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Internet and politics: the impact of new information and communication technology on democracy

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 2033 (2014)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully examined Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2033 (2013) on the "Internet and politics: the impact of new information and communication technology on democracy", which it has transmitted to the relevant steering committees for comments.[2]

2. The Committee of Ministers has taken note of the Assembly's recommendation that the Committee of Ministers launch without delay the preparation of a Council of Europe White Paper on "Democracy, politics and the internet", whose analysis would be centred on two main aspects: the exercise of fundamental freedoms (individual and collective) and their protection on the web, on the one hand; citizen participation in the decision-making process and in public life by means of the Internet, on the other hand.

3. The Committee of Ministers attaches the greatest importance to the protection of fundamental freedoms on the Internet. In this respect, the Committee of Ministers recalls that the Council of Europe's Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015[3] aims, *inter alia*, at protecting the Internet's universality, integrity and openness, and at maximising rights and freedoms for Internet users. The Strategy has already delivered many tangible results, as shown in the mid-term report by the Secretary General (cf. document SG/Inf(2014)7). The Council of Europe's contribution and influence in this field are now recognised globally, as epitomised by the Secretary General's participation in the High-level Panel on Global Internet Co-operation and Governance Mechanisms, which was set up by the CEO of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

4. The coming two years will focus on the delivery of appropriate legal and political instruments and other tools, such as key instruments and tools on net neutrality, transparency, free flow of Internet content, through relevant bodies and actors of the Council of Europe as well as by co-operation arrangements between governments, the private sector, civil society and relevant technical communities. A number of the issues raised by the Assembly will thus be addressed. In addition, the conclusions of the conference "Shaping the Digital Environment – Ensuring our Rights on the Internet" (Graz, March 2014)[4] allowed to identify some strategic priorities beyond 2015. These conclusions will be examined in the framework of the elaboration of the Strategy on Internet Governance 2016-2019.

5. The Committee of Ministers draws attention to its Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)6 on a Guide to human rights for Internet users, adopted on 16 April 2014. The guide was officially launched during the Freedom Online Coalition conference "Free and Secure Internet" in Tallinn on 29 April 2014. The guide is based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other Council of Europe conventions and instruments that deal with various aspects of human rights protection. The guide is also inspired by the

1. Adopted at the 1204th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (2-3 July 2014).
2. The Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) and the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG).
3. Cf. document CM(2011)175 final.
4. Cf. http://www.coe.int/t/informationsociety/Config2014/default_en.asp.

continuous interpretation of these rights and freedoms by the European Court of Human Rights and by other relevant legal instruments of the Council of Europe. It focuses on the human rights on which the internet has most impact (notably: access, non-discrimination, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, privacy, data protection, protection of children and young people, right to effective remedies). As advocated by the Assembly, this instrument was developed with broad multi-stakeholder consultation. The guide thus responds to a great extent to the Assembly's suggestion that the Committee of Ministers draft a text concerning the exercise of fundamental freedoms and their protection on the web.

6. The Committee of Ministers agrees with the Assembly's view that the Internet constitutes a vital tool for connecting people and for participating in democratic processes. Particular attention must therefore be paid to the impact of new communication technologies on democracy, both in terms of opportunities and of threats. In this respect, the Committee of Ministers recalls that one of the objectives of the Council of Europe's Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015 specifically aims at maximising the Internet's potential to promote democracy.

7. The Committee of Ministers draws attention to the strategic perspectives on positive engagement with a range of stakeholders of the democratic process opened up by the 2013 World Forum for Democracy on "Rewiring democracy – connecting citizens and institutions in the digital age".[5] The World Forum for Democracy identified the potential of e-technologies for enhancing citizen participation and institutions' responsiveness and accountability, as well as a range of challenges that require monitoring and regulation. In its final report,[6] the Forum notably proposed a number of ways to use the Internet to reinforce participation of the general public in the governance of our societies, as suggested by the Assembly. The Committee of Ministers also notes that the next edition of the World Forum for Democracy (Strasbourg, 3-5 November 2014), entitled "From participation to influence: can youth revitalise democracy?" will explore ways of engaging young people in rethinking the democratic arenas of today, including through new technologies.

8. Having regard to the developments referred to above, the Committee of Ministers considers that the Organisation's existing initiatives and instruments in this field already respond to a large extent to the Assembly's Recommendation 2033 (2013). The Committee of Ministers will consider the question of a possible White Paper on "Democracy, politics and the Internet" advocated by the Assembly during preparations for the new Council of Europe's Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2019. In the meantime, the Committee of Ministers reiterates its full support to the Organisation's activities on Internet governance, which are highly relevant, of added value and visible. The Committee of Ministers attaches great importance to maintaining the Council of Europe's influence in this field, not only in Europe but at the international level.

5. Cf. http://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/conclusions.
6. Cf. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/news/wfd/2013report_en.pdf.