**COVID-19 and Special Voting Arrangements:**

***What can EMBs do to prepare for elections?***

***Organised by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania***

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## Concept Note

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority will convene an online roundtable titled *COVID 19 and Special Voting Arrangements (SVA): What can EMBs do to prepare for elections?* The objective of this online event is to share knowledge and insights in using a variety of SVAs as countries prepare to hold elections in situations where epidemiological concerns necessitate the adoption of special arrangements to ensure the safety of election administrators and voters.

According to the information collected by International IDEA, from the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, some twenty countries across the globe have held elections as originally scheduled (nine out of these were nation-wide) while fifty-three countries have decided to reschedule elections to a later date (eighteen being nation-wide ballots). In some cases, governments have invoked emergency situations, automatically triggering the postponement of elections. Others have invoked special types of emergency situations, such as epidemiological emergencies, which do not trigger the postponement of elections, but entail unprecedented and unfamiliar challenges in order to ensure that relevant epidemiological requirements of hygiene and physical distancing are met during elections. In many other countries, the uncertainties of the pandemic will continue to influence public health guidelines pertaining to activities where people assemble in crowds and where various interactions and physical transactions take place. This has already affected pre-election activities such as training of election administrators, voter registration and verification, with election officials having to hold them under new, shorter timelines.

Forms of **special voting arrangements** conventionally include early, postal, online and proxy forms of voting. Some of these forms of SVAs involve voting within supervised voting stations and some enable voting without/outside polling stations. A growing number of countries across Europe have made use of these forms, with early, postal and proxy voting becoming more common over the past decade, while Estonia remains the only European country with on-line voting for nation-wide elections. In the past months, the COVID19 pandemic has led many governments and election management bodies to increasingly consider adopting new or scaling up these special voting arrangements in order to avoid crowded voting on an election day.

Forms of voting that involve casting a ballot outside a supervised polling place such as online and postal forms of voting raise operational and integrity concerns and necessitate scrupulous and often lengthy testing and legislative processes. For in-person voting, examples of elections held in recent weeks in countries such as South Korea offer useful insights on what measures can be adopted to mitigate risks of disease contagion while voters assemble to cast their ballots at polling stations.

**Event Objective**

This online discussion among professional electoral practitioners aims to foster knowledge exchange among EMBs and electoral assistance providers on using a variety of special voting arrangements while organizing elections under health restrictions.

Uncertainty is what sets the current situation apart from other known situations that warrant risk analysis and contingency planning. This situation calls for a more coordinated knowledge generation and exchange among practitioners and for evidence-based decision-making. These exchanges can equip election practitioners with useful knowledge not only in relation to elections during 2020, but can help build mid and long-term transformations to make elections more agile and secure. The meeting will not cover in detail the concerns and mitigation strategies for conducting electoral political campaigns.

This practitioners’ discussion forms part of a series of guidance materials that International IDEA has developed within its COVID19 and impact on democracy work. These materials aim to support countries in ensuring that elections held or postponed due to the COVID 19 pandemic uphold standards of free and fair elections while at the same time ensuring the health of voters and election administrators.

**Event Participants**

The online roundtable discussion will bring together experts from International IDEA, the PEA of Romania, representatives of electoral management bodies and election experts from electoral assistance organizations from across Europe.

**Event Format**

Given the limitations that the online format entails, the roundtable will be of a limited duration (max. 2.5 hrs) and will be conducted in the format of presentations and a Q&A. Speakers will be selected from EMBs. Other contributors may include international electoral assistance providers.

**Questions to be addressed:**

Participants will discuss and share experiences on:

* Overview of the **special voting arrangements** currently in place in Europe; what methods are more commonly used, what are the options and associated risks for their adoption in the short and medium term;
* In-person voting: measures to mitigate health risks, accompanying voter education and information measures, added financial costs;
* Experiences in regulatory assessments for special voting arrangements;
* Contingency planning undertaken by EMBs;
* What support is necessary from election assistance providers?