

## Information Documents

SG/Inf(2020)34

23 November 2020

---

## Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Committee of Ministers' Deputies, in their decision of 21 November 2019 (CM/Del/Dec(2019)1361/11.1 – Part 1) invited the Secretary General, in consultation with member states, to consider and prepare a four-year strategic framework reflecting the priorities for the Council of Europe's longer-term mission, building on the priorities underlying the Programme and Budget 2020-2021.

Consequently, and based on consultations with the member states held on 18 and 21 September 2020, with the chairs of the monitoring and advisory mechanisms on 29 June 2020, and with the chairs of the steering and ad hoc committees of intergovernmental co-operation (through written consultations), the Secretary General has elaborated a strategic framework outlining the priorities, which, in her view, should represent the core of the Organisation's many activities over the next four-year period, reflected in its Programme and Budget.

The Organisation's action is multi-disciplinary, carried out through an integrated model of standard setting, monitoring and co-operation:

- ▶ European Court of Human Rights judgments and collective supervision of their execution by member states; assessment of the situation in member states (monitoring) and identification of measures to remedy gaps in legislation, policy and practice;
- ▶ agreeing standards to fill gaps and respond to emerging challenges at the pan-European level;
- ▶ multi-stakeholder platform for dialogue, raising awareness, peer to peer exchange and sharing of experience and good practice; providing support to member states, partner countries and entities in implementing Council of Europe standards through targeted co-operation programmes.

## II. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND CONCRETE ACHIEVEMENTS FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS

### **Key strategic priorities of the Council of Europe over the next four years**

Article 1 of the Statute of the Council of Europe states clearly that the aim of the Organisation is to achieve greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress. Moreover, it states that this aim shall be pursued through the organs of the Council by discussion of questions of common concern and by agreements and common action in economic, social, cultural, scientific, legal and administrative matters and in the maintenance and further realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Furthermore, Article 3 of the Statute clearly outlines that every member of the Council of Europe must accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and collaborate sincerely and effectively in the realisation of the aim of the Council.

This is more relevant than ever in the current circumstances where there are attempts to undermine multilateralism. Indeed, it is both multilateralism and intergovernmental co-operation that underpin our Organisation's work and its capacity to address common problems and new challenges to our rights and freedoms under the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter and other instruments. We have seen that clearly in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognising this, and in line with the Statute, the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the rule of law and democracy, remain the overarching priority of the Organisation.

The virtuous circle of intergovernmental standard-setting work, co-operation activities and the monitoring of the implementation of standards remains of prime importance in this respect.

The key strategic priorities for the four-year Strategic Framework are:

1. Implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights. This is the most important legally-binding instrument for collective enforcement of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Europe and the cornerstone of values upon which our Organisation is founded. States Parties must secure its enjoyment for everyone within their jurisdiction, including in those parts of the continent affected by confrontation and unresolved conflicts. Protecting and promoting the human rights of over 835 million citizens remains a clear priority for the Council of Europe and contains two major elements:
  - a) ensuring the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of the European Convention on Human Rights system, as outlined in a number of decisions of the Committee of Ministers (notably in its 130th Session in Athens on 4 November 2020: assessment of the Interlaken Process and the way forward). This requires the continuous engagement of member states to implement the Convention at the national level, and of the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) and the Council of Europe as a whole;
  - b) strengthening member states' execution of judgments from the Court, a process whose supervision remains a clear prerogative of the Committee of Ministers. In this respect, there should be further development of the working methods and means available to this process, particularly to the Human Rights meetings of the Committee of Ministers' Deputies devoted to this matter. Changes should aim to further enhance efficiency, effectiveness and tangible impact. This would, of course, require the decision(s) of the Committee of Ministers.
2. Ensuring freedom of expression, both online and offline. This is under increasing challenge, and strong action is required to uphold it as a cornerstone of democratic and pluralistic society. The Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists will continue to play a specific and important role in this context.
3. Fighting growing social inequalities and poverty. These have been further highlighted by the current COVID-19 crisis. The most vulnerable have been hit most severely by the pandemic and Europe faces the longer-term consequences of a deep economic crisis. In light of this, the promotion of social and economic rights will be crucial at the European level and achieved through further strengthening the implementation of the European Social Charter.
4. Non-discrimination and ensuring the protection of vulnerable groups. Worrying developments and adverse trends in this area too call for an enhanced and strengthened focus on prevention in order to ensure democratic and inclusive societies. Strong emphasis should be put on combating all forms of violence against women and domestic violence, in particular through the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) as well as through its further ratification by member states.

Additional focus should be devoted to the enhanced fight against the sexual exploitation of children, in particular through the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the Lanzarote Convention). The protection of the rights of the national minorities, LGBTI persons, refugees and migrants, especially unaccompanied minors and the elderly, as particularly vulnerable groups will also receive additional impetus at the level of the Organisation. The promotion of equality between women and men, as well as gender mainstreaming, will also remain in the focus.

5. Fighting inequality, racism, xenophobia and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief or any other ground. It is crucial to step up the fight against these adverse and growing phenomena, including by combating all forms of hate speech and hate crime. The role of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in the revision and strengthening of the relevant standards remains pivotal.

6. The independence, efficiency and resilience of the judicial systems of our member states. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has further shown the importance of strengthening these. The overall preservation and further promotion of relevant European standards related to the rule of law, including in emergency situations, will be high on the Organisation's agenda. The activities of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) are of particular importance.

7. The fight against corruption and money laundering, as well as combating cybercrime. Central to this is the work of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), and the implementation of its recommendations, and the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL). The implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime, as the global standard, is crucial for fostering the rule of law in member states.

8. The fight against human trafficking. A growing number of people are victims of this crime and the current pandemic, with its potentially long-term socio-economic impact, creates a heightened risk of exploitation of vulnerable groups. Reinforced prevention efforts are therefore merited. Action will remain a priority, based on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and on the Roadmap of the Secretary General on strengthening action against trafficking in human beings for the purposes of labour exploitation (SG/Inf(2019)34 and SG/Inf(2020)29).

9. Artificial intelligence (AI). AI and the broader impact of digital transformation and the use of new technologies on human rights, democracy and the rule of law shall be a focus of the activities of the Council of Europe.

10. The fight against environmental degradation and climate change. Addressing the challenges that these pose to the protection of human rights has become a priority, in particular as their impact will undoubtedly increase in the coming years.

11. Supporting the role and diversity of civil society, including human rights defenders, as well as national human rights institutions in member states. Besides general aspects of upholding the freedoms of assembly and association, as guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights, additional focus will be applied to exploring the best possible ways to ensure better participation by civil society in the activities of our Organisation, including a stronger and more active role for its representatives in the activities of our statutory bodies. This will require decisions by the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly respectively.

12. Education for democratic citizenship and empowerment and strengthening of young people's role in decision-making. This constitutes an investment in the future democratic development of European societies and a strong guarantee of future generations' commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights, democratic values and the rule of law. This is also crucial in the context of action against radicalisation/extremism in our societies.

### **Concrete achievements (“deliverables”) over the four-year period**

In order to deliver on the priorities of the Organisation over the next four-year period, it is particularly important to emphasise and allocate necessary human and financial resources to the activities that will facilitate concrete results and significant achievements (“deliverables”) over this period. These include:

1. Accession of the European Union (EU) to the European Convention on Human Rights: a key priority for both our Organisation and the EU.
2. Strengthening member states' execution of the Court's judgments, in particular through further development of the working methods and means available to the process of supervision, particularly the Human Rights meetings of the Committee of Ministers' Deputies.
3. Adopting relevant common standards with regard to artificial intelligence and human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
4. Additional strengthening of relevant standards for combating intolerance and all violations of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as related hate speech and hate crime.
5. Facilitating reporting obligations under monitoring mechanisms, particularly by aligning monitoring and reporting (similar to the UN practice of a single “core document”) for several monitoring mechanisms with targeted questionnaires between the monitoring cycles. Achievement of enhanced co-ordination (alignment of visits, joint visits etc.) at the level of the Organisation, as well as with respect to the monitoring activities of other international organisations.
6. Revision of the treaty system of the European Social Charter with a view to reinforcing its effectiveness in both the short and longer terms, building on the report of the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) “Identifying good practices and making proposals with a view to improving the implementation of social rights in Europe”.
7. Elaboration of an instrument on human rights and the environment.
8. Adoption of decisions aimed at ensuring better participation for civil society in the activities of our Organisation and based on the Secretary General's recent proposals, including a stronger and more active role for representatives of civil society in the activities of our statutory bodies. This would require necessary decisions by the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly respectively.
9. Streamlining organisational structures and operations, including a more task-force oriented approach with greater flexibility in the assignment of our human resources to different activities.
10. Strengthening the co-ordination and role of intergovernmental committees, ensuring that they reflect the key strategic priorities in the intergovernmental structure (2022-2025) and the Strategic Framework.

11. Improved, targeted communications to increase awareness among our member states and their publics-at-large concerning the Organisation and its activities.
12. Strengthening and enhancing references and links between the activities of the Council of Europe and specific UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **III. FURTHER ACTIONS AND MEASURES FOR ACHIEVING OUR GOALS**

#### **Possible introduction of a longer period for future programming of activities**

In defining the Organisation's priorities for the next four-year period, it would be advisable to change the current practice of programming on a biennial basis and move to a four-year programme. This would facilitate a more cohesive, stable and predictable approach. At this stage, the budget of the Organisation would continue to be projected on the biennial basis. Equally, in the context of developing a four-year programme, the budgetary perspective should be considered. A mid-term review of the four-year programme would be envisaged with a view to updating, adjusting and additionally focusing the activities, as required.

#### **Ways to further strengthen cohesion and synergy among and between the monitoring mechanisms**

Monitoring mechanisms represent one of the most important features of the Council of Europe's work and contribute to the Organisation's clear added value. Nonetheless, work remains to be done in order to achieve closer co-operation and synergies among and between kin or similar monitoring mechanisms and to avoid duplication in their work. Solutions must of course ensure that monitoring takes place without undue interference in the independence and respective mandates of monitoring bodies. Current reporting obligations and schedules are often demanding and cumbersome. This has resulted in a certain "monitoring fatigue", which can lead to important delays in the monitoring cycles and could result in jeopardising the key achievements and fundamentals of the monitoring systems. An important means to alleviate the existing problems could be a move towards the facilitation of reporting obligations under the monitoring mechanisms. Specifically, there could be alignment of monitoring and reporting (similar to the UN practice of a single "core document") for several monitoring mechanisms with targeted questionnaires between the monitoring cycles.

Finally, close dialogue between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly should be established with a view to enhancing synergy and co-ordination and avoiding duplication between the Assembly's monitoring procedure and other monitoring mechanisms within the Organisation (both convention and non-convention based).

While some of the proposed steps could be achieved through enhanced co-ordination at the level of the Organisation (alignment of visits, joint visits etc.), others would require the decision of the Committee of Ministers or States Parties or an enhanced political dialogue with the Parliamentary Assembly, requiring common effort and political will from all stakeholders concerned.

#### **Ways to further strengthen intergovernmental co-operation**

Intergovernmental co-operation lies at the heart of the Organisation and its importance was reaffirmed by the member states at the 129th Session of the Committee of Ministers on 17 May 2019 in Helsinki. The co-ordination and role of intergovernmental committees will be further strengthened in line with the practical proposals presented by the Secretary General and welcomed by member states on 21 October 2020. The intergovernmental structure (2022-2025) will reflect the key strategic priorities of the Strategic Framework for the development of common policy instruments and legal standards as well as the sharing of good practice, while remaining sufficiently flexible to adapt to urgent and emerging needs.

## **Relations with other international organisations**

The further strengthening of relations and synergy with other international organisations remains a priority for the Organisation, particularly with our key partners: the EU, the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Besides the development of joint activities and programmes, additional emphasis should be placed on avoiding duplication, in particular regarding monitoring activities. In the context of the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is of utmost importance to strengthen and enhance the references and links between relevant activities of the Council of Europe and specific SDGs.

## **Continued reform processes and results-oriented management culture**

This Strategic Framework is not intended to address plans for future reform of the Organisation. That will be elaborated in other documents. However, it is right to note that continued structural and administrative reform does remain a priority, with a view to further improving the working methods, efficiency and effectiveness of the Council of Europe.

In this context, there will be a focus on the further development of a results-oriented culture. Streamlining our organisational structures and operations may facilitate this, including, for example, a more task-force oriented approach with greater flexibility in the assignment of our human resources to different activities.

## **A new communications strategy and improved visibility for the Organisation**

Further strengthening of the Organisation's profile and visibility and ensuring adequate communication and outreach is a key priority. The adoption of a new Communications Strategy, which will provide for an enhanced and more effective internal co-ordination of communication activities, would represent an important step forward. Furthermore, it is crucial to strengthen targeted communication activities towards member states and their publics-at-large, so that the Organisation's strategic priorities and activities are more widely known. Increasing the visibility of our achievements and added value within the European architecture relies on the close co-operation of all relevant stakeholders – member states, statutory and other key organs, as well as the Secretary General.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

This document, elaborated and submitted pursuant to the decision of the Committee of Ministers' Deputies of 21 November 2019, attempts to provide a short and crisp overview of the Council of Europe's key priorities for the next four-year period. It also outlines some of the crucial challenges for the Organisation in the period ahead and possible ways to address these. While the document reflects the vision of the Secretary General, it is for the Committee of Ministers, as the key decision-making body of the Organisation, to consider follow-up, including through possible adoption of relevant decisions at the forthcoming session of the Committee of Ministers in May 2021.