



International Conference
Shaping democratic renewal: civic space and
the path to a New Democratic Pact for Europe
Strasbourg, 2-3/02/2026



18 September 2025

Concept note

At the 2023 Reykjavík Summit, Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe adopted the landmark Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, setting out a common vision of the key elements of a functioning democracy. These Principles underscore the vital role of civil society in upholding democratic values and safeguarding fundamental freedoms across Europe.

By fostering trust, encouraging participation, and promoting accountability, civil society strengthens democratic resilience. It helps ensure that public institutions remain responsive and inclusive. Yet, civil society actors are facing growing constraints. Opportunities for meaningful participation in public decision-making are shrinking, while restrictions on organisations and individuals defending human rights – including those working on migration, women's rights and gender equality, LGBTI equality, and environmental justice – are becoming more pronounced. Legislative restrictions on civic space, harassment and surveillance of civil society actors and human rights defenders, the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and increasingly limited funding all undermine civic engagement.

The 2025 Report of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, *Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe*, highlights the urgency of protecting civic space as a cornerstone of democratic renewal. It calls for stronger cooperation among member states, international organisations, and civil society to reverse current trends and reinforce democratic institutions.

In response, the process leading to the New Democratic Pact aims to revitalise democracy through innovation, institutional renewal, and civic empowerment. This high-level event will contribute to that effort by exploring how civic space can be strengthened at both national and international levels. It will showcase practical initiatives for monitoring civic space and inspire new approaches for civil society and member states to jointly advance the Pact and build a more inclusive and resilient democratic future.

The conference will provide a strategic platform for reinforcing stakeholder commitment to developing and strengthening a coherent mechanism for monitoring and protecting civic space across Council of Europe member states. It will facilitate the exchange of best practices and the formulation of concrete proposals – including policy recommendations, collaborative frameworks, and pilot initiatives – aimed at laying foundations for such a mechanism. In doing so, the event will also contribute to advancing the New Democratic Pact for Europe, by articulating actionable insights to strengthen civic space as a cornerstone of democratic renewal.

Objectives

- Foster sustained dialogue and strategic cooperation on civic space across Europe, identifying policy gaps and co-developing solutions to strengthen an enabling environment for civil society.
- Promote international collaboration and diplomatic engagement to protect and expand civic space through joint initiatives and protection mechanisms, policy innovation, and shared commitments under the New Democratic Pact for Europe.
- Ensure meaningful civil society participation in shaping the New Democratic Pact for Europe through inclusive consultation and representation in decision-making processes.

Draft programme

Monday, 2 February 2026

14.00 – 14.30 | Opening session: setting the scene

Introductory remarks by a high-level representative of the Council of Europe

Short video messages from civil society organisations: civic space struggles in practice

Welcoming

- Representative of a member state
- Representative of civil society

14.30 – 15.50 | Session I: Taking stock – what is the state of civic space in Europe?

Objective: This session will present and discuss key findings, emerging trends, and lessons learned regarding the current state of civic space across Europe. Drawing on evidence and experiences from a diverse range of stakeholders, it will help identify critical gaps, vulnerabilities, and opportunities in civic space monitoring and protection. The session will set the stage for deeper exploration and strategic dialogue throughout the conference.

Moderator: Representative of civil society

Speakers:

- Representative of a national level civil society organisation
- Representative of European civil society and CINGO Expert Council on NGO law
- Representative of a national ombudsperson
- Representative of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (tbc)
- Representative of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) (tbc)

15.50 – 16.20 | Coffee Break

16.20 – 17.40 | Session II: Monitoring civic space – learning from practice

Objective: Building on the insights from Session I, this session will explore current pilot initiatives and institutional practices aimed at monitoring and protecting civic space. It will highlight lessons learned, showcase innovative approaches, and identify opportunities for stronger collaboration between international organisations, member states, civil society and human rights defenders. The session will also serve as a platform for proposing new ideas and partnerships to enhance the effectiveness, sustainability and impact of civic space monitoring efforts.

Moderator: Representative of the Council of Europe Secretariat

Speakers:

- Representative of European civil society
- Representative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (tbc)
- Representative of a national human rights institution
- Representative of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) (tbc)
- Representative of national civil society

17.40 – 19.30 | Networking and reception

Tuesday, 3 February 2026

9.30 – 10.50 | Session III: Legislative trends and civic space – navigating regulatory change

Objective: This session will explore the evolving landscape of legislative and regulatory measures impacting civic space, with a focus on laws governing transparency, accountability, and funding, including those involving foreign sources. Drawing on national and regional experiences, the discussion will focus on how civil society and institutional actors can respond to these developments. The session will highlight legal, policy, and advocacy approaches to mitigate risks, adapt to new requirements, and identify opportunities for coordinated, constructive, and rights-based engagement.

Moderator: Representative of civil society

Speakers:

- Representative from the European Parliament (tbc)
- Representative from Council of Europe member state
- Representative of a national civil society organisation
- Representative of an organisation engaging in strategic litigation on behalf of civil society
- Representative of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) (tbc)

10.50 – 11.20 | Coffee Break

11.20 – 12.20 | Session IV: Digital civic space – innovation, inclusion, and protection

Objective: This session will explore how digital technologies are reshaping civic space and creating new opportunities for participation while also introducing risks such as surveillance, disinformation, and exclusion – risks that must be carefully addressed in monitoring and protection efforts. At the same time, digital tools hold significant potential for more inclusive civic engagement, and promising practices are emerging in this field. The session will explore new dimensions of digital civic space and discuss how the Council of Europe can strengthen its support through policy guidance and cooperation.

Moderator: Representative of civil society

Speakers:

- Representative of civil society
- Representative of civic tech initiative or academia
- Representative of a national institution
- Representative of the Council of Europe

12.20 – 14.00 | Lunch Break

14.00 – 15.20 | Session V: Civic space at a crossroads – charting strategic pathways forward

Objective: This session will synthesise key insights from the conference and provide a platform for diverse actors – across institutional, academic, and grassroots sectors – to identify strategic directions and actionable recommendations. These reflections will inform the conference key takeaways and guide future Council of Europe initiatives to strengthen civic space across Europe.

Moderator: Representative of a relevant Council of Europe institution

Speakers:

- Representative of European Youth Forum
- Representative from the Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs
- Representative of CDDEM
- Representative of a member state
- Representative of International IDEA

15.20 – 15.50 | Coffee Break

15.50 – 16.30 | Session VI: From insight to impact – advancing Council of Europe action on civic space

Objective: The closing session will consolidate the key outcomes of the conference and translate these into concrete next steps. The session will also summarise strategic opportunities for the Council of Europe to strengthen its role in protecting and expanding civic space, and invite further dialogue and reflections from diverse stakeholders.

Moderator: Representative of the Council of Europe Secretariat

Speakers:

- Moderators: reports from previous sessions
- Conference rapporteur: presentation of the key takeaways
- Representative of civil society: comments

Closing Reflections and Next steps by the moderator

16.30 – 16.45 | Group photo

Practical information

- The conference will feature moderated panel discussions with diverse speakers from civil society, member states, and international organisations.
- Each panel will include structured opportunities for audience engagement, such as Q&A sessions, live polling, and facilitated dialogue segments to encourage active participation, foster dynamic exchange and generate concrete ideas.
- The event will take place in English and French, with interpretation provided, and will be live-streamed.
- An accompanying programme will include an exhibition space for materials and a civic space resource table showcasing reports, standards, case law, and tools.