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Debate on:
Working conditions of local elected representatives – shortage of candidates

Concept paper prepared by the Secretariat

1. The quality of representative democracy depends on the quality of the people who stand for elected office. This applies not only to the national level but also to local and regional governments. Citizens want their elected members to be committed, honest and efficient in their work. However, there are growing concerns that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit talented people into local politics. Political parties are becoming increasingly desperate in their search for suitable mayoral candidates. Even recruiting candidates for town councils is proving difficult in some smaller communities. This is a serious problem.

2. It is important to determine whether this is a widespread problem in the member States and, if so, to identify ways to remedy the problem and increase the number of people who are willing and able to participate in politics as local representatives.

3. Many people realise that holding public office is a difficult job that can require working long hours and taking on a lot of responsibilities. In most countries, the public sector has expanded significantly in recent decades and is becoming increasingly complex. This has resulted in stricter demands for good working practices among politicians, who are expected to prepare adequately for decision-making and to review large amounts of data, taking into account a plethora of laws, regulations and administrative instructions.

4. Increasing demands in this area are making the work of elected members ever more difficult and time-consuming. This in turn has contributed to a transfer of power from politicians to local government officials, a development which itself diminishes the interest of talented individuals to run for public office.

Remuneration

5. It is well known that low salaries adversely affect recruitment in any profession. Politics are no exception. Many local politicians feel that they receive insufficient allowances, salaries and compensation for their duties and for the time they have to invest. Many have taken pay cuts to be politicians and to serve their communities. Local representation is often considered a part-time job, but the wages are so low that many talented people with interest in politics cannot be persuaded to present themselves as candidates for municipal councils.

6. As well as playing a vital rule in their communities, these councils are also important training camps for future mayors, providing them with valuable knowledge. If conditions deter talented people from seeking elected office in these councils, they will also prevent qualified people from becoming mayoral candidates in the future.

7. Politics is one of the professions considered to have the least job security. According to the nature of the job, an elected member can never be sure of retaining the job for longer than the current term of office. Such conditions do not attract people who want to build a career based on job security.

Work-life balance

8. For politicians, the distinction between work and private life is less than that of most other professions. An integral part of the politician's role is to be in constant relationship with voters by attending meetings, taking telephone calls, writing e-mails etc. Much of this work is done after normal working hours, which is not a family-friendly situation. Many skilled people have rejected offers to participate in politics because they realise it would put too much pressure on their private lives and negatively impact their family obligations.

9. Local representation is often an additional occupation, a part-time job conducted alongside a main job. As with family life, it can be difficult for politicians to co-ordinate such work with their obligations towards their main employer. Specialisation and performance requirements are constantly increasing in the private sector. Many ambitious people are not interested in participating in politics as elected members because they know that serving two masters can be difficult. Many employers do not want their employees to hold an additional job. In many countries, there is still a significant gender gap, with the bulk of childcare and responsibilities for other dependent family members falling on women..

New challenges and threats

10. With the advent of social media, the nature of public debate has changed enormously. People who previously did not participate publicly in political discussions have now been given a wide-open platform to express their views publicly for better or worse. The performance of politicians is constantly discussed on the Internet in a much more critical way than before. People can now say or write anything they like, about anybody and at any time. Politicians are now fiercely attacked around the clock with insensitive online comments, often based on half-truths or even fake news.

11. While most such attacks come from individuals, others are orchestrated by political opponents. It is virtually impossible for ordinary politicians to defend themselves against such slander and most of them don't even try, even though such attacks are affecting them and their loved ones. This new environment has had a negative effect on recruitment in politics by discouraging people from running for public office.

12. Physical threats and attacks against local government representatives are also becoming an ever more frequent occurrence. Growing hate speech and the rise of extremism have led to increased violence in European politics. More than half the mayors in Germany report that they have been threatened in one way or another. Elected local representatives are often held responsible by the public for policies decided at central government level. The fact that local politicians are more accessible to voters makes them more likely to be victims of such attacks than national politicians.

13. What can be done to raise the number of talented people seeking candidacy? Local governments could conduct a comprehensive review of their politicians' working conditions to identify what could be done to make it more desirable to run for local public office.

- The workload and demands on elected members should be reviewed and evaluated to see whether changes in working arrangements could increase their efficiency.

- The working conditions of politicians should be examined to see how they could be made more attractive for people with family obligations.

- Financial compensation of local and regional elected members should be reviewed according to their responsibilities. The aim should be to enable all citizens to consider standing for office whatever their socioeconomic or family status. In some cases this would mean raising wages of representatives to make elected office more attractive.

- Local politicians and officials must address the rise of hate speech and extremism by developing networks of confidence and trust in their communities. This can be done by implementing some local democracy projects and encouraging balanced discussions in public and social media. It is important that politicians themselves are good role models when it comes to political debates and statements.