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Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination
Rapporteur: Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, Ukraine, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination congratulates the rapporteur of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, Ms Elisabetta Gardini (Italy, ECPA) for a timely and relevant report that clearly describes the extent and gravity of political violence and hate speech targeting politicians, as well as their nefarious consequences on the democratic life of the Council of Europe member States and other countries, such as those enjoying observer status with the Organisation.

2. The committee shares, in particular, the view that political violence and hate speech targeting politicians represent an existential threat to democracy.

3. The committee also agrees that women in politics are particularly exposed to the risk of political violence and hate speech. This also applies to politicians belonging to groups vulnerable to discrimination, such as ethnic minorities or racialised people, or to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) persons.

4. In addition to violence and hate speech against politicians as an internal issue for democracies, these phenomena should also be addressed when used as tools for external interference. For instance, in the case of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, violent and stigmatising language, often amounting to hate speech, is used as a tool for war-related disinformation. In this context, targeting politicians is not merely an attack on individuals, but a direct attack on statehood.

B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 7, first sentence, after the words "minority groups", insert the following words:

"as well as young politicians and public officials".

Explanatory note

Younger politicians are among those disproportionately affected by hate speech, with a severe chilling effect that contributes to undermining proportional political representation, by discouraging the participation of young voices in political life.

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1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15846, Reference 4776 of 22 January 2024. Reporting committee: Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. See Doc. 16363. Opinion approved by the committee on 20 April 2026.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 7, first sentence, replace the word “homophobic” with the following words:

“LGBTI-phobic”.

Explanatory note

While homophobia is a widespread feature of hate speech and violence targeting political representatives, not only lesbian and gay politicians are affected, but rather all those belonging to the LGBTI community. The term homophobia only refers to a part of this group and may be interpreted as neglecting or downplaying the challenges faced for instance by transgender politicians.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 14, insert the following paragraph:

“The Assembly highlights that, in addition to internal societal dynamics, violence and hate speech against politicians may be the result of external interference and hybrid warfare strategies.”

Explanatory note

This amendment aims to integrate in the draft resolution an important aspect of violence and hate speech targeting politicians, which originates from external interference.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 21, insert the following paragraph:

“The Assembly reiterates its support for the work of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance, as a forum for discussion specialising in measures to address hate speech.”

Explanatory note

The No Hate Parliamentary Alliance is a network of parliamentarians committed to taking a proactive stance against racism, intolerance and hatred. It regularly works on hate speech and proposes measures to address it, including when motivated by sexism or other types of bias.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

Before paragraph 22.1, insert the following paragraph:

“subscribe to the Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-racist and Inclusive Society, as endorsed by Resolution 2443 (2022) “The role of political parties in fostering diversity and inclusion: a new charter for a non-racist society”, and fully implement its provisions:”

Explanatory note

The Parliamentary Assembly has reviewed and relaunched an important tool for political parties to prevent and combat hate speech and foster diversity within their ranks and in politics at large. This resolution is a good opportunity to promote it.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Yevheniia Kravchuk, rapporteur for opinion

1. The report by Ms Elisabetta Gardini (Italy, ECPA) and the draft resolution contained therein, as adopted by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, are a valuable contribution to a much-needed process of raising awareness and fostering understanding of a serious issue. Hate speech, and stigmatising and discriminatory language, are a grave problem affecting our societies as a whole, and particularly those vulnerable to discrimination. When it comes to individuals engaged in politics, not only their personal freedom and dignity are at stake, but also collective values such as political representation and the proper functioning of democratic institutions.

2. In this regard, I can only but agree with the rapporteur that political violence and hate speech targeting politicians represent an existential threat to democracy. Far from being protected by freedom of expression, hate speech constitutes a serious violation of this freedom. By creating a chilling effect, it discourages individuals – in this case, politicians – from freely exercising their right to speak and their freedom of expression, thereby undermining the very foundations of open democratic debate.

3. Ms Gardini's report is therefore timely and relevant, and it clearly describes, through numerous examples, the extent and gravity of political violence, as well as its harmful consequences for democratic life in Council of Europe member States and in other countries, including those enjoying observer status with the Organisation.

4. Women in politics are particularly exposed to the risk of political violence and hate speech. This also applies to politicians belonging to groups vulnerable to discrimination, such as ethnic minorities, racialised individuals, or LGBTI people. The risk increases exponentially when multiple grounds of discrimination intersect, as is the case for female politicians who are racialised or belong to religious or linguistic minorities. former French Minister Christiane Taubira and Italian MEP Cécile Kyenge are examples of prominent politicians subjected to severe hate speech with both racist and sexist connotations. Such intersectional targeting not only silences diverse voices in public life but also perpetuates patterns of exclusion and inequality that affect entire groups, in addition to the politicians who belong to them.

5. In the case of the LGBTI community, gay and lesbian political figures are often targeted by aggressive homophobic rhetoric from the public, particularly on social media, but also at times from fellow politicians. Daily micro-aggressions also contribute to the chilling effect that the Parliamentary Assembly seeks to address by means of the forthcoming resolution. In the case of transgender individuals, these micro-aggressions include subtle but equally corrosive practices such as "deadnaming" (the use of a former name abandoned during gender transition), misgendering, or being required to use toilets corresponding to the sex assigned at birth. Such practices should be carefully avoided, particularly by fellow politicians.

6. As a Ukrainian parliamentarian, I consider it particularly important to highlight a specific dimension of political violence and hate speech. Ms Gardini's report mainly addresses violence against politicians as an internal issue within democracies, linked to polarisation, populism, and social media. However, hate speech used as a means of external interference should also be taken into account and addressed. The example of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is particularly clear and serious. In this context, hate speech and violence are used as instruments of war-related disinformation. Deepfakes and co-ordinated attacks form part of a deliberate Russian strategy. Here, targeting politicians is not merely an attack on individuals, but a direct attack on statehood, democratic resilience, and the functioning of public authorities in times of war.

7. Ms Gardini's report and the draft resolution contained therein are a step in the right direction, part of a longer process to which we must all commit with determination. I can only support this text and encourage the members of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, as well as the Assembly as a whole, to do the same. The amendments I propose are therefore inspired by a desire to complement and strengthen a text that is already, in itself, both timely and necessary.