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Speech by Leendert VERBEEK

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Council of Europe

- 5 Debate on “Fight against disinformation to ensure a functioning and resilient democracy at all levels
Brussels, Belgium, 2 December 2021 1826 words

Dear Vice President Cordeiro,

10 Dear members of the European Committee of the Regions,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to contribute to the important debate on the future of
European democracy, on behalf of the Congress of Local and
15 Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe,
in the spirit of the long-standing partnership between our two
institutions.

**It is crucial for both our institutions to join their efforts today when
20 our democratic model and the functioning of democracy is facing
multiple challenges.**

**This debate is taking place amid the ongoing pandemic when new
25 restrictive measures for democracy and human rights are being
introduced across the continent.**

**This health crisis has put to a rigorous test our institutions of
governance and their ability to respond to the challenge and protect
30 our citizens.**

The situation remains tense and precarious within the nations.

**The national executive authorities in many countries are still retaining
the considerable powers which were re-centralised from the regional
35 and local level in a reflex as part of the crisis management.**

At the same time, the post-crisis recovery is another important aspect.

**The Committee of the Regions was right to ring the alarm bell early on
40 the lack of consultations with local and regional authorities and their
insufficient presence in post-Covid recovery plans.**

**The Congress presented a series of specific recommendations in this
respect, to the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers in Athens in
45 November 2020.**

They remain fully valid and included:

- **better use of the multi-level governance system,**
- **constant dialogue with subnational authorities and their greater
50 involvement in central decision making,**
- **and better access to direct funding.**

**It is encouraging that the foreign ministers of the 47 Council of Europe
member States recognised the need for improved multi-level
55 governance in Europe.**

**This in response to the health crisis, complemented by better multi-
lateral co-operation, as the pandemic is not impressed by national
borders.**

60 **Dear colleagues,**

The Covid-19 pandemic represents certainly the “clear and present danger” to our democracy, to use the military jargon, but it is by far not the only one.

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Before the pandemic broke out, the Congress already raised alarm in 2019 about multiple crises faced by our societies and the loss of citizens’ confidence in the ability of our system of governance to provide an adequate response.

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In its contribution to the Committee of Ministers in Helsinki in May 2019, the Congress expressed concern about the deteriorating link between public institutions and citizens.

This done in a worrying context of an increase in anti-liberal tendencies, a return to authoritarian temptations and a resurgence of nationalism.

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This is happening against the background

- **of the tangible effects of climate change,**

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- **the struggle to cope with the increasing pace of technological change, the challenges of migration,**
 - **the globalisation of our economies**
 - **and its impact on our traditional cultural references.**

85 **We argue that these transformations lead to social anxiety and an evolution in our political perceptions.**

Reflected more specifically in a crisis of representation that manifests itself in many European countries.

90 **Also in the emergence of a “clash” society in which confrontation is the norm, with new forms of individual and collective violence.**

We also see a trend towards a habit of strongly voicing indignation, and a loss of a discourse and discussion based on reflection and arguments.

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In addition, a growing proportion of citizens do not feel that they are properly represented nor secure and voice their dissatisfaction with the elected politicians.

100 **Many of these phenomena have been observed during Congress
monitoring and electoral observation missions.**

**We argued that restoring the link between institutions of governance
and citizens passes through regaining citizens' trust,
105 and the crucial role of 'democracy of proximity' in this regard.**

**Using the net capital of higher levels of citizens' confidence in local
and regional elected representatives and territorial authorities overall.**

110 **As we address today, in this debate, the question of disinformation
and its impact on the functioning of democracy, it is important to see
this larger picture of the current situation and the current challenges.
It is important because the trust in fake news begins with the mistrust
in public authorities and the information they provide.**

115 **Rebuilding citizens' confidence in the political system is therefore the
only sustainable way to reverse the spread of disinformation .**

**I am grateful to President Macron who yesterday addressed the
threats of cyber attacks and fake news in electoral campaigns and
120 processes.**

The first line of defence against the threats to pluralistic democracy is the local level, are municipalities, towns and cities for they are the glue of our societies.

125 **Dear colleagues,**

This brings me directly to the subject matter of today's debate.

It goes without saying that in the context of the multiple crises our societies are facing.

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The importance of reliable information received by citizens cannot be overestimated.

In a democracy, citizens must have access to reliable information that they can use to participate in government, civic, and corporate decision-making.

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Information is the key to making the right decisions at all levels of governance and is therefore a crucial factor for the good functioning of democracy and its resilience to challenges.

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Yet the information landscape has been changing fast, with the widespread use of – and reliance on – the internet and its online content, social media and the usage of blogs.

145 **The volume, the content, the platforms – each of these has evolved beyond recognition in a short period of time.**

Twenty-five years ago, most of our information came from printed publications, television and radio.

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Today, these are complemented, rivalled and often eclipsed by websites, blogs and social media.

The monopoly of the professional press has been democratised.

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Well-known outlets are joined by an abundance of new sources – including millions of individuals – that spread news with the click of a share button.

160 **This new environment represents a challenge to the traditional media.**

The values

- **of the original journalism – independence,**
- **the protection of sources,**
- 165 • **verification of information,**
- **investigative reporting –**

have been under pressure from the need to compete with the immediacy of online content.

170 **This at the risk of the decline of fact-checking and quality journalism overall.**

The fast development of algorithms and artificial intelligence adds to the complexity of the issue.

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The fight against disinformation has confronted us with the question what is acceptable when it comes to regulating freedom of speech.

An open and regular dialogue between tech companies, governments, international institutions and civil society is instrumental in balancing
180 **rights and harm in the content moderation process.**

Policies have been designed by civil society and governments around the world to stop the spread of false information, while safeguarding the right to freedom of expression and access to information.

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If technology spreads disinformation, it should be tamed.

The new media and tech giants should be held to account, based on the need for transparency, responsibility and neutrality.

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However, is it feasible to mandate them with upholding specific standards of information? – and who would decide on those standards?

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The fight against disinformation involves a range of actors: citizens, governments, private sector, media and social media, as well as international platforms.

Media literacy is crucial in this fight.

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A new social culture surrounding internet must be created:

- **in order to promote social responsibility,**

- **establish clear rules on what is appropriate online behaviour,**
- **and raise awareness about the risks.**

Governments need to put in place new structures.

To support quality media, especially the Public Service Broadcasters,
which are vitally important to a healthy media landscape and have
been able to maintain relatively high levels of trust.

At the same time, the traditional media need to reach beyond their
usual scope in order to connect with broader sections of society.

Local media, which has come under immense financial pressure in
recent years, must also be actively supported financially by central
and local authorities and institutions.

One of the general solutions is to raise awareness among the broader
population of the role that the traditional media play.

225 **In this regard, local and regional authorities play a major role on all fronts in responding to this complex issue, using their proximity to citizens.**

They can do so by:

- 230 • **engaging citizens and civil society in public debates and democratic participation,**
- **supporting grassroots initiatives and local media,**
- **raising public awareness**
- **as well as improving media literacy and access to reliable information overall.**

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Local and regional authorities have a direct stake in the matter .

A debate held in the Congress last October showed that local and regional elected representatives throughout Europe are constantly confronted with the rise of fake news and hate speech.

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Particularly on the Internet and social networks, and this has worsened significantly in recent years.

245 **This makes the use of these media not only an interesting opportunity
to local politicians but also a challenge.**

**Fake news and hate speech have powerful repercussions on the work
of mayors and councillors and, more broadly, on the functioning of
250 democracy, especially during election or referendum campaigns.**

**It is clear that responses to stop fake news and hate speech must go
beyond site blocking or content filtering.**

255 **In order to do more, the Congress has engaged in a scientific co-
operation project involving academics and experts from university
institutions in Ludwigsburg, Budapest, Bucharest, Kosice and Vienna.**

**This inter-university research project will explore the trends and
260 harms of fake news and hate speech and the ways in which they affect
local democracy.**

**Congress members will contribute their own experiences to this
project.**

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It will result in a report with policy recommendations for fighting online fake news and hate speech in the local and regional context.

270 **This report will be presented at the Congress Session in March next year.**

Dear colleagues,

275 **Local and regional authorities play a crucial role in responding to the threat of disinformation which undermines the good functioning of democracy.**

Elected representatives at grassroot level are the authorities closest to citizens.

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They must take the advantage of their direct relations with citizens and the higher levels of confidence they enjoy to ensure regular communication of information people can trust.

285 **We, the Congress and the Committee of the Regions as institutions representing these authorities, must use our networks for pooling**

experiences and disseminating good practice to counter the spread of disinformation.

I look forward to our discussion on the matter today.

290 **Thank you for your attention.**