

Changes to overseas Korean policy: ‘We will introduce a postal voting system for overseas Koreans’

Discussed various methods, such as postal and electronic voting, like the U.S. and key OECD countries.



OKA Commissioner Lee Sang-duk (7th from L, front row) poses for a photo with more than 150 teachers from 64 Hangeul schools in 18 countries across Europe at the European Council of Hangeul Schools' teacher training on May 16.

Since the inauguration of President Lee Jae Myung, overseas Korean policy has marked a significant turning point in its direction and concrete implementation measures. Since his presidential campaign, President Lee has systematically presented policies to ensure the practical rights of overseas Koreans, foster future generations and improve administrative convenience. In particular, he has clearly presented the introduction of a postal voting system for overseas Koreans as a top priority for his term in office, arousing great expectations among the overseas compatriot community.

Postal voting to be introduced to ensure overseas citizens' right to vote

Despite having the right to vote, overseas citizens have consistently been challenged by the difficulty of actually participating in the process. Currently, overseas Koreans can register to vote via email or postal vote, but to actually cast their vote, they must travel long distances to vote in person at a diplomatic mission

polling station.

This has resulted in low voter participation rates, and diaspora communities have consistently called for reforms to ensure real suffrage. As major developed countries, such as the United States and Canada, have already introduced various methods, such as mail-in voting, fax, email and webpage voting, there have been many calls for Korea to introduce mail-in voting and electronic voting through amendments to the Public Official Election Act.

Recognizing this reality, Lee listed “improving voting rights, including promoting the introduction of a postal voting system for overseas Koreans,” as a top priority in his presidential campaign manifesto. He pledged to actively push for the revision of the law and the introduction of the system within his term.

In fact, overseas Korean organizations, such as the Overseas Koreans Voters Association, have petitioned for the introduction of a postal voting system, and related bills have been proposed by political parties, but in the past, they have been unsuccessful due to a lack of political consensus and controversies over the reliability of postal voting. However, now that the president has made a direct pledge and expressed his intention to proceed, the overseas community has high expectations that concrete discussions and legislation will materialize.

Fostering next generation of compatriots and strengthening solidarity with overseas Korean communities

President Lee's overseas Korean policy is not just about improving the voting system. Another key task is to foster the next generation of overseas Koreans and strengthen solidarity with the overseas community. The plan is to expand support for local educational institutions, such as Hangeul schools and Korean schools, and to support the next generation of overseas Koreans in cultivating their national identity and strengthening their global capabilities through various programs, such as scholarships, invitational training in Korea and activating global networks. This will help the next generation of Koreans maintain their ties to their homeland and raise the profile of the Korean people around the world.

The administration is also focusing on strengthening solidarity with the Korean diaspora. The emphasis is on creating channels for the Korean diaspora to actually participate in Korea's policy-making process and a shift in perspective to respect Korean diaspora as a "subject" rather than an "object" of policy. This reflects a policy philosophy that goes beyond mere support to enable the Korean diaspora to actively participate as partners in the future and growth of Korea.

Protecting safety and rights, innovation in administrative and consular services

Protecting the rights of overseas Koreans is also one of the president's important pledges. He promised to improve the prevention and response system for overseas crises, incidents and accidents. To this end, he said he will increase the crisis response capabilities of overseas missions, strengthen cooperation with local police and institutions, systematize emergency communication networks, and increase the budget and manpower to protect overseas Koreans. In fact, the establishment of a system that can quickly respond to incidents and accidents that occur overseas is highly demanded by the compatriot community.

In addition, innovation in administrative and consular services for the convenience and safety of overseas Koreans is also considered an important change. The plan is to improve the online consular service system and simplify the procedures for passport issuance and various administrative services so that overseas Koreans can receive convenient support anytime and anywhere. Other initiatives include applying for services through mobile apps, expanding the number of support centers in overseas missions and introducing a service quality evaluation system. This is expected to lead to administrative innovations that the overseas Korean community can practically experience.

Expectations and concerns of overseas community on institutional changes

Lee's overseas Korean policy can be summarized as strengthening all-around support to ensure substantive rights, fostering the next generation of Koreans, protecting safety and rights, and innovating administrative services. The overseas compatriot community is hopeful that the introduction of postal voting will increase voter participation and help to reduce costs.

In fact, as of 2023, there are 7.08 million overseas Koreans and 1.97 million



This photo shows an overseas voting station at the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Manhattan, New York, on May 20, the first day of overseas voting for the 21st presidential election.

overseas voters aged 18 and over who are eligible to vote, but under the existing system, the actual voting participation rate is less than 10 percent. The introduction of postal voting is seen as a realistic alternative to overcome these limitations.

However, there are still concerns about the trustworthiness of postal voting, proxy voting and false declarations, as well as unreliable postal systems, which can lead to the loss of ballots or delayed delivery. Certain circles in politics are calling for caution in introducing the system. However, the Korean diaspora is hopeful that substantial changes will be made this time, given Lee's understanding of the problems on the ground and his strong commitment to real systemic change.

Policy transformation working for coexistence of Korea and diaspora

The Lee administration's overseas Korean policy heralds sweeping changes, including the guarantee of the right to vote through the introduction of a postal voting system for overseas Koreans, fostering the next generation of Koreans, protecting safety and rights, and innovating administrative services. This is an expression of the government's intention to recognize overseas Koreans as important assets of the Republic of Korea and to put coexistence and solidarity with the compatriot community at the core of its policies. It will be interesting to see how President Lee's pledges will be implemented in practice and what positive changes they will bring to the lives of the Korean diaspora. 🇰🇷