

Foreword by Dr Andreas Kiefer, General Secretary of the Congress



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In 2021, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and five academic partners launched a four-month collaborative research project, entitled “Open-Government and Open-Data Against Fake News and Hate Speech”. The Congress welcomes the publication of the present research paper which constitutes the main outcome of a successful collaboration and will nurture the future Congress activities supporting local and regional politicians of the Member States of the Council of Europe against fake news and hate speech.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are many opportunities offered by new communication technologies to politicians at all levels of government – allowing for easily accessible and low-threshold communication with citizens – European local and regional politicians, mayors, councilors and elected politicians in regional governments and assemblies have increasingly been exposed to online hate speech and disinformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the negative impacts of hate speech and fake news on local and regional elected representatives, especially during election campaigns. In addition, information wars, including disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks are becoming commonplace. Online threats by disgruntled citizens or coordinated online campaigns can turn easily into physical attacks, as has been illustrated by the tragic death of the Mayor of Gdansk, Paweł ADAMOWICZ, in 2019 or the assassination attempt on the Mayor of Cologne, Henriette REKER, in 2015 among many others.

The Congress acknowledges the prominence of this issue and held several debates on mayors under pressure in 2018 and 2019 and a debate on “How to preserve democracy in the face of fake news and hate speech” in October 2021. Congress members shared their experiences and the threats they and their families were exposed to. The wide-range of experiences and worries voiced by local and regional politicians during these debates, as well as the variety of ad-hoc solutions explored, highlighted the need for a more complete review of legal and technological frameworks and for a better understanding of how to approach fake news and hate speech. Most of the time, local elected representatives are not prepared to handle such threats or not well aware of legal and technical solutions and tools that are available to them. Some may feel increasingly helpless.

As a result, hate speech and fake news have a paralysing effect on our democracies and political life on local and regional levels. This negative trend creates a toxic atmosphere of fear and confusion among local and regional politicians as well as among citizens of municipalities and regions which disturbs societal cohesion. And it makes interested citizens think twice whether to sacrifice their privacy for serving the people and may put them off standing in elections.

This study shows the concrete impacts of hate speech and fake news on working conditions of local and regional politicians, which were until this report under-evaluated. Better awareness of this negative phenomena was a pre-condition for the Congress to efficiently support local and regional politicians. This study helps to better apprehend how fake news and hate speech work in practice, how they affect the political debate and democracy and how they can be detected. Moreover, the present report clarifies the functioning of social media and the limitations for technical remedies against the platforms allowing for the spread of fake news and hate speech. It explores the benefits of open government and open data, which the Congress has also highlighted in previous resolutions, as a potential tool to improve democracy at local and regional levels, in areas such as budgeting, law making, contracting, policy making, service delivery and in promoting the involvement of citizens in local public life. Furthermore, the evidence gathered in the questionnaire shows that local and regional politicians need not only reliable “hardware”, such as rules and law, but also a compatible “software”, such as skills, information, resources to address the challenges. This report successfully sheds light on both sides of the challenge.

The Congress collaborated to the “Open-Government and Open-Data Against Fake News and Hate Speech” research project by contributing to the design and inception of the project as well as to the dissemination of the research questionnaire to all its members and youth delegates. Close to 200 members of the Congress took this opportunity to share their experience and ideas of effective remedies against fake news and hate speech. Responding to this questionnaire provided highly valuable input to the research team and highlighted that lack of technical or legal knowledge and skills or confusion vis-à-vis the solutions available were also commonplace.

The Congress would like to thank for their involvement all academic institutions participating in this project including the WU Vienna – Institute of Production Management (Austria), the University of Public Administration and Finance Ludwigsburg (Germany), the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (Hungary), the Faculty of Public Administration at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration Bucharest (Romania), and the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University Košice (Slovakia). The Congress would also like to thank Professor Robert MÜLLER-TÖRÖK, of the University of Public Administration and Finance Ludwigsburg, for facilitating the collaboration between the Congress and the research team. Finally, the Congress would like to express gratitude to all Congress members and youth delegates who devoted some of their precious time to contribute to the questionnaire.

The Congress, as the voice of Europe’s municipalities and regions, will work to pursue the conclusions and remedies put forward in this report. These will serve as the basis of a policy report to be adopted by the Congress, providing guidelines and support to local and regional elected representatives. Additionally, future design of Congress cooperation activities in member States most affected by the spread of fake news and hate speech may be informed by the present research report.

Promoting fundamental rights online and offline, the Congress reiterates its attachment to strengthening the protection of the rights of local and regional elected representatives. It is crucial to ensure a meaningful and democratic political life at local and regional levels and to serve the needs of all citizens.