with Mr. Gianni Buquicchio, President of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

We all know the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic changed not only people's lives but also the way states function.

The consequences of the pandemic left decision-makers dealing with serious dilemmas.

In what follows, I would like to share with you some of the electoral challenges Hungary faced due to the pandemic and, especially what tasks the National Election Office of Hungary (NEO) has to perform.

I have been in charge of NEO Hungary for one year, in other words, I did not arrive here at a conventional time.

In Hungary, voters can exercise their right to vote in parliamentary, municipal and European parliamentary elections as well as in local and national referendums. The central tasks relating to the preparations and the conduct of elections belong to NEO Hungary.

Let me begin by underlining that the different waves of the pandemic hit my country at a time when no general election or national referendum were in process. With the pandemic progressing, the state of danger was introduced and the National Assembly ordered that no date for by-election can be set until the day after the pandemic has ended, and elections where the date had already been set, would be cancelled.

Similar measures were taken concerning national and local referendums.

All these measures were introduced to prevent a human epidemic or to stave off its consequences.

As the situation regarding the pandemic improved in the summer of 2020, dates for holding by-elections had been set and municipal by-elections and national minority by-elections were organized in more than thirty settlements. One parliamentary by-election was also held.

During the preparations for these by-elections more and more questions emerged and NEO Hungary issued circulars as to what protecting measures should be applied. The measures were aimed at helping the full exercise of the right to vote and included three main domains:

- how to proceed with public gatherings organized prior to election day;
- how to conduct the voting in the polling stations;
- and how to conduct voting by mobile ballot boxes and in particular the procedure to follow in social and health services.

During the preparations, NEO Hungary led consultations with the National Public Health Center. By taking into account the recommendations formulated by the National Public Health Center, NEO Hungary made it possible for voters in quarantine or in social and health service facilities under visit ban to vote.

In addition to measures of protection, the National Election Office covered the fees of the supplementary record-keepers in the polling districts and distributed anti-pandemic packages in the polling districts (containing 50 masks, 10 pairs of disposable gloves and hand antiseptic gels) for the conduct of the voting.

With the situation deteriorating, the state of danger was again ordered on the 4th of November 2020. As a consequence, neither elections nor referendums could be conducted. At the moment, the dates for some 80 by-elections are to be set.

July 2021 produced another turning point, as from that date national referendums could again be initiated and a parliamentary general election is about to be organized in spring 2022.

Several questions are raised in the context of the pandemic and the experiences gained from by-elections are helpful in answering those.

Local election offices did everything they could to ensure that by-elections were conducted with the utmost security. In several settlements, in addition to central recommendations such as physical distancing and the use of protective equipment, other measures were also taken, for example, division of the rooms in polling stations by putting up plexiglass walls or installing polling stations in rooms larger than on previous occasions.

Before these by-elections, it was also a question whether members of the election commissions would like to participate at all in the electoral operations in fear of contracting the virus, but later this proved to be unfounded.

Overall, we learned a significant deal from the local electoral bodies and we wanted to channel back the experiences.

One way to do that was the series of conferences on election management that has just ended.

Indeed, the National Election Office organized this series of regional events – each of them lasting two days – for the heads of territorial and parliamentary single-member election offices. In total 591 persons took part in it, many of whom (36%) had never been involved in carrying out electoral tasks, at least not as managers.

The trainings covered legal, administrative, financial and IT topics in the form of lectures held by colleagues from NEO Hungary. This year, measures to be applied in connection with the epidemic were the focal points of discussion. The information acquired here will then be handed over by the heads of the territorial election offices to colleagues working at local level.

One could ask for good reasons: how measures meant to provide protection against the pandemic could be centrally regulated in a more homogeneous manner?

In this context it has to be emphasized that Hungary's general pattern of settlements is very fragmented with significantly different characteristics between the settlements, which makes a good case for the local level when it comes to envisage specific measures to be implemented to ensure safe conditions.

A change related to the pandemic concerning the electoral body is that from the 21st of January 2021, the National Election Commission may hold its session online (using electronic communication devices). These sessions are organized by the National Election Office. The Commission held several successful meetings online in the recent past, revealing that discussions and decision making can continue effectively even in this new format.

When speaking of elections, it is mainly the organization of voting day's operations that comes to mind as voting day's operations involve most of the personal contacts. There are, however, some key services that have to be performed without hindrances for the elections to be organized adequately. In Hungary, one of these is the national post, responsible for the delivery of 9 million packages in electoral periods. Another one is the press producing materials in massive quantities for elections. Special care should be taken in these services to avoid any massive disease outbreak.

To cope with the increased workload brought on by the election periods, the National Election Office employs an additional 100 new colleagues, which means that we too have to bear in mind that caution is priority when organizing work.

The next election is special from the point of view of the epidemic in the sense that certain voters will be able to cast their votes at Hungarian embassies and consulates. So, we will have to take into account not only the pandemic situation in Hungary, but also the conditions outside our country.

And a final word on challenges other than those implied by the pandemic.

Indeed, information technology security in elections is also a key issue in this regard. Information technology is developing at an incredible rate and we, electoral experts are doing our best to allow information security solutions and mechanisms of control to prevent possible electoral abuses.

I greatly appreciate your kind attention and wish you a fruitful day.