

DEMOCRACY AND THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES



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Introduction

Democratic backsliding has intensified across Europe and globally, driven by factors such as growing socio-economic inequalities, non-inclusive decision-making processes, harmful use of new technologies, violent conflicts and escalating environmental challenges. Populist movements and divisive narratives exploit growing insecurities arising from these developments - amplifying disinformation, hate speech and the stigmatisation of ethnic, linguistic and religious minority identities. The result is increasing social disintegration, societal division and the erosion of democratic norms.

Persistent conflicts that instrumentalise ethnic, linguistic and religious identities and the failure to respect diversity further threaten minorities, undermine social cohesion and peace, and endanger democratic security. In this context, [the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities \(FCNM\)](#) plays a vital role. By safeguarding minority rights and promoting diversity as a valued and integral part of society, it aims to foster societal resilience and cohesion, thereby contributing to peace, stability and democracy in Europe.

The FCNM's preamble affirms that a genuinely democratic society enables persons affiliating with national minorities to express, preserve and develop their identities. To ensure equality despite different identities requires more than protection from discrimination. States must create conditions for the effective participation of persons affiliating with minorities in all aspects of public life. An inclusive democracy is one in which everyone engages in meaningful dialogue and contributes to decisions shaping society as a whole.

Building on the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy ([Reykjavik Declaration - United around our values](#), 2023) and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe's 2025 Report, [Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe](#), a renewed strategic and political process has been launched. This aims to reinforce democracy, rebuild trust and rejuvenate democratic practice so that its benefits are tangible and meaningful for all.

The FCNM provides important safeguards linking diversity management through minority rights to democracy, including:

- ▶ Article 3: The right to free self-identification;
- ▶ Article 4: Principles of effective equality and non-discrimination;
- ▶ Article 6: Promotion of tolerance, mutual respect and intercultural dialogue by everyone;
- ▶ Article 15: Effective participation of persons affiliating with national minorities in cultural, social, economic and public life.

This factsheet highlights how the principles and norms of the FCNM, and the work of the Advisory Committee on the FCNM (ACFC) can inform this process and contribute to the three pillars defined in the New Democratic Pact for Europe (NDPE).

Pillar I. Learning and practising democracy

Key contribution: Inclusive education and effective participation strengthen democratic culture and trust.

The first pillar of NPDE focuses on strengthening democratic institutions and practices, and on empowering all actors within democracy.

Learning democracy

Education is fundamental for fostering an inclusive society. In line with Articles 6 and 12 of the FCNM,¹ the ACFC emphasises that education:

- ▶ Promotes tolerance, mutual respect and intercultural dialogue;
- ▶ Affirms diversity as an integral societal value and recognises minority contributions to societies;
- ▶ Prepares young people for inclusive democratic engagement.

1. Article 6 of the FCNM and [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 4](#), The Framework Convention: a key tool to managing diversity through minority rights. The scope of application of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, adopted on 27 May 2016, paragraphs 53-54 and 59- 60.

The ACFC recommends that:

- ▶ Respect for diversity is integrated across all levels of education – from early childhood to tertiary, adult and vocational education;
- ▶ National minorities and persons affiliating with them, and their contributions to societies, are visible throughout national curricula;
- ▶ Educational materials actively counter prejudice, racism, including antigypsyism, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, exclusive nationalism and hate speech;
- ▶ Human and minority rights, democracy and the rule of law are compulsory parts of national curricula – as dedicated subjects or integrated across study programmes;
- ▶ High-quality teaching resources are developed that promote both societal integration and recognition of minority identities as an integral part of society, with ongoing professional support provided for teachers.²

National minority representatives, reflecting intra-community diversities, should help shape how their cultures are portrayed, ensuring they are depicted as empowered rights holders and equal members of democratic societies, not merely as folkloric groups.³ In societies emerging from conflicts, education should foster reconciliation and a shared civic identity for active citizenship.⁴ History learning should not be exploited to sow further division, but approached critically and from multiple perspectives. This requires high quality educational materials, particularly in history education, and continuous professional development and support for teachers.

Practicing democracy

Effective participation of persons affiliating with national minorities in public affairs is essential⁵ for tackling disillusionment and polarisation, and for maintaining democratic integrity. The ACFC notes that participation takes multiple forms, including:⁶

- ▶ Information exchange and dialogue with minority representatives;
- ▶ Informal and formal consultations, including through minority councils, government commissioners, offices for minority issues and other consultative bodies;
- ▶ Direct involvement in decision-making (e.g. through lower electoral thresholds for minority lists or reserved seats in elected bodies at all levels).

In its monitoring, the ACFC assesses minority participation in terms of its effective influence on decision-making as well as its inclusiveness as a reflection of intra-minority diversities.⁷ Recommendations are tailored to national contexts, responding to the diverse needs and interests of persons affiliating with national minorities – including minority women and youth. Gender mainstreaming⁸ helps states parties design inclusive and effective participatory systems and strengthens general public trust in democracy.

Including persons affiliating with national minorities in societal and economic life delivers broader benefits, helping to address the causes of mistrust, disillusionment and polarisation. Articles 4 and 15 of the FCNM affirm that economic empowerment, rooted in effective participation, is central to the equality and successful inclusion of everyone.⁹ Many persons affiliating with minorities face notable barriers to entering the labour market, highlighting the importance of intercultural education for everyone and ensuring that education imparts competences in both minority and official languages.

2. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 1](#) on education under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National minorities, adopted on 31 May 2024, revising and replacing Thematic Commentary No. 1 (2006), paragraphs 19, 27, 29 and 31.

3. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 1](#), 2024, paragraph 28.

4. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 1](#), 2024, paragraphs 33-36.

5. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), The effective participation of persons belonging to national minorities in cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs, adopted on 27 February 2008, paragraphs 69-145.

6. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), 2008, paragraph 70.

7. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), 2008, paragraph 69.

8. [Factsheet on challenges faced by women and girls belonging to national minorities](#).

9. [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), 2008, paragraph 23.

Economic challenges also vary among and within communities. Roma, Travellers and indigenous peoples are at higher risk of exclusion, often compounded by undeveloped infrastructure in their geographic locations. The ACFC urges states parties to adopt targeted measures – such as regional investment and bilateral co-operation - to expand socio-economic opportunities and revitalise border regions with significant minority populations.¹⁰

Inclusive policies that address poverty and exclusion among national minorities advance social justice, support democratic security and ensure no one is left behind.

Pillar II. Protecting democracy

Key contribution: Minority rights counter polarisation, safeguard pluralism and reinforce democratic security.

The second NDPE pillar targets the protection of democratic institutions and the rule of law, media pluralism, and civic space, while countering exclusionary narratives and polarisation which can lead to democratic backsliding.

Promoting mutual respect and understanding as foundations of democratic societies

The FCNM holds that protecting minority rights as an integral part of human rights is essential for stability, democratic security and peace. It seeks to prevent interethnic tensions and promote intercultural dialogue. This should contribute to open and inclusive societies, in which everyone benefits from equal opportunities.¹¹

Article 6 requires states parties to:

- ▶ Promote mutual respect and understanding among all persons living on their territory;
- ▶ Establish reliable and effective channels for dialogue between persons affiliating with national minorities and the majority population and public authorities.

The ACFC monitors the broad social climate, recognising that societal non-acceptance of diversity in general often spills over into discrimination against persons affiliating with national minorities. Comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks for equality and non-discrimination are essential for democratic legitimacy and for effective participation regardless of ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious affiliations.

Framing democracy in narrow terms of rule by the majority, or tolerating divisive and exclusionary discourse, undermines the ability of persons affiliating with national minorities to participate, and weakens democratic foundations. Inclusive societies that respect minority rights are more resilient and less vulnerable to conflict and instability, which is an important precondition for democratic security in Europe.¹²

The ACFC urges states parties to:

- ▶ Publicly condemn all forms of intolerance, hate speech and hate crime – especially in public discourse;
- ▶ Ensure prompt and effective investigation and prosecution of such acts, so that everyone, including persons affiliating with national minorities, feels safe to participate in public life and in democratic debate.

Media pluralism and the promotion of minority languages and cultural rights

Media pluralism is another cornerstone of minority rights protection. Article 9 obliges states parties to support domestically produced media in minority languages and media content of interest to persons affiliating with minorities. Article 10 guarantees the right to use minority languages freely.

Pluralistic media access and production:

Ensure that all citizens, including persons affiliating with national minorities, have access to reliable information, protecting democracy from disinformation and hostile foreign influences;

10. ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2, 2008, paragraph 43.

11. ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 4, 2016, paragraph 54.

12. Twelfth Activity Report of the ACFC, covering the period 2018-2020, pp. 9-10.

- ▶ Enhance the visibility and revitalisation of minority cultures and languages, strengthening social cohesion and fostering intercultural understanding.¹³

The ACFC monitors access to minority rights across print and digital media, TV and radio in both public and private sectors.¹⁴ Sustained support for minority media, and minority language content in public media, are important safeguards for democracy. Minority participation in all spheres of life is an essential indicator of pluralism and good governance.¹⁵

Pillar III. Innovating for democracy

Key contribution: Inclusive approaches to digitalisation, environmental governance and participation prevent new forms of exclusion.

The third NDPE pillar focuses on creating inclusive spaces and systems, promoting positive use of digital technologies, and rebuilding trust in democracy, especially among underrepresented or digitally excluded groups and individuals. It also examines the effects of climate change and other environmental issues on democratic governance.

The ACFC identifies specific environmental challenges affecting minorities,¹⁶ including:

- ▶ Disruption of traditional uses of land;
- ▶ Disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards;
- ▶ Socio-economic challenges from the green transition;
- ▶ Threats to traditional ways of living and intergenerational impacts.

Emerging technologies also offer both opportunities and risks.¹⁷ Digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI), if well-regulated, can promote inclusion but they may also create algorithmic discrimination and ethnic biases, thus reinforcing exclusion and inequalities.

States should:

- ▶ Regulate AI to ensure it does not negatively or unfairly impact national minorities and persons affiliating with them or their minority languages;
- ▶ Remain vigilant against digital technologies that distort information about persons affiliating with national minorities or foster negative perceptions and tensions;
- ▶ Use new technologies for positive outcomes, such as distance learning and affordable educational materials for minority language education, and making administrative forms, documents and other materials available in minority languages.

Such digital innovation can facilitate access to education, support the revitalisation of minority languages and minority identities, and enhance digital inclusion.

Conclusion

The FCNM is based on the recognition that inclusive and diverse societies are the foundation of peace, democratic security and stability. Protecting minority rights and recognising persons affiliating with minorities as equal and valued members of society are essential to these outcomes.

The ACFC's findings over the past almost three decades confirm that diversity requires continuous attention and inclusive management through minority rights for it to be a source of strength. Effective implementation of minority rights thus contributes to social cohesion, resilient democracy and lasting peace and stability in states parties and across Europe.

**For the Opinions adopted by the ACFC and its other work, please see [HUDOC-FCNM](#).*

13. ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 3, The Language Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities under the Framework Convention, adopted on 24 May 2012, paragraphs 40-50.

14. ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 3, 2012, paragraphs 40-50.

15. ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2, 2008, paragraph 8.

16. Factsheet on Environmental Challenges and National Minorities.

17. ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 1, 2024, paragraph 149.

The protection of national minorities is a core issue for the Council of Europe, and one of the major achievements in this field is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The entry into force of the Framework Convention on 1 February 1998 was indeed an event of universal stature, for it is the first ever legally binding multilateral instrument devoted to the protection of national minorities in general.



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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.

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