

Several Recommendations on Organizing Elections during COVID-19 Pandemic

Purpose

The purpose of this short paper is to present some good practices in organizing elections, observed in some countries that conducted elections during the pandemic. The overall goal is to offer a set of recommendations to public institutions, primarily the Central Election Commission (CEC), on ways to prevent the infection of citizens with COVID-19, on the day of Early Parliamentary Elections to be held on 14 February 2021. In this framework, a good example are the extraordinary elections for Mayor of Podujevë/Podujevo held on 29 November 2020.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the social, economic and political lives of every individual. Many countries have been forced to take measures to restrict fundamental human rights and freedoms. According to statistics published by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA),¹ 75 countries that had planned holding of elections, subsequently postponed them, 101 countries held them, while five of them planned to hold elections this year. Republic of Kosovo is among the countries that have planned to conduct the elections during the pandemic. Namely the Parliamentary Elections are scheduled to be held on 14 February 2021.

The first COVID-19 cases in Kosovo were reported on 13 March 2020, and now the number of active cases exceeds 60.000 of which around 1.506 people lost their lives. From this point on, the Government of Kosovo has taken various decisions, sometimes adopting more severe and sometimes easing the measures against COVID-19, depending

¹ Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) 'Global Overview of Covid-19 Impact on Elections'. (2021). Available at Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections | International IDEA

on the epidemiological situation assessed by the Ministry of Health, National Institute of Public Health (NIPH). The measures applicable as of today include wearing a mask, having and using a disinfectant, maintaining distance and movement restrictions after 21:30 hours, based on the classification of municipalities into three zones. Municipalities with over 150 active cases with COVID-19 per week are included in the red zone, municipalities with 76-149 active cases are included in the yellow zone and municipalities with up to 75 active cases with COVID-19 per week are part of the green zone. The classification of municipalities according to these three zones is updated weekly by the NIPH, depending on the number of positive cases registered in each municipality.

Despite the adverse situation with the pandemic throughout this period, the Republic of Kosovo will organize its Early Parliamentary Elections on 14 February 2021. These elections will be held after the dissolution of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, respectively the Seventh Legislature, by the Acting Kosovo President, Ms. Vjosa Osmani. This decision was taken after the Constitutional Court issued a judgment declaring the Assembly vote to elect Hoti's Government invalid.²

1. Parliamentary Elections in North Macedonia

Parliamentary elections in North Macedonia were held during the COVID-19 pandemic, on 15 July 2020. This country adopted new rules in the electoral process, in order to preserve the health of its citizens. It is worth mentioning that the parliamentary elections in this country were held for three days, in order to avoid crowding of voters inside the polling centers. In addition, some other measures included:

■ Voters had to keep a distance of

1.5m

from each other;

- Persons who had been in self-isolation, or were currently infected with COVID-19, had the opportunity to vote by authorizing a proxy on their behalf;
- On Election Day, prior to the start of voting, each polling station had to be ventilated and disinfected;
- Voters had to keep a distance of 1.5 meters from each other;
- Voters had to wear a mask, and disinfect their hands before and after entering the polling station;
- Voters were allowed to remove the mask for a moment, at the time they presented their identification document to the Polling Station Committee member.³

2. Parliamentary Elections in Serbia

Parliamentary elections in Serbia were scheduled to take place on 6 May 2020, but due to COVID-19 pandemic, the election process was postponed until 21 June of the same year. The measures undertaken by state institutions included:

- Wearing of masks, gloves and a distance of one meter from each other was mandatory for all Polling Station Committee members;
- In all polling stations, a poster with instructions on measures against COVID-19 had to be placed;
- Awareness videos and media messages were broadcasted a few days before the election, to inform voters of their responsibilities and how to protect their health on elections, during the pandemic.

² Constitutional Court, Judgment No. KO95/20, available at: https://gjk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ko_95_20_agj_shq.pdf

³ International Foundation for Electoral System 'Featured Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken During COVID-19', (October, 2020). Available at IFES, 'Featured Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken During COVID-19', October 21, 2020

3. France Municipal Elections

■ Posters on measures against

COVID-19

were placed in each polling station, in order to be as comprehensive as possible;

France was among the first countries to hold elections after the spread of COVID-19. Local elections in this country were held in two rounds, the first being held on 15 March 2020, while the second round was held on 28 June of the same year. The distinguishing feature in the electoral process in France was proxy voting, a form which was allowed in both election rounds. To request proxy voting, voters had to apply in person at their respective area's police station or first-instance courts. Other mandatory measures of the Ministry of Interior included: ⁴

- Placing distinctive signs on the floor, in order to ensure that a distance of one meter was maintained between the voters;
- Each voter was requested to bring its own pen to vote with, in order to avoid contact with objects which could spread the virus;
- Posters on measures against COVID-19 were placed in each polling station, in order to be as comprehensive as possible;
- Disinfectants were placed at the entrances and exits of every polling station;
- Voters were instructed to remove the mask only temporarily, during the identification process by Polling Station Committee members. In case of refusal, they were not allowed to vote.

4. Parliamentary elections in South Korea

Voter turnout on these elections was the highest recorded in the past twenty years, with approximately

66%

of eligible voters turning out to vote.

Parliamentary elections in South Korea were held on 15 April 2020. South Korea is one of the countries with a success story of holding elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Elections in this country were held over two days, to avoid voter crowding at polling stations. A 'code of conduct' was drafted for voters, instructing them to behave according to some of the following rules:

- Before entering the polling station, the voters' temperature was checked; if above 37 degrees, the person was allowed to vote at a designated place and was then sent for testing;
- If the temperature was below 37 degrees, the voter was obliged to put on gloves before receiving the ballot, and a special place was dedicated at the exit for disposing of their gloves, at the end of the voting;
- Persons currently infected with COVID-19 were allowed to vote by mail;
- The government allowed voters who were in self-isolation to participate in-person in the elections, but by voting at specially designated places. The government sent text messages to individuals in self-isolation, asking them about their willingness to vote. This was intended to enable proper preparation, and smooth implementation of this process;
- Polling Station Committee members were required to wear a protective suit and keep a distance of three meters from each other.

Elections in South Korea serve as an example to democracies on how to organize elections in the times of a pandemic. Voter turnout on these elections was the highest recorded in the past twenty years, with approximately 66 percent (%) of eligible voters turning out to vote.⁵

⁴ BBC News 'France's Macron defies coronavirus lockdown with elections', (Mars, 2020). Mund të gjendet në France's Macron defies coronavirus lockdown with elections - BBC News

⁵ Vox 'This is what democracy can look like in a pandemic', (2020). Available at How South Korea held national elections during the coronavirus pandemic - Vox

Lessons Learned from Elections for Podujevë/Podujevo Municipality Mayor

The elections for Mayor of Municipality of Podujevë/Podujevo were held on 29 November 2020, after the resignation of the then Mayor, Agim Veliu, who had been appointed Minister of Interior in the Government of Kosovo. Elections for this municipality were originally scheduled to take place on 15 March, however due to the pandemic, they were postponed for eight months.

In order to organize the elections in this municipality, CEC passed an Administrative Instruction⁶ on Measures to Prevent the Infection with COVID-19, intended for voters and electoral staff on Election Day. According to the pertinent Instruction, some of the measures to be applied by voters included:

- Wearing a mask, covering both mouth and nose;
- Maintaining a physical distance of two meters between the voters, while waiting in the line;
- Hands disinfection, when entering the polling station;
- When presenting the identification document, temporary removal of mask, to enable identification by the Polling Station Committee member;
- Hands disinfection, while exiting the polling center.

Although these measures were not fully respected, the adoption of these measures by the CEC was highly commended by the Head of EU Office in Kosovo, Tomas Szunyog.⁷ However, after the polls closed in the Municipality of Podujevë/Podujevo the citizens gathered at the headquarters of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje and the Democratic League of Kosovo, by completely ignoring the instructions for protection against COVID-19. These post-election rallies should have been prevented by the police and political parties, which should have called upon the citizens not to gather.

Non-compliance with the measures imposed by the CEC for Mayoral Elections in Podujevë/Podujevo, were also reported by the observers on these elections. Democracy in Action (DiA), that monitored the electoral process in this municipality, found that “in terms of implementation of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, DiA considers that the measures and voting procedures provided by the CEC instruction, were insufficiently respected. Despite the fact that the CEC hired monitoring teams to ensure implementation of anti-COVID measures, present in almost all centers, DiA observers reported partial observance of adequate masking. This was mostly noticed among the Polling Station Committee members”.⁸ According to the DiA statement, other measures were also not respected on the elections for the Mayor of Podujevë/Podujevo, such as the physical distance between voters and Polling Station Committee members, while disinfection of hands at the entrance to the polling center was the least respected one. In terms of the polling center premises, DiA identified a high number of observers in these centers, contrary to the CEC decision providing for only one observer. According to this organization, “The CEC failed to make use of the necessary capacity in terms of polling facilities, with observed overcrowding of voters on some polling stations, resulting in the inability to keep the distance”.⁹

Persons who were in self-isolation in the Municipality of Podujevë/Podujevo, due to infection with COVID-19, also had the opportunity to vote. For this purpose, CEC issued another Administrative

⁶ Central Election Commission ‘Decision to Adopt Administrative Instruction No. 03/2020 on Protective Measures to Prevent Infection with COVID-19 of Voters and Electoral Staff on Election Day’. (2020). Available at [1154-2020-Vendim-per-miratimin-e-udhezimit-adm-nr-03-2020_17-11-2020_1.pdf](https://www.kqz-ks.org/03-2020_17-11-2020_1.pdf) [kqz-ks.org]

⁷ Reporteri.net ‘EU Office in Kosovo reacts after elections in Podujevo’, (November, 2020). Available at [Pas zgjedhjeve në Podujevë dhe në veri të Mitrovicës, reagon Zyra e BE-së - Gazeta Online 'Reporteri.net'](https://www.reporteri.net/en/eu-office-in-kosovo-reacts-after-elections-in-podujevo/)

⁸ RTK Live ‘DiA: Peaceful elections but without compliance with anti-covid measures’, (2020). Available at [DnV: Zgjedhje të qeta por pa respektim të masave anti-covid \[rtklive.com\]](https://www.rtklive.com/)

⁹ Ibid

Instruction¹⁰ on Voting of Persons Infected with COVID-19 in Podujevë/Podujevo Municipality. According to this instruction, persons in self-isolation had the opportunity to vote through CEC mobile teams. Initially, these persons were contacted by the Municipal Election Commission (MEC) to be informed about the opportunity to vote, and they were registered in the Voters' Lists, depending on the confirmation of persons in self-isolation, of their willingness to vote. According to the CEC Spokesperson, the MEC in the Municipality of Podujevë/Podujevo contacted citizens with the right to vote in the Municipality of Podujevë/Podujevo who are in house quarantine, due to a positive test for COVID-19. The CEC contacted around 500 people and almost half of them expressed their willingness to vote through mobile teams.¹¹

In terms of voting of persons infected with COVID-19 at the time of the elections to be held on 14 February 2021, the CEC will identify citizens with the right to vote who are positive for COVID-19. The identification of these persons will be done through communication with the institutions managing the pandemic, maintaining the lists with the names of these citizens / voters. Voters will be contacted by phone, to explain the service offered by the CEC of voting through mobile teams. On Election Day, the CEC will send mobile teams to the addresses of these voters (homes and apartments) to enable them to vote.¹²

10 Central Election Commission 'Administrative Instruction No. 01/2020 on identification, confirmation and voting of persons who are under house quarantine due to a positive test for COVID-19 and persons under a measure of self-isolation', (2020). Available at [1092-2020-Vendim-per-udhezim_al.pdf](#) (kqz-ks.org)

11 Interview with Valmir Elezi, Central Election Commission Spokesperson. (Prishtinë, January, 2021)

12 Ibid.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable as better organization of the electoral process as possible, especially on Election Day on 14 February 2021, Kosovo should follow good practices of other countries that organized elections in times of the pandemic. Some of the measures that can be implemented in Kosovo on the early elections for the Assembly of Kosovo, include:

To CEC:

- Reduce the number of Polling Station Committee members and observers, to avoid the overcrowding inside enclosed spaces;
- Extend the voting hours from 07:00 to 21:00 hours, to disperse voters over a longer time interval;
- Call on persons over the age of 65 to vote in the morning hours, while others who do not have to vote in the morning, to vote in the afternoon. This reduces a chance of the virus spreading among elderly people;
- Increase the number of polling stations and polling centers, in order to reduce the number of voters who visit these centers and those waiting in the line to vote;
- Regulate the manner of voting for persons in self-isolation, by engaging the CEC mobile teams with the support of the Ministry of Health staff, in order to provide them with an equal opportunity to vote with other persons;
- Place disinfectants at the entrances and exits of every polling station;
- Place plastic shields between the voters and Polling Station Committee members;
- Disinfection of facilities to be done every three hours, such as: polling station door handles, ballot screens, ballot box, stamps, invisible ink sprays, tables, etc;
- Ventilation of polling stations to be done every hour, for ten minutes;
- Maintain the distance between the voters by placing the distinctive signs on the floor, so that the voters are clear about where to wait in the line.

To the Government:

- In order to avoid the gathering of people after the end of the voting process, it is recommended to establish a curfew throughout the country starting from 21:30 hours. This is aimed at avoiding the mistake that was made in this regard in the Municipality of Podujevë/Podujevo.

To voters:

- Wear masks during the election process;
- Voters should bring their own pen, to avoid contact with objects used by many people;
- Avoid gatherings and respect the distance 1.5 meters while waiting in the line to vote.