

# EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA

## FORUM OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF THE EEA EFTA STATES

Ref. 19-4730

### TWENTIETH MEETING OF THE FORUM OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF THE EEA EFTA STATES

*Brussels*

*12-13 December 2019*

#### **OPINION ON EUROPEAN INITIATIVES IN RELATION TO THREATS TO DEMOCRACY, PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION AND HATE SPEECH TOWARDS ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES.**

**Rapporteur:** Ms Rósa Guðbjartsdóttir

The EEA EFTA Forum of Local and Regional Authorities:

- A. Having regard to the measures introduced by the European Union in 2018 to bolster European democracy and to protect free and fair elections in Europe;
- B. Having regard to the European Union's Internal Security Strategy for the period 2015-2020;
- C. Noting that the European Union's approach has been to address acts of terrorism at its source and to tackle this issue at a level closest to the most vulnerable individuals;
- D. Noting that there is no international definition of "hate speech", while Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights from 1966 states that: "Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law";
- E. Having regard to the European Union Framework Decision on Combatting Racism and Xenophobia from 2008;
- F. Noting that the Framework Decision on Combatting Racism and Xenophobia from 2008 criminalises the public incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent, national or ethnic origin;
- G. Having regard to the European Union's approach towards illegal hate speech online;
- H. Noting the reinforced subsidiarity principle set out in the Lisbon Treaty and its explicit reference to the local and regional dimension and self-government;
- I. Noting the role of the Forum as a body in the EFTA structure;

J. Acknowledging the impact of European Union legislation on local and regional authorities in the EEA EFTA States through the EEA Agreement;

1. Takes note of the measures introduced by the European Union to bolster European democracy and to protect free and fair elections in Europe;
2. Underlines that the European Union's approach to address acts of terrorism at its source and to tackle this issue at a level closest to the most vulnerable individuals requires close cooperation with local authorities;
3. Recognises that the public incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent, national or ethnic origin is defined as a criminal act in the European Union Framework Decision on Combatting Racism and Xenophobia. This includes illegal hate speech online.
4. Believes that it is a threat to democracy that elected representatives, at national and local level, are exposed to hateful statements and threats;
5. Recognises that challenges, such as hate speech, that elected representatives are faced with may lead to difficulties in engaging new and/or young people in political participation;
6. Underlines the need for more knowledge of the actual legal situation concerning threats and hate speech against elected representatives at local and regional level in the EEA EFTA and EU Member States;
7. Supports, if such knowledge reveals the need, stronger legal protection of elected representatives, and points to the fact that local and regional elected politicians often have less legal and practical protection from threats and hate speech than do elected representatives at national level;
8. Stresses that municipalities and regions have to develop routines and practices to prevent and deal with hateful statements and threats against elected representatives and employees;
9. Stresses elected representatives' responsibility for upholding democratic values by being role models in discussions and debates, avoiding personal attacks, hate-speech, bullying and harassment, while encouraging fair political debates based on sound arguments.
10. Encourages the European Union and the EEA EFTA States to find suitable ways to support the municipalities and regions to develop such routines and practices;
11. Emphasises that the European Union and the EEA EFTA States must work together to counteract actions intended to destabilise democracy as a form of government;
12. Calls on the EEA EFTA States to work closely with the European Union to bolster European democracy and to fight against radicalisation and hate speech;
13. Asks the EFTA Secretariat to forward the opinion to the Standing Committee of the EFTA States.