

# 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 conflicts, growing socio-economic inequalities, the rapid and sometimes harmful use of new technologies, and escalating environmental challenges. Populist movements and divisive narratives exploit these insecurities - amplifying disinformation, hate speech, and the stigmatisation of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. The result is growing social division and the erosion of democratic norms.

Persistent identity-based conflicts and insufficient respect for cultural identities further threaten minority communities, undermine social cohesion and peace, and endanger democratic stability. In this context, [the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities \(FCNM\)](#) plays a vital role. By safeguarding minority rights and promoting diversity, it builds societal resilience, prevents conflict, and supports democracy in Europe.

The FCNM's preamble affirms that a genuinely democratic society enables national minorities to express, preserve, and develop their identities, and requires more than protection from discrimination. States must also create conditions for the active participation of minorities in all aspects of public life. An inclusive democracy is one in which everyone - minorities and majority alike - engages in meaningful dialogue and contributes to decisions shaping society.

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 reimagine democratic practice so that its benefits are tangible and meaningful for all.

The Framework Convention provides important safeguards linking minority protection and democracy, including:

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

This factsheet highlights how the principles of the Framework Convention, and the work of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (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 NDPE focuses on strengthening democratic institutions and practices, and empowering all actors within democracy.

### Learning democracy

Education is fundamental for fostering an inclusive society. In line with **Articles 6 and 12** of the Framework Convention,<sup>1</sup> the ACFC emphasises that education:

- ▶ Promotes tolerance and intercultural dialogue;
- ▶ Affirms diversity as an integral societal value;
- ▶ Prepares young people for democratic engagement and mutual respect.

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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, 59 and 60.

The Advisory Committee recommends that:

- ▶ Tolerance and respect for diversity are integrated across all levels of education – from early childhood to tertiary, adult, and vocational education;
- ▶ National minorities are visibly represented throughout curricula;
- ▶ Educational materials actively counter prejudice, including antigypsyism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and other forms of racism and hate speech;
- ▶ Human and minority rights, democracy, and the rule of law are compulsory part of the national curriculum, either as dedicated subjects or integrated across disciplines;
- ▶ High-quality teaching resources are developed that promote both societal integration and recognition of minority identities as an integral part of society.<sup>2</sup>

National minority representatives should help shape how their cultures are portrayed, ensuring their depiction as empowered rights holders, not merely as folkloric groups.<sup>3</sup> In societies emerging from conflict, education should foster reconciliation and a shared civic identity,<sup>4</sup> encouraging students to critically examine history. To achieve this, a multiperspective approach should be embedded in educational materials, particularly in history education, and in teacher training, while equipping students with the skills needed for active citizenship.

### Practicing democracy

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Effective participation by national minorities in public affairs is essential<sup>5</sup> for tackling disillusionment and polarisation, and for maintaining democratic integrity. The ACFC notes that participation takes multiple forms, including:<sup>6</sup>

- ▶ Information exchange and dialogue;
- ▶ Informal and formal consultation;
- ▶ Direct involvement in decision-making (e.g. allocated parliamentary seats);
- ▶ Indirect avenues, such as minority councils or other consultative bodies.

The Advisory Committee's monitoring examines both minority participation and the effectiveness of their influence on decision-making.<sup>7</sup> Recommendations are tailored to national contexts, responding to the diverse interests of national minority communities - including minority women and youth. Gender mainstreaming<sup>8</sup> helps States design inclusive participatory systems and strengthen public trust in democracy.

Including national minorities in societal and economic life delivers broader benefits, helping to address the causes of disillusionment and polarisation. **Articles 4 and 15** of the FCNM affirm that economic empowerment, rooted in equality and participation, is central to successful inclusion.<sup>9</sup> Many minorities face notable labour market barriers, especially where language proficiency is limited, highlighting the importance of intercultural education.

Economic challenges also vary among and within communities. Roma, Travellers, and indigenous peoples, for example, are at higher risk of exclusion, often compounded by remote or disadvantageous geographic locations. The ACFC urges States to adopt targeted measures - such

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2. See: [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. See: [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 1](#), 2024, paragraph 28.

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

5. See: [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. See: [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), 2008, paragraph 70.

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

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

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

as regional investment and bilateral cooperation - to expand socio-economic opportunities and revitalise border regions with significant minority populations.<sup>10</sup>

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

## Pillar II. Protecting democracy

**Key contribution: Minority protection counters polarisation, safeguards pluralism and reinforces 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 Framework Convention holds that protecting national minorities is essential for stability, democratic security, and peace. Its core aim is to prevent interethnic tensions and promote dialogue in open and inclusive societies, benefiting everyone in society.<sup>11</sup>

**Article 6** requires States to:

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

The social climate is monitored broadly, recognising that intolerance toward diversity in general often spills over into discrimination against national minorities. Comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks for equality and non-discrimination are essential for democratic legitimacy and for national minorities' ability to speak up with confidence.

Framing democracy as majority rule, or tolerating divisive, intolerant discourse, undermines national minorities' ability 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.<sup>12</sup>

The Advisory Committee urges States 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 national minorities feel safe to participate in democratic debate.

### Media pluralism and the promotion of language and cultural rights

Media pluralism is another cornerstone of minority protection. **Article 9** obliges States to support domestically produced media in minority languages; **Article 10** guarantees the right to use minority languages freely.

Pluralistic media access and production:

- ▶ Ensure all citizens, including national minorities, have reliable information, protecting democracy from disinformation and hostile foreign influence;
- ▶ Enhance the visibility and revitalisation of minority cultures and languages, strengthening social cohesion.<sup>13</sup>

10. See: [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), 2008, paragraph 43.

11. See: [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 4](#), 2016, paragraph 54.

12. See: [Twelfth Activity Report of the ACFC, covering the period 2018-2020](#), pp. 9-10.

13. See: [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.

The Advisory Committee monitors content across print, digital, TV, and radio in both public and private sectors.<sup>14</sup> Sustained support for minority media, and minority language content in public media, is a safeguard for democracy. Participation of minorities in all spheres of life is an essential indicator of pluralism and good governance.<sup>15</sup>

## **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. It also examines the effects of climate change and other environmental issues on democratic governance.

The ACFC identifies specific environmental challenges affecting minorities,<sup>16</sup> including:

- ▶ Disruption of traditional agricultural practices;
- ▶ 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.<sup>17</sup> Digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI), if well-regulated, can promote inclusion but they may also create algorithmic discrimination, reinforcing exclusion and inequality.

States should:

- ▶ Regulate AI to ensure it does not negatively or unfairly impact national minorities or their languages;
- ▶ Remain vigilant against digital technologies that distort information about national minorities or foster negative perceptions and tensions;
- ▶ Leverage new technologies for positive outcomes, such as distance learning and affordable educational materials for minority language education.

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

## **Conclusion**

The Framework Convention demonstrates that inclusive and diverse societies are the foundation of peace, democratic security, and stability. Protecting minority rights and recognising minorities as valued members of society is essential to these outcomes.

The Advisory Committee's findings over the past 28 years confirm that diversity is a source of strength. Effective minority rights implementation contributes to social cohesion, resilient democracy, and lasting peace and stability across Europe.

*\*For the Opinions adopted by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) and its other work, please see [HUDOC-FCNM](#).*

14. See: [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 3](#), 2012, paragraphs 40-50.

15. See: [ACFC Thematic Commentary No. 2](#), 2008, paragraph 8.

16. See: [Factsheet on Environmental Challenges and National Minorities](#).

17. See: [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.