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Debate on foreign Interference in local and regional electoral processes

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Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to introduce this report, which comes at a very crucial time, as foreign interference has been placed at the centre of global conversations about election processes, with more countries suffering from it and perpetrating it.

It is not a new phenomenon. From Cold War power struggles to the modern era, state and non-state actors have sought to influence electoral outcomes. However, the scale, sophistication, and impact of such interference have grown quickly, largely due to technological advancements and increasing geopolitical tensions, notably since the beginning of the the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, the distinction between legitimate international engagement and illicit influence is increasingly blurred, as is the line between influence and corruption.

Much attention has been given to interference at the national level. But local and regional elections, the most crucial in shaping the communities where people live and work, are also increasingly vulnerable to external interference, including in recent elections observed by the Congress in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Moldova.

Local and regional elections offer an often less regulated entry point for foreign actors aiming to influence political landscapes, establish political legitimacy, build networks, and access public resources. Additionally, the decentralised nature of local governance can make coordinated responses to foreign interference more challenging.

As we often say, local and regional elections must be decided solely by the voters residing in a given community but foreign interference seems to also compromise the free formation of voters' opinions and the ability to express these opinions without manipulation or coercion in grassroots elections.

Over time, through a wide range of corrosive actions, external actors can undermine confidence in democratic institutions and weaken social cohesion, a trend that is clear to see today. Let me focus on three of these actions analysed in the report:

- First, financial interference: it can involve illicit funding of political campaigns or political parties by foreign sources.
- Second, information manipulation—including disinformation campaigns, targeted propaganda, and the amplification of divisive narratives: the rise of digital platforms has made it easier than ever for external actors—whether governments, private companies, or even individuals—to spread misleading information and manipulate public opinion.
- Third, electoral cyberattacks, including hacking voter registers and disrupting electoral processes: pose another major challenge.

This list is not exhaustive, but all these tactics threaten key democratic principles enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the European Convention on Human Rights. The Council of Europe has already made important strides in addressing electoral integrity but focused predominantly on national elections. At the local level, regulation and protections are often lacking while research remains scarce and cases of interference are difficult to detect and even harder to prove.

In response, the recommendation and resolution before you today call for a resolutely comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. First, we need to improve our understanding of foreign interference, learn how these tactics are evolving, and develop strategies to counter them. The response to foreign interference must be based on facts, evidence, and democratic principles. This is especially important in close or highly contested elections, where even a small amount of interference can make a big difference.

Second, we must strengthen overall electoral integrity through enhanced monitoring, transparency, and accountability mechanisms. To do so, electoral management bodies need the resources and expertise to detect and counter foreign interference effectively. Specifically, local and regional authorities must be given the support they need to build their cyber capacities to ensure that electoral processes are robust and resistant to outside interference. Just as national governments have had to adapt to these threats, so too must local governments. Considering holding local elections on different days from national elections could also be a good tool to protect them from large-scale interventions.

Third, legal frameworks must be updated to reflect the realities of modern foreign interference. Member states should consider

- banning foreign and anonymous funding of local campaigns and stepping up political finance regulations;
- enhancing transparency requirements for political advertising,
- introducing measures to counter disinformation which fully respect the freedom of expression.

Let me stress that efforts to counter foreign interference must not be used to suppress civil society, investigative journalism, or legitimate political opposition. On the contrary, the misuse of foreign agent laws, as seen in some member States, only weakens democracy rather than protecting it.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, we must build resilience at grassroots level. Subnational and national authorities, civil society, and the media play a crucial role in protecting electoral integrity and should work together to raise awareness about foreign interference, promote media literacy and voter education, and foster civic engagement. These are essential steps to empower citizens of all ages and enable them to better recognise external manipulation. Local and regional media are also essential to this effort, providing communities with trustworthy news and detecting disinformation and we must therefore support them to ensure that accurate information is available to all, including in minority languages.

Let me conclude with a bit of nuance: while it is crucial to counter foreign interference, we must also remain cautious about overamplifying this threat and fuelling the vicious

cycle of mistrust in elections, thereby doing more harm than good. The vast majority of threats to local and regional elections remains domestic and excessive focus on external actors must not distract us from necessary measures to strengthen democracy from within, nor should it create a campaign environment of suspicion and political polarisation.

These two trends, domestic and foreign interference, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are interconnected, making the need for a coordinated approach to reinforce electoral integrity even more pressing. By tackling one, we confront the other.

Dear colleagues, our member States are all facing this growing phenomenon that is taking hold in our democracies at every level of government, driven by AI, cyber-attacks, emerging technologies and social media. Let's prevent foreign interference from becoming the norm and an integral pillar of our electoral processes.

Thank you for your attention and I am looking forward to hearing the guest speaker and the debate.