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41st Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities/Council of Europe

Chamber of Local Authorities – Wednesday, 27 October 2021

CONCEPT NOTE**Thematic debate: Working conditions of local elected representatives in times of hate speech and fake news on the internet**

Hate speech and fake news on social media are negative phenomena of our society which is connected, to a large extent, by the internet. There are many opportunities that social media offer to politicians at all levels of government, allowing for easily accessible and low-threshold communication with citizens – but there is also a downside. In recent years, local and regional elected representatives throughout Europe, who are closest to the citizens, have increasingly been exposed to online hate. This is the backdrop of a topical debate in the Chamber of Local Authorities (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe) to be held on 27 October 2021, in the frame of the 41st Congress Session in Strasbourg.

In 2018, the Congress launched a series of debates on mayors under pressure. In the focus were mayors who came under undue legal, financial, psychological and even physical pressure from central governments, majority parties but also other players in their respective communities. Often this kind of centrally steered pressure has been observed in so-called emerging democracies. Verbal and physical attacks, however, as well as fake news targeting politicians and administrations, have been increasingly noticed in traditional and new democracies equally, in Europe and beyond. This is a global phenomenon.

Some governments and legislative bodies discuss and implement remedies which are, at least when analysed, useless, because they cannot be enforced in a global setting where a webserver is not subject to any law except the one of the country in which it is physically located. The blocking of internet sites is not feasible technically, because there are easy workarounds accessible to anyone. Upload filters, as recently introduced by some legislations, are no appropriate solution either, because they leave the decision to the programmer of the filter and to the entity which runs the respective website.

At the same time, fake news can have strong effects on our democracies and political life, especially in an election or referendum context, and so has does hate speech. Mayors and other local elected officials have increasingly become the target of disgruntled citizens, as illustrated by the tragic death of the Mayor of Gdansk (Poland), Paweł Adamowicz, in 2019 or the assassination attempt on the Mayor of Cologne (Germany), Henriette Reker, in 2015. Also the long-standing former Congress member and Mayor of Haarlem (Netherlands), Jos Wienen, has been exposed to threats of criminal gangs over many years.

Many other local elected officials have been subject to online threats. The internet and social media, by providing a platform for fake news and hate speech, play a role in the violence against local politicians. In order to fight fake news and hate speech affecting mayors and councillors in Council of

Europe municipalities and regions, the Congress has engaged in an innovative scientific cooperation project which involves, notably, the University of Public Administration and Finance of Ludwigsburg/HVF (Germany), the Budapest University of Technology and Economics/BME (Hungary), the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bukarest (Romania), the University Kosice/UPJS (Slovakia) as well as the Vienna University of Economics and Business, Institute of Production Management (Austria).

Led by Professor Robert MÜLLER-TÖRÖK from the University of Ludwigsburg, the inter-university research project will explore the trends and harms of fake news and hate speech and the ways in which they affect local democracy and political life as such. It will provide information on the technical foundations of the internet and, more specifically, of social media usually using the internet but having additional features and business models. It will show how fake news and hate speech can be identified, especially in a social media context, and given the complexity, that the line between freedom of expression and hate speech is often difficult to identify. It will also reveal why legal remedies are limited and why mechanisms like open government and open data may be beneficial in this respect.

The conclusions of this research work in form of a comprehensive study will be presented to the Congress in March 2022 and will feed in a new thematic report to be prepared by its Governance Committee. Apart from presentations and debates scheduled for the 41st Congress Session (27 October 2021) and the forthcoming meeting of the Governance Committee (19 November 2021), Congress members will be actively involved through a survey which will allow them to reflect on their own internet experiences and tools used.

The questionnaires filled-in by the Congress members will also be a means to verify or falsify assumptions made and hypothesis presented by the researchers in order to provide, for the first time, a scientific basis for a policy fighting internet fake news and hate speech in the local and regional context.

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