UNESCO Colloquium "Improving the communications and information ecosystem to protect the integrity of elections"

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Opening remarks

Good morning everyone and on behalf of the Global Network Initiative let me welcome you todays' colloquium.

Let me first extend our thanks to UNESCO for hosting us today and co-organizing this event. Thank you to Deputy Director General Engida for his kind words of introduction and to Guy Berger and the freedom of expression and media development division for all of their work putting together our programme for today.

Let me next say a few words about the Global Network Initiative for those of you who may be unfamiliar with our work.

GNI is a multi-stakeholder organization. We bring together information and communications technology companies, investors, academics, and civil society organizations, to forge a common approach to free expression and privacy in the ICT industry.

Our growing membership now consists of more than 50 companies, academics, civil society organizations, and investors, with new members from Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East.

Our members commit to the GNI Principles, which are based on international human rights laws and standards. The GNI principles and implementation guidelines provide a framework for companies to respect freedom of expression and privacy rights in their operations. The goal is that these principles take root as a global standard for human rights in the ICT sector.

GNI's company members commit to a process of independent assessment Our accountability process—the only mechanism of its kind—is designed to generate trust among stakeholders and build public credibility. The ultimate goal is the demonstrable protection and advancement of user rights.

Providing shared learning opportunities in a safe space is a central aspect of GNI's work. The goal is to provide real-time problem solving through our members' deep expertise, knowledge and networks.

GNI regularly holds learning events for our participants, and also brings together our membership with outside experts and policymakers to explore key challenges for freedom of expression and privacy in the ICT sector.

Last but far from least, a key component of the GNI principles is that our members, individually and collectively, engage governments and international institutions to promote the rule of law and the adoption of laws, policies and practices that protect, respect and fulfill freedom of expression and privacy.

So it is with this focus on human rights-based public policy and our commitment to shared learning that we turn our focus to today's topic, elections and the ICT sector.

ICT innovations continue to dramatically affect social, economic and political aspects of modern life.

Information and communications technology, from the SMS message to the ubiquitous uptake of social media in societies around the globe, offers new possibilities to deepen and broaden democratic discourse and enhance electoral processes. At the same time, we have seen in recent years new threats that arise from misuse of technology by malicious actors, from wholesale network shutdowns at particularly critical moments, to the hacking of election technologies and lists, to the use of social media to spread disinformation.

In response to these serious challenges, there are important steps that governments can and must take, for instance to protect voter registration data, regulate political advertising, and secure critical election infrastructure like voting machines. At the same time, given the importance of preserving the credibility of elections, it is also important to think carefully about how governments legislate and regulate around elections in order to avoid unintended consequences and the appearance of impropriety. This caution is especially warranted when it comes to regulating technology, where government actions tend to be oriented toward solving the problems from the last election and are often not flexible enough to address new challenges that may emerge in the next election.

We have two multi-stakeholder panel discussions with global expertise from across diverse sets of stakeholders to collectively identify both risks and opportunities for improving elections through ICTs.

Our aim today is to foster learning and catalyze conversations across stakeholder groups that may not be in the habit of speaking with each other. We want to generate concrete examples of good practice, whether in the form of regulation, voluntary initiatives, or educational efforts to help ensure that new technologies' net impact on electoral activities is a positive one.

In addition to our speakers, there is also tremendous expertise here in the audience today. I hope our colloquium is truly interactive and that we all learn from each other as we explore this complex and compelling set of issues.

Thank you.