



International Foundation
for Electoral Systems

Elections in Bulgaria

2021 Repeat Parliamentary Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Eurasia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Frequently Asked Questions

- When is Election Day?..... 1
- What was the outcome of the April 4 parliamentary election? 1
- What is at stake in these elections? 1
- What is the electoral system?..... 2
- Who is eligible to run as a candidate? 2
- Who is eligible to vote, and how many registered voters are there? 3
- What are the campaign timeline and expenditure and donation limits?..... 4
- What is the election management body? What are its powers? 5
- How is the election management body protecting the elections and voters from COVID-19? 6
- What is the election management body doing to strengthen its technology and procedures to resist vulnerabilities and counter malign interference? 7
- What provisions are in place to support the equal rights of women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups?..... 7
- When will official results be announced? 8
- Resources 9
- About IFES in Bulgaria 9
- Disclosure 9

When is Election Day?

The Republic of Bulgaria will hold parliamentary elections on Sunday, July 11, 2021, across the country and in designated voting locations abroad. Voting will take place from 7:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m.¹ in 11,879 polling stations in Bulgaria² and from 7:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. (local time) in 791 diplomatic missions and consular posts abroad.³ Polling stations in Bulgaria will be staffed by more than 80,000 poll workers. Voters in medical and detention facilities, nursing homes and specialized social services institutions, or aboard Bulgarian sea vessels, can cast their ballots in these locations so long as there are 10 or more eligible voters.⁴

What was the outcome of the April 4 parliamentary election?

After the April 4, 2021, parliamentary election, Bulgaria's political parties were unable to form a majority government, and President Rumen Radev called for a new election.⁵

Overall, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) observed that the April 4 elections were competitive and generally well-managed despite the ongoing pandemic, and that fundamental freedoms were respected.⁶ However, the ruling party used state resources to gain an advantage in the elections, and campaigns focused on candidates rather than political party platforms.⁷

What is at stake in these elections?

The elections for the National Assembly of Bulgaria (the Parliament) will take place amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and just months before a critical presidential election.⁸ The elections follow last year's extensive anti-government protests, organized in response to a series of government scandals that revealed widespread corruption among and an incompetent response to the pandemic by the ruling party, the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB).⁹ Despite these setbacks, GERB won 26 percent of votes in the April 2021 parliamentary elections.

These elections may also have broader implications for the wider region. GERB's leader and Bulgaria's Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov, has held up neighboring North Macedonia's European Union accession, demanding that the country recognize its national language as a regional dialect of Bulgarian.¹⁰ This obstacle has angered European Union member states and

¹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 14, Section 5, Article 220.

² Addresses of polling stations, Central Election Commission.

³ "Bulgarians abroad will be able to vote in more polling stations," BNR Radio Bulgaria, June 19, 2021.

⁴ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 2, Section 2, Article 9(6-9).

⁵ "Bulgaria to hold fresh parliamentary elections in July after coalition talks fail," *Euronews*, May 5, 2021.

⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) Interim Report, Bulgaria Parliamentary Elections, April 4, 2021: Preliminary Statement, page 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Bankov, P., "What to expect from the 2021 Bulgarian parliamentary election," *London School of Economics*, March 24, 2021.

⁹ Tsoneva, J., "What is happening with the Bulgarian protest movement?" *Al-Jazeera*, September 10, 2020.

¹⁰ Hajdari, U., "Tongue-tied: Bulgaria's language gripe blocks North Macedonia's EU path," *Politico*, December 9, 2020.

outraged political leadership in North Macedonia. Should GERB or Borissov lose footing in the elections, North Macedonia may see a reversal, permitting its eventual path to accession.

Furthermore, voting machines will be in full use as a result of a 2019 Election Code amendment that faced heavy criticism from civil society and international interlocutors.¹¹ Machine voting through direct-record electronic devices will be mandatory (with some exceptions) and available in nearly 9,400 polling stations.

What is the electoral system?

In Bulgaria, national representatives are elected through a proportional representation system designated by party, coalition and nomination committee candidate lists.¹² The electoral system is governed by the Bulgarian constitution, the Election Code and the Law on Political Parties. If necessary, the system is further regulated by Central Election Commission decisions.¹³ There are 240 seats in the National Assembly, and representatives are elected for four-year terms.¹⁴ The seats are allocated through a single-preference option in 31 multi-member constituencies, which are established according to the size of the population of the constituency. Each constituency has a minimum of four seats.¹⁵ Parties and coalitions must receive at least 4 percent of valid votes at the national level to be represented in Parliament.¹⁶

Who is eligible to run as a candidate?

All citizens over the age of 21 have the right to run for office as long as they are eligible to vote and do not hold citizenship in another country.¹⁷ In the April parliamentary elections, nearly 7,000 candidates on 30 candidate lists were registered across parties and constituencies.¹⁸ Approximately 6,023 candidates are registered for the repeat elections in July. Candidates are nominated by parties and coalitions, or by nomination committees for independent candidates.¹⁹ To register, parties and coalitions must deliver a deposit to a designated Bulgarian National Bank account of 2,500 Bulgarian Lev (BGN, equivalent to USD 1,512), and nomination committees must deliver BGN 100 (USD 60.48).²⁰ Parties and coalitions register with the Central Election Commission with at least 2,500 voter signatures.²¹ Nomination committees register with the designated constituency election commission,²² and each independent candidate must receive at least 1,000 voter signatures.²³ Independent candidates must meet a

¹¹ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, Bulgaria Parliamentary Elections April 4, 2021, page 6.

¹² Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 2, Articles 246–247.

¹³ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 4.

¹⁴ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 1.

¹⁵ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 7.

¹⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 7.

¹⁹ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 6.

²⁰ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 9, Section 1, Article 129(1).

²¹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 9, Section 2, Article 132(1) and 133(3) and Section 3, Articles 139 and 140(2).

²² Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 9, Section 5, Article 151(2).

²³ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 5, Article 257(1).

constituency electoral quota to be eligible for seat allocation.²⁴ Candidates are then ranked by party, coalition or nomination committee on candidate lists.²⁵ Candidate lists are registered no later than 32 days before Election Day²⁶ (in this case, June 9, 2021, at 5:00 p.m.)²⁷

On Election Day, a voter may also cast a ballot that does not support any candidate list; such ballots will be counted toward voter turnout but will not influence allocation of seats.²⁸

Who is eligible to vote, and how many registered voters are there?

According to the constitution of Bulgaria, citizens over 18 years of age have the right to vote in state and local elections, except for prisoners or other people prohibited by law.²⁹ There is no permanent voter register; before each election, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (GRAO) compiles a list of eligible voters from the National Population Register and provides the electoral roll to the Central Election Commission.³⁰ The executive leadership of medical or detention facilities, specialized social services institutions or Bulgarian sea vessels are responsible for compiling electoral rolls and providing them to the municipal administrations relevant for those voters.³¹

The final voter list for the April 4 parliamentary elections included 6,635,654 voters.³² Currently, the preliminary voter list for the July 11 elections comprises 6,711,048 individuals.³³ Voters who are not on the official voter list on Election Day may be added if they provide proof of residency in the municipality where they wish to vote.³⁴

Citizens living outside Bulgaria are also eligible to vote if they request that their names be added to the voter list of a polling station abroad. The heads of the diplomatic missions and consular posts compile electoral rolls, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs then shares with the GRAO.³⁵ However, voters abroad may vote at any diplomatic mission or consular post voting section upon presenting Bulgarian identification.³⁶ For the April 4 parliamentary elections, 88,038 citizens were included on the out-of-country voter list.³⁷

²⁴ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 3.

²⁵ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 10, Section 1, Article 156(2).

²⁶ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 5, Article 255(2).

²⁷ Chronograph for Elections of Members of National Assembly on April 4, 2021 (adopted by Decision No. 1949-NA of January 21, 2021).

²⁸ "Bulgaria's April 2021 parliamentary elections: Factfile," *The Sofia Globe*, March 4, 2021.

²⁹ Constitution of Bulgaria, Chapter 2, Article 42(1).

³⁰ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 5.

³¹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 4, Section 2.

³² OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*: Preliminary Statement, page 1.

³³ Number of voters in preliminary lists for voting in the election of members of Parliament on July 11, 2021, Central Election Commission.

³⁴ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 6.

³⁵ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 4, Section 3, Article 31.

³⁶ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 6.

³⁷ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*: Preliminary Statement, page 1.

What are the campaign timeline and expenditure and donation limits?

The election campaign officially begins 30 days before Election Day³⁸ (in this case, June 11, 2021). The campaign will end at midnight on July 9, the start of a 24-hour period of silence during which no active campaigning, paid content or publication of public opinion polling is permitted.³⁹

Amendments to the campaign finance legal framework in 2019 resulted in a nonexistent donation ceiling, which allowed donations from legal entities and reduced funding for political parties.⁴⁰ Although funding for political parties decreased, the new amendments made it easier for parties to receive public funding.⁴¹ Parties that received 1 percent to 4 percent of the votes nationwide in the previous election could receive public funding; the annual amount of the state subsidy per valid vote received was 8 Bulgarian Lev (BGN) (USD 4.84).⁴² While legal entities were allowed to make donations, nonresidents, religious institutions and foreign states are not permitted to donate to campaigns.⁴³ However, Bulgaria's Constitutional Court ruled in April 2021 that several parts of the 2019 amendments, including unlimited donation ceilings, are unconstitutional.⁴⁴

The National Audit Office (NOA)⁴⁵ oversees campaign finance, which is regulated by the Election Code, the Law on Political Parties and the State Budget Act.⁴⁶ For National Assembly elections, BGN 3 million (USD 1.8 million) is the expenditure limit for a party or coalition, and BGN 200,000 (USD 120,964) is the limit for independent candidates.⁴⁷ Candidates must report weekly to the NOA on the origins of donations received during the campaign period. Candidates are not required to disclose campaign expenditures before Election Day, but a representative must submit a report on revenues, expenditures and commitments for payments⁴⁸ within 30 working days after the election. The audited report will be published 15 days later.⁴⁹

Parties that otherwise receive no state funding are provided BGN 40,000 (USD 24,192) to spend on paid political advertisements; nomination committees receive BGN 5,000 (USD 3,024).⁵⁰ Advertisements are to be published or disseminated no later than 40 days prior to Election Day, and the media is required to price paid advertisements equally for all candidates.

³⁸ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 12, Section 1, Article 175.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 2.

⁴¹ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 7.

⁴² OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 8.

⁴³ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 2.

⁴⁴ *The Sofia Globe*, Bulgaria Constitutional Court strikes down rules on party financing, 2021.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 8.

⁴⁷ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 11, Article 165.

⁴⁸ Chronograph for the elections for Members of the National Assembly, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 11, Article 172.

⁵⁰ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 12, Article 178(1).

What is the election management body? What are its powers?

There are three primary levels of election management bodies (EMBs) in Bulgaria: the Central Election Commission (CEC); district (or constituency) election commissions (DECs); and precinct election commissions (PECs).⁵¹ For the April 4 elections, there were 31 DECs and 11,888 PECs.⁵² Section election commissions and mobile election commissions exist to oversee specific voting sections in Bulgaria.⁵³

The only permanent EMB in Bulgaria is the CEC,⁵⁴ an independent body that is responsible for conducting and administering elections.⁵⁵ In April 2021, Parliament voted to reduce the size of the CEC from 20 to 15 members,⁵⁶ with five political parties represented, and to approve a new chairperson, Kamelia Neykova. The CEC is led by the commission chairperson, along with the deputy chairpersons and secretary, who are all nominated by the National Assembly.⁵⁷ All CEC members are appointed by the president.⁵⁸ Members of the CEC serve five-year terms. Unless a CEC member violates eligibility rules or resigns from his or her position, that member must vacate the office within one month of the appointment or election of new members.⁵⁹ According to the Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, some duties of the CEC include:

- Implementing activities in line with the Election Code;
- Guiding the operation of and appointing lower-level election commissions;
- Registering parties, coalitions and candidate lists for elections;
- Establishing terms and procedures for election observers;
- Determining the location of voting sections abroad;
- Overseeing the conduct of the election campaign;
- Examining all complaints regarding election irregularities; and
- Processing and publishing election results.⁶⁰

Members of the public can access the CEC's meetings via livestream or on its website, and certain outside observers may attend meetings in person.⁶¹ The CEC also receives input from a public council group made up of Bulgarian civil society representatives.⁶²

⁵¹ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 4, Article 89.

⁵⁴ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 5.

⁵⁵ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 1, Article 46.

⁵⁶ *The Sofia Globe*, 2021.

⁵⁷ "President Radev issues decree to promulgate amendments to Electoral Code in State Gazette," BNR Radio Bulgaria, April 30, 2021.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 1, Article 51.

⁶⁰ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 1, Article 57.

⁶¹ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 5.

⁶² Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 1, Article 55.

Similar to the way the CEC is formed, CEC members appoint DEC members, who are nominated by represented political parties and who in turn nominate members of PECs.⁶³ The size of a DEC is based on the population of the district. Like the CEC, the DEC is led by a chairperson, and no single party can hold a majority.⁶⁴ Once appointed, members of the DEC hold office until two weeks after the election is completed. Many of the powers, functions and checks established for the CEC are the same at the district level, and DEC members receive their training from the CEC. Members of PECs perform the same functions as the DEC members and the CEC at the precinct level and receive training from their respective DEC members.⁶⁵

How is the election management body protecting the elections and voters from COVID-19?

The Central Election Commission (CEC) is preparing for Election Day by focusing on ensuring the safety of voters, election administrators, observers and media representatives. The Ministry of Health issued instructions and recommendations for health and safety protocols for voters and election officials on Election Day, which the CEC will oversee.⁶⁶ The CEC also developed signs, brochures and other public resources to highlight health guidelines for the elections. Some guidelines include:^{67, 68}

- Maintaining 1.5 meters between people in line;
- Posting signs that tell voters where to stand and wait;
- Requiring face masks to be worn in or at polling stations;
- Dismissing poll workers from the polling station if they have an elevated body temperature or show symptoms of COVID-19;
- Ensuring regular (or at least hourly) ventilation in the polling station;
- Providing hand sanitizer and regularly disinfecting frequently touched surfaces;
- Requiring officials to inspect identity cards without physically touching them;
- Disinfecting pens after each use;
- Placing disinfectant next to each voting machine; and
- Requiring voters to use disinfectant before voting.

Mobile voting was expanded for this election for voters who are COVID-19–positive or are quarantining because of COVID-19 exposure. Voters can be visited by a mobile polling team on Election Day if they submitted applications to the CEC before the election.⁶⁹ The same health and safety guidelines apply to mobile voting, such as required wearing of masks and disinfection of hands.

⁶³ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 5.

⁶⁴ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 2, Article 61.

⁶⁵ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 5, Section 2, Article 8.

⁶⁶ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 4.

⁶⁷ Central Election Commission of Bulgaria, Elections for the National Assembly 2021, Training Portal, COVID-19.

⁶⁸ “Bulgaria’s April 2021 parliamentary elections: Factfile,” *The Sofia Globe*, March 4, 2021.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

What is the election management body doing to strengthen its technology and procedures to resist vulnerabilities and counter malign interference?

The Central Election Commission (CEC) developed a robust voter education campaign that includes detailed videos, brochures and other digital materials to give voters access to timely and accurate information. Resources include instructional materials on the use of voting machines.⁷⁰ The CEC also published detailed training documents and instructions for poll workers and local election officials on its website. These procedures and materials contribute to efforts to protect election integrity and promote a transparent information environment.

What provisions are in place to support the equal rights of women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups?

Although the electoral legal framework was recently amended, current laws do not include measures to promote the participation of women, and they still prohibit the formation of political parties along ethnic, racial or religious lines.⁷¹ There are no quotas for sex or national minority representation on candidate lists.⁷² While the constitution prohibits discrimination on an ethnic or religious basis and guarantees the right to self-identification, it makes no reference to national minorities. Furthermore, campaigns can be conducted only in the Bulgarian language.⁷³

The Central Election Commission (CEC) has published informational videos on machine voting and accessibility for persons with disabilities.⁷⁴ Additionally, the Election Code includes provisions to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. At least seven days before Election Day, the relevant election management bodies must announce measures that are in place to help voters with physical disabilities or who are blind or have low vision.⁷⁵ One required measure is ensuring that a polling station has a designated voting section on the ground floor for accessibility.⁷⁶ Voters with disabilities may be assisted by an attendant if allowed by the constituency election commission or the municipal election commission.⁷⁷ Polling booths must also accommodate those with physical disabilities or who are blind or have low vision.⁷⁸ Voters with permanent disabilities who are unable to access the polling site can be visited by a mobile polling team on Election Day if they submitted the proper paperwork⁷⁹ no later than 14 days before the election⁸⁰ (by June 27, 2021).⁸¹ The mobile ballot box will be placed in an accessible

⁷⁰ OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, *op. cit.*, page 6.

⁷¹ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 4.

⁷² OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 6.

⁷³ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 12, Section 2, Article 181(2).

⁷⁴ OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 11.

⁷⁵ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 14, Section 8, Article 234.

⁷⁶ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 2, Section 2, Article 10.

⁷⁷ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 14, Section 8, Article 236.

⁷⁸ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 14, Section 9, Article 218.

⁷⁹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 14, Section 9, Article 237.

⁸⁰ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 4, Section 6, Article 37.

⁸¹ Chronograph for the elections for Members of the National Assembly, *op. cit.*

location for the voter. Most importantly, persons with disabilities are allowed to vote at any polling station of their choice and do not need to submit a request beforehand.⁸²

When will official results be announced?

No later than four days after Election Day⁸³ (by July 15, 2021),⁸⁴ the Central Election Commission (CEC) will announce the votes received and the allocation of seats to parties and coalitions. The CEC will announce the names of the elected national representatives no later than seven days after Election Day⁸⁵ (by July 18, 2021).⁸⁶ After the election, the CEC will create a publicly accessible database of voting data.⁸⁷ A computer program will compare the results and document any discrepancies.⁸⁸ If errors or discrepancies are found, the CEC will update the data and decide how to resolve the issue.⁸⁹ Therefore, election results are officially determined by the updated database.⁹⁰ The president has up to one month after the elections to convene the newly elected National Assembly, according to the constitution.⁹¹

⁸² OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, *op. cit.*, page 6.

⁸³ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 10, Article 300(1).

⁸⁴ Chronograph for the elections for Members of the National Assembly, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 10, Article 300(2).

⁸⁶ Chronograph for the elections for Members of the National Assembly, *op. cit.*

⁸⁷ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 10, Article 301(2).

⁸⁸ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 10, Article 301(3).

⁸⁹ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 10, Article 301(4).

⁹⁰ Election Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, Chapter 15, Section 10, Article 301(5).

⁹¹ "Bulgaria's July 11, 2021 parliamentary elections: Factfile," *The Sofia Globe*, June 12, 2021.

Resources

- [Constitution of Bulgaria](#)
- [Election Code of Bulgaria](#)
- [Central Election Commission of Bulgaria](#)
- [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\)/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights \(ODIHR\) Needs Assessment Mission Report, Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria, April 4, 2021](#)
- [OSCE/ODIHR Interim Report, Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria, April 4, 2021](#)

About IFES in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, as part of the Effective Combat Against Corruption project funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) partners with the Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives (BILI). BILI focuses on preventing abuse of state resources in elections and improving training for auditors and political party financial managers in coordination with the National Audit Office, clarifying criteria for judicial remuneration in cooperation with the Supreme Judicial Council and strengthening judicial mentorship programs and judicial ethics training in coordination with the National Institute of Justice.

Through IFES' Regional Europe program funded by the United States Agency for International Development, Bulgarian election professionals and civil society actors are also engaged in a number of activities designed to support democratic resilience, especially related to cybersecurity, information integrity and anti-corruption.

Disclosure

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Bulgarian election authorities as of June 30, 2021, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

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