THE CONGRESS
OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 394 (2015)[1]
E-media: game changer
for local and regional politicians

1. Political awareness, involvement and adherence to democratic norms by citizens are essential elements of an authentic democracy. Internet use and Internet penetration in society can have a positive impact on democratisation and democratic attitudes. The information that is exchanged through e-media tools can have a mobilising effect on voters.

2. The Congress' Governance Committee, which has taken stock of recent developments in its 2014 seminar on Deepening Democracy with E-Media, focussing on open data in local government, web applications for voters and combining online and offline democracy, believes that the development of e-tools, including websites, blogs, forums, discussion groups and social networks, can help mobilise voters and increase citizen participation so as to reinforce the legitimacy of elected representatives.

3. The increasing accessibility and use of broadband, combined with the profusion of portable devices and smartphones, enable citizens to browse for politically relevant information and interact with politicians at any time and from anywhere.

4. It is important that elected representatives take advantage of the possibilities to influence and guide topical political debate through e-media, which has the advantage of making a debate more transparent and accessible; giving participants a sense of control, which in turn, can increase trust and acceptance.

5. E-media can also help voters to be better informed about what local and regional authorities actually do and can help elected representatives to remain informed about the expectations and levels of satisfaction of citizens. E-technologies, such as survey techniques and sentiment analysis of online content, are useful for authorities to keep a "finger on the pulse of society".

6. Local and regional authorities need to move beyond unidirectional communication, merely providing information to citizens via the Internet. Information needs to be provided in a more interactive manner, allowing input and involvement by citizens. E-technologies, and in particular integrated digital platforms, can enable tailor-made delivery of information and reciprocal communication, so that citizens learn about politics, and politicians get to know more about the opinions and the priorities of their citizens.

7. Elected representatives and their authorities need to be proactive in creating an online presence. It is no longer enough to be available to constituents offline. The quality and standard of political debate online is the responsibility of all elected representatives and political parties. Online debates that take place in a "political vacuum" will have little impact.

8. An important challenge for e-democracy is to ensure an "equal hearing" of all groups. Efforts should be made to engage the elderly and those less inclined to participate in politics, including youth. Since the Internet is a domain where younger generations tend to be well represented, e-engagement initiatives can help to mobilise them, which can in turn bring a new energy to local and regional politics, which traditionally have lower levels of youth participation than national politics.

9. Local and regional authorities need to be prepared for increasing levels of online activity. If large numbers of people participate in a public debate using e-media, consideration needs to be given as to how all positions and opinions on the issue can be taken into account. The quality of a deliberative process depends partly on its ability to take minority opinions into account. Such opinions are a valuable source for policy makers, who also have a responsibility for ensuring that minority interests are respected.

9. It is important to regard e-media tools as complementary to traditional forms of citizen participation, rather than their replacement. While the web is fundamentally changing how people think and participate, it is not affecting everybody, everywhere, at the same pace.

10. Engaging voters through e-media is easier when it concerns an issue that they understand, which is important to them and has a direct impact on their lives. It has also been shown to be more effective if an e-democracy project is promoted through national, regional and local media. Citizens can only get involved if they know that an initiative exists.

11. The Congress therefore recommends that associations of local and regional authorities:

a. encourage local and regional authorities to develop the use of online consultations in their deliberative activities;

b. offer support, training and guidance to elected representatives on how to create an online political presence;

c. encourage more use of sharing and pooling of applications, programmes and e-media tools;

d. promote the innovative use of open data at the local and regional level.

12. The Congress resolves to:

a. encourage political parties to get involved in online debates, thereby demonstrating to citizens and civil society groups that an issue deserves serious discussion;

b. continue its efforts to ensure that people who are less e-literate and less digitally active are not excluded from the political process;

c. take a proactive approach to new e-media tools and to continue to develop its online political presence.

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1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 22 October 2015, 3rd Sitting (see Document CG/2015(29)14FINAL, explanatory memorandum), co- rapporteurs: Leo Aadel, Estonia (L, ILDG) and Josan Meijers, Netherlands (R, SOC).

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Council of Europe, F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
http://www.coe.int/congress

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Tel.: + 33 (0) 3 88 41 21 10
Fax: + 33 (0) 3 88 41 27 51/+ 33 (0) 3 88 41 37 47

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