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## **HYBRID ELECTION MANAGEMENT METHODS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS\*\***

### **Abstract**

This paper is based on qualitative secondary data analysis to provide more comprehensive insights into innovative electoral policy choices of election management bodies (EMBs), faced with multiple challenges of COVID-19 to different aspects of organisation of electoral cycle: its regulatory, operational, and procedural framework to ensure safe voting environment, voter participation and democratic legitimacy. Various COVID-19 related arrangements are reviewed: health safety measures and more extensive use of already existing special voting arrangements (SVAs) – early, postal, mobile or proxy voting and possibilities for online voting in the future. Strengths and weaknesses, costs and benefits of these hybrid voting methods are compared. Conclusion of this analysis is that the traditional preference of EMBs for in-person, in-polling station voting with low-tech paper ballots remains unchanged by COVID-19. There was not enough time, resources and political incentive of decision-makers to introduce innovative or high-tech online SVAs. Analysis shows that postponement of elections during pandemic challenges institutional stability and should not be regarded as an example of future good practice. Decreased or inadequately high voter turnout during COVID-19 was registered as a significant threat to democratic legitimacy and to resilience of democracy. Necessity for strategic contingency planning of electoral cycle is confirmed and recommended.

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## INTRODUCTION – RESEARCH METHOD AND QUESTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic is a ‘health nightmare’ but also a scientific dream, since it has prompted scientists from across the world to collaborate with joint noble aim to find treatments and a vaccine to stop the spread of global contagion. In the realm of political sciences, we could observe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a ‘political nightmare’ but also an ideal opportunity for many populist and authoritarian rulers to seize even more power and to endanger further democracy and freedom of citizens. During the pandemic, we are likely to see further erosion of fundamental institutions of representative democracy – parliaments, political parties, elections are becoming more vulnerable than before for new types of misuse, or disregard. Politicians, decision makers, and election management bodies (EMBs) were faced with multiple challenges of the COVID-19 crisis – they were expected to provide swiftly, innovative electoral policy choices to ensure safe voting environment for citizens – voters, as well as democratic and legitimate outcome of the elections.

For the purpose of this analysis, elections are perceived as massive social event that mobilize and unite millions of people in a joint ritual through which voters, in ‘possession’ of sovereign power of their individual vote, determine who should represent them in legislative or executive branch of government. As Orr notes, elections are rituals that has a specific rhythm: “a dimension of a grand ritual, a recurrent public occasion marking the passage and renewal of political seasons. It is an extended ritual run according to established timetables and made up of a myriad of ritualized processes” (Orr 2015).

In this sense, elections could be defined as continuous process of ritualized re-production of authority. Through these rituals of voting, ‘the voice’ and the ‘will of the people’ perform an act which Bourdieu, in his essay “Rites of Institution”, describes as a form of ‘social magic’ which has transformative power to change the public order – the power relations between individuals and authorities (Bourdieu 1991, 26). That is why we should explore changes in political culture of election rituals – the COVID-19 pandemic made us revisit the patterns of acculturation to new modes of exercising of citizenship rights and freedoms (Vukomanovic 2020).

Still, approach of this paper is not focused on the analysis of the predominant competitive models of elections. We want to explore experimental dimension of elections, in a social space not regulated by laws, but by emergency – i.e. by the COVID-19 pandemic which dictate new patterns and modes of electoral behavior. Focus of further analysis is to explore how voter experience of elections is changing, and how elections are re-defined as live events in emergency context, irrespective of the political results of voting. To do this, we are having in mind the electoral cycle model, developed by The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network project<sup>1</sup> that comprehends elections as continuous set of steps and processes involved in the conduct of elections, which is divided in three main periods:

1. the pre-electoral period (planning, training, information, and voter registration);
2. the electoral period (nominations, campaigns, voting, and results);
3. the post-electoral period (review, reform, and strategies).

Decision makers had to assess and identify which exact dimensions of the electoral cycle could be disrupted and find-out sustainable solutions to these threats. It was reasonable to expect that the greatest challenge for risk management will occur during electoral period, not in pre or post electoral period of electoral cycle. Landman and Splendore (2020) pointed out that the highest likelihood and highest impact on overall elections will have risks of electoral disruption during second phase of electoral cycle: nomination, campaign, voting, vote counts and processing of results of election.

Having in mind this electoral cycle, further analysis should provide comprehensive review and mapping of risk matrix of elections – what new challenges, threats, risks and costs were emerging in the process of organizing and conducting of elections in new extraordinary environment caused by COVID-19? What policy choices have been made to ensure safe environment for elections – what risk mitigating measures have been implemented during elections to prevent negative threats to public health? Furthermore, analysis should provide insight into the hybrid mixture of traditional in-person, in-polling station voting protocols with already existing, or possibly newly designed special voting arrangements (SVAs). Finally, analysis should provide also reliable indicator on the level of democratic legitimacy of elections during COVID-19 – based on in/adequately low/high voter turnout.

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<sup>1</sup> The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network Project [online] <https://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/electoral-assistance/electoral-cycle> [12/03/2022].

To provide answers to the above-mentioned research questions this paper is based on qualitative secondary data analysis to deliver more comprehensive answers and in-depth insights. Firstly, a review of reliable analytical literature – empirical/case studies was conducted to get a detailed understanding on how elections have been managed during COVID-19. In addition to that, a review of inter/national documentation and data-bases on elections conducted since the outbreak of the pandemic, in comparative perspective in Europe and worldwide, was undertaken. Finally, the main trends in public policy choices and future strategic planning related to reforms of voting methods in emergency environment were scanned.

## **RISK MANAGEMENT OF ELECTIONS AND “POSTPONEMENT PARADOX”**

The spread of COVID-19 was an external threat, a contingency that was not intentionally produced by human, i.e. political actors. Nevertheless, politicians had to organize elections and implement risk management of emerging crisis. To do that, they had to construct a risk matrix in order to assess and address the impact of this contagious disease to elections.

In any crisis situation, question ‘who is in charge?’ is the key question to be resolved first. It is evident that the landscape of stakeholders in charge of election management was extended during COVID-19, since not only EMBs, but also medical experts who were making assessments of health risks were also becoming ‘in charge’. In Serbia, for example, in March 2020, the Government formed the Crisis Headquarters for the Suppression of Infectious Diseases COVID-19 (CHQ). The President of the Serbian Government, and the Minister of health have been appointed, among others, as the co-leaders of the Crisis HQ. Members of this body were also directors of relevant health institutes and clinics, and representatives of other relevant bodies. This *ad hoc* body was the most prominent and very influential public health authority in charge of blueprinting official, legally binding recommendations to mitigate the risk of coronavirus transmission. The fact is that every country has similar task force body – the most well-known is, of course, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

These various national, public health oriented ‘task force’ expert bodies, together with incumbent politicians had very strong, if not decisive influence on EMBs. A group of authors support that competent public health professional should couple their expertise with the technical

knowledge of electoral authorities to develop adequate safety protocols for conducting of elections, and take a firm stand against actors who push for decisions that can put voters and poll workers at risk to advance their political interests (Birch *et al.* 2020, 4). But these authors are also warning on the problem of politicization – “perception of political dependence and reputational issue” between prominent government figures, members of public health task force bodies, and EMBs (Birch *et al.* 17). Time will show if this *ad hoc* alliance between politicians and ‘white coats’ – medical experts will produce increasing incentives for misuse of political power and expert authority, especially during future health emergencies.

Election management bodies (EMBs) in charge of organizing of elections responded to COVID-19 crisis in different ways, which might be classified to vary between traffic light ‘stop – wait – go’ options of policy choices:

1. moving forward with elections with no changes to procedures;
2. moving forward with elections and implementing some measures to mitigate risks to voters and poll workers;
3. postponing elections, as Burić and Darnoff observed (2020).

According to the Global overview of the impact of COVID-19 on elections, developed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA 2022), from February 21, 2020 until December 31, 2021, at least 153 countries and territories have decided to hold national or subnational elections despite concerns related to COVID-19 (out of which at least 127 have held national elections or referendums). But at least 80 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and subnational elections (out of which at least 42 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums). Finally, at least 63 countries and territories have held elections that were initially postponed, out of which at least 31 have held national elections or referendums.<sup>2</sup>

When comparing on a global level, it seems that governments – i.e. EMBs in Europe were the most cautious, i.e. more reluctant to hold initially scheduled elections, in comparison to decision makers in other parts of the world: out of total number of postponed national or sub-national electoral events, the greatest percentage of delays occurred in Europe – 32.5% of all postponements. In Asia Pacific region 22.5% elections of the total number were made, and the same percentage was recorded in North and Latin America – 22.5%. Politicians in Africa were

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2 This list is composed according to reports made by governments, electoral management bodies, and news media. The IDEA notes that this list is not comprehensive but represents a snapshot of decisions and events across the globe.

less keen to postpone elections – 18.8% of overall cases of postponed elections were on this continent. The remaining percentage of globally postponed elections - 3.7% occurred in Middle East (International IDEA 2022).

More detailed list of 23 European countries that were postponing national or subnational – municipal or local elections and referendums, shows that these elections were not canceled for a lengthy period. Mostly, they were postponed for a time span of several months – from 1-7 months. Most cautious were decision makers in the UK – a series of local elections scheduled for May 2020 were moved to be held in May 2021. In Germany, local elections in Hessen, scheduled for April 2020 were moved to March 2021 (International IDEA 2022). It should be noted one unique case – that voters in Croatia even went to the polls ahead of time, although critics argued that the ruling party – government has pushed for early elections, in July 2020, in order to capitalize electoral victory on its competent management of the coronavirus epidemic – and, according to the final results of the elections, they were right (Čepo *et al.* 2020).

Croatian case is evidence that incumbent politicians were still advocating to preserve ‘business as usual’ approach regarding the question of whether or not to hold elections – since they are calculating that their hardline approach during pandemic will result in increased support of voters for them. As James and Alihodzic illustrate, there are both *pros* and *cons* for postponing of elections, and they call this situation as “postponement paradox”, since the postponement might “break institutional certainty, which could pose threats of democratic breakdown—especially in presidential systems.” These authors are warning that this may lead to situations of statecraft and partisan squabbling which could trigger democratic breakdown and trust in the system (James and Alihodzic 2020, 1). Long time ago, James Madison, the architect of the U.S. Constitution, wrote: “where annual elections end, tyranny begins.”

Working Group of the Global Commission on Democracy and Emergencies finds out that democratic and hybrid regimes were more likely to postpone their elections than authoritarian regimes. This can partially be explained by the fact that democracies wanted to ensure the legitimacy of their elections through sufficient voter turnout and the ability of the opposition to conduct electoral campaigns. On the other hand, for incumbents with authoritarian tendencies, holding elections during the pandemic “provided an opportunity to sideline and silence political opponents, civil society, critical media, and human rights advocates” (Club de Madrid and IDEA *n.d.*, 5).

## RISK MITIGATION MEASURES

The key question for political decision makers was how to ensure sufficient and credible levels of voter participation amid the pandemic that would manage to guarantee the inclusion, representativeness, and democratic legitimacy of elections. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) were charged with the task to provide a safe voting environment for both voters and poll workers, and to maintain inclusivity for the most vulnerable groups in populations.<sup>3</sup>

South Korea laid the blueprint for holding an election during a pandemic. South Korean precedent was an example, as Spinelli puts it: of “extraordinary measures for extraordinary circumstances” (Spinelli 2020, 2). South Korea was not under a national lockdown, and decision was made to hold elections on April 15, 2020. A detailed set of precautionary measures was made to enable voters to participate in the election with minimal safety concerns. Procedures for early voting in South Korea, as well as many risk mitigation measures provided conditions in which the turnout reached 66% in 2020 of approx. 44 million eligible voters. It was the highest turnout in the last three decades, since 1992 (in 2016 it was 58%). The turnout of early voting in 2020 hit almost 27% (12% in 2016). Conclusion can be made that a mixed voting modes – combination of early and in-person methods of voting ensured by COVID-19 risk mitigation measures led to higher turnout.

A special “Code of Conduct of Voters” was implemented due to COVID-19 which provided detailed instructions and outlined actions, safeguards and precautions that voters were required to follow through each step of the voting process. “Code of Conduct for Voters” included:

- wearing of face masks when queuing to vote, keeping a safety one meter distance, with signs and marks placed throughout the voting premises;
- temperature checking (with non-contact thermometers, 37.5 degrees Celsius max. limit);<sup>4</sup>
- sanitizing hands and wearing plastic gloves, while keeping IDs ready for inspection;
- temporarily lowering or removing mask to facilitate voters’

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3 Important considerations for decision-makers and EMBs were highlighted in International IDEA’s 2020 Policy Brief “Managing Elections During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations for Decision-Makers.

4 Those showing a temperature higher than 37.5 degrees Celsius, or displaying respiratory problems, were redirected to special polling stations with even higher degrees of protection.

identification;

- receiving, handling, and casting ballots;
- when leaving the polling station, voters had to discard their gloves into a disposal box, at the exit (Spinelli 2020, 3).

Safety measures similar to those for voters were also applied for police officers, media representatives and election observes. Korean`s National Election Commission (NEC) confirmed that the adopted extraordinary measures required an additional force of 20.000 poll workers to be deployed. The NEC exerted significant efforts to disseminate, as widely as possible, the “Code of Conduct” and to reach the electorate. The NEC broadcasting channel – eTV was established, and frequent voting information advertisements were running frequently on national television, and affixing posters and banners were around the country. Livestreaming of election day was also made available (*ibid.*).

Every context is unique for each country, so the South Korean case certainly cannot be generalized all over the world, but it was the first role-model to prove that elections could be managed very successfully during COVID-19. In some other parts of the world – in more than 90 countries where purple fingers of voters marked with indelible ink was still used to deter electoral fraud, detailed protocols have been also introduced to mitigate health risks at polling station. Based on the recommendations from indelible ink manufacturers, EMBs were advised to use the ink product by applying three primary protocols: soap and water, minimum 60 percent alcohol solution or 0.05 percent chlorine solution to sanitize their hands prior to ink application (Darnolf *et al.* 2020).

Special attention was focused to voter education – EMBs were advised to ensure that voters understood new hygiene procedures by using different IEC (Information, Education and Communication) materials: for example, special posters outside polling stations and public service announcements. Voter education efforts should have been made to reach out all citizens, including voters with disabilities and those with low literacy levels (Darnolf *et al.* 2020). But it should be noted that most IEC materials are not powerful enough by themselves to change electorate behavior.<sup>5</sup> Timeframe to make innovative changes to electoral procedure was unreasonably short, and all these health related protocols – safety measures were novel rituals for majority of voters, unprecedented in their previous experience during elections.

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5 IEC materials include various range of products like: infographics, flyers, leaflets, brochures, social media posts, television adverts, audio spots for radio, posters, billboards, murals etc.



All these extraordinary public health measures enacted to guarantee safe conditions for voters, have been benefiting but costly. Lists of procurements, logistic and human resources, financial costs and other necessities were quite extensive. We should be mindful of variations in socio-political context, as well as of diverse levels of resources and infrastructure available by different countries when making post-election evaluation of costs and benefits of election related mitigation measures.

To give an illustrative example – in Ukraine, with 35.7 million of voting age population, additional costs of implementing extraordinary public health measures during COVID-19 are estimated at 46 million USD, or 1.29 USD additional cost per voter. Ukraine was significant for one more positive example – EMBs organized in advance an Election Day simulation exercise to identify potential problems during Ukraine’s 2020 local elections (IFES 2020). In South Korea, for example, Covid-19 measures alone (in particular personal protective equipment – PPE) came to 16 million USD, which equates to approximately 9% of the total election cost, or 0.37 USD additional cost per voter. The ‘champion’ of spending of extra-funds on elections are, as it can be expected, USA with additional cost that have been estimated to 2 billion of USD (with voting age population of approx. 225,15 million) – additional cost per voter was estimated to be 7.84 USD, mainly for organizing online registration, postal voting, in-person voting and public education (source: Asplund *et al.* 2020).

It is important to emphasize that in regular time, before outbreak of COVID-19, research evidence shows that there is a positive relationship between ample funding and election quality. Better-run elections are often those which are better resourced – when funding is cut, election quality is cut. As Toby points out, it is therefore “essential that there is sufficient investment in electoral democracy for elections to function properly and democratic ideals to be achieved” (Toby 2020, 63). Fair elections require investment, and investment in elections is long term policy orientation in election management – especially during or after the pandemic, election budgets should not be reduced.

## **HYBRID MODES OF VOTING DURING COVID-19**

Global overview of risk mitigation measures implemented, or ‘invented’ during national elections in COVID-19 pandemic presents an extensive list of measures that are of a hybrid nature<sup>6</sup> – a mixture of

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<sup>6</sup> We are using the term “hybrid” in the colloquial sense – something that is a mixture, of mixed character, composed of two or more different elements.

in-person, in-polling station voting protocols with already existing Special Voting Arrangements (SVAs). SVAs are defined as ‘alternative methods of voting’ to the more ‘conventional’ or ‘ordinary’ voting in person at a polling station. These broadly used definition include alternative voting methods, safeguard voting measures, convenience voting, special voting channels, etc. While in practice several forms of SVAs exist, the four methods presented below have been of particular relevance for in-country voting during the COVID-19 pandemic:<sup>7</sup>

Early voting – an in-person opportunity for submitting one’s vote at a polling station before election day. Early voting can make it easier to maintain the secrecy and integrity of the vote, unlike in the other SVAs, it is conducted in a controlled environment – protocols should outline where and in what timeframe a voter can cast his/her ballot, as well as where and how completed ballots must be counted and stored. Postal voting – those measures that allow a voter to submit ballot by physical post to the election administration. Postal voting is the most convenient form of voting, especially to be considered amidst the COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> The key prerequisite for this method is that the postal service is reliable – in the sense it is organized and functions properly, and that it is secure, i.e. safe from intentional interference.

Mobile voting – allows members of the election administration to visit voters either at home or at an institution in which they reside with a mobile ballot box to facilitate their vote. This method is different from special polling stations, as it involves a ballot box being brought upon request for a single voter, while special polling stations usually require a threshold of voters and involve establishing the controlled environment in an institution of residence such as a hospital, nursing home or prison. Proxy voting – enables an authorized individual to cast or transmit a ballot on behalf of the voter. While proxy voting is generally restricted to special circumstances, some countries allow it for any reason. In most cases, voters must request to vote by proxy in advance and a procedure must be defined for the voters and their proxies to identify themselves. Many countries limit the number of proxies per voter to mitigate any manipulation of votes.

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7 A detailed maps of availability of different SVAs in Europe, as well as legal regulations that define different SVAs in individual European countries, see in: Heinmaa 2020.

8 The USA and, in much lesser extent Poland expanded model of postal voting during COVID-19 in their 2020 presidential elections. Postal voting in the USA recorded a dramatic increase from approx. 17% in 2016 (around 23 million votes) to over 41% (under 36 million votes) in 2020, when in Poland less than 1% of voters registered in-country requested to vote by mail (Asplund *et al.* 2021).

A comparative study of voting methods conducted in 51 countries worldwide during COVID-19 in 2020 reveals that, in total, 63 per cent – 32 out of 51 states that held national elections or referendums made use of at least one SVA. Furthermore, 23 countries (45%) extended existing SVAs for people with COVID-19 or under quarantine (Asplund *et al.* 2021). Adaptation of pre-existing SVAs was, especially in many countries in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region the predominant approach in election management during COVID-19. The more detailed breakdown of data on SVAs used during 2020 shows that mobile ballot boxes were used in 21 countries, early voting was made possible in 15 countries, while postal voting was enabled in 8 countries, and proxy voting in 4 countries. COVID-19 risk mitigation measures were implemented in 11 countries. Still, in 19 countries, none of the above-mentioned voting arrangements were not made available for voters. Researchers concluded that the examples of countries adopting innovative, entirely new SVA procedures, beyond COVID-19 related arrangements in polling stations, were rarely and “difficult to locate” (Asplund *et al.* 2021).

These SVAs are permitted in countries throughout the world, especially in Western world, but they are rather ‘exception than the rule’ – they are legally allowed or used in ‘certain circumstances’ and their patterns vary considerably. There are also risks, negative consequences and political controversies regarding use of SVAs, including the risks of possible misuse, or fraud, such as heightened risk of ‘family voting’, etc. Both Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and EU European Commission highlight important considerations for voting through SVAs. Venice Commission is of opinion that the use of mobile ballot boxes is “undesirable because of the attendant serious risk of fraud” (The Venice Commission 2002, paragraph 40). That is why precautionary measures for adequate use of SVAs should include: mechanisms for reliable voter identification, ensuring the secrecy and non-coercion of the vote, preventing manipulation of results, guaranteeing functioning postal or other relevant services, and the concurrent costs and capacities of EMBs (European Commission 2018).

As a potential solution to multiple challenges of election during COVID-19, Landman and Splendore (2020) are suggesting a “mixed system of voting” which may include:

1. postal voting for out-of-country people and those who are over 65;
2. online voting<sup>9</sup> for people with certificate electronic signature;

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9 The literature sometimes uses the term ‘e-voting’ to describe ballots cast online. But it is also in use distinctive term ‘internet voting’ to distinguish this method from voting

3. standard voting in polling stations under strict health safety measures for the rest of people.

But the problem with this, shall we call it – “hybrid system of voting” is that there are numerous challenges to be resolved first, in order to opt for this costly change in election administration policy. First and foremost – both postal and online voting methods must be sustainable, secure and reliable. Postal voting has become highly controversial owing to the belief that such a system may be biased to particular party affiliations. Any online solution faces problems relating to information security – the threat of deliberate cyber attacks, especially from abroad, and hacking more generally, as well as questions over the integrity of the results, as was seen during the alleged Russian interference in the USA Presidential elections in 2016. There is also a question of reliability, due to some shortcomings in the hardware and software available for online voting. Both postal and online voting can generate mistrust in elections and the rejection of an unfavorable outcome. Even optimistic expectations that the novel blockchain technology could provide some of the solutions to many security questions in this regard is not sustained.

Namely, some authors are challenging suggestions that voting over the Internet or voting on the blockchain would increase election security, and finds out that “such claims might be wanting and misleading” and that blockchains may introduce “additional problems for voting systems”, with conclusion that “this state of affairs will continue as long as standard tactics such as malware, zero day, and denial-of-service attacks continue to be effective” (Park *et al.* 2021). These authors are concluding that electronic, online, and blockchain-based voting systems are more vulnerable to serious failures than available paper-ballot-based alternatives. That is why the surprising “power of paper” remains highly appreciated by EMBs, since low-tech paper ballots may help protect against vulnerabilities of electronic voting systems – i.e. malfunctions or attacks of higher-tech voting system components (Park *et al.* 2021).

## **RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19**

If elections are the most reliable indicator of the level of people’s trust to democracy, it seems that people are not ready to defend democratic rituals at any cost – especially if massive gatherings during elections present a serious threat to their health. IDEA’s data base on

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at electronic voting machines (EVM) at polling stations, which is also referred to as ‘e-voting’ (EU Commission 2018, 5).

voter turnout collected in elections held in 100 countries worldwide – at all continents, show that, when comparing voters’ turnout in elections held during COVID pandemic 2020-2021 to average turnout in elections held between 2008 and 2019 (before COVID-19):

a) voter turnout declined in 65% of observed 100 countries – mean decline is 9.96%;

b) voter turnout increased in 35 % of observed 100 countries – mean increase is 7.91% (source: International IDEA 2022).

If this is so, can we conclude that people are losing trust in democracy, and that democracy is in decline, globally – and what should be done in regard to these trends? There is nuanced evidence that turnout in many countries during COVID-19 is likely to be even lower than it might otherwise be during natural disasters, for example - floods (James and Alihodzic 2020, 9). That is why the examples of countries, particularly in the worldwide regions that are often faced with seasonal natural disasters, needs to be studied and followed when organizing elections.

Question emerges – how to help democracies to enhance their resilience to emergencies as well as their ability to deliver in uncertain times? In general, it seems clear that a more consistent crisis management of elections should be blueprinted in advance, and that parliaments need to consistently carry out oversight of such plans (Murphy 2020, 67). Club de Madrid and International IDEA recommended that election-related authorities should prepare plans, strategies and roadmaps that ensure a consultative and transparent process during emergency situations, especially when electoral calendars are changed (Club de Madrid and International IDEA *n.d.*, 13-15).

Experts gathered by The ACE Project, suggest that development agencies and partner countries should plan and implement electoral assistance within the democratic governance framework by thinking ahead 5 to 10 years, in all three aspects of the electoral cycle, rather than reacting to each electoral event as it occurs. Landman and Splendore (2020) have concluded that in the medium-term perspective, every country needed a backup plan to hold the election and that a solid electoral framework needed to contemplate pandemic solutions. That is why decision makers should always have in mind a holistic ‘build back better’ strategy aimed at reducing the risk to the people and communities to create a more resilient preconditions in the wake of future disasters and shocks.

## CONCLUSIONS

This analysis has provided ample evidence that elections could be successfully safeguarded during the pandemic through preventive health risk management measures. Our analysis shows that postponement of elections during emergency/pandemic should not be regarded as an example of a ‘good practice’, and that ‘postponement paradox’ should be regarded as a threat to institutional stability and resilience of democracy, and therefore cannot be recommended as a pro-democratic model of future crisis management in the case of pandemic.

Nevertheless, there was no ample evidence to conclude that election management bodies were prodigiously expanding already existing special arrangements of voting. The traditional vision of an election – that citizens vote in-person at polling stations using a paper ballot remained unchanged during COVID-19. What we could have seen was a lot of usual ‘paper work’ produced by hybrid mixture of traditional voting protocols and already existing SVAs (especially early, postal, mobile and proxy voting) with new health-risk mitigation measures related to COVID-19.

An equally important finding of this analysis is that this pandemic has produced significant democratic legitimacy deficit of elections in many countries, due to decreased voter turnout. In as much as it is important for decision makers to avoid delaying of elections, analysis shows that it is even more important to incentivize massive participation of citizens in elections. Furthermore, analysis shows that it is necessary to ensure not only political willingness, but also to invest increased logistical, expert, human and especially financial resources to enable innovative redesigning of traditional voting protocols during pandemic. To achieve these goals, EMBs could use The Electoral Cycle model as a good planning tool, designed by the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network project, to better understand the cyclical nature of various challenges produced by pandemic and creating of contingency plans for elections in advance, in all three phases of electoral cycle (pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral)

This paper is not presenting a complete comparative assessment of COVID-19 related voting protocols, or codes of conduct, neither for voters, nor for poll staff. Main intention of this paper is to highlight the necessity of future electoral reform to focus on the paradigm of hybrid voting schemes. Analysis shows that hybridizing of two existing voting protocols: traditional in-person in-polling stations voting with already existing SVAs does not provide ‘the best of both worlds’ in the context

of pandemic emergency. Further research and continuous secondary data analysis should be made with the aim of designing emergency voting protocols that will be hard to manipulate during possible future pandemic or natural disasters.

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