

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

MED-27(2026)01

15 June 2026

Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education

“Empowering Educators for a Democratic Europe in the Digital Age”

27th Session

Podgorica, Montenegro, 3-4 December 2026

Concept note

Context

1. The 27th Session of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education will take place in Montenegro under its Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, at the mid-point of implementing the Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024–2030, “Learners First.” The Conference will serve both as a mid-term evaluation of progress achieved and adjust course for 2027–2030, and a European forum to chart clear commitments for the years beyond 2030.

2. The Ministers will hold a focused discussion on how Europe can strengthen, protect and modernise the teaching profession across schools, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. Throughout, learners and the wider education community remain the main focus, with enhanced support for teachers and school leaders as a core driver of democratic, inclusive and digitally responsible education systems. In a period marked by rapid technological change, geopolitical instability and social transformation, education systems play a stabilising role for societies, providing continuity, trusted public institutions and spaces where democratic values and social cohesion can be sustained and renewed. The Council of Europe’s New Democratic Pact for Europe places education — and those who deliver it — at the very heart of democratic renewal.

3. Proposed theme of the Conference: “Empowering Educators for a Democratic Europe in the Digital Age”

The Conference main theme will highlight the essential democratic mission of educators and the need to reinforce their professional development, autonomy and wellbeing. The New Democratic Pact for Europe aims to respond to democratic backsliding, declining trust in institutions, growing polarisation and societal fragmentation across Europe by strengthening democratic resilience, reinforcing institutional integrity and restoring citizens’ confidence in democratic governance.

At the Strategy’s mid-point, the Conference will advance a holistic “Learners First” agenda that empowers and sustains both educators and learners for a democratic and digital Europe. Teachers and school leaders—supported by effective governance frameworks - working in partnership with parents, communities and civil society—model human rights, foster intercultural understanding and build competences for democratic culture across the school. Schools remain among the most trusted public institutions and provide stable environments where democratic norms, critical thinking and civil engagement can be cultivated, particularly in times of uncertainty and societal change. Yet teachers’ shortages, uneven working conditions and rapid digitalisation risk eroding autonomy and trust.

The theme therefore calls for investment in professional development, autonomy, leadership, wellbeing and social dialogue; for policies that strengthen rights and attractiveness of the teaching profession at all levels of education; and for a human-centred digital transformation—rooted in AI literacy, ethical governance, equity—that enhances learning while safeguarding democracy.

4. Three sub-themes

The agenda is structured around three interconnected sub-themes:

- **Teachers as Builders of Democratic Culture;**

Teachers are identified as key agents in strengthening democratic culture within education systems, particularly in the context of the European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE). School leaders also play a crucial role in creating institutional environments where

democratic values are embedded in governance, school culture and everyday practice. They play a decisive role in developing competences such as critical thinking, empathy, civic responsibility, and co-operation skills. While democratic competences are widely recognised in policy frameworks, implementation remains uneven, and teachers operate in increasingly complex environments shaped by digital transformation, misinformation, societal polarisation, crises, and workforce pressures.

Systemic challenges include fragmented integration of democratic competences, difficulties in assessment, digital risks, tensions between transparency and privacy, and declining attractiveness of the profession. Addressing these issues requires coherent policy alignment across curriculum, teacher education, professional autonomy, school leadership and school culture to ensure teachers can effectively support democratic resilience.

The European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE), which ministers are set to launch, should be regarded as a means of enhancing the quality of citizenship education across Europe, as well as a response to democratic backsliding, declining trust in institutions, growing polarisation and societal fragmentation across Europe. Education systems are central to renewing democratic culture, and teachers are its primary agents.

The ministerial exchange is expected to:

- identify policy measures that strengthen the role of teachers and school leaders in embedding democratic culture across education systems;
- support the launch of the European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE).

- **Teachers and digital transformation**

Digital transformation, accelerated by AI, presents both opportunities and risks for education, making teachers and school leaders responsible for digital governance within schools is central to ensuring that technology strengthens rather than undermines teaching and democratic values. While digital tools can reduce administrative burden, support personalised learning and provide better connection to professional networks and resources, they may also constrain professional autonomy, weaken the human core of education, and create governance challenges related to data use and accountability.

Digital transformation must be built on human rights. It should respect the rights of teachers and learners, ensure equity, protect privacy and dignity, and remain democratically accountable. It should also address the ethical dimensions of digital technologies, including questions of authorship, academic integrity, and the responsible use of AI-generated content.

More than ever, teachers therefore require sustained professional learning, protected autonomy, manageable workloads, and meaningful involvement in technology decisions. Effective transformation depends on clear safeguards, trustworthy governance and procurement frameworks, and coherent alignment with curriculum, assessment, and professional standards. These elements ensure that innovation remains human-centred, rights-compliant, and supportive of a stable, sustainable teaching profession.

The White Paper on the Futures of Teachers and the Teaching Profession will guide future policy and standard-setting of the cooperation programme in Education of the Council of Europe. It sets out the main challenges teachers face today and may face tomorrow. It describes a shared European vision built on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It explores policy options and paths for action. And it proposes practical steps to strengthen teaching as a profession – one that builds knowledge, drives change, and supports democratic

resilience. The White Paper also looks at how digital technologies – including but not only AI – affect teachers and teaching.

The ministerial exchange is expected to:

- identify priorities for strengthening teachers' digital competences and professional autonomy in AI-enabled education environments;
- support the policy directions outlined in the White Paper on the Futures of Teachers and the Teaching Profession.

- **Safeguarding Academic Freedom**

Academic freedom constitutes a core democratic value and a precondition for the effective functioning of higher education systems. It safeguards independent inquiry, supports pluralism of ideas, institutional autonomy, and the integrity of public debate.

Together with academic freedom, strong institutional governance and leadership in higher education institutions are essential to ensure that universities remain spaces of open debate, critical inquiry and democratic engagement.

Across contemporary democratic contexts, academic freedom faces growing pressures that extend beyond direct political interference to include indirect governance and funding constraints, legal intimidation, self-censorship, online harassment and polarisation.

Existing protections remain fragmented and often insufficiently adapted to the realities of academic work. Addressing these challenges requires stronger normative clarity, greater coherence across legal frameworks in Europe, and more effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure academic freedom is safeguarded in practice. The main challenge in Europe is not the absence of principles, but the gap between principle and effective protection under contemporary conditions.

In order to protect academic freedom as a core democratic value, the establishment of an effective legal protection system at European level is essential.

The ministerial exchange is expected to:

- support the development of a European system for the protection of academic freedom;
- reinforce the role of higher education institutions as pillars of democratic resilience and trusted sources of knowledge in European societies

5. The Conference is expected to steer the Strategy's second phase and launch:

- **the European Space for Citizenship Education;**
- **the White Paper on the Futures of Teachers and the Teaching Profession;**
- **the construction of a European system for protection of academic freedom.**

6. A transversal discussion will also address Europe's contribution to the post-2030 follow-up of the SDG4 agenda, ensuring alignment between national reforms, Council of Europe standards and global education goals.

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7. Objectives

The Conference will aim to:

- review progress in implementing the Education Strategy 2024–2030 “Learners First”;
- reaffirm the democratic mission of education and strengthen trust in the teaching profession;
- endorse the European initiatives supporting educators and learners;
- contribute to alignment of national reforms and Council of Europe standards with the post-2030 SDG 4 agenda;
- adopt a Ministerial Resolution defining priorities and commitments for 2027–2030.

8. Impact and Short-Term Effects

The Conference is expected to:

- strengthen teacher professional development for democratic culture;
- generate renewed political momentum around the democratic and digital transformation of education;
- modernise the profession for the AI era and reinforce protection of pedagogical and academic freedom of teaching staff;
- strengthen co-ordination between national policies and Council of Europe frameworks;
- enhance visibility of the Organisation's leadership in education for democracy and human rights.

9. Expected Results

- adoption of a Ministerial Resolution on “Empowering Educators for a Democratic and Digital Europe” reflecting the three sub-themes;
- launch of the ESCE, the White Paper and the European system for legal protection of academic freedom;
- synthesis report feeding into the post-2030 SDG 4 follow-up;
- strengthened partnerships with teachers' organisations, students' unions, and other stakeholders.

10. High-Level Exchange with Education Stakeholders

3 December 2026, morning

A cornerstone event of the Ministerial Conference - dedicated to ensuring teachers' voices are front and centre - will take place immediately before the Ministerial conference from 09:00 to 12:45 on 3 December 2026, in partnership with Education International and the European Trade Union Committee for Education.

Purpose & Focus

The Exchange is a strategic milestone in the New Democratic Pact process. It provides a dynamic forum for dialogue among ministers of education, the Council of Europe, teachers' organisations, and key members of the school community—including experts in teacher education, school leaders, parents, and students. By placing educators' real-world experiences at the heart of decision-making, the event directly shapes ministerial discussions and future initiatives at the Council of Europe.

Impact

Key insights and recommendations from the Exchange will feed directly into the afternoon's Ministerial Conference, shaping the Ministerial Resolution. The outcomes will also inform the Council of Europe's ongoing efforts to support the teaching profession—including the anticipated White Paper on the Future of Teachers and the Teaching Profession. This event ensures educational policies reflect the realities faced by teachers, strengthening the connection between democratic values and classroom practice.

Expected Outcomes

Participants in the High-Level Exchange will help to:

- Develop key messages for the Ministerial Conference's draft Resolution
- Shape policy directions for the future of teaching within the Council of Europe's 2028-2031 education programme
- Enhance cooperation between the Council of Europe and education stakeholders
- Clearly illustrate how the New Democratic Pact applies in both formal and non-formal education settings

By connecting the realities of professional life to the principles of democracy, the Exchange will show how education renews and upholds democratic society every day.

Participants

About 80 participants are expected. Attendees will include:

- The Secretary General of the Council of Europe (tbc)
- Ministers of Education
- Members of the CoE Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU)
- Representatives of teachers' unions and professional associations
- School leaders, higher education and research professionals
- Members of student and learner organisations
- Parents, civil society representatives, and teachers from the host country
- Subject matter experts

Interactive formats will ensure everyone's voice is heard and engaged throughout the Exchange.

Organisation

11. Dates and venue

Host Country: Montenegro (under its Presidency of the Committee of Ministers)

Venue: to be confirmed

Dates: 3-4 December 2026

Duration: one and a half conference days, preceded by a half-day CDEDU plenary session.

12. Participants

The responsible body is the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU).

The Conference will bring together participants from Council of Europe member States; Holy See; Kazakhstan; Committee of Ministers; Parliamentary Assembly; Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe; Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB); North-South Centre, European Union.

Observers:

Canada; Israël, Japan; Mexico; United States of America; Nordic Council of Ministers; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO); and non-governmental organisations admitted by the CDEDU.

13. Preparatory Work

Preparations will be led by the CDEDU Bureau acting as the Preparatory Working Group, responsible for co-ordinating the programme, overseeing the drafting of the full concept note/discussion notes for the main topic and sub-topics, draft outputs for each subtopic, and produce the final resolution.

The preparatory process will include:

- Development of draft outputs and the Ministerial Resolution;
- Consultations with member States and stakeholders;
- Submission of final documents for endorsement by the CDEDU (September 2026) and subsequent consideration by the Committee of Ministers.

14. Conference Format

The event will be structured as follows:

- 2 December (afternoon): CDEDU Plenary Session;
- 3 December (morning): High-Level Exchange with Education Stakeholders;
- 3 December (afternoon): Ministerial opening and thematic session I;
- 4 December (morning): Thematic sessions II and III - Ministerial roundtable and adoption of final Resolution.

15. Conference Budget

The host authorities will cover venue, local logistics, and protocol.

The Council of Europe will finance co-ordination, documentation, interpretation, communication, the cost of the organisation of the CDEDU plenary Session and mission costs from the Education Programme's ordinary budget and possible voluntary contributions.