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The theme of migration and asylum in election campaigns and its consequences on the reception of migrants and their rights

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Rapporteur: Mr Tural GANJALIYEV, Azerbaijan, European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy congratulates the rapporteur, Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC), on his report on “The theme of migration and asylum in the election campaign and the consequences on the welcoming and rights of migrants”, which provides clear indications on how to capitalise on and strengthen the instruments and programmes introduced by the Council of Europe and its partners on this issue.
2. The committee acknowledges that the theme of migration and asylum, especially during election campaigns, is increasingly becoming distorted and manipulated. This can trivialise xenophobic discourse and hate speech, normalise discriminatory policies denying migrants and asylum seekers access to their rights and even lead to verbal and physical attacks against them.
3. The committee agrees with the report’s findings and analysis, and supports the draft resolution. It committee proposes four amendments to the draft resolution with a view to strengthening its message.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.2, insert the following paragraph:

“urges member States to strengthen action to protect political debates against foreign interference and manipulation, especially during electoral campaigns, and when this is aimed at spreading hatred and xenophobic discourses.”

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 8.2, insert the following paragraph:

“invites the Assembly’s election observation missions to monitor and report on, especially during their pre-electoral missions, the use of hate speech, including subtle hate speech, in the framework of the online and offline electoral campaign debate in the observed country.”

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15415, Reference 4622 of 24 January 2022. Reporting Committee: Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons. See [Doc. 15832](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 13 December 2023.



Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 8.4, after the words “calls for regular consultations on a formal footing between”, insert the following words:

“the Assembly,”

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

Before paragraph 12, insert the following paragraph:

“Acknowledging the role that social media can play in exposing users to diverse sources of information and opinions, especially during electoral campaigns, and in line with Resolution 2281 (2019) “Social media: social threads or threats to human rights?”, the Assembly invites social media platforms and tech companies to strengthen their efforts to identify, monitor and remove online content that promotes hatred, violence, and discriminatory discourses, while safeguarding freedom of expression and avoiding undue censorship, and signalling them to the competent authorities when the conditions require it.”

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Tural Ganjaliyev, rapporteur for opinion

1. I wish to congratulate our colleague Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez for his report on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons on “The theme of migration and asylum in the election campaign and the consequences on the welcoming and rights of migrants”. The report thoroughly analyses the increasing exploitation and manipulation of the theme of migration and asylum during electoral campaigns in Europe, and how this can lead to a normalisation of xenophobic discourse, and subsequently to discrimination, erosion of access to rights and even violent acts towards migrants and refugees.

2. This phenomenon is obviously interlinked with the debates around freedom of expression, the behaviour of politicians during and after a political campaign, and the role of the media. The draft resolution provides an exhaustive description of the different instruments of the Council of Europe addressing these dimensions. I commend the series of recommendations it contains addressed to member States, their parliaments, political parties, media, civil society organisations and different Council of Europe bodies, to further tackle this issue.

3. The theme of migration is becoming ever more related to global challenges such as geopolitical tensions, economic and financial turmoil as well as climate change, often disproportionately affecting populations from least developed and developing countries. It is therefore a highly sensitive topic, which has to be tackled through national and multilateral responses alike. For this very reason, it remains high on the agenda of European governments, on occasions triggering heated debates among and within States over their responsibilities in the management of migrants and asylum seekers.

4. Unfortunately, the debate at national level is often manipulated by xenophobic and populist movements, in particular far-right parties, which distort data and information to exaggerate the phenomenon and portray migrants and refugees as a threat, in order to attract votes from citizens open to these views. Already in 2010, the Parliamentary Assembly expressed concern over the non-negligible risk that mainstream political parties tend to rely on racist discourse in order to avoid losing part of their electorate,² and this position was reiterated in 2012 through [Resolution 1889 \(2012\)](#) “The portrayal of migrants and refugees during election campaigns”. In addition, in October 2023, the Assembly adopted [Resolution 2511 \(2023\)](#) “The challenge of far-right ideology to democracy and human rights in Europe”, which further analyses the risks related to far-right ideology for European societies and articulates relevant recommendations.

5. The theme of migration and asylum is also prone to manipulation and interference by foreign actors, which represent a significant threat to security in Europe and contribute to the erosion of democratic space. In 2021, an in-depth analysis commissioned by the European Parliament’s Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE), concluded that “migrant-related disinformation operations reveal a mixture of disinformation linked to the Kremlin and domestic far-right actors.”³ In 2022, the European Parliament included the instrumentalisation of migrants in a

2. [Resolution 1754 \(2010\)](#) “Fight against extremism: achievements, deficiencies and failures”.

3. Judit Szakács, Éva Bognár, “[The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU](#)”, June 2021.

list of different foreign interference tactics.⁴ For these reasons, I propose to include a recommendation urging member States to strengthen action to protect political debates against foreign interference and manipulation, in particular when it comes to spreading hatred and xenophobic discourse.

6. Closely related to this issue is the challenge posed by online propaganda and the dissemination of fake news, especially through social media platforms. I welcome the description contained in the explanatory memorandum of the ongoing efforts to regulate these forums of discussion, including the provisions contained in Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech, as well as of a related judgment recently passed by the European Court of Human Rights.⁵ [Resolution 2511 \(2023\)](#) also calls on member States to “combat online radicalisation through collaboration with social media platforms and tech companies to identify and remove online content that promotes far-right ideologies, while safeguarding freedom of expression and avoiding undue censorship”. I propose to include an explicit reference to these provisions in the resolution, to stress the role that social media platforms can play in blocking the dissemination of content that promotes hatred.

7. In order to ensure that the political debate around the theme of migration and asylum is held according to democratic values, member States must ensure that the right to freedom of expression is aligned with the fight against hate speech, including “subtle hate speech”. The collaboration of all spheres of society to achieve this is essential, from public authorities to the media and civil society organisations. Their role can be strengthened by the provision of capacity building, and I welcome the recommendations contained in the resolution to this purpose. In particular, the Council of Europe is already providing assistance and training to electoral management bodies,⁶ and it could engage youth organisations on this matter through the activities of its European Youth Centres and the network of Schools of Political Studies.

8. The Assembly could also play an important role: the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance adopted, in February 2023, a [Parliamentary Toolkit on Hate Speech](#), and the draft resolution already recommends that the Alliance considers examining the issue within its activities. The draft resolution also calls for regular consultations on a formal footing between the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI), the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), and the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), and I believe that the Assembly itself could provide useful insights to these consultations, which should focus on elections at all levels of government. In addition to this, the Assembly’s election observation missions could consider monitoring and reporting on the presence of hate speech elements during the electoral campaign in observed countries. I propose to include two provisions in the draft resolution to reflect these observations.

4. European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (2020/2268(INI)).

5. European Court of Human Rights, Grand Chamber judgment in the case of *Sanchez v. France* ([Application No. 45581/15](#)).

6. Council of Europe, “[Toolkit on combating hate speech during electoral processes](#)”, 2022.