

WORKING WITH THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



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COUNCIL OF EUROPE:**
A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

French edition:
*Travailler avec le Conseil de l'Europe:
un guide pratique pour la société civile*

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THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation, bringing together governments to build a future based on human rights, democracy and justice. **Civil society** is an important element of that mission, and whilst it always played its part, its involvement has grown over the years. With the Secretary General's Roadmap on **Civil society** engagement with the Council of Europe 2024-2027 (SG/Inf(2023)28) which was presented on 15 December 2023, that role was strengthened.

Our aim with the dedicated civil society portal and the practical guide published thereon is to give you the information you need to work alongside the Council of Europe. As a large organisation that has grown over many years, it can look complex at first glance. But there are many ways that civil society and NGOs - especially international NGOs (INGOs) - can get involved, from actual partnership, to providing information to different bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights or the Commissioner for Human Rights, to aiding the work of monitoring bodies as they carry out their work in different countries. It also gives guidance on available resources and describes ways that human rights defenders can seek help if they are under threat.

As you navigate through the site you will find all the information you need on the Council of Europe's co-operation with civil society in its core areas of human rights protection, building democratic societies and ensuring respect for the rule of law. Join us to build a better Europe.



COUNCIL OF EUROPE WORK

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. All member states have signed up to the **European Convention on Human Rights**, a treaty designed to **protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law**, creating a common European legal space.

The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention. Individuals can bring complaints of human rights violations to the Strasbourg court once all possibilities of appeal have been exhausted in the member state concerned.

The Council of Europe advocates freedom of expression and the media, freedom of assembly, equality, and the protection of minorities. It has launched campaigns on issues such as child protection, online hate speech, and the rights of the Roma, Europe's largest minority. The Organisation helps member states fight corruption and terrorism and undertake necessary judicial reforms. Its group of constitutional experts, known as the Venice Commission, offers legal advice to countries throughout the world.

The Council of Europe promotes human rights through international conventions, such as the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the Convention on Cybercrime. Conventions are prepared and negotiated within the institutional framework with negotiations culminating in a decision by the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe's decision-making body. It is then agreed to open the treaty for signature by member states and, if necessary, by other states or organisations who took part in drawing it up. Conventions owe their legal existence to the consent of those member states that sign and ratify them. A full list of conventions, their explanatory reports, the status of signatures and ratifications, declarations and reservations made by states, and notifications issued since 2000, are available on the [website of the Council of Europe Treaty Office](#).

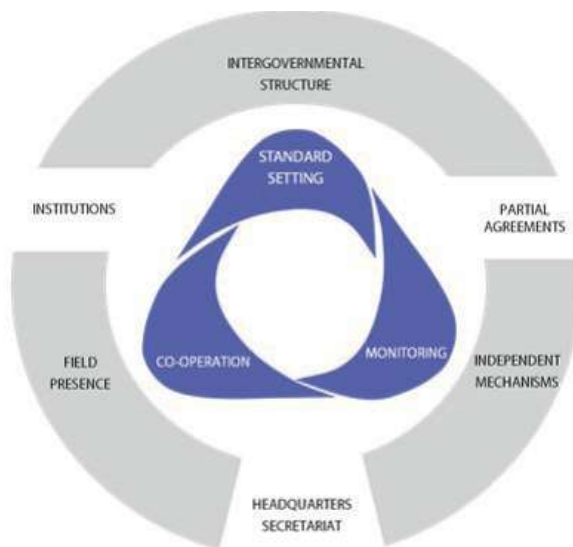
Another important legal mechanism is the Council of Europe's recommendations on different topics. These are made by the Committee of Ministers, and whilst they are not binding, they set a policy framework agreed by member states. Much of the work of intergovernmental steering committees is devoted to either creating or following up recommendations. Links to relevant recommendations can be found under the entries in this handbook.

The Council of Europe works in close partnership with the European Union, and co-operates with the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with partner countries in its neighbourhood and worldwide. For example, the European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines and Healthcare, which protects public health through the development of quality standards both for safe medicines and their safe use, and for blood transfusion, organ, cell and tissue transplantation and consumer health issues has agreements with Brazil, China, South Africa and the United States.

In addition to the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe consists of several working institutions.

- ▶ The **Secretary General** leads and represents the Council of Europe.
- ▶ The Committee of Ministers, made up of member states' foreign ministers and their representatives, acts as the main decision-making body.
- ▶ The **Parliamentary Assembly** consists of 306 members of parliament from the 46 member states; the Assembly elects the Secretary General, the Human Rights Commissioner and the judges to the European Court of Human Rights; it provides a democratic forum for debate.
- ▶ The **Commissioner for Human Rights** independently addresses and draws attention to human rights violations.
- ▶ The **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities** is responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy.
- ▶ The **Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations** represents organised civil society and promotes participatory democracy.

The Organisation's action is structured around three dimensions constituting a "dynamic triangle" – standard setting, monitoring and co-operation. These three dimensions are integrated into its functioning and operation and form one of its key strengths and comparative advantages.



Standard-setting includes activities aimed at drawing up and adopting standards – whether legally binding or not – and identifying best practices. These can include conventions, protocols, recommendations, conclusions, guidelines or policy recommendations.

Monitoring and advisory include activities aimed at assessing compliance by states with the above-mentioned standards, whether in pursuance of legal undertakings or on a voluntary basis, or whether following a legal procedure or not; for example, to assess compliance with a convention, recommendation or undertaking.

Co-operation includes activities conducted mostly in the field. Co-operation aims at raising awareness about agreed standards and policies, supporting states in reviewing their laws and practice in the light of those standards, and enhancing their capacity; including when the monitoring procedures reveal areas where measures need to be taken to comply with the standards of the Organisation.

Results-Based Management approach

The Council of Europe strives to deliver focused and tangible results, with maximum efficiency and from a clear "value for money" perspective. To this end, it has developed a result-based management (RBM) approach to develop its Programme and Budget 2024-2027 and address the three fundamental questions: why (the Organisation needs to act), what (the Organisation does), and how (what structures and resources are needed).

RBM is a management strategy that explains why an intervention is necessary and describes how it will be implemented, monitored and assessed, including risk management at each stage. It ensures a focus on results, through programmes and projects structured around public policy objectives that target clearly identified problems and challenges and employs monitoring and evaluation systems. In this way, RBM becomes a tool for tangible change, where each action contributes to a successful outcome.

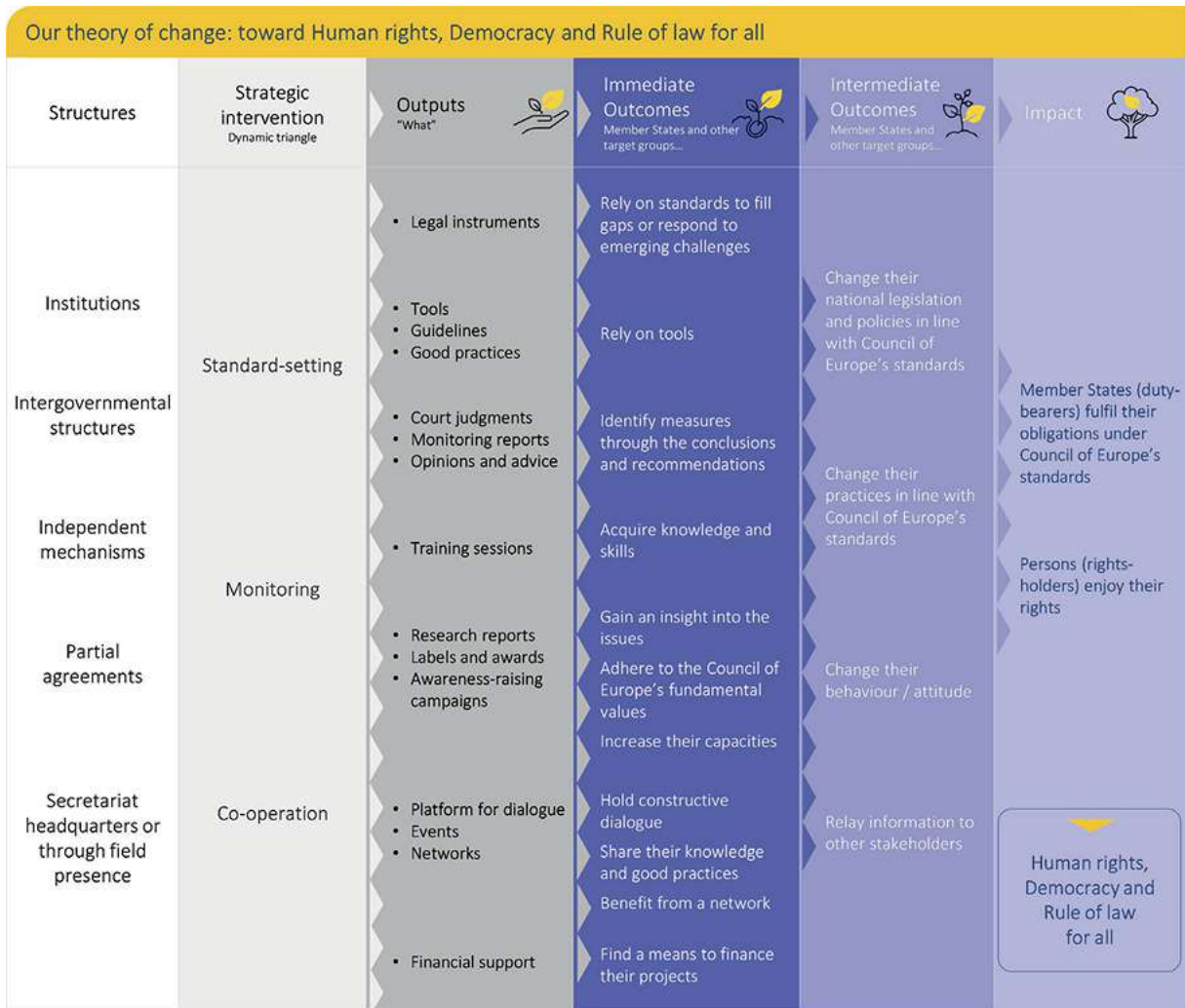


Figure 1 – Our theory of change: toward Human rights, the Rule of Law and Democracy for all



WHAT ROLE FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOS) IN THE WORK OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE?

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) can apply for participatory status with the Council of Europe and once accepted become members of the **Conference of INGOs** – information on the requirements can be found below.

While INGOs can work with the Council of Europe through the Conference of INGOs, there are also opportunities for local, national and regional NGOs to get involved with the Council of Europe in both formal and informal ways. The contribution of civil society is invaluable, for example, in exchanging information related to human rights monitoring, where NGOs can participate in consultations at national level, propose solutions to rights violations, contribute to the development of standards and provide information throughout the monitoring cycle.

Participatory status with the Council of Europe

Independent NGOs are a vital component of European society, guaranteeing freedom of expression and association, both of which are fundamental to democracy. Recognising their influence, the Council of Europe provides international INGOs with the opportunity to acquire participatory status.

The Council of Europe has had working relations with NGOs since 1952 when it introduced consultative status. In 2003, in recognition of the increasingly active role played by INGOs, the Council of Europe decided to change this to participatory status.

A revision of the guidelines on participatory status was carried out in consultation with the Conference of INGOs in 2015 and in July 2016 the **Committee of Ministers adopted resolution (2016)3**, which sets out the rules for granting participatory status, gives more information on the background of the status, what it represents, the conditions to be met and the possibilities it gives to INGOs to co-operate with the Council of Europe.

More than 300 INGOs currently have participatory status, making them an active part of the Conference of INGOs. In turn, the Conference of INGOs has participatory status in various Council of Europe bodies and participates in numerous intergovernmental committees. For instance, members of the Conference of INGOs can ask for accreditation to lodge collective complaints under the **additional protocol of the European Social Charter (ESC)** adopted in 1995. They can also contribute to the European Social Charter's reporting procedure. More information is provided in the relevant sections of the handbook.

If your INGO would like to apply for participatory status, **please read the resolution** closely and refer to the section below "How to apply" (these criteria may undergo further changes in the future).

When an INGOs is granted participatory status it joins the Conference of INGOs. The Conference represents organised civil society at the Council of Europe and works to promote participatory democracy. It holds two annual plenary sessions and organises events linked to Council of Europe priorities, such as visits to member states, where it focuses on how civic space is protected. Its ensuing report is then sent for comment to the member state concerned and debated in plenary with the member state and NGO representatives invited.

How to apply

Participatory status is for international NGOs that are represented at European level and that have working relations with the Council of Europe. Before submitting an application please check whether your INGO fulfils all the following conditions:

Participatory status may be granted to INGOs:

- ▶ which respect and defend the values and principles of the Council of Europe;
- ▶ which are able, through their work, to support the achievement of closer unity mentioned in Article 1 of the Council of Europe's statute;
- ▶ which are created based on a constitutive act adopted according to democratic principles;
- ▶ which have a democratic structure and governance;
- ▶ which are particularly representative in the field(s) of their competence and the fields of action shared by the Council of Europe;
- ▶ which are represented at European level and which have members in at least five member states of the Council of Europe;
- ▶ which were created and have implemented activities at least two years before the moment of applying for participatory status;
- ▶ which already have working relations with the Council of Europe;
- ▶ which can contribute to and participate actively in Council of Europe deliberations and activities;
- ▶ which can make known the work of the Council of Europe to society.

Applications for participatory status must be submitted on the official form and must be accompanied by the following documents in French or English, and preferably in both official languages of the Council of Europe:

- ▶ completed application form;
- ▶ the INGO's statute;
- ▶ a list of its member organisations;
- ▶ an activity and financial report covering the previous two years;
- ▶ a declaration to the effect that it accepts the principles set out in the preamble and in article 1 of the Council of Europe statute.

Participatory status is granted once a year. If your INGO fulfils all the conditions listed above and would like to apply, please send your completed application form and supporting documents to NGO-Unit@coe.int The application form and article 1 of the Council of Europe statute are available [here](#).

Conference of INGOs

The Conference of INGOs includes the over 300 NGOs that have gained participatory status. It engages directly with its members through its thematic work, issue-specific consultations, public events and two annual general assembly sessions. Since 2018 the Conference has marked World NGO Day with public events highlighting the role of NGOs in democratic society.

The Conference engages with member states and with civil society in those member states during the several country visits it carries out each year. It draws the Organisation's attention to civil society concerns by adopting resolutions, communicating with the Secretary General and the Commissioner for Human Rights and informing the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress. It has representatives on intergovernmental steering committees and is a member of the governing body of the North-South Centre. The Conference runs an expert council on NGO Law which provides legal expertise and carries out studies on issues connected to freedom of assembly and association.

The bulk of work on thematic topics is undertaken in committees which are set up for a limited period, normally limited to two years. They provide a focus for discussion and research on issues relevant to the work of the Council of Europe and prepare reports, draft declarations, recommendations and resolutions that are then discussed at the INGO general assembly.

Presidents are elected every three years and can be re-elected once. The president is supported by two vice-presidents and eight elected members of the standing committee.

Through the work of the Conference of INGOs, the Council of Europe ensures civil society has its place in intergovernmental activities and the means to connect with members of parliament and local and regional authorities on challenges facing society. The Conference of INGOs is an important partner to the other Council of Europe institutions.

NGOs can also become involved in intergovernmental committees

NGOs can also become involved in intergovernmental committees so that they can contribute to the policy-making process (article 8 of CM/Res(2021)3). This role is strengthened in the terms of reference for 2022-2025, which asked for all committees to enhance the role of civil society in their work wherever relevant.

Expert council on NGO law

The Expert Council carries out thematic and country studies on specific aspects of NGO legislation and its conformity with international standards, especially the European Convention on Human Rights and recommendation (2007)14 on the legal status of NGOs in Europe.

It was set up in January 2008 by the Conference of INGOs with the aim of creating an enabling environment through examining national NGO legislation and its implementation and providing advice on how to bring national law and practice into line with Council of Europe standards and European good practice.

It is composed of 15 members with expertise in different areas, such as the law, human rights and good practice. Members are appointed by the Conference of INGOs for a three-year term and serve in their personal capacity.

It carries out the following types of work:

- ▶ monitoring the legal and regulatory frameworks affecting NGOs throughout Europe and how those frameworks are implemented, including country visits and thematic consultations;
- ▶ preparing opinions and studies on whether national laws and regulations affecting the status and operation of NGOs are compatible with international standards;
- ▶ producing thematic studies analysing legal, regulatory and policy issues affecting NGOs;
- ▶ providing advice and training and carrying out awareness-raising activities about the standards applicable to the status and operation of NGOs.

Other work includes contributing to Council of Europe inter-governmental standard-setting work and supporting the president of the Conference of the INGOs

The Expert Council prepares opinions and thematic studies either on its own initiative or at the request of the Conference of INGOs, NGOs, national authorities or Council of Europe bodies. Once adopted, these are presented to the Conference of INGOs, which decides on the follow-up required and ensures that they are shared. [Make contact with the Expert Council using this form.](#)

COMMITTEES' WORK (STANDARD-SETTING AND MONITORING) AND NGOS

Committee work lies at the heart of the Council of Europe. It allows governmental and independent experts to participate directly and is the main tool to **develop and monitor policy instruments and legal standards, building a common pan-European legal space.**

The first type of committee includes **steering committees, ad hoc committees and subordinate bodies**: for the period 2024 to 2027 there are 25 steering or ad hoc committees and 19 subordinate bodies for the Ordinary Budget. Their job is to draw up policy texts and legal standards, such as treaties or recommendations. These committees are made up of representatives from member states who have the highest possible rank in the relevant field. They include relevant international and regional organisations, civil society and other partners in their work. An NGO can request observer status in accordance with the conditions set forth under article 8 of Resolution CM/Res(2021)3.

The second type of committee monitors Council of Europe policies and legal texts and ensures these are always relevant. They include:

- ▶ committees representing parties to a given treaty;
- ▶ committees representing all member states which follow a specific resolution (legal text) of the Committee of Ministers;
- ▶ committees composed of independent experts, sitting in their individual capacity (independent monitoring or advisory committees);
- ▶ committees established to manage partial and enlarged agreements, which only include certain member states of the Council of Europe ("partial") and possibly also non-member states ("enlarged").

These committees involve civil society in their work in different ways, according to their respective rules.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S CO-OPERATION SECTOR AND NGOS

Active participation by civil society in co-operation programmes is essential, both in devising and implementing them and in helping member states and other partners achieve European standards and practice. **Civil society is involved in co-operation activities across all sectors.** The Council of Europe supports independent monitoring and puts considerable emphasis on fostering dialogue between civil society and authorities to ensure reforms are relevant and transparent. One example is consultative NGO councils that allow civil society to become involved in the design and implementation of national policies. **Civil society regularly takes part in Council of Europe activities** such as public hearings and training sessions and is involved in different stages of technical co-operation activities, either formally, informally or through direct engagement in project delivery.

The Council of Europe applies a [project management methodology](#) at all levels and stages of its co-operation programmes, bringing human rights norms and processes into project management, avoiding any unintentional harm, imbalance or negative impact in its work and achieving sustainable and high quality outcomes. The human rights approach is guided by four main principles: participation and inclusion, including engagement with civil society; equality and non-discrimination, by including and empowering vulnerable people; accountability to partners, beneficiaries and the public, and transparency and access to information.

Co-operation is usually managed through a country action plan or similar programming documents in accordance with the [guidelines on civil society organisations' participation in Council of Europe's co-operation activities](#). Civil Society is always included in drawing up and carrying out action plans. At project level, civil society participates in steering committee meetings and in the implementation of some project activities. They are the main target group of some projects.

The Council of Europe also has numerous [Field Offices](#) that support the implementation of cooperation activities.



INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNING BODIES

Committee of Ministers

The **Committee of Ministers** is the Council of Europe's **statutory decision-making body**. It is made up of the ministers of **foreign affairs from each member state**. It meets at **ministerial level** once a year and at ministers' deputies level (permanent representatives) approximately 30-35 times a year. The deputies are assisted by a bureau, rapporteur groups, thematic co-ordinators and ad hoc working parties. The Committee's role and functions and the conduct of meetings is governed by the statute and rules of procedure. The Committee of Ministers' work includes supervising how member states execute judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

Each year, the president of the Conference of INGOs takes part in an exchange of views with the ministers' deputies and is also invited to various meetings, including the ministerial sessions. The president sometimes attends meetings of rapporteur groups to speak about activities or give input to a Committee of Ministers debate. Representatives of NGOs have been invited to participate in thematic debates organised by the ministers' deputies.

Following decisions taken at the 2019 Committee of Ministers meeting in Helsinki, three rapporteur groups covering issues relating to human rights, democracy and legal co-operation organised regular informal exchanges of views with civil society on a specific topic.

European Court of Human Rights

The **European Court of Human Rights**, set up by the **European Convention on Human Rights**, is the Council of Europe's independent international judicial body. Its **principal mission is to ensure that member states observe their commitments to the Convention** by examining applications from people who allege there has been a violation of their human rights as protected by the **ECHR Convention** and delivering a judgment where the application is admissible and well-founded. Many cases come to the Court each year, and the number is growing, proving that its role in protecting and improving the **rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights** is more relevant than ever.

The Court is making continuous efforts to speed up the examination of cases and improve its working methods and case management. A new strategy launched in 2021 ensured increasingly focused and efficient processing of cases, while applications continue to be filtered effectively. The strategy aims to prioritise chamber cases so judgments and decisions in high impact cases are delivered quickly and to strengthen the ability to deal with



key legal issues of relevance. Almost all other cases, with the exception of Grand Chamber cases, are dealt with as efficiently as possible by the committees.

[More information on how to apply can be found here.](#)

There are two other ways in which the Court works with civil society.

Firstly, the Court president can decide to invite anyone concerned with a case who is not the applicant to submit written comments or take part in a hearing. This is called the third-party intervention mechanism ([article 36 of the Convention](#)) and over the years it has allowed several NGOs engaged in defending human rights or interested in a relevant sector of law to submit their arguments to the Court. Third-party interventions by NGOs are fairly common and cover a broad spectrum of issues such as the relationship between religion and state, the rights of minorities, the rights of LGBTI people and abortion rights. NGOs offer a wide range of submissions, from legal points to facts and figures, information on governmental policy, or details on whether there is consensus or divergence of views amongst member states on certain issues. NGO submissions are often referred to in judgments.

Secondly, NGOs can be involved in meetings and seminars. Once every two years, normally in late November or the beginning of December, the Court holds a general meeting with representatives of the main European NGOs specialised in litigation to discuss case law developments and procedural matters. Seminars on specific topics are organised on an ad hoc basis, to which representatives of NGOs with particular expertise in the subject matter are invited. Judges and lawyers travel all over Europe – sometimes, beyond the borders of Europe – to events aimed at sharing the Court’s case law and practice with different sectors of civil society, for instance, conferences for journalists on freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

Commissioner for Human Rights

The **Commissioner for Human Rights** is an **independent** and **non-judicial institution** established in 1999 by the Committee of Ministers. The Commissioner operates under a wide mandate. The **rapid reaction capacity** is one of the main assets of the institution.

The Commissioner’s mission is to promote awareness of and respect for human rights in member states by encouraging reforms and assisting them in implementing Council of Europe human rights standards.

The Commissioner is in constant dialogue with member states and other stakeholders, including national human rights structures, and carries out visits to member states to monitor and evaluate the human rights situation, addressing key problems and giving precise recommendations through country-specific reports. The Commissioner publishes thematic documents on specific questions, can intervene as a third party in European Court of Human Rights’ proceedings and can address communications to the Committee of Ministers as part of its role in supervising the execution of Court judgments. The Commissioner also contributes during emerging crises or in post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Civil society and human rights defenders are key partners for the Commissioner: protecting human rights defenders and promoting an enabling environment for their work lie at the core of the mandate. The Commissioner for



Human Rights' specific role with regard to human rights defenders is highlighted in the [Committee of Ministers declaration on action to improve the protection of human rights defenders and promote their activities of 6 February 2008](#). Throughout the years, commissioners have used various tools in the framework of their mandate with the aim of improving the situation of human rights defenders, assisting them when they are at risk and promoting their work. A [dedicated page on the Commissioner's website](#) contains information on the institution's work in this area.

The Commissioner's meetings with representatives of civil society and human rights defenders are an integral part of visits to member states. The Commissioner also holds thematic consultations with representatives of civil society and draws upon their expertise while preparing [issue papers](#), [human rights comments](#) and other publications. [Contact the Commissioner's office here](#).

Parliamentary Assembly

The Parliamentary Assembly, along with the Committee of Ministers, is one of the two statutory bodies of the Organisation. It acts as the democratic conscience of Europe, speaking on behalf of Europe's 700 million citizens through their elected representatives. It is sometimes regarded as the "driving force" of the Council of Europe, since it generates many ideas and initiatives which are subsequently taken up by other parts of the organisation.

It is made up of parliamentary delegations from the 46 member states which mirror the political balance in their home parliaments and holds four week-long plenary part-sessions each year. Though it has no power to pass binding laws, it debates and adopts recommendations, resolutions and opinions on any theme dealt with by the Council of Europe, including on the most topical or controversial issues.

The Assembly can demand action from the Committee of Ministers, with which it holds an ongoing dialogue, and its members have the power to question Presidents and Prime Ministers on any topic. It scrutinises the actions of governments, monitors how far member states are respecting the commitments they made on joining the Organisation, and can investigate particular human rights abuses in a member state if national inquiries are lacking or inadequate. It must also give its green light before any country can join the Council of Europe and has used this power to set conditions on membership, such as ending the death penalty.

The Assembly acts as a champion of the European Convention on Human Rights, which it helped to draw up, demanding new protocols to deal with fresh human rights challenges, pressing states to implement rulings of the Strasbourg Court, and electing its judges to guarantee their independence and legitimacy. It also has the power to request opinions from legal experts in the Venice Commission on whether new laws in member states are compatible with the Council of Europe's democratic and human rights standards. Assembly delegations regularly observe elections in member or partner countries as part of international election observation missions.

When invited, the Conference of INGOs participates in relevant committee meetings, in particular those of the [Migration, Equality, Social Affairs and Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committees](#). This latter has also appointed a General Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.



Just as in national parliaments, NGOs often provide valuable data and information when Assembly reports are being drafted and can be invited to give testimony at parliamentary hearings organised by the committees. They are able to inform and advise Assembly members in person during country visits and sessions in Strasbourg and actively contribute to the organisation of side-events and hearings to raise awareness of particular issues. In particular, national NGOs are often consulted by the rapporteurs preparing regular assessments of the countries subject to the Assembly's monitoring procedure.

More widely, the Assembly is a stout defender of civil society and a champion of human rights defenders, both of whom may be under pressure in their home countries. It has created the **Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize** to honour outstanding work by human rights defenders, and adopted a series of resolutions and recommendations on this topic, among which:

- ▶ Resolution 2382 (2021): Media freedom, public trust and the people's right to know
- ▶ Resolution 2378 (2021): Strengthening the role of young people in the prevention and resolution of conflicts
- ▶ Resolution 2362 (2021): Restrictions on NGO activities in Council of Europe member states
- ▶ Recommendation 2194 (2021): Restrictions on NGO activities in Council of Europe member states
- ▶ Resolution 2225 (2018): Protecting human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States
- ▶ Recommendation 2133 (2018): Protecting human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States
- ▶ Resolution 2226 (2018): New restrictions on NGOs activities in Council of Europe member States
- ▶ Recommendation 2134 (2018): New restrictions on NGOs activities in Council of Europe member States

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

The **Congress** is a **bicameral assembly of local and regional elected** representatives including municipal or regional councillors, and mayors or presidents of regional authorities. Its mission is to **improve local and regional democracy in Europe**, to advance decentralisation and regionalisation processes, and foster transfrontier co-operation between cities and regions. It brings local and regional authorities' perspective of democracy, human rights and rule of law to the Council of Europe and serves as a promoter of the Organisation's values and standards at that level. The Congress co-operates with the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Commissioner for Human Rights, and steering committees.

The **European Charter of Local Self-Government** is the international benchmark for local and regional democracy and one of the Congress's main activities is to regularly assess how member states are applying it to their own local and regional democracy, including through monitoring visits. The Congress helps national, local and regional authorities implement changes suggested in its recommendations and offers expertise in several fields such as evaluating the legal and institutional framework or contributing to drafting new laws and policies.

The Congress observes local and regional elections at the invitation of the national authorities concerned. During their observation missions, delegations meet with various local and international NGOs.

It works in close co-operation with the Council of Europe Venice Commission and other international organisations such as the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). It maintains close institutional relations with European partner organisations in areas of common concern, with a co-operation agreement signed in 2018 with the European Union Committee of the Regions that ensures complementarity and avoids duplication. It also has co-operation agreements with the Assembly of European Regions, the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies, and the Association of European Border Regions.

The Congress has always recognised the importance of co-operation between local and regional authorities and NGOs: in 2008 it published a [joint memorandum](#) on this theme with the Conference of INGOs. The revised “[Code of good practice for civil participation in the decision-making process](#)”, adopted in parallel by the Congress and the Conference of INGOs in 2019, defines ways to strengthen civil participation and sets out mechanisms for NGO participation while taking into account social and technological changes. A [toolkit to support the code](#) was developed and is in use within different co-operation projects. It includes an inventory of good practices and provides guidelines for local and regional authorities to ensure civil participation in political decision-making processes. The online compendium BePart is a new project developed jointly by the Congress, the Conference of INGOs and the Council of Europe’s Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy to offer public authorities and NGOs the opportunity to share best practices on successful implementation of the code.

The Congress offers four types of partnership status for European and international organisations and associations of cities and regions: statutory partner, institutional partner, observer partner and guest observer. Since 2014, the Congress invites one young person from each member state, chosen via a selection process, to participate as a youth delegate in its sessions and committee meetings. Follow these links for [more information on partnership](#) and on the [BePart initiative](#).

The Congress has adopted the following reports and resolutions to promote civil society participation. It was also the driving force behind the [European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#):

- ▶ **Resolution 452 (2019):** Revised Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-making Process
- ▶ **Resolution 385 (2015):** Fostering active citizenship by building partnerships with civil society
- ▶ **Resolution 404 (2016):** Women’s political participation and representation at local and regional levels
- ▶ **Resolution 386 (2015) :** Bringing down barriers to youth participation: adopting a lingua franca for local and regional authorities and young people
- ▶ **Resolution 371 (2014):** Promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities and their participation at local and regional levels
- ▶ **Resolution 366 (2014):** Empowering Roma youth through participation : effective policy design at local and regional levels

The **Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance** (CEMG) at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is an important hub for cooperation projects that address public administration and multilevel governance reforms; develop capacities of staff and elected officials of local and regional authorities; and deliver advice to promote good democratic governance.

CEMG projects and activities aim to promote the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy and **Principles of Good Democratic Governance**, in line with the commitments of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe to “**secure and strengthen democracy and good governance at all levels throughout Europe**”.

It does this by creating and developing partnerships and networks with national and international stakeholders; by developing impact-oriented practical tools; and by actively enabling and encouraging democratic participation at all levels.

Strong **cooperation with civil society, including associations of local authorities and youth organisations**, is actively pursued to promote effective participation in decision-making processes at all levels.

The Centre organises country-specific and ad hoc training and capacity building activities which are often open to (and benefit from) the participation of civil society. A specific e-tool on the [12 principles](#) is freely available to all interested participants on the e-learning HELP platform.



Secretary General

The **Secretary General leads and represents the Organisation**. Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly for a five-year term, the Secretary General is responsible for the **strategic planning and direction of the Council's work programme and budget**. **Alain Berset** became Secretary General of the Council of Europe on 18 September 2024.

The Secretary General's Roadmap on **Civil society** engagement with the Council of Europe 2024-2027 (SG/Inf(2023)28), produced by his predecessor, was published on 15 December 2023.

The Roadmap puts forward the Secretary General's proposals aimed at shaping a policy for meaningful engagement with civil society as a whole, including youth civil society, in all aspects of the intergovernmental work (standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation activities) building on the existing framework and on [decisions adopted at the ministerial session in Helsinki in May 2019](#), "A shared responsibility for democratic security in Europe – the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe". As the [Reykjavík Principles for Democracy](#), appended to the [Reykjavík Declaration](#), reaffirm: "civil society is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy".

The Secretary General's proposals build on existing standards and practice and other relevant discussions, including consultations with national delegations and civil society. They focus on areas where further action was identified as necessary and complement the existing framework of work with civil society. The Secretary General has continued to repeat the message that civil society and NGOs are key partners of the Council of Europe, including in her annual reports, highlighting the way their work complements government and international organisations, especially given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ensuing emergency measures. This support for the role and diversity of civil society, including human rights defenders and national human rights institutions in member states, is reflected in key priority 11 of the [Council of Europe's strategic framework](#) and was echoed by the [corresponding decision taken at the Hamburg ministerial session on 21 May 2021](#). On this occasion, the Committee of Ministers reiterated the commitment to strengthening the role and meaningful participation of civil society and national human rights institutions.

The Secretary General's procedure to assist human rights defenders

The Secretary General has set up a [procedure to assist human rights defenders](#) who allege that they have been subject to reprisals because of their interaction with the Council of Europe. This is managed by the Secretary General's private office based on the existing mandates within the Organisation. The information provided should include precise elements regarding the persons/entities subject to the alleged reprisals; as to the nature of the alleged incidents (when, where and how they have occurred and by whom). The assessment considers whether the reprisal or risk thereof meets a minimum level of severity, upon which it will warrant consideration. The assessment of this minimum level will depend on the circumstances of the case; there should be a reasonable degree of causality between the interaction or the intention to interact and the alleged reprisal. Any action under the procedure does not interfere with European Court of Human Rights procedures or the activities of the Parliamentary Assembly or the Commissioner for Human Rights.

Patronage

The [Secretary General's patronage](#) is non-material support which may be granted to any non-profit event which has a European dimension and is of clear political importance to the Council of Europe's activities or objectives. A limited number of events are granted patronage each year. No financial undertaking is linked to the granting of patronage, as the Council of Europe has no budgetary resources beyond those which are used to implement its intergovernmental work programme.

AT A GLANCE: SELECTED MAIN TEXTS

Several texts are mentioned in the developments related to the various Council of Europe bodies and their work. The most important ones are gathered here for the sake of convenience.

The first set concerns the legal instruments and other policy-related texts (the standards) aimed at shaping legislation and policies in the member States regarding a safe and enabling civic space as well as promoting the participatory dimension of democracy: these provide a picture of what civil societies across Europe can expect in terms of legal frameworks, policies and practices from the authorities at central, regional and local level in the countries where they conduct activities.

The second set refers to the modalities of cooperation with the Council of Europe.

Legal instruments and other policy texts on civil society

- ▶ Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 5)
- ▶ European Social Charter (revised) (ETS No. 163)
- ▶ European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207)
- ▶ European Convention on the Recognition of the Legal Personality of International Non-Governmental Organisations (ETS No. 124)

- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6 on deliberative democracy
- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)6 on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes
- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe
- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)4 on the participation of citizens in local public life
- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)14 on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe

- ▶ Revised Code of good practice for civil participation in the decision-making process (2019)
- ▶ Guidelines for civil participation in political decision making (CM(2017)83-final)
- ▶ Venice Commission and OSCE-ODIHR Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association (CDL-AD(2014)046)
- ▶ Congress Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2003)
- ▶ CINGO: Expert Council on NGO Law: periodic general reports, country studies/opinions and special thematic reports on developments in national standards, developments and case law

Cooperation with the Council of Europe

- ▶ Secretary General's Roadmap on the Council of Europe's engagement with civil society 2024-2027 (SG/Inf(2023)28)
- ▶ Report of the Secretary General's First Regular Exchange of Views with Civil Society (15 September 2023)
- ▶ Resolution CM/Res(2021)3 on intergovernmental committees and subordinate bodies, their terms of reference and working methods
- ▶ Resolution CM/Res(2016)3 on participatory status for international non-governmental organisations with the Council of Europe



THEMES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CHILDREN

Violence in different forms and settings, lack of access to justice, challenges due to new technologies, poverty, social exclusion and discrimination disproportionately affect children. The Council of Europe is committed to ensure the **effective protection of children and to empower them in fulfilling their rights**. It adopts a transversal approach around **multi-annual strategies** aimed at maximising states individual and collective capacity to **make the rights of children a reality**: the current strategy runs from 2022 to 2027.

Challenges are addressed through targeted actions. Member states are supported with guidelines and other tools to implement international and Council of Europe standards on children's rights. Tailored support is also provided through co-operation activities. Partnerships with other international organisations and civil society are developed to ensure coherence, to make the most of synergies and to strengthen the impact of action taken.

Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF)

The CDENF guides intergovernmental work in the field of the rights of the child and advises the Committee of Ministers on appropriate action to be taken.

Focus 2024-2027

The CDENF's *Terms of Reference* for the period 2024-2027 set out in detail its tasks and responsibilities, with a focus on the following topics:

- ▶ Oversee the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027);

- ▶ Prevent and combat violence against children, including through the provision of guidance on age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education;
- ▶ Ensure justice is adapted to children's needs, by carrying out a thematic review of the Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers on Child-friendly justice and by developing guidance on multidisciplinary and interagency services for child-friendly justice;
- ▶ Protect the best interests of the child in parental separation and in care proceedings;
- ▶ Promote children's participation;
- ▶ Protect children's personal data and privacy;
- ▶ Analyse issues on children and artificial intelligence.

During this period, the CDENF also oversees the following subordinate bodies:

- ▶ The Committee of Experts on the rights and the best interests of the child in parental separation and in care proceedings (CJ/ENF-ISE), jointly with the European Committee on Legal Co-operation (CDCJ),
- ▶ The Committee of Experts on the prevention of violence (ENF-VAE), and
- ▶ The Committee of Experts on access to child-friendly justice through multidisciplinary and Interagency services (ENF-JUS).

Civil society involvement

The CDENF, as well as its subordinate bodies, includes representatives from civil society:

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers: several international and European NGOs
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, dedicated hearings, in writing or through collaboration in child participation activities

Protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Lanzarote Convention)

The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, also known as Lanzarote Convention, criminalises all forms of sexual offences against children. It requires States to adopt specific legislation and take measures to prevent sexual violence, to protect child victims and to prosecute perpetrators.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are encouraged to actively participate in the monitoring and capacity building work of the Lanzarote Committee. The Committee invites CSOs to provide additional information to the questionnaires sent out during its monitoring rounds and by implementing child participation workshops to feed into the Committee's monitoring work. National and local CSOs may also take part as speakers in the meetings and capacity building events of the Committee. International non-governmental organisations working in the field of prevention and protection of children from sexual abuse and sexual exploitation may be admitted as observers to the Lanzarote Committee.

For more information on how to contribute to the Lanzarote Committee's work, please see the dedicated webpage.

18 November

Civil society has an essential role to play in raising awareness on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse on the occasion of our annual awareness raising day: 18 November. Many CSOs undertake activities to combat sexual violence against children in the context of this day. Their activities are promoted on a dedicated website – [End Child Sex Abuse Day](#). This helps build stronger ties with the Council of Europe in general and the Children's Rights Division in particular.

Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU)

As a practical implementation of the Declaration on the situation of the children of Ukraine (Appendix II of the [Reykjavík Declaration](#)), a **Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU)** was formally launched in November 2023.

The main objective of the CGU is to act as an operational platform to facilitate dialogue and the exchange of information, in a multilateral setting, on policies regarding Ukrainian children residing in Council of Europe member states.

41 Council of Europe member states (situation: October 2024) have appointed national experts responsible for decision making and co-ordination of issues related to children of Ukraine, mainly from Ministries of Social Affairs, but also from Ministries of Justice or Interior.

Other strategic partners, including the **European Commission**, the **EU Asylum Agency (EUAA)**, the **EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)**, **UNHCR**, **UNICEF ECARO**, the **Hague Conference on Private International Law (HCCH)**, and some key civil society organisations, have also nominated focal points, both Ukrainian and European umbrella organisations.

Co-operation projects

To support states in implementing children's rights, the Council of Europe offers technical assistance that focuses on reviewing legislation and policies, on training and on awareness-raising. The co-operation activities are built on the standards and monitoring findings of the Organisation and flow from the priorities of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child. The Children's Rights Division co-operates with civil society as part of these projects and grassroots NGOs are always invited to contribute on issues such as child-friendly justice, juvenile justice, child sexual exploitation and abuse – including online – and eliminating all forms of violence against children.



DEMOCRACY

The **Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM)** has been established as a result of the commitment by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe at their 4th Summit in Reykjavik 2023, its role being to lead the Council of Europe's intergovernmental work in the field of democracy.

In accordance with its [Terms of Reference 2024-2027](#), the CDDEM will assist member states in ensuring that their political and legal systems are resilient and continue to improve, rather than erode democracy. To that end, the CDDEM will hold exchanges of experience and good practices among member states and on that basis develop common policy responses, standards and tools to strengthen democracy, its institutions and processes and good governance at all levels.

The CDDEM will innovate the Council of Europe's work on democracy by addressing the performance of democratic systems as a whole, meaning their institutional architecture and the entirety of their legal and policy mechanisms and safeguards. This holistic approach is to complement and further the sectoral work of the Organisation on individual essential elements of democracy and, to this end, the Steering Committee will collaborate closely with its sectoral counterparts. In addition, the CDDEM will work on democratic renewal through participatory and deliberative models of democracy at all levels, towards meaningful participation in democratic life of all members of society.

The CDDEM's work in addressing democratic challenges and evolution will be grounded in the [Reykjavik Principles for Democracy](#) as the core elements that underpin democratic systems, and one of the first tasks of the Committee will be to operationalise these principles through concrete parameters.

In addition to this, the CDDEM Terms of Reference focus on:

- ▶ Enhancing the meaningful engagement of civil society and supporting a safe and enabling civic space by providing guidance and input in the operationalisation of the Roadmap on the Council of Europe's Engagement with Civil Society ([SG/Inf\(2023\)28](#)), working on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe and the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.

- ▶ Furthering participative and deliberative democracy by promoting the participation in public life of all citizens, and in particular youth, women and girls, exploring new forms of participation, as well as literacy on how to use AI in democratic life.

- ▶ Supporting elections

by addressing disaffection of voters, in particular youth and vulnerable groups and exploring the need for policy actions, also addressing how emerging technologies can be harnessed to enhance democratic processes.

- ▶ Supporting democracy and good governance reform

by working on good governance, which is crucial for a sustainable democracy and building people's trust in public institutions.

Civil Society

In 2019, the Committee of Ministers pointed to the need to [strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe](#) and promoted a series of initiatives in this direction. More recently, The Heads of State and Government of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe adopted the [Reykjavík Declaration](#) in 2023 and reconfirmed the need to reinforce the Council of Europe's engagement with civil society: "We also call for a review and further reinforcement of the Organisation's outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations and national human rights institutions." As a follow-up to this declaration, the Secretary General developed a Roadmap on the Council of Europe's Engagement with Civil Society (SG/Inf(2023)28) aimed at shaping a policy for meaningful engagement with civil society as a whole, in all aspects of the Council of Europe work including standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation activities. Moreover, one of the aims of the Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM) created in 2024 (see above) is to contribute to strengthening meaningful engagement of national human rights institutions and civil society in the Council of Europe work, in line with the Reykjavik Declaration and the Secretary General's Roadmap.

Please see also the section [What role for non-governmental organisations \(NGOS\) in the work of the Council of Europe?](#)

Civil participation

The heart of [participatory democracy](#) is that citizens' interests and needs should be the focus of every political decision-making process at all governance levels. Participatory and deliberative processes allow for exactly that – giving citizens the possibility to take part in decision-making and to provide the impulse for change.

Different standards have been adopted under the aegis of the Council of Europe, including [guidelines for civil participation in political decision making](#), Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of citizens in local public life, Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on deliberative democracy and a [code of good practice for civil participation in the decision-making process](#). Round table events, expert discussions, capacity building and public campaigns are organised to raise awareness and knowledge regarding international and European standards such as those above, always including NGOs and citizens, and technical assistance is provided to introduce innovative formats of citizens engagement.

Various [tools supporting participatory democracy](#) are available on the webpages devoted to this subject, including to analyse and forecast decision options, a game-based training for citizens and schoolchildren and a toolkit for young girls and women from disadvantaged groups.

The online platform BePART provides a space for peer-to-peer learning for practitioners from public institutions and civil society through sharing good practice examples of civil participation Initiatives: [Share your own good practice here](#).

World Forum for Democracy

Initiated in 2012, the **World Forum for Democracy** is a platform for **dialogue and innovation in democratic governance**, which promotes Council of Europe principles across the world. It is a unique platform for **political decision-makers and activists to debate solutions** to key challenges for democracies worldwide, giving people their rightful place in political decision-making. By identifying and analysing grassroots initiatives and



practices, the Forum **highlights and encourages democratic innovations** that strengthen the foundations of democratic societies, thus contributing to the evolution of democracy towards more participatory and inclusive structures and institutions.

The World Forum for Democracy is organised by the Council of Europe in partnership with the French Government, the Region Grand Est, the European Collectivity of Alsace, and the City of Strasbourg. Participation is free of charge and open to the public.

The Conference of the INGOs (CINGO) has a representative on the steering group of the World Forum for Democracy.

Access to official documents

Access to official documents – often referred to as freedom of information – is a crucial component of **good democratic governance**. It allows citizens and the media more effectively to scrutinise the activities of public authorities, thereby forming a **safeguard against corruption** in public life. Freedom of information is an important component of **freedom of expression** under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and contributes to the activities of the **media and civil society**.

The Council of Europe **Convention on access to official documents**, known as the **Tromsø Convention**, is the **first binding international legal instrument** to recognise the right to access official documents held by public authorities without discrimination and regardless of an individual's status or motives in seeking access. In this respect, it goes further than the freedom of information recognised by the European Court of Human Rights under Article 10 of the ECHR, and is not limited to journalists. Adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2009, it entered into force in 2020.

Access Info Group

The **Access Info Group** (AIG) is the group of independent experts established under the Tromsø Convention to evaluate the Parties' implementation of the convention. The AIG currently has 10 members, elected by the Consultation of the Parties to the convention in March 2022 for a four-year, once-renewable term of office. At its first meeting in November 2022, the AIG elected Helena Jäderblom as its chairperson.

- ▶ Civil society involvement
- ▶ The AIG's **Rules of Procedure** state that only its members, Secretariat, and other persons invited or approved to do so by the Group participate in its meetings.
- ▶ The AIG may consult relevant civil society actors in the course of its work, including by inviting them to submit written comments on the reports submitted by the Parties or the AIG's own draft evaluation reports. It may also hold hearings with relevant civil society actors.
- ▶ All of the AIG's information is made public, subject to certain specific limited exceptions.



Elections

The Council of Europe works to ensure there is an **adequate regulatory framework for elections and civil participation**, building up the necessary capacities of public authorities and civil society to ensure **free and fair elections** and **effective and transparent engagement of citizens in the political decision-making process**. The aim is to create effective and sustainable citizen participation, which in turn will legitimise institutions and build trust.

Electoral cooperation is based on standard-setting, monitoring, and co-operation, guided by Council of Europe recommendations, opinions and other texts.

Co-operation is based on reports from election observation missions and **Venice Commission** opinions to help member states resolve shortcomings identified during the electoral process. If a member state or partner institution requests, the Council of Europe can also provide rapid response support before or after elections.

The Council of Europe works closely with electoral management bodies to ensure that election officials at all levels are familiar with international standards and national regulations, so that the integrity and transparency of the electoral process and voters' rights are guaranteed. Special attention is paid to strengthening the capacities of NGOs in charge of domestic observation of elections. There are for example various handbooks, including **Reporting on Elections**, **Council of Europe Handbook for Civil Society Organisations** and **Using International Standards in elections: Council of Europe Handbook for Civil Society Organisations**.

Another useful resource is **The Vote Outside of the Box** project and its **online course**, which supports NGOs to develop strategic approaches to raise awareness of electoral processes and to build electoral knowledge amongst young people as potential first-time voters.

The Council of Europe also contributes to awareness raising on the importance of participating in elections both as voters and candidates. It assists election administrations in developing voter education and information campaigns, with special focus on **women**, **monitoring of media coverage**, national minorities and other underrepresented groups of voters.

Further publications interesting for **NGOs working on electoral matters** can be found on **ElecLab**, an online compendium of electoral data, which produces interactive maps and graphics, such as analysis of the electoral process, trends concerning turnout, and representation of women in national parliaments. ElecLab provides information on the frequency of parliamentary elections and tracks general trends. It also provides direct links to election observation mission reports and recommendations adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress.



DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Artificial Intelligence

The Council of Europe, through the work of its various bodies and of the *ad hoc* Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAHAI), later succeeded by the Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAI), has long concerned itself with the problems confronting humankind as a result of advances in information and digital technologies, and in particular algorithmic and artificial intelligence (AI) systems.

The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS No 225) was adopted in May 2024 by the Committee of Ministers and opened for signature on 5 September 2024. It is a first-of-its-kind global legally binding instrument designed to ensure that activities within the lifecycle of AI systems respects common standards in human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and to minimise the risk of those rights and principles being undermined as a result of the use of AI systems.

The Framework Convention adopts a risk-based approach considering the severity and likelihood of a negative impact on human rights, democracy and the rule of law by AI systems. This requires a methodology to guide and assist in identifying contexts and applications where the deployment of AI systems could pose risks to the enjoyment of human rights, the functioning of democracy and the observance of the rule of law, and to assess and mitigate these risks. The development of this methodology, called HUDERIA (acronym for Methodology for the Risk and Impact Assessment of Artificial Intelligence Systems from the point of view of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law), is the main focus of the CAI's work at present.

Civil society, research and academic institutions which have been admitted as observers by the CAI participate in its activities.

The Framework Convention is complemented by sector-specific work throughout the Council of Europe.

Data Protection

The Council of Europe was the first to create a legally binding text on **data protection** when **Convention 108** was opened for signature in January 1981. Its principles are valid to this day, but with the immense shift in communication technology new approaches were needed and a modernised version – **Convention 108+** – was developed, which lays down principles on **respecting individual human rights in respect of personal data processing**.

The Conventional Committee of Convention 108 (T-PD) is responsible for interpreting its provisions and ensuring its implementation through multilateral exchange and co-operation. It strives to enable the evolution of data protection and to extend its influence beyond European national or regional borders. The Committee develops recommendations and guiding documents to help states and all concerned stakeholders to implement its principles and to follow and anticipate evolutions in technology and society that might impact on the processing of personal data.

Its focus in 2022-2025 is on promoting more ratifications of the modernised convention; providing guidance on data protection issues related to digital identity, anti-money laundering action, data protection, including the use of biometrics in voting and elections, digital identity in the context of migration and setting up evaluation and follow-up mechanism.

Civil society is a key partner in the work to ensure human rights are respected in the collection and processing of personal data. Committee members, staff and the Council of Europe Data Protection Commissioner regularly take part in events organised by civil society involved in data protection and privacy. Civil society is also an important partner in technical assistance and co-operation activities, especially regarding legal development and awareness raising. Once Convention 108+ comes into force civil society will be included in monitoring activities.

The Convention gives NGOs active on data protection issues the possibility to observe and to contribute following a specific procedure.



EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Education for Democracy

Europe is experiencing a **backsliding of democracy**. Many citizens – and some political leaders – resort to seemingly **simple solutions to complex issues**, encourage distrust in institutions, disregard facts and engage in hate speech against the vulnerable and those who do not share their views. This reflects a lack of knowledge and understanding of **how to deal with increasingly complex issues** that is amplified by digital technologies.

The Council of Europe is well placed to support policy makers, educators and young people to develop the competences needed to build and maintain genuine democracy thanks to policy initiatives such as the **reference framework of competences for democratic culture**, the **common European framework of reference for languages** and various **recommendations** by the Committee of Ministers. It works to encourage member states through their education ministries to develop a diverse and participatory model of education that is designed to engage critical thinking in a safe environment; providing a range of standards, tools and practices that can be adapted to local situations. Schools, higher education institutions and universities, specialised agencies, NGOs and young democratic leaders are also involved.

Steering Committee for Education – CDEDU

The CDEDU oversees action in the field of education and advises the Committee of Ministers. Rooted in the four purposes of education as defined by the Committee of Ministers, the overall aim of the education programme is to support member states in developing their policies, legislation and practice in view of promoting democratic, quality, inclusive and corruption-free education systems, taking into account the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Democratic Culture. The CDEDU focuses on Council of Europe priority areas and covers all levels and strands of education.

Focus 2024-2030

Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024-2030 “*Learners First – Education for Today’s and Tomorrow’s Democratic Societies*”, Renewing the democratic and civic mission of education; enhancing the social responsibility and responsiveness of education; advancing education through a human rights-based digital transformation; learner autonomy; flexibility in curriculum and programme design; professional development; inclusion and participation; democratic and participatory governance of education systems and institutions.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, through dedicated hearings or in writing.

European Centre for Modern Languages (Graz)

In recent years there has been a marked loss of support for **learning foreign languages**, leading to a rise in intolerance towards other people and cultures and the languages they speak. The **acceptance of minority and migrant languages** is also under threat. These concerns are directly addressed in [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)1 on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture](#).

The mission of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), based in Graz, Austria, is to promote excellence and innovation in language education practice. It works with language professionals to develop research-informed solutions to key challenges in language education. It runs four-year programmes which provide the framework for multilateral development projects, organises in-country capacity building and runs a range of activities for a wider public.

The ECML coordinates the European Day of Languages each year on 26 September, which promotes the continent's rich linguistic diversity and highlights the many and varied benefits of language learning. It is celebrated by hundreds of thousands of language learners and teachers worldwide.

The ECML involves over one thousand language education professionals each year in its face-to-face training events in Graz and in the member states, as well as through webinars, think tanks and conferences.

The ECML engages with civil society through its [professional network forum](#) which meets annually in Graz and whose members often contribute to ECML events. This forum, which was established in 2010, currently brings together 16 international associations and institutions that share the core values of the Council of Europe and its commitment to plurilingual and intercultural education. Each member has a particular focus within the broad field of language education which can be sectoral – e.g. higher education or informal/non-formal learning, or topical – e.g. assessment or pluralistic approaches. This forum provides a unique platform for INGOs to share expertise and know-how. Members work together on themes of major relevance in language education, including through the production of publications such as *“From crisis to sustainability: policy guidelines on supporting the development of language education”*.

Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTe)

The **Observatory on History Teaching in Europe**, set up as an enlarged partial agreement in November 2020, has the mission to **promote practices of history teaching** that strengthen and promote the Council of Europe's values.

It builds on the Organisation's decades-long experience in history education, offering new insights into the way that history is taught in member states in the light of recommendations and guidelines in this field. The Observatory seeks to achieve this by collecting and making available factual information on the state of history teaching in all participating countries through a series of regular and thematic reports.

The Observatory draws on external expertise to realise its mission, so there are several possibilities for NGOs to co-operate. Occasional [calls for tender](#) for experts and consortia to support the drafting of thematic and regular reports are published on the observatory's website. There is also the possibility to get involved on a more regular and continuous basis through the co-operation platform HISTOLAB which was formally launched in December 2021. Its objective is to bring together networks and organisations who share the Observatory's vision that the knowledge, skills, and values that young people acquire through history teaching contribute to the fostering of peace, democracy and respect for human rights. It enables knowledge to be shared from national, regional, and European experiences through discussion of case studies and exchange of innovative practices. Co-operating organisations may actively engage in the process by organising seminars and other events, and by participating in the drafting of guidelines and documents. Through these activities, NGOs have several opportunities to actively take part in the work and development of the platform and the observatory.



Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North- South Centre)

The North South Centre of the Council of Europe (European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity) is a key instrument of the external dimension of the Council of Europe since 1989. It serves as a vector for transmitting its values, standards, and tools beyond the European continent through political dialogue, networking, and the implementation of cooperation projects. As an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe, it brings together several European and African countries to exchange ideas and take action on shared issues.

One of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe's advantages lies on its institutionalised "quadrilogue" engaging high-level representatives from governments, parliaments, local and regional authorities, as well as civil society from different regions of the world to work together on issues of common interest.

Among the "quadrilogue", civil society is especially relevant to the work of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe. It plays a central role in **its governance** and the execution of its initiatives. The North-South Centre of the Council of Europe relies on a solid network of youth organisations to facilitate structured, inclusive, and sustainable participation, resulting in a multiplier effect.

With over three decades of experience, the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe has proven its expertise in **global education**, intercultural dialogue, and **youth sector cooperation** in Europe and beyond, its mandate extending on the Southern Neighbourhood and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The North-South Centre of the Council of Europe benefits from those advantages in the implementation of its projects and events, such as:

- ▶ the Youth Universities in **Spain**, **Tunisia**, and **Cabo Verde**, consolidated youth networks and contributed to reinforce the skills of nearly 10,000 representatives of youth organisations in human rights, democratic participation, intercultural dialogue and global education;
- ▶ the **Lisbon Forum**, a platform that brings together personalities from various regions of the world to engage in a prospective exchange and take action on issues of common interest through initiatives like the Rule of Law Youth Network (RoLYN);
- ▶ the North-South Intercultural Conference, an international meeting to facilitate intercultural and interreligious dialogue;
- ▶ the **North-South Prize of the Council of Europe**, which has honored more than 50 laureates – including André Azoulay, Bob Geldof, Kofi Annan, Mary Robinson, Simone Veil, and the International Commission against the Death Penalty – for their contributions to the protection of human rights, defense of democracy, or raising public awareness on issues of interdependence and global solidarity.

The North-South Centre of the Council of Europe also offers **online training courses** that cover different dimensions of global education. It involves civil society organisations, national NGOs platforms and ministries from

almost 40 countries part of its extended Global Education Network and organise the annual Global Education Week counting on more than 300 000 participants each year.

To support the implementation of the [Reykjavik Declaration](#), the 2024-2027 strategy of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe strengthens the external dimension of the Council of Europe to:

- ▶ enhance the impact of the Council of Europe's Neighbourhood Policy with the Southern Mediterranean by disseminating the values and standards of the Council of Europe among the youth, a cornerstone to ensure the sustainability of democratic reforms;
- ▶ develop further and gradually cooperation with Sub-Saharan African countries that demonstrate an interest in the standards of the Council of Europe;
- ▶ act as a facilitating platform for dialogue between Europe and other regions of the world on the priorities of the Council of Europe.

Culture and Heritage for Democracy

Cultural diversity is a characteristic element of sustainable societies and a powerful vector of democratic participation. By **promoting culture and cultural heritage**, the Council of Europe contributes to **strengthening societies and protecting the environment**. It also **promotes human rights**, including the **right to life, to health, to free expression and to creativity**.

The Council of Europe has developed a set of conventions in the fields of culture, heritage and landscape: the [European Cultural Convention](#), the [Council of Europe Landscape Convention](#), the [Framework Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society \(Faro Convention\)](#) and the [Convention on offences relating to cultural property \(Nicosia Convention\)](#).

Through the follow-up and monitoring mechanisms of these conventions and co-operation and technical assistance activities, the Organisation helps member states promote access to culture and creative expression, to create respect for the diversity of cultural and natural heritage, and to attune spatial/regional planning with sustainability-driven landscape policies.

This task includes fostering co-operation, capacity building (legislative and technical assistance) and sharing of good practices. There is also close work with the European Union and other stakeholders such as United Nations, UNESCO, the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP), and the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA).

Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape – CDCPP

The CDCPP oversees intergovernmental work in the field of culture, heritage and landscape. It advises the Committee of Ministers and provides standards, policies and good practices to sustainably manage cultural, cultural heritage and landscape resources, as a basis for democratic and inclusive societies in a digitally evolving environment, impacted by environmental degradation.

Focus 2024-2027

Capacity to address the global crisis; impact of the latest technological developments; integrated culture/cultural heritage/nature approach; freedom of artistic expression; prevention of offences relating to cultural property; contribution to democratic participation and non-discrimination; youth involvement in a digital world; heritage days; sustainable heritage.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participants: Conference of INGOs (CINGO) of the Council of Europe
- ▶ Observers: see page 4 of the [Terms of reference of the CDCPP 2024/2027](#)
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

The Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society stresses important aspects of heritage as they relate to human rights and democracy. It promotes a wider understanding of heritage and its relationship to

communities and society. By involving everyone in society in the ongoing process of defining and managing cultural heritage, it emphasises the active role civil society can play.

The [Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property](#) (Nicosia, 2017) aims to prevent and combat damage, destruction and the illicit trafficking of cultural property as cultural property crimes are a danger to the preservation, legacy and sustainability of human culture. Each year, these crimes destroy thousands of artefacts, archaeological sites and monuments; they also cause irreparable damage to museums, galleries, public and private collections, as well as to religious buildings, thereby impoverishing humanity as a whole.

The [European heritage strategy for the 21st century](#) aims to promote a unifying approach to cultural heritage as a resource for democracy. It pursues an interdisciplinary and participatory approach through three components of the strategy – (1) social; (2) territorial and economic; (3) knowledge and education. [The social component of the strategy](#) is dedicated to the promotion of social participation and good governance and highlights the important role of civil society. It focuses on the relationship between heritage and societies, citizenship and the sharing of democratic values through participatory governance.

The [European Heritage Days](#) – a Council of Europe/European Union joint action since 1999 – are the most widely celebrated participatory annual cultural events in Europe, reaching out and mobilising millions of people under the motto “Europe, a common heritage”. NGOs operating in the field of culture and heritage actively participate in celebrations, encourage people to become active in local heritage and to share cultural experiences at both local and European levels. Civil society can join initiatives, such as the [Call for European Heritage Days Stories](#) which is a competitive grant award procedure and [Young European Heritage Makers](#) which aims to give a voice to children and young people to interpret their local heritage and share their stories.

Artistic Freedom of Expression

Artistic freedom remains a part of the cultural rights anchored firmly in the principles of the European Cultural Convention and is a human right that requires protection. Following the launch of the [Manifesto on the Freedom of Expression of Arts and Culture in the Digital Era](#) in November 2020, the Council of Europe has been conducting **the Free to Create** activity which examines and addresses the challenges that European artists and cultural workers face in the practice of their right to freedom of artistic expression.

In 2023, the Council of Europe published its first expert report on the Artistic Freedom in Europe which presented an overview of the state of artistic freedom in Europe and its challenges. In preparing such reports, the Council of Europe is actively working with an artistic community through its own established network of experts and artists who make direct contributions to reports by sharing their experiences and perspectives. The report provides recommendations on what can be done to protect artistic freedom, by international institutions and by the cultural sector and artists themselves.

The Council of Europe also put in place a [digital #exhibition](#) featuring works of art from member States to promote the importance of freedom of artistic expression. It was set up in consultation with the [Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape \(CDCPP\)](#) to mark the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Cultural Routes

The [Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes \(EPA\)](#) was established to demonstrate how **different countries and cultures of Europe** contribute to a **shared cultural heritage**. The cultural routes help to communicate **Council of Europe values at grass-roots level**, promoting human rights, cultural democracy, cultural diversity, mutual understanding and exchanges across boundaries. They also contribute to sustainable local development, with positive effects on the attractiveness of territories and employment.

The EPA helps to develop cultural route projects, supports them with a certification, and carries out evaluations of certified and candidate routes. They cover a wide range of cultural themes, from art and architecture, landscape and religious heritage, to major figures of European history, music and literature.



The EPA works with European networks responsible for managing the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, composed of over 3 000 members, including local and regional authorities, museums, cultural institutions, universities and other local stakeholders. It is implemented with the support of the [European Institute of Cultural Routes](#), established in 1998 and funded by the government of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg.

NGOs are invited to work with the Secretariat of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe Programme based in Luxembourg and can also request participatory status with the Governing Board of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe.



ENVIRONMENT

Reykjavik process

The Ad Hoc Multidisciplinary Group on Environment (GME) started its operations in May 2024. The GME marks a new step in the Council of Europe’s intensified efforts to address environmental challenges and their impact on human rights, as set forth in the Reykjavik Declaration adopted at the 4th Council of Europe Summit of Heads of State and Government in May 2023. The Summit affirmed that “a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations.” The GME was established to develop a Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment.

Bern Convention

The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (the “Bern Convention”) is a binding international legal instrument in the field of nature conservation, covering most of the natural heritage of the European continent and extending to some States of Africa. It is the only regional Convention of its kind worldwide, and aims to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats, as well as to promote European co-operation in this field. 49 countries and the European Union have already signed up to the Convention.

In 1989, the Council of Europe launched the Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (Emerald Network) as part of the Bern Convention, which now covers over 3 500 sites all over Europe dedicated to areas of special conservation interest. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe also awards the European Diploma for Protected Areas.

Landscape convention

See also the Section “Culture and Education for Democracy”. The Council of Europe Landscape Convention, ratified to date by 40 member States, is aimed at the protection, management and planning of the landscape, with reference to the entire territory of the States parties, promoting public awareness and participation. The Convention is based on the assumption that landscape is a key element of individual and social well-being everywhere, an essential component of human beings’ surroundings and an important part of their quality of life. The Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP) is the Committee responsible for activities related to Culture, Heritage and Landscape and to follow-up on their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In addition, Conferences on the Council of Europe Landscape Convention are held every two years.

Civil society is largely involved in the work of the above-mentioned bodies, through the observership status, the participatory status and the Conference of INGOs, and on an ad hoc basis. For instance, 15 leading NGOs are observers with the GME. This helps to ensure that the outcomes have a real and innovative impact.

EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement

EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement is a platform for co-operation in the field of major natural and technological disasters between Europe and the South of the Mediterranean. Set-up in 1987, its main objectives are to reinforce and to promote co-operation between member States in a multi-disciplinary context to ensure better prevention, protection against risks and better preparation in the event of major natural or technological disasters. It has to date 22 member States. At the political level, the Ministerial Meeting takes place every four/five years except when circumstances and emergencies can justify Ministerial meetings being held at other times. It is assisted by the Committee of Permanent Correspondents who meet once a year. At the scientific and technical level, the specific role of the Specialised Euro-Mediterranean Centres (also meeting once a year) is to develop projects, both at national and regional levels, which aim to improve the awareness of and resilience to major risks within the population.

For a general overview, see also: [The Council of Europe and the environment](#)



EQUALITY, MINORITIES, INCLUSION

Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion

Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion – CDADI

The CDADI steers the Council of Europe’s intergovernmental work to promote equality for all and build inclusive societies that offer effective protection from discrimination and hate, ensure equal participation in political and public life for all without discrimination on any ground, and where diversity is respected.

It advises the Committee of Ministers on issues such as preventing and combating hate crime, hate speech and discrimination, with a particular focus on fighting antigypsyism and improving the active participation and inclusion of Roma and Travellers in society, safeguarding the rights of persons belonging to national minorities and the use of regional or minority languages, ensuring equality of rights of LGBTI persons, and promoting intercultural inclusion.

Focus 2024-2027

1. Combating hate crime and hate speech; 2. Artificial intelligence, equality and discrimination; 3. Intersectional discrimination; 4. Equality of rights of intersex persons; Combating discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics; 5. Regional or national minority language protection; 6. Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls; desegregation and inclusion policies in the field of education; participation of Roma and Travellers in public and political life; and 7. Intercultural inclusion and strategies for inclusion of migrants.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participants: Conference of INGOs (CINGO) included in the [terms of reference](#) among other international organisations;
- ▶ Observers: several large international networks of civil society organisations have the status of observers to the CDADI;
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

The **European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)** monitors developments in each and every member states of the Council of Europe by **drawing up reports containing a set of country-specific recommendations within the framework of monitoring cycles** lasting approximately five years as well as **general policy recommendations** addressed to all states. ECRI engages with **national equality bodies** to support authorities and civil society actors in developing a shared agenda for addressing all forms of racism, intolerance and racial and anti-LGBTI discrimination of a structural nature and **creating successful inclusion policies**.

Racism and intolerance can only be successfully countered if civil society is effectively engaged. ECRI attaches great importance to ensuring that its anti-racism message filters down to the whole of civil society so that all sectors of society are involved in intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect.

Co-operation with NGOs is strengthened through a **permanent working group dealing with civil society relations**, including information exchange, meetings, and hearings. In the context of its country visits, ECRI holds meetings with various civil society actors to assess the situation as accurately as possible and identify key issues to raise with government representatives. Following publication of country reports or conclusions, information meetings may be organised in co-operation with national government and non-government partners.

National minorities

The **Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)** and the **Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)** evaluate the situation in their respective fields on the basis of periodic reports submitted by countries that are party to their respective treaties and information gathered both during country visits and provided by **representatives of national minorities and NGOs**. **Country-specific opinions** and **evaluation reports** are adopted every five years.

NGOs and minority associations have a **key role in the monitoring mechanism of the framework convention**. The advisory committee may seek information from civil society and NGOs and in their turn NGOs can submit information to the advisory committee at any time, and about any country. The most appropriate moment is when a state report has been received and a country visit is being prepared: the **status of country monitoring can be seen here**. Contributions in English or French are preferable. State authorities are also **encouraged to include NGOs** in the drafting process of the state report and to ensure participation of NGOs in follow-up meetings once the opinions are made public

Regional and minority languages

The **European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)** is a treaty designed to protect and promote regional and minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe's cultural heritage. It is also designed to enable speakers of a regional or minority language to use it in private and public life (education, judiciary, administration, media, cultural life, economic and social life, and transfrontier co-operation). Its overriding purpose is cultural. The charter covers regional and minority languages, non-territorial languages and lesswidely used official languages.

NGOs are **key partners in promoting language diversity**. Before a country ratifies the charter, NGOs can assist in choosing the provisions to be applied to each regional or minority language. After ratification, their role is to co-operate with national authorities in designing practical measures, implementing the charter provisions and informing the committee of experts of shortcomings. To monitor states' compliance, the committee of experts adopts evaluation reports containing recommendations on how the use of each regional or minority language can be improved. When preparing these reports, the committee organises on-the-spot visits to the countries concerned to consult associations representing regional or minority language speakers and national, regional and local authorities. The secretariat also maintains regular contacts with relevant European organisations and participates in exchanges with a view to obtaining pertinent information to be used in evaluation reports.

Roma and Travellers

Civil society has always been an important and valued partner in the work carried out by the Council of Europe for Roma¹ and Traveller rights over the past 30 years or so. Whether working together with Roma NGOs at grassroots level in cooperation activities or with other international organisations or INGOs at national and European levels for capacity-building and awareness-raising activities, the Roma and Travellers Division strives to ensure that the voices of the estimated 10 to 12 million Roma in the 46 Council of Europe member States, the Western Balkans and Türkiye are heard.

To do this, first and foremost, the Council of Europe reminds governments of, and assists them in the implementation of, their legal obligations arising from the judgments issued by the European Court of Human Rights and policy instruments such as Recommendations issued by the Committee of Ministers, the decision-making body of the Council of Europe.

The Roma and Travellers Division also organises training to build and reinforce the capacities of civil society to provide NGOs with the knowledge and skills to undertake strategic litigation using the Council of Europe's tools and standards.

This was also the theme of a recent Dialogue meeting where Roma and Traveller civil society representatives discussed challenges in the process of execution of Roma and Traveller-related judgments. These bi-annual Council of Europe Dialogue meetings with Roma and Traveller organisations serve as a forum for Roma and Traveller civil society, the Council of Europe, and other stakeholders to exchange experiences, share examples of good practices, and to plan future co-operation activities such as advocacy and awareness-raising activities. The topical result-oriented agendas enable Roma and Traveller organisations to bring their concerns and suggestions directly to the attention of the Organisation.

The Roma and Travellers Division also invests in youth and Roma and Traveller women as actors of change in their local communities to ensure that voices are heard and uplifted to a higher level in terms of political participation and equality of Roma and Traveller women and girls.

An important element of this is the recognition of Roma history of Roma and Travellers through its inclusion in school curricula and teaching materials at national level.

The [Council of Europe's Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion \(2020-2025\)](#) provides the conceptual framework to combat antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma and Travellers and focuses on three main lines of action: combating antigypsyism and discrimination and supporting real and effective equality; supporting democratic participation and promoting public trust and accountability; and supporting access to inclusive quality education and training.

Through its cooperation activities, the Roma and Travellers Division also carries out joint programmes with the European Union, such as INSCHOOL, EQUIROM, ROMACT, ROMACTED, and Roma Integration III. NGOs contribute to the design and implementation of strategic documents and public policies at local level which target the Roma community.

For more information, please consult the [Roma and Travellers website](#).

1. The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.



Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programmes

The **Intercultural Cities programme**, implemented by the **Intercultural Inclusion Unit**, supports **local and regional authorities** in designing and implementing inclusive integration policies. The programme is based on an **intercultural integration policy model** that focuses on enabling communities, organisations and businesses to manage the diversity of people in a way that ensures the **equal value of all identities**. It is now being implemented by over **160 cities in Europe** and beyond, including Australia, Canada, Japan, Israel, Mexico, Morocco, the Republic of Korea, and the United States.

At the level of local policies, intercultural integration is a comprehensive approach driven by committed leadership that cuts across political and administrative divides. It implies a strategic engagement to develop institutional capacity that ensures equal rights and opportunities for all, promotes positive intercultural mixing and interaction, and encourages participation and power-sharing. The model helps public authorities to achieve inclusion, equality and prosperity by unlocking the potential of diverse societies while minimising the risks related to human mobility and cultural diversity.

While local authorities are members of the Intercultural Cities network, **the development and implementation of local intercultural policies is a participatory process that involves a wide range of NGOs**, including migrant led organisations, along with individual citizens. The Intercultural Cities programme also co-operates with civil society organisations in the context of specific initiatives and campaigns and promotes anti-rumour methodology, a model to fight stereotypes and prejudice in the city through co-operation between the city, civil society and individual residents.

Sexual orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics

The Council of Europe standards and mechanisms seek to promote and ensure respect for the **human rights of every individual**. These include equal rights and dignity of all human beings, **including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons**.

The **Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Unit** was set up in 2014 to address human rights challenges identified by Recommendation **CM/Rec(2010)5** on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. In particular, it provides technical support and expertise to member states, upon request, through cooperation activities aiming at improving the legal and institutional frameworks, builds capacity of administration staff, the judiciary and law enforcement among others, and also promotes the sharing of good practices and raises awareness. Specific themes range from Legal Gender Recognition, the recognition of same-sex couples; combating SOGIESC-based hate crime, hate speech and bullying, as well as multiple and intersectional discrimination (e.g. LBQ women, LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees, LGBTI persons deprived of their liberty; LGBTI youth).

As of 2024, the Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (**ADI-SOGIESC**), a subordinate body to the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (**CDADI**), is instructed to complete the following deliverables: 1) a draft Recommendation on the



equality of rights of intersex persons; 2) a comprehensive review of the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 based on a new review methodology; 3) a draft Council of Europe strategy for the equality of rights of LGBTI persons (2027-2032), based on the implementation review of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 and, subject to its adoption, on the above-mentioned Recommendation on the equality of rights of intersex persons; 4) a Study on the risks and impediments to the full access to rights resulting from discrimination and violence on grounds of gender expression; 5) a review of thematic dimensions of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5

Civil society in the field of LGBTI is a key partner in the cooperation activities conducted by the SOGIESC Unit in the CoE member States. The following eight LGBTI human rights INGOs are observers to the ADI-SOGIESC and contribute to policy development and standard-setting: EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community (EL*C); European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups; European LGBTI Police Association (EGPA); ILGA Europe; International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Youth & Student Organisation (IGLYO); Organisation Intersex International Europe (OII Europe) ; Rainbow Cities Network (RCN); Transgender Europe (TGEU). The Organisation provides support to civil society in the areas of capacity-building, awareness-raising and sharing of good practices through peer to peer exchanges, research and [publications](#), training on combating hate speech and [combating hate crime](#) and promoting the engagement of civil society in consultation processes.

Migrants' rights

The Council of Europe [action plan on protecting vulnerable persons in the context of migration and asylum in Europe \(2021-2025\)](#) provides a framework of measures to address the **human rights challenges** affecting the most **vulnerable migrants and refugees** in member states. It works across four pillars: **protecting and promoting safeguards to identify and respond to vulnerability; ensuring access to law and justice; fostering democratic participation and inclusion;** and **enhancing co-operation among relevant authorities**. The Special Representative of the Secretary General on Migration and Refugees coordinates its implementation, which includes activities from the whole Organisation.

Civil society enjoys a fruitful relationship with the Special Representative and gives valuable input in country and thematic work as well through the Conference of INGOs' committee dealing with migration.

Secretariat of the Partial Agreement on the Council of Europe Development Bank

The **Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB)** is a multilateral development bank with a **social mandate** which was established in 1956. Its principal activity consists of **granting loans to borrowers** in its 42 member countries for economically and socially viable projects that promote social cohesion. Working to strengthen social cohesion through its lending activity, the CEB **promotes the values and principles of the Council of Europe**. Focusing on **vulnerable populations**, including refugees, migrants and displaced people, it contributes to reducing social inequalities and building inclusive societies.

Applications for loans or guarantees must receive the Secretary General's opinion that the project is in conformity with the political and social aims of the Council of Europe, which is drafted by the [CEB secretariat](#). It is then submitted to the CEB's administrative council for approval.

The secretariat prepares an annual report on the social effects of completed projects and liaises with other Council of Europe bodies.

The bank's borrowers include governments, local and regional authorities, and public and private financial institutions. NGOs can also borrow, provided their project is approved by a CEB member state. Recent examples include projects for the Roma Education Fund and the Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative.

There is no direct civil society participation in the bank's decision-making mechanism. The CEB relies on its borrowers to carry out the required consultations with civil society during project preparation: nevertheless citizens' groups and NGOs occasionally make contact on issues related to implementation of specific projects. Such cases are handled by the bank's competent services on a case-by-case basis.

NGOs working on social matters are eligible to apply for the [CEB Award for Social Cohesion](#). This annual competition was launched in 2020 to acknowledge outstanding contributions to social cohesion across Europe. A €25,000 prize is awarded by an independent jury to a project that addresses pressing social issues in an exemplary way.



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA

Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Media

The Council of Europe work on Freedom of Expression includes the standard-setting – by the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI); cooperation – projects which provide practical assistance to help member states implement those standards; as well as special actions such as the Platform and the Campaign for the Safety of journalists.

Civil society participates actively in this work, and there are various ways for NGOs such as associations of journalists, anti-SLAPPs coalitions, organisations working in the areas of media literacy, access to information, countering disinformation, etc. to get involved.

Steering Committee on Media and Information Society – CDMSI

The CDMSI steers the Council of Europe's work in the fields of freedom of expression, media, digital governance and other information society-related issues and oversees work on personal data protection. It advises the Committee of Ministers and takes part in standard-setting activities on all questions within its area of expertise, including freedom, independence, pluralism and diversity of media; safety of journalists; support for professional journalism, protection and promotion of human rights, with an emphasis on freedom of expression, both online and offline.

Focus 2022-2025

Countering the spread of online mis- and disinformation through fact-checking and platform design; use of digital tools including artificial intelligence for journalism/by journalists; sustainable media financing; strategic lawsuits against public participation; media and information literacy tools to help adult media users understand the digital media environment and navigate their media choices; role of social media and other digital platforms in public debate and the formation of public opinion; safety of journalists; hate speech; defamation in the media.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers

- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in expert committees, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

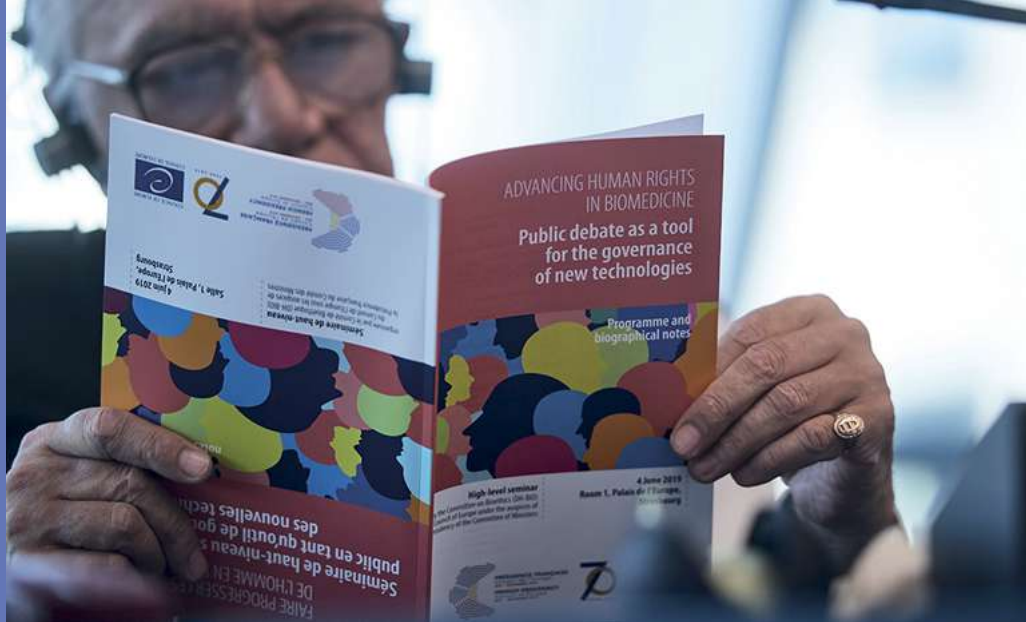
Platform for the Safety of Journalists

The **Platform for the safety of journalists** is a public space to help compile, process and share information on **serious concerns about media freedom** and **safety of journalists** in Council of Europe member states. It aims to improve the **protection of journalists**, better address threats and violence against media professionals and foster early warning mechanisms and response capacity within the Council of Europe. The platform enables the Council of Europe to be alerted on time and in a more systematic way so that it can take timely and coordinated action when necessary. It helps the Organisation **identify trends and propose adequate policy responses** in the field of media freedom.

On 4 December 2014, the [Council of Europe and the platform's partner organisations](#) (Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of journalists, the European Federation of journalists, the Association of European journalists and Article 19) signed a [memorandum of understanding](#).

Today, 15 international NGOs and associations of journalists are partners to the platform. They are allowed to post alerts, subject to their own verification processes and standards. Each contributing partner is responsible for information which it posts. When circumstances allow, the Council of Europe and a member state which is directly referred to in information posted on the platform may post reports on how they have responded.

The platform also highlights the work carried out by the Council of Europe in the field of media freedom, such as texts prepared by the Parliamentary Assembly, standards adopted by the Committee of Ministers and the relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights.



HEALTH

Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health

Scientific and technological developments are a source of important potential advances for **biomedicine and health**. However, some of these developments, the way they are applied and the evolution of practices could give rise to infringements of fundamental rights.

The **Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine** is the only international legally binding text which specifically addresses human rights protection in the biomedical field, including healthcare. Its principles are further developed in additional protocols focusing on specific issues.

Work focuses on developing legal texts to reinforce existing laws and on producing tools and other material to help implement binding legal principles, following developments emanating from decisions and judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. The Council of Europe maintains partnerships with other intergovernmental organisations working on the issue, such as WHO, OECD, UNESCO and with civil society.

Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health – CDBIO

The CDBIO carries out work on the applications of biology and medicine covered by the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine; conducts intergovernmental work on human rights protection in the fields of biomedicine and health; especially issues raised by the Covid-19 pandemic, taking into account lessons learned from the health crisis; advises and provides expertise to the Committee of Ministers.

Focus 2022-2025

Promoting autonomy in mental healthcare; equitable access to (i) medical treatment and equipment in situations of scarce resources, (ii) appropriate innovative treatments and technologies in healthcare; health literacy – contributing to trust building and equitable access to healthcare; protection and promotion of patients' rights; participation of children in decision making processes on matters relating to their health; artificial intelligence in healthcare; promotion of public dialogue on genomic medicine; genome editing; youth forum on bioethics.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines & Healthcare (EDQM)

The EDQM's mission is to protect public health by enabling the development and supporting the implementation of quality standards for safe medicines and their safe use, as well as other health products such as substances of human origin, cosmetics and food contact materials. The standards set by the EDQM are recognised scientific benchmarks and are applied in Europe and beyond. The EDQM's work covers a wide range of areas, each requiring specific expertise and scientific know-how. It is responsible for: establishing the official quality standards of the European Pharmacopoeia, which prescribe how human and veterinary medicines and substances used in their manufacture should be tested and quality controlled; granting Certificates of Suitability to manufacturers after they have demonstrated that the substance they produce can be adequately controlled by the quality standards defined in the European Pharmacopoeia; co-ordinating a network of Official Medicines Control Laboratories to ensure effective, independent quality control of medicines in Europe; providing policies and model approaches for the safe use of medicines, including guidelines on pharmaceutical care; drafting ethical, safety and quality standards for blood transfusion and organ, tissue and cell transplantation; working with national, European and international organisations to protect public health from the dangers of falsified medical products; establishing standards for cosmetics and food contact materials, and co-ordinating a network of Official Cosmetic Control Laboratories to ensure and monitor the quality of cosmetics on sale in Europe.

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) may contribute to the elaboration and maintenance of the European Pharmacopoeia's standards by attaining observer status to the European Pharmacopoeia Commission, in line with the Commission's Rules of Procedure. Furthermore, representatives of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe may participate in the work of various intergovernmental committees on healthcare issues, contributing to discussions on pharmaceuticals, blood transfusion, organ transplantation and other public health matters. In addition to these formal roles, civil society can participate in public consultations, providing feedback on draft documents. The EDQM also encourages engagement of civil society through various events.

To become involved and stay informed about upcoming opportunities, civil society representatives are encouraged to visit the [EDQM website](#), where information about the EDQM's activities, pending consultations and forthcoming events is available.

Drugs and Addictions (Pompidou Group)

Drug addiction is a challenge to **human rights and public health** and brings with it the potential to adversely affect the rule of law in society through **illicit trafficking**.

The **Pompidou Group** is an enlarged partial agreement working on this issue in the Council of Europe to guarantee a fair balance between the demands for public safety and the protection of individual rights. It promotes humane and sustainable drug policies by providing multidisciplinary responses to address problems resulting from use and addictive behaviours. Given the global nature of drug problems, it acts as a bridge between Europe and other world regions.

The Pompidou Group provides a forum for open debate to discuss different approaches to drug policy, offers innovative solutions, and facilitates capacity building across disciplines to enhance knowledge for better informed and evidence-based drug policy choices. It develops guidance and tools for policy makers, managers and practitioners involved in the development of drug policy and its implementation and evaluation. It promotes international co-operation to establish human rights oriented drug policies, thus helping to reduce drug use and the associated negative social and health consequences

The Pompidou Group involves civil society in most of its activities, in particular major non-governmental international platforms such as the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), Harm Reduction International, Correlation Network, the EU Civil Society Forum on Drugs, and the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs. At Council of Europe level, its main partner is the INGO Conference, which has permanent observer statute in the Pompidou Group statutory bodies.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The **Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights protection organisation**. It does this through its most important legal treaty - the **European Convention on Human Rights** - and the work of the **European Court of Human Rights**, along with systems for making sure that countries respect the Court judgments.

But there is so much more. The Council of Europe has designed specific ways of protecting vulnerable groups: children, women, Roma, LGBTI people, migrants, minorities. It works to stop violence against women, including domestic violence; to create gender equality, to guard against fake medicine and to make sure that working conditions and social rights are fair and freely available. It is also important for us to make sure human rights defenders can work independently and without harassment, that journalists can report free from undue pressure and violence, that prisoners and others deprived of their liberty are properly cared for and free from the shadow of torture, and that technology such as artificial intelligence or data collection does not breach our rights.

Execution of ECHR judgments and decisions

The long-term effectiveness of the human rights system relies on the proper and timely execution of judgments made by the **European Court of Human Rights** at national level. Responsibility for carrying out the Court's judgments lie with the member state concerned, which undertakes to abide by a decision when it becomes part of the **European Convention on Human Rights**. The task of supervising whether this is done is carried out by the **Committee of Ministers**, aided by the **Department for the Execution of Judgments**. Maintaining the system's effectiveness also relies on close co-operation with the relevant bodies and authorities at domestic and international level, and making sure that human rights challenges or gaps are addressed in a timely way.

The work of the Department for the Execution of Judgments includes supporting states through on-going dialogue as to what they need to do to ensure that victims of violations obtain appropriate redress and/or that measures are carried out to prevent similar violations occurring in the future. This can include different forms of targeted support such as advice of a technical and legal nature, including in the form of workshops, round tables, training courses and study visits.

NGOs play an important role in the execution of judgments and they are entitled to share information with the Committee of Ministers under rule 9.1 of the Committee of Ministers' Rules. The [procedure for doing so can be found here](#).

Effectiveness of the ECHR System at national and European level

The **European Convention on Human Rights** has made an extraordinary contribution to **protecting and promoting human rights and the rule of law** in Europe and plays a central role in maintaining democratic security and improving good governance. Making sure that it is **effectively implemented at national level**, especially when it comes to systemic and structural human rights problems, remains the principal challenge.

The Council of Europe's legally binding human rights texts, the case law of the Court and the findings of monitoring bodies provide a means to achieve this. Its transversal and multidisciplinary approach includes standard-setting work, through which the Organisation provides guidance in response to challenges posed to human rights in European societies, and targeted co-operation programmes which support domestic authorities in addressing the issues raised by the Court's judgments and by other Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms.

Steering Committee for Human Rights - CDDH

The CDDH carries out intergovernmental work on human rights and advises the Committee of Ministers.

Focus 2022-2025

Inter-state and conflict-related cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights, national measures to prevent and remedy violations, accession of the European Union to the court, human rights and the environment, trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation, human rights in situation of crises, human rights and business, human rights and artificial intelligence

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in their meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

Creating forums and networks between policy makers, the legal and justice professions and civil society is at the core of co-operation work. Civil society with specific expertise in justice and human rights both benefit and contribute to discussions about the functioning of the justice system and protection of human rights. Civil society may be directly involved as a partner, beneficiary, target group or expert.

NGOs can benefit from the HELP Programme (Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals), which plays a significant role in supporting member states in implementing the Convention and executing the Court's judgments. [HELP human rights online courses](#) are available for free. Skills covered include bioethics, environment, data protection, violence against women, fair trial or reasoning of judgments.

The Council of Europe collaborates closely with individual national human rights institutions (NHRIs) in all areas of activity, ranging from human rights compliant business practices to torture prevention. This is organised according to how they are set up in their national systems and is not limited to Council of Europe member states, but extends beyond, covering neighbourhood countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

The Council of Europe also works closely with regional NHRI networks, such as the European Network of NHRIs (ENNHRI). ENNHRI was closely involved in work that resulted in the adoption of recommendations on the development and strengthening of effective, pluralist and independent national human rights institutions and strengthening the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.

NHRIs play an important role in the system of execution of Court judgments carried out by the Committee of Ministers.

The Committee of Ministers has made recommendations, drawn up in close co-operation with civil society. They call on member states to ensure that their national laws and practices comply with clear principles, and to regularly evaluate national measures designed to strengthen the space for civil society. A handbook called *Civil Society and Human Rights* explains the three recommendations in detail.

- ▶ [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)11](#) on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe;
- ▶ [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)6](#) on the development of the Ombudsman institution;
- ▶ [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2021\)1](#) on the development and strengthening of effective, pluralist and independent national human rights institutions.

More information on co-operation in the field of justice and human rights is available [here](#) and you can [make contact here](#).

Human rights education for legal professionals - HELP

Legal professionals who are at the forefront of human rights protection must know the European human rights standards to apply them effectively. This is done through the [HELP online courses](#) that cover a range of human rights topics. The main objective of the courses is to enhance the capacity of judges, lawyers and prosecutors in all Council of Europe member states and beyond to apply European human rights standards in their daily work.

[HELP online courses](#) can be tailored to the different needs of countries, institutions and professionals. Since 2015, other professionals such as court staff, prison or probation officers or health practitioners have become increasingly interested in accessing HELP courses. NGOs can also benefit from any of the 40 HELP courses by either encouraging their staff or beneficiaries to take them or promoting their use. NGOs can assess the completion of HELP courses by requesting their staff or beneficiaries to present self-generated e-certificate upon completion of any given course.



In January 2022 the HELP online platform had more than 90 000 active users.

The [Council of Europe HELP e-learning platform](#) courses are free and open to anyone who creates an account. They offer the highest quality as they have been developed with experts, including lawyers from the European Court of Human Rights. Partners such as the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN), the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE), the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), UNHCR and OSCE/ODIHR also contribute.

You can make contact with [HELP](#) through the website.

Death Penalty

Abolition of the death penalty remains high on the Council of Europe's political agenda. For the Council of Europe, abolition does not stop at Europe's borders.

The Council of Europe has created a death penalty free zone in its 46 member states. It has been more than a quarter of a century since the last execution in 1997.

In the early 1980s, the Council of Europe became a pioneer for the abolition of capital punishment, considering it to be a grave violation of human rights. The organisation's Parliamentary Assembly gradually persuaded governments to help Europe become the first region in the world to permanently outlaw the death penalty. The prohibition of the death penalty has also become a precondition for membership since the 1990s.

In 1983, the Council of Europe adopted the first legally binding instrument providing for the unconditional abolition of the death penalty in peacetime: Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). This text is currently ratified by all 46 member States.

In 2002, the Council of Europe adopted Protocol No. 13 to the ECHR concerning the abolition of the death penalty in all circumstances, in other words also in time of war or of imminent threat of war. Reservations to and derogations from the Protocol are not possible. The Protocol entered into force on 1 July 2003. It has to date been signed and ratified by 45 member States.

The European Court of Human Rights has developed a significant caselaw on the abolition of the death penalty, relating in particular to cases of extradition : see the information document (factsheet) about the abolition of the death penalty.

At the Reykjavik Summit, held on 16-17 May 2023, it was decided to strengthen the Council of Europe's work on the abolition of death penalty (the Reykjavik Declaration recalls that "the Council of Europe has played a crucial role to ensure that Europe is a death penalty-free zone" and states that "it should pursue the fight against the reintroduction of the death penalty, and in favour of its universal abolition, in all places and in all circumstances").

To know more about the main activities and projects of the Council of Europe on the abolition of the death penalty, which involve numerous interactions with the civil society : [Abolition of the death penalty \(coe.int\)](#)



Prevention of Torture and Other Forms of Ill-Treatment (CPT)

The **prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment**, set out in **article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights**, is an absolute human right from which there can be no derogation. Respect for a person's physical and mental integrity lies at the core of human rights protection and every effort must be made by states to ensure people deprived of their liberty are not ill-treated.

The work to prevent torture and other forms of ill treatment is carried out by the **European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT)**, an independent, non-judicial and proactive control mechanism with a preventive mandate.

The CPT organises visits to places of detention to assess how people deprived of their liberty are treated. These places include prisons, juvenile detention centres, police stations, holding centres for immigration detainees, psychiatric hospitals and social care homes. CPT delegations have unlimited access to places of detention and the right to move inside such places without restriction. They interview people deprived of their liberty in private and communicate freely with anyone who can provide information.

The CPT is a non-judicial body, and is not empowered to take up individual complaints, which are handled by the European Court of Human Rights

Before carrying out a periodic or ad hoc visit to a country, the CPT usually consults various civil society organisations and human rights defenders. During visits, meetings with representatives of international and/or national non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders are an integral part of the programme.

After each visit, the CPT transmits a confidential report which contains the CPT's findings and specific recommendations to the state concerned. The national authorities are requested to provide a response to the issues raised in the report. Visit reports and government responses are published only at the request of the national authorities (on a case-by-case basis or through a so-called "automatic publication procedure").

Individuals and organisations with relevant information concerning the situation of people deprived of their liberty in member states are invited to [inform the CPT through the contact page](#).

New challenges to human rights in European societies

The Council of Europe plays a crucial role in developing a **coordinated response** to new challenges posed to human rights in European societies. In recent years, standard-setting work has addressed a **wide range of issues**, including human rights and the environment, human rights in situations of crisis, human trafficking for the purposes of labour exploitation, human rights and business, and civil society and national human rights institutions.

Building on the common minimum standards set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, as interpreted through the caselaw of the European Court of Human Rights, the **Steering Committee for Human Rights** prepares reports and studies on new and emerging challenges to human rights and develops binding and non-binding instruments intended to harmonise national law and practice and ensure that full and effective enjoyment of individual rights is maintained.



RULE OF LAW – CRIME – JUSTICE

Healthy, just **societies need to respect the rule of law**, with clear and transparent justice, fair and independent processes, and safeguards to ensure that **everyone is treated equally** before the law.

The Council of Europe has designed a number of ways to make this reality throughout Europe, helping countries to set up and run legal and justice systems that reflect the needs of their citizens. In parallel, work is being carried out day to day to stop crimes that affect us all and know no borders, such as corruption, money laundering, trafficking in human beings, fake medicine and medical products, and cybercrime. Ensuring good conditions for prisoners, creating safe, inclusive and fair sports, and finding answers to the challenges of drugs and addiction are also key to creating fair societies.

Rule of Law based institutions

Well-functioning **legal and democratic institutional** structures based on the rule of law are necessary to ensure democratic security in Europe. Independent, impartial and efficient judiciaries are key to **inspiring public trust** and **securing human rights**. They guarantee that **all individuals are treated equally** before the law and that rights and freedoms are enjoyed in practice. Concerted and effective responses to common challenges and threats are required to consolidate a coherent pan-European legal space that reflects Council of Europe standards and findings fully, including in the areas of civil, public and private law and public international law.

The aim of the Council of Europe in this area is to achieve a pan-European legal area in which robust, independent, impartial, transparent and accessible institutions and procedures based on the rule of law exist at all levels.

Action against crime, security and protection of citizens

Effective enjoyment of **human rights**, **democratic stability** and **secure societies** depend on countering all threats to the rule of law. These include terrorism and its financing, organised crime, money laundering, corruption, cybercrime, medicrime, trafficking in human beings and human organs, match fixing, doping, and violence and corruption in sport. It is also important to have **well-run prisons and probation services** with adequately trained staff in sufficient number and effective execution of penal sanctions. Law enforcement must likewise integrate a human rights-based approach aimed at combating ill-treatment and avoiding impunity.

The aim of the Council of Europe is effective protection of citizens from threats to the rule of law. It pursues a multidisciplinary approach and has developed key standards and legal treaties in areas such as terrorism and its financing, money laundering, cybercrime, corruption, counterfeiting of medical products, trafficking in human beings and in human organs. The focus is on ensuring that existing standards are implemented effectively, including the case law of the European Court of Human Rights; that new challenges are identified and responded to early, and that there is technical co-operation to address problem areas identified by relevant Council of Europe bodies. The Council of Europe has also developed a series of treaties which establish a common basis for co-operation in criminal matters across Europe and, increasingly, beyond.



Democracy through Law (Venice Commission)

The European Commission for Democracy through Law – better known as the [Venice Commission](#) as it meets in Venice – is the Council of Europe’s advisory body on constitutional matters. The Commission has 61 member States: the 46 Council of Europe member States, and 15 other States (Algeria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Korea, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Mexico, Peru, Tunisia and USA). Its individual members are university professors of public and international law, supreme and constitutional court judges, members of national parliaments and a number of civil servants. They are designated for four years by the member States, but act in their individual capacity.

The role of the Venice Commission is to provide legal advice to its member states and help them bring their legal and institutional structures in line with European standards and international experience in the fields of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It also helps to ensure the dissemination and consolidation of a common constitutional heritage, and provides legal advice to States carrying out constitutional reforms.

The Venice Commission’s pivotal role in upholding and strengthening democracy and the rule of law was underlined in the 2023 [Reykjavik Declaration](#) of the Heads of State and Government who undertook to raise the profile and strengthen the Venice Commission, by, for example, giving more visibility and status to its Rule of Law Checklist² and exploring ways the Organisation can better support the implementation of its recommendations.

The types of contact points between civil society organisations (CSOs) and the Venice Commission are threefold:

- ▶ Legislation on CSOs as the subject of opinions of the Venice Commission: The Venice Commission has adopted numerous reports and opinions in a number of individual countries. It also contributes to safeguarding freedom of association in its member states through, for instance, general guidelines on freedom of association and on the funding of associations.
- ▶ CSOs’ role in democratic law-making: In its opinions, the Venice Commission systematically recommends consultation with civil society organisations as an essential phase of democratic law-making.
- ▶ CSOs are essential partners in preparing Venice Commission opinions: delegations of the Venice Commission that visit countries as part of the preparation of opinions regularly meet civil society organisations to obtain their views and expertise.

Independence and efficiency of Justice

An **efficient, impartial and independent justice system**, whose decisions are enforced, is an essential pillar of the **rule of law** and a precondition for the enjoyment of all fundamental rights and freedoms.

Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides that “everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law”. This – and key

² Rule of Law Checklist - CDL-AD(2016)007.

recommendations from the Committee of Ministers – form the basis of Council of Europe support to member states to address any shortcomings that may exist. This is carried out through the work of three different bodies: the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), the Consultative Council of European Judges (CCJE) and the Consultative Council of European Prosecutors (CCPE).

The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) advises and supports policy makers and justice professionals by carrying out a data-based in-depth analysis of the day-to-day functioning of judicial systems in Europe, by developing pragmatic and innovative tools for use at national and local level focused on efficiency, quality and cyber-justice, and by supporting the most effective methodologies for judicial data collection, processing and analysis.

Consultative Council of European Judges – CCJE

The CCJE is a consultative body composed exclusively of serving judges, unique in this way at European level. This ad hoc committee is tasked with fostering the independence, impartiality and competence of judges by drawing up standards and guidance as regards the status and career of judges and the effective exercise of the judicial profession, bearing in mind the Council of Europe's standards, the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the findings and recommendations of the relevant monitoring mechanisms.

Focus 2022-2025

- ▶ Issues related to the independence, impartiality, and other aspects of a fair trial, competence, nomination, career, ethics, accountability, evaluation or other aspects of career of judges or judicial profession

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

Consultative Council of European Prosecutors – CCPE

The CCPE is a consultative body composed exclusively of serving prosecutors (unique in this way at European level), represents the various existing prosecution systems. This ad hoc committee is tasked with fostering the independence, impartiality and competence of prosecutors, by drawing up standards and guidance as regards the status and career of prosecutors and the effective exercise of the prosecutorial profession, bearing in mind the Council of Europe's legal standards, the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the findings and recommendations of the relevant monitoring mechanisms.

Focus 2022-2025

- ▶ Issues related to the independence, impartiality, competence, nomination, career, ethics, accountability, evaluation or other aspects of careers of prosecutors or the prosecutorial profession.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice – CEPEJ

The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) advises and supports policy makers and justice professionals by carrying out a data-based in-depth analysis of the day-to-day functioning of judicial systems in Europe, by developing pragmatic and innovative tools for use at national and local level focused on efficiency, quality and cyber-justice, and by supporting efficient methodologies for judicial data collection, processing and analysis concerning the functioning of judicial systems.



SPECIAL FILE

2024 Evaluation cycle (2022 data)

Focus 2022-2025

- ▶ Issues relating to the efficiency and quality of justice, including access to justice, judicial time management, day-to-day work of justice professionals, the functioning of courts, cyber-justice and the use of artificial intelligence in judicial systems.
- ▶ All aspects relating to the collection, management, quality control and analysis of judicial data and statistics.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ International organisations representing justice professionals who are observers to the CEPEJ (judges, prosecutors, lawyers, court clerks, bailiffs, experts, etc.)
- ▶ Justice professionals and law students through the organisation of the Crystal Scales of Justice Prize
- ▶ IT experts through the CEPEJ European Cyberjustice Network
- ▶ Users of justice through the organisation of satisfaction surveys

Legal co-operation

Public institutions and services are the foundation of the social contract between individuals and the state. Their accessibility, legitimacy, and effective operation enable structural inequalities and breaches of law to be addressed, provide redress for violations and facilitate peaceful resolution of disputes, hence playing a critical role in sustaining accountability and trust, and contributing to the well-being of individuals and societies. **Most people are affected by public and private law decisions** at some time in their lives, especially as profound changes in **society, economics and technology impact** their lives. Common approaches at European level help member states design appropriate legislative and policy solutions and strengthen mutual trust and understanding, leading to better regional and cross-border cooperation in rule of law matters.

Through its intergovernmental work, the Council of Europe develops and promotes agreed common standards, policies and good practices that contribute to reinforcing the common legal space. Solutions are proposed where gaps, operational problems and obstacles to the ratification and implementation of conventions are identified. In addition, co-operation programmes support justice sector reform in member states especially in the areas of judicial, civil and administrative law and practice in line with Council of Europe standards.

European Committee on Legal Co-operation – CDCJ

The CDCJ oversees the Council of Europe’s work in the field of public and private law and advises the Committee of Ministers.

Focus 2022-2025

- ▶ Protection of the profession of lawyer; the rights and the best interests of the child in parental separation and in care proceedings; artificial intelligence and administrative law; preventing and resolving disputes



related to child relocation ; administrative detention of migrants; child-sensitive procedures in administrative and migration law in connection with statelessness; rights of people conceived by donor to know their origins; legal aid and representation; access to justice for vulnerable people, mainstreaming gender in public and private law reform processes.; judicial independence and impartiality.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, through dedicated hearings in writing.

The Council of Europe develops public international law, international criminal justice and other topical issues by assisting member and observer states and international organisations in areas such as immunities, reservations and declarations to international treaties, implementation of international sanctions and respect for human rights, peaceful settlement of disputes including those of a private character, to which an international organisation is a party.

Committee of Legal Advisers on Public International Law – CAHDI

The CAHDI examines questions, exchanges views and provides opinions related to public international law.

Focus 2022-2025

Legal opinions at the request of the Committee of Ministers, compilation of national practices from member and non-member states in different fields of public international law

Crime and terrorism

The **fight against crime and terrorism** is pursued through the development of standard-setting, providing **technical and analytical advice**, gathering information, conducting thematic events and advising the Committee of Ministers.

European Committee on Crime Problems – CDPC

The CDPC identifies priority elements for intergovernmental legal co-operation and proposes areas for action on criminal law, procedure, criminology and penology by developing standard setting, providing scientific advice, collecting information and advising the Committee of Ministers.

Focus 2022-2025

- ▶ Protection of environment through criminal law; protecting victims of crime; criminal liability related to the use of artificial intelligence; protection of witnesses; combating hate crime; fighting smuggling of migrants; prison and probation services; international co-operation in criminal matters.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

Council of Europe Committee on Counter-terrorism – CDCT

The CDCT identifies priority issues for intergovernmental legal co-operation and proposes areas for action in the field of counter-terrorism by developing standard setting, providing technical and analytical advice, collecting information and advising the Committee of Ministers.

Focus 2024-2027

Legal definition of terrorism; abuse of new technologies by terrorist actors; prosecuting violent extremism conducive to terrorism; victims of terrorism; preventing radicalisation and terrorist propaganda online; terrorism and armed conflict; disengagement of women with links to terrorism; reintegration of children affected by terrorism.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

Money Laundering and Criminal Assets Recovery

The Council of Europe has established two different mechanisms to combat **money laundering and terrorist financing** that work in close co-operation: MONEYVAL and the [Conference of the Parties to CETS 198](#).

The Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) is an independent monitoring body which assesses compliance with the principal international standards to counter money laundering and terrorist financing. MONEYVAL is an associate member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

The Conference of the Parties (CoP) to the Council of Europe “Warsaw” Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism is responsible for monitoring the provisions of that convention. The action of the Conference of the Parties is central to the fight against organised crime and contributes to the Council of Europe’s action against corruption, human trafficking, cybercrime and economic crime in general.

The aim of MONEYVAL is to ensure that its member states have in place effective systems to counter money laundering and terrorist financing and comply with the relevant international standards in this matter. This includes several requirements on Governments to help NGOs protect themselves from TF risk. MONEYVAL engages with NGOs in the context of its mutual evaluations to determine the risk mitigating measures in assessed jurisdictions.

Medicrime

Counterfeiting of medicine and medical products has increased worldwide in recent years, endangering public health, affecting patients and sapping their confidence in the legal marketplace.

Even more profitable than drug trafficking, this new form of crime has an undeniable advantage for criminals: they go largely unpunished or receive only mild sanctions. Even when states take strict measures to regulate the production and distribution of medical products and devices, these measures often prove insufficient, especially when criminals find gaps in legislation, or are able to exploit international networks. This makes fake medicine and medical products a danger to health and to human rights.



The Council of Europe's response is the **MEDICRIME Convention** which: a) provides for specific and effective **criminal sanctions** for those who carry out the falsification of medical products and other similar crimes; b) protects the **rights of victims**; and c) promotes **national and international co-operation**.

The MEDICRIME Convention is the only international legally binding instrument in the criminal law field to counter the falsification of medical products and other similar crimes involving threats to public health. It is the only international instrument which deals with this issue from a criminal-law perspective.

The Council of Europe supports its member states and other Parties in implementing the monitoring recommendations through technical cooperation and assistance.

Work focuses on developing legal texts to reinforce existing laws and on producing tools and other material to help implement binding legal principles. The Council of Europe maintains partnerships with other intergovernmental organisations working on the issue, such as *inter alia* UNODC, INTERPOL, WCO, WHO, EU and with civil society.

Civil society can participate as observers within the MEDICRIME Committee.

MEDICRIME Committee

The MEDICRIME Committee:

1. monitors the implementation of the Convention by the Parties in particular and, where appropriate:
 - a. by making proposals to facilitate or improve the effective use and implementation of the Convention, including the identification of any problems and the effects of any declaration or reservation made under the Convention;
 - b. by expressing an opinion on any question concerning the application of the Convention;
 - c. by making specific recommendations to Parties concerning the implementation of the Convention.
2. facilitates the collection, analysis and exchange of information, experience and good practice between States to improve their capacity to prevent and combat the counterfeiting of medical products and similar crimes involving threats to public health. Where appropriate, the MEDICRIME Committee shall:
 - a. facilitate the exchange of information on significant legal, policy or technological developments;
 - b. express an opinion on any question concerning the application of the Convention.

Focus 2024-2025

Responding to the evolving nature of counterfeit/falsified medical products and other similar crimes involving threats to public health in Europe and beyond, the Council of Europe's MEDICRIME Committee adopted a **MEDICRIME strategy for 2024-2025** which offers new tools and concrete responses to continuous and emerging challenges faced by state authorities.

The strategy aims at strengthening efforts in Europe and beyond by addressing not only the phenomenon of counterfeit/falsified medical products but also its root causes and their promotion, particularly on online media.



The new strategy will be implemented by the **MEDICRIME Committee**, in close co-operation and co-ordination with other relevant international organisations and Council of Europe bodies.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, or through dedicated hearings or written consultations

Cybercrime

The **Budapest Convention** is the most relevant international criminal justice agreement on **cybercrime and electronic evidence** with currently 70 states that are Parties and 23 states that have signed it or been invited to accede. The **Cybercrime Convention Committee** (T-CY) – representing the parties to this treaty – oversees its effective use and implementation and the Cybercrime Programme Office of the Council of Europe (C-PROC) in Romania is supporting countries worldwide through building activities. Operational since April 2014, over 2100 activities supported by C-PROC have benefitted more than 130 countries.

Civil society contributed to the preparation of the new **Second Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime** between 2017 and 2021 in six rounds of consultations. This Protocol was opened for signature in May 2022. Co-operation with civil society, data protection organisations and industry is also sought within the framework of capacity building activities. The Octopus Conference, organised every 12 to 18 months by the Cybercrime Division of the Council of Europe, constitutes one of the largest platforms of exchange on cyber-crime matters gathering experts from more than 130 countries from public and private sectors, civil society and academia. Some 18 civil society organisations participated in its 2023 edition.

Combatting Corruption (GRECO)

Corruption poses a continuous threat to the essence and core values of societies and institutions. It undermines **justice and the equal treatment of citizens** and endangers **good governance** and the **stability of democratic institutions**. The **fight against corruption** is carried out through the **Group of States against Corruption** (GRECO) which assists member states in this area.

GRECO takes a multidisciplinary approach. It monitors observance of the Council of Europe's anti-corruption legal texts, including the **Twenty Guiding Principles for the Fight against Corruption**, the **Criminal Law Convention on Corruption** and its additional protocol, the **Civil Law Convention on Corruption** and the recommendation on common rules against corruption in the **funding of political parties and electoral campaigns**, along with other legal texts on whistle-blowers, access to official documents and lobbying.

GRECO's monitoring combines a dynamic process of mutual evaluation and peer pressure, resulting in country specific **evaluation reports** which include a detailed analysis and tailor-made recommendations drawn up

following an on-site visit and adopted by the GRECO plenary. Measures taken to implement these recommendations are subsequently assessed by GRECO under a separate follow-up procedure (“compliance procedure”). A high profile is maintained in external relations to secure additional support, coordination and synergy, notably with the United Nations, the OECD, OSCE/ODHIR, and the European Union.

Many NGOs play a role in the fight against corruption. A [list of those working with the Council of Europe](#) is available here.

Prisons and Police

Prison conditions are long-standing challenges and continue to require concerted action by member states particular when it comes to over-crowding, the **treatment of prisoners** in line with international human rights standards, successful **rehabilitation and re-socialisation**. Excessive use of force by law enforcement agents, discrimination and misconduct continues to be reported. Any suggestion of impunity on the part of the police or other agencies undermines public trust in effective law enforcement and violates human rights.

The European Convention on Human Rights provides the framework for the Council of Europe’s action in this field. This is complemented by legal texts adopted by the Committee of Ministers, the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and the findings of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). The Court and the CPT highlight areas where member states need to act to fulfil the Council of Europe’s standards on prisons and probation, and as regards the actions of law enforcement officials.

The Council of Europe has long-standing expertise in the execution of penal sanctions and measures and has developed several key standards and legal texts in this area. The emphasis is placed on good management of prisons, maintaining humane prison conditions by ensuring proper selection and training of staff, by guaranteeing proper living standards, and considering the needs of vulnerable prisoners. Each year the Council of Europe publishes statistics on prisons and probation, as well as managing platforms for exchange of good practices, promoting the latest Council of Europe standards and organising discussions of new challenges in forums such as annual conferences of directors of prison and probation services.

The Council of Europe provides assistance to prison and probation services, police and other law enforcement bodies in areas identified as needing improvement; offering training, legislative support, policy advice and exchange of good practice. When it comes to the police, the emphasis is on human rights-based policing and on combating ill-treatment and impunity as regards law enforcement structures.

The Council of Europe currently implements projects in many member states with NGOs playing an important role in most, if not the leading role. Co-operation projects on prisons and police encourage authorities to open up their prison systems, their police and probation services to NGOs, getting them involved in the organisation of treatment programmes and activities and allowing them to assist in reintegrating prisoners back into society. For example, NGOs are involved in the system of civil monitoring boards in Turkey and some of the board members are also part of either an NGO or a trade union: they are also invited to meetings of the national preventive mechanism.

Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)

Trafficking in human beings is a serious crime and a grave violation of human rights. The Council of Europe’s **Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which entered into force in 2008**, is an important step to stamping out this abuse worldwide. It is monitored by the **Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)** which evaluates periodically each State Party and draws up reports. On the basis of GRETA’s reports, the Committee of the Parties to the Convention adopts recommendations addressed to the country concerned. In addition, GRETA can launch an urgent procedure to prevent or limit the scale or number of serious violations. The Council of Europe also assists states in **implementing the Convention**, through targeted co-operation activities.

Civil society is an important source of information for GRETA. The convention provides for co-operation and strategic partnerships with civil society, which can help governments fulfil their obligations. Prior to each country evaluation visit, GRETA seeks information directly from civil society, based on a questionnaire, and NGOs may answer some or all of the questions. NGOs can also decide to provide a joint report. [Guidance for NGOs to report to GRETA](#) has been developed by two INGOs.



During country evaluation visits, GRETA holds meetings with civil society representatives (specialised NGOs, trade unions, research institutes, and so on) and visits shelters for victims of trafficking run by NGOs. Civil society is also active in the implementation of the Convention through awareness raising, research, training, detecting victims of trafficking, providing them with accommodation and other assistance, and supporting them through the criminal justice process and to claim compensation. GRETA periodically organises hearings with NGOs. The Committee of the Parties can also invite international NGOs as observers to its meetings.

Trafficking of Human Organs

The trafficking in human organs is a problem of global proportions that violates basic fundamental freedoms, human rights and dignity and constitutes a direct threat to public health, integrity, freedom and often the life of individuals. The Council of Europe's [Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs](#) is an important step to stamping out this abuse worldwide. It is monitored by its Committee of the Parties (named the Santiago de Compostela Committee), representing the Parties to this convention, which oversees its effective use and implementation. It adopts recommendations addressed to the countries Parties to the Convention. The Council of Europe also assists states in **implementing the convention**, through targeted co-operation activities. Civil society is an important source of information for the Santiago de Compostela Committee. And this is the reason why the convention provides that representatives of civil society, and in particular non-governmental organisations, may be admitted as observers to the Committee of the Parties. Co-operation with civil society is also sought within the framework of capacity building activities. [Civil society can participate as observers within the Santiago de Compostela Committee.](#)



SOCIAL RIGHTS

Protecting social rights and promoting social progress is a priority for the Council of Europe and one of the main tools to build social justice and inclusive societies. This is even more necessary in times of crisis and economic hardship, with the **Covid-19 pandemic** revealing both strengths and serious weaknesses in a broad range of social rights across Europe.

Social Charter

One of the Council of Europe's aims is the effective **protection of economic and social rights** and it achieves this through the implementation of the [European Social Charter](#), a treaty that guarantees economic and social rights and complements the **European Convention on Human Rights**.

The [European Committee of Social Rights](#) supervises how the Charter is implemented through a reporting procedure and a collective complaints procedure. National and international NGOs can engage with the Committee within these two monitoring procedures. They can also play a part in the follow-up procedures.

Following a 2022 decision from the Committee of Ministers, States Parties can now be asked to submit ad hoc reports for analysis or review by the European Committee of Social Rights. Such reports may be requested when new or critical issues arise with a broad or transversal scope or with a pan-European dimension. Follow-up should involve dialogue among the States Parties in association with relevant stakeholders such as the social partners and civil society. A dedicated web page explains the process in detail.

Under the reporting procedure, states covered by the Charter regularly submit a report on its implementation in law and in practice. The European Committee of Social Rights examines the national reports and any comments received from third parties, as well as any other information at its disposal. It then makes a legal assessment of the conformity of the situation and adopts "conclusions" for each of the Charter provisions and each of the States concerned. The [Governmental Committee of the European Social Charter](#) and the [European Code of Social Security](#), which is composed of representatives of states who are party to the Charter and of observers representing European trade unions and employers' organisations, is responsible for follow-up to conclusions and may make proposals for resolutions and recommendations to States in order to bring situations into conformity with the Charter. On the basis of such proposals, the Committee of Ministers may then address a resolution or a recommendation to a State asking it to change the situation in law and/or in practice. With the adoption of the reform package by the Committee of Ministers in September 2022, further emphasis is placed on recommendations as a way to engage further with States Parties in order to achieve compliance with the Charter. That may include, as appropriate, technical assistance and meetings, exchange of good practices as well as cooperation projects.

The collective complaints procedure was introduced by the 1995 Additional Protocol providing for a system of collective complaints allowing certain organisations including the international and national social partners and INGOs with participatory status with the Council of Europe, to bring complaints. Collective complaints can only be brought against states that have accepted the complaints procedure.

A complaint is examined by the European Committee of Social Rights which declares it admissible if the formal requirements have been met. The Committee then takes a decision on the merits of the complaint, which it transmits to the parties concerned and to the Committee of Ministers. The decision is made public within four months of this transmission.

With respect to reporting on **follow-up to collective complaints**, certain procedural adjustments were made pursuant to the above-mentioned 2022 reform package. In particular, in cases where the Committee of Ministers addressed recommendations to States Parties after the European Committee of Social Rights found that the Charter had not been applied in a satisfactory manner, States Parties will be asked to submit a single report on the follow-up undertaken two years after the recommendation. The assessment of the European Committee of Social Rights on the follow-up will then be transmitted to the Committee of Ministers. Depending on the assessment of the European Committee of Social Rights, the Committee of Ministers may:

- ▶ close the case with a resolution,
- ▶ renew the recommendation,
- ▶ before renewing the recommendation, it may refer the case to the Governmental Committee for further consultations. In the light of the outcome of these consultations, the Committee of Ministers decides whether to close the procedure or renew the recommendation.

There are a number of ways that NGOs can get involved in the Charter procedures.

Under the reporting procedure and the ad hoc reports procedure:

States who are party to the Charter are under an obligation to communicate copies of their national reports to trade unions affiliated to the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and to national organisation that are members of Business Europe and of the International Organisation of Employers (OIE).

These organisations and, more generally, trade unions, employers' organisations, NGOs and others may submit comments and information on state reports to the European Committee of Social Rights. The extent to which these comments are taken into account is within the discretion of that Committee.

Comments on national reports must be submitted to the secretariat of the Department of Social Rights before 30 June of the year during which the European Committee of Social Rights examines the national report concerned. This deadline has been set to allow states time to respond to comments if they so wish.

Under the collective complaints procedure:

Only certain organisations can bring collective complaints to the European Committee of Social Rights. In addition to the European social partners (ETUC, OIE and Business Europe), these include representative national trade unions and employers' organisations and INGOs having participatory status with the Council of Europe and having been included on a [list of international Non-Governmental Organisations \(INGOs\)](#). States Parties may also declare that they accept complaints to be brought from national NGOs (only one State has done so, namely Finland). In any event, national NGOs or INGOs that are not on the list can work together with listed INGOs entitled to lodge collective complaints. Information can be found on the website of the [European Social Charter](#) and on the website of the [Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations of the Council of Europe](#).

Civil society (and other) organisations can provide input as "third parties" with regard to collective complaints brought by others. In this case, those organisations should indicate to the European Committee of Social Rights their interest in submitting information on a pending collective complaint. To do so, they are invited to contact the Secretariat of the Department of Social Rights at DGI-ESC-Collective-Complaints@coe.int



SPORT

Sport Conventions

Sport is a major component of society, bringing people together based around values such as respect, mutual understanding, compliance with rules and fair play. At its best, it contributes to **health and happiness**, breaking down barriers and building trust and community spirit. It is an **excellent vector for promoting the values and goals of the Council of Europe**. Yet, sport faces growing threats and risks that can affect the health and wellbeing of players and spectators, including issues around safety, security and service and acts of violence, racism or other criminal offences.

Faced with the manipulation of sports competitions as well as the doping of athletes and technological cheating, sport, both on the part of participants and spectators, faces an issue of fairness which compromises its integrity.

The Council of Europe contributes through its sports conventions: the [Saint-Denis Convention on an integrated safety, security and service approach at football matches and other sports events](#) which promotes safe, secure and welcoming sports events for all participants; the [Anti-doping Convention](#) and the [Macolin Convention on the manipulation of sports competitions](#). These conventions are monitored to make sure they are properly implemented; standards are developed to promote Council of Europe values, emphasising issues such as the fight against violence, racism, xenophobia and discrimination, corruption, and digital technologies. Co-operation with the [Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport \(EPAS\)](#) ensures maximum impact.

The Council of Europe co-ordinates appointments by European public authorities to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) governing bodies. It develops strategic partnerships with sport organisations to embed Council of Europe principles and standards into their policies and operations and sets up platforms for engaging with civil society, such as athletes' and supporters' organisations.. It also works with many key international partners, including the EU, UNESCO, UNOCT, Interpol, FIFA, UEFA, WADA and the IOC.

A number of sport organisations, such as European and international sports federations, athletes' organisations or major event organisers, have observer status in the sports convention committees. Consultation with civil society is organised regularly on specific topics, either through direct participation in meetings, through dedicated hearings or in writing.



The Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS)

Sport is defined by the European Sports Charter as “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.”

The Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) promotes sport for all, a sport founded on values and capable of bringing benefits to individuals and society in terms of health, social inclusion and especially education.

EPAS provides a pan-European platform of intergovernmental sports co-operation, involving both political and technical levels and including the public authorities of its member states, sports organisations and NGOs.

EPAS develops policies and standards to promote more ethical, inclusive and safer sport in member states. EPAS enabled the revision of the European Sports Charter in 2021 which serves as a foundation for sports policies.

Through visits, EPAS supports member states in implementing the values of the European Sports Charter. Local public authorities and civil society are notably present during these visits. In addition, EPAS prepares texts and recommendations for submission to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, as demonstrated by the recent adoption of a declaration on sport integrity.

It provides technical assistance and capacity building to public authorities and the sports movement. It also supports dialogue and co-operation between governments and sports organisations, at political and technical levels.

EPAS works in close co-operation with the three existing convention committees and the ad hoc European Committee for the World Doping Agency (CAHAMA) on topics covered by the sports conventions and issues of common interest. The partial agreement works with international partners including the EU, UNESCO and the UNODC, the International Partnership Against Corruption in Sport (IPACS) co-founded by the International Olympic Committee and numerous International and European federations, umbrella organisations and NGOs involved in sport.

EPAS includes a consultative body made up of 27 civil society organisations. Civil society actively participates in the creation and development of projects around key cross-cutting themes such as gender equality in sport, the human rights of transgender and intersex athletes or the inclusion of migrant children in and through sport. Sports NGOs can apply for consultative committee membership by [applying to the EPAS secretariat](#).

EPAS runs thematic projects to help its member states address issues such as discrimination in sport and child protection through its flagship project “Start to Talk” and the international pool of experts on safe sport.

Finally, under the authority of EPAS, the Network of Magistrates / Prosecutors Responsible for Sports, or MARS Network, was recently founded. It aims to strengthen international cooperation and the exchange of information in the protection of sport integrity by allowing the creation of synergies between different countries and legal systems.



WOMEN

Gender Equality

The Council of Europe bases its action to **promote gender equality** on a set of conventions and recommendations, on the case law of the **European Court of Human Rights** and the conclusions of the **European Committee of Social Rights** (European Social Charter), and on a **strategy agreed amongst all its member states**. Its combined approach includes developing standards, following them up and supporting member states through a variety of measures such as policy guidelines, capacity building, peer-to-peer exchange of good practice, and awareness-raising. More information on co-operation activities are [here](#). **Gender equality is included in all the policies and activities of the Organisation through gender mainstreaming.** The Council of Europe maintains **partnerships** on this issue with other **international and regional organisations** (UN bodies, European Union and its specialised agencies, OSCE, OECD) and with **civil society**.

Gender Equality Commission - GEC

The GEC steers the Council of Europe's intergovernmental work in the field of gender equality and advises the Committee of Ministers on appropriate action to be taken in its field of competence, taking due account of relevant transversal perspectives.

Focus 2024-2027

Implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy (2024-2029); preventing and combating sexism; artificial intelligence and gender equality; combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls; deflecting anti-gender rhetoric and creating a new narrative; equal participation of women and men in political and public decision-making; gender equality in education; migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women; involvement of men and boys in gender equality policies and in policies to combat violence against women.

Civil society involvement

- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, through dedicated hearings or in writing



Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO and the Committee of the Parties)

Violence against women and domestic violence are a violation of human rights. One in three women in Europe has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. The form of violence knows no social status, nor geographical borders, is widely spread and highly underreported.

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – known as the *Istanbul Convention* – is at the core of action to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. It operates under two main pillars: the Group of independent Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) and the Committee of the Parties. GREVIO draws up country reports, evaluating legislative and other measures taken by countries. It can initiate a special inquiry to prevent a serious, massive or persistent pattern of any acts of violence covered by the convention. The Committee of the Parties adopts recommendations based on GREVIO evaluation reports and follows up on their implementation.

Co-operation with other international organisations and regional and international mechanisms on women's rights ensures coherence, efficiency, impact and visibility of results.

GREVIO's aim is that all NGOs active in preventing and combating violence against women can contribute to the evaluation procedure. At the same time, it is aware that NGO resources are limited and although they may be willing to provide input at the early stages of evaluation they may simply not be in a position to do so.

GREVIO strongly encourages NGOs to work through coalitions, networks or platforms, drawing on the experiences gained from NGO participation in other monitoring mechanisms. This remains one of the most viable ways of sharing NGO resources and expertise, of organising the necessary information flow among NGOs and contributing effectively to GREVIO's work. It may also help GREVIO establish an on-going dialogue with civil society, including during country visits. Where appropriate, national human rights institutions or NGOs in the countries under evaluation may co-ordinate NGO reporting to GREVIO.

GREVIO is particularly keen to receive information from women's and grassroots organisations on the practical implementation of the convention, as well as those who work at the intersection of different forms of discrimination that women victims of violence may experience. NGOs consulted by the authorities or otherwise involved in the drawing up of a state report can and should also be heard as independent voices.

NGOs can provide GREVIO with information at any time, before, during or after GREVIO decides to organise an evaluation of a particular country or set a deadline for state reporting.

The Committee of the Parties engages in follow up to GREVIO's work by issuing recommendations and monitors their implementation. In this context, it welcomes information submitted by NGOs. However, as the Committee only monitors the implementation of the recommendations it issues in respect of each Party as opposed to the entire convention, NGO submissions should focus on the level of implementation of the recommendations by Parties. This is also the point in the evaluation procedure at which NGO submission to the Committee of the Parties can have the highest impact. The information should be provided in one of the official languages of the Council of Europe (English or French). More details are available on the [NGOs and evaluation section of the Council's website on violence against women](#).



YOUTH

Youth for Democracy

The Council of Europe's co-management system is an example of good governance practice in participatory democracy and citizen participation. It is a place for common reflection, combining the voice of young Europeans and that of public authorities responsible for youth affairs. This dialogue, in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect, gives legitimacy and relevance to the programme of activities proposed by the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) and meaningfulness to intergovernmental co-operation for responsive and needs-based youth policies. The inclusion of young people in the search for responses to emerging challenges also enables the Council of Europe to benefit from their unique perspective, experience and expectations on issues such as technological development and climate change. Beyond governments and youth organisations, youth work practitioners, educators, researchers, policy experts, and young people from grassroots movements are routinely involved.

Council of Europe action in the youth sector is guided by a comprehensive strategy – the [Youth sector strategy 2030](#) – and run through a co-managed decision-making structure. In their Reykjavik Declaration, the fruit of their 4th Summit, the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe agreed there should be “a youth perspective in the Organisation's intergovernmental and other deliberations as youth participation in decision-making processes improves the effectiveness of public policies and strengthens democratic institutions through open dialogue.” This youth perspective is to be integrated into the Council of Europe's action. Furthermore, youth policy standards and values are being promoted throughout the member states and through institutional co-operation between the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

The Organisation also grants a [quality label for youth centres](#), which allows a growing network of youth centres to be associated with the youth sector's values and for youth policy standards to reach a broader spectrum of young people.

Youth Co-Management

- ▶ **CDEJ European Steering Committee for Youth** – governmental representatives from public administrations responsible for youth issues
- ▶ **CCJ Advisory Council on Youth** – thirty young non-governmental representatives
- ▶ **CMJ Joint Council of Youth** – the CDEJ and the CCJ together
These committees compose the co-managed structure which establishes the priorities, programmes and budget of the youth sector.
- ▶ **CPJ Programming Committee on Youth**
This subordinate body establishes the programme of activities of the European Youth Centres and the European Youth Foundation, in accordance with decisions of the Joint Council on priorities and immediate outcomes.

Joint Council on Youth – CMJ

The CMJ oversees the Council of Europe’s programme in the youth field and advises the Committee of Ministers. It is the policy-making body of the youth sector, bringing together the members of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ).

Focus 2024-2027

Supporting youth participation as a way of revitalising pluralistic democracy, including protecting youth civil society and young people; supporting young people’s access to rights, including those engaged in climate action, those living in rural areas, including access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights, and furthering the Charter on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education; supporting young people’s capacities to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, including supporting young refugees in transition to adulthood, Roma youth participation, supporting young people living in war zones; supporting youth work as a means of contributing actively to society

Civil society involvement

- ▶ the Advisory Council on Youth is composed of civil society representatives
- ▶ Participant: Conference of INGOs (CINGO)
- ▶ Observers: European Youth Card Association (EYCA), European Youth Forum (YFJ), European Youth and Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA)
- ▶ Consultation with civil society, either through direct participation in meetings, through dedicated hearings, consultations, etc

European Youth Foundation

Youth organisations and associations are confronted with reduced funding, resulting in declining opportunities for young people’s active involvement in civil society. At the same time, youth organisations are laboratories of civic engagement contributing to the promotion of and advocacy for human rights and democracy. Through the [European Youth Foundation \(EYF\)](#), financial support is available to encourage co-operation among young people to promote the values and priorities of the Council of Europe across the continent and their meaningful participation in democratic processes.

The EYF provides support to European youth-led projects through international, national and local youth NGOs, or youth networks. Each year, approximately 200 projects and 10 000 young people aged between 15 and 30 benefit from EYF support for projects that are in line with the priorities of the “Youth for democracy” programme of the Council of Europe. There are different types of grants: annual work plans, one-off international activities, and local pilot projects. The EYF also offers advice and support to young people to develop and implement these projects. The financial sustainability of international youth NGOs and networks is supported through structural grants. All decisions related to EYF grants are taken by the Programming Committee on Youth (CPJ), composed on an equal footing of representatives of governments and youth NGOs, thus reflecting the unique co-management system.

GRANTS AND RESOURCES

The Council of Europe offers two different kinds of grants: **project-related**, which is for a specified action, and **operational**, which normally last no more than twelve consecutive months.

The grant must assist in reaching the grantees goals or objectives and must advance the Council of Europe's values or policies.

The [grant award procedure](#) is based on the principles of transparency, non-retroactivity, non-cumulative awards, not-for-profit, co-financing and non-discrimination.

Bodies that have received grants are listed on [the grant portal](#).

[European Youth Foundation](#) awards grants to non-governmental youth organisations to support international, national or local youth-led projects addressing the Council of Europe youth sector's priorities, such as revitalising democracy, access to rights, peace building and the development of youth work. The Foundation also supports international youth organisations and networks with operational grants.

The [Roma and Travellers sector awards](#) grants for Roma and pro-Roma NGOs to run Roma political schools in several member states. The EU/CoE joint programmes "Building capacity at local level for the integration of Roma (ROMACT)" and "Promoting good governance and Roma empowerment at local level (ROMACTED)" feature small grant schemes for local Roma inclusion projects and for local authorities and/or local Roma NGOs.



www.coe.int/en/web/civil-society

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.