

Dionisie Ternovschi: “Interference in electoral processes is a new threat to each and every one of us”

Completely unknown candidates winning 30% of the vote at their first attempt... Unexpected results overturning years of forecasts in a single election... Foreign interference in electoral processes is a real and burgeoning problem that national, local and regional authorities must tackle as a matter of urgency. In a resolution and recommendation debated and adopted on Wednesday 26 March, the Congress outlined several ways in which this might be done.

Attempts at interference are hardly a new phenomenon, but not since the end of the Cold War have we seen them perpetrated on such a scale and with such sophistication, noted Stewart Dickson (United Kingdom, R, ILDG) when presenting his report. Fuelled both by Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine and by the rapid spread of new technologies, this interference can take the form of corruption and vote buying, but it can also be achieved through disinformation and, of course, cyberattacks and hacking electoral registers. With central governments now better at protecting themselves than a few years ago, it is time for local and regional authorities to follow suit. Any interference, however limited, can change the outcome and disrupt the political landscape, and while “external” interference is the most common kind, it can also come from within the country concerned.

“Interference is something that is of particular relevance to the people of Moldova,” continued Dionisie Ternovschi, President of the Ungheni District Council, Republic of Moldova: in the presidential elections and then the referendum on Europe in 2024, blatant interference was detected, on a scale sufficient to threaten the European aspirations of the majority of the population. Orchestrated lies throughout the media, whether online or audiovisual, publications and brochures, but also barely concealed vote buying: the pro-Russian parties have made every conceivable effort to turn Moldovans away from Europe and democracy. “Europe must continue to help us on our path towards Europe, because it is our model for living, and that also means increased mobilisation against interference,” he added. For the Republic of Moldova, the moment of truth will come next October when crucial parliamentary elections are due to be held. It is imperative that they be free from interference.

As pointed out by most of the Congress members who spoke in the debate, Russian interference is not limited to the Republic of Moldova and operates in similar ways in Ukraine, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Interference is not the sole preserve of Russia, however, noted Stewart Dickson, mentioning China in particular, as well as non-state actors such as fascist and far-right groups.

Interference that is political, financial and digital

During the debate, many elected representatives and youth delegates spoke of the pernicious effects of artificial intelligence and social networks in terms of interference: “while social media have the potential to strengthen local democracy, paradoxically, they can also undermine

it,” observed Gudrun Mosler-Törnström (Austria, L, SOC/G/DP), and “when it comes to protection, it is very much a David and Goliath contest”.

Maria Galit (Republic of Moldova, L, SOC/G/DP) described the methods used by Russia to influence elections, particularly during the regional election in Gagauzia in 2023 when “huge sums of money were poured in by oligarchs, including for the purpose of manipulating the media,” and saw protecting democracy and local elections as a job for the whole of Europe. In the opinion of Alexandr Tarnavski (Republic of Moldova, R, ILDG), it was important, too, that interference not “enable those with the most money to spend to gain power”. If electoral fraud could not be stopped, he foresaw a very real danger to democracy at the next elections.

Due to its structure, Bosnia and Herzegovina is also particularly vulnerable to interference, particularly from Serbia and Croatia, noted the youth delegate for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Emina Pasanovic. Igor Stojanovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina, R, SOC/G/DP) believed that his country was threatened both by interference from digital technologies and by direct interference from neighbouring Serbia. Freja Fernholm, the Swedish youth delegate, felt there was a pressing need to foster critical thinking among young people who, as the biggest users of social media, were particularly susceptible to fake videos and images: “it is absolutely essential to teach the difference between information and fake news,” she insisted, a view that was supported by Lukas Langer, the Czech youth delegate, in a plea for media literacy education.