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STEERING COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (CDDH)

Conference on the Protection and the Promotion of Civil Society Space in Europe

Helsinki, Finland, 25 June 2024



Draft Programme

Concept note

While the primary responsibility for the implementation of human rights lies with States, civil society performs important functions in democratic societies to ensure continuing progress towards the fulfilment of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In emphasising this objective, it is crucial to highlight “the positive, important and legitimate roles of all human rights defenders, including NHRIs and civil society organisations, in independently promoting the realisation of all human rights”.¹ Most recently, in the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, appended to the [Reykjavík Declaration](#), Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe reaffirmed that “civil society is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy”.² For the fulfilment of these functions, “supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence”³ is key.

Yet civil society faces diverse challenges that hamper their ability to perform these functions. Many of these challenges have been noted in successive annual reports of the Secretary General on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, as well as in the work of the Commissioner for Human Rights, the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and the opinions of the Venice Commission and the Expert Council on NGO Law.

The Steering Committee on Human Rights (CDDH) has assessed the impact of national legislation, policies and practices on the activities of civil society organisations, human rights defenders and national human rights institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights. This work led to [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)11](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space, which was adopted by the Committee of Ministers in response to a “deep concern at the shrinking space for civil society resulting, inter alia from restrictive laws, policies and austerity measures taken recently by member States”.

The Appendix to the Recommendation sets out principles to be complied with by Council of Europe member States for the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe. These principles concern (i) the national legal framework and political and public environment to protect and promote civil society space; (ii) national measures to protect civil society space; (iii) national measures to promote civil society; and (iv) support from Council of Europe bodies and institutions.⁴ The Recommendation calls for the examination of the implementation of the recommendation within five years after its adoption.

The time is opportune for an evaluation of developments since the adoption of the Recommendation. The present conference therefore aims to promote dialogue on the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe and to feed into the CDDH’s examination of the implementation of CM/Rec(2018)11.

The first panel will identify persistent and new challenges (such as the impact of COVID-19 measures) concerning national legal frameworks/ measures and the political and public environment which negatively affect the protection and promotion of civil society space. The second panel will identify good practices concerning national legal frameworks/measures and the political and public environment relating to the protection and promotion of civil society space. The final panel will introduce Council of Europe activities to support an enabling environment for civil society, including the Secretary General’s [Roadmap](#) on the Council of Europe’s Engagement with Civil Society and the future work of the new Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM).

¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space.

² [Reykjavík Declaration](#), p 16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Appendix to CM/Rec(2018)11.

09h30 – 09h45
Welcome Address <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christos Giakoumopoulos, Director General, DGI Human Rights and Rule of Law
09h45 – 10h15
Keynote Speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Michael O’Flaherty, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
10h15 – 11h00
First panel - Challenges in Protecting and Promoting Civil Society Space in Europe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marie Struthers, Director, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, Amnesty International Phil Lynch, Executive Director, International Service for Human Rights Jeremy McBride, President, Expert Council on NGO Law, Council of Europe Conference of International NGOs <p><i>Moderator:</i> Antoine Buyse, Professor, Utrecht University School of Law</p>
11h00 – 11h30 Coffee break
11h30 – 12h15
Second panel - Good Practices for Protecting and Promoting Civil Society Space in Europe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gerhard Ermischer, President, Council of Europe Conference of International NGOs Katrien Meuwissen, Human Rights Team Leader, European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) Andreas Accardo, Head of Unit, EU Fundamental Rights Agency <p><i>Moderator:</i> Carla Ferstman, Professor, University of Essex, Law faculty</p>
12h15 – 12h45
Third panel - CoE Activities to Support an Enabling Environment for Civil Society <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marja Ruotanen, Director General, DGII Democracy and Human Dignity Niklas Wilhelmsson, Member of the Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM)
12h45 – 13h00
Closing remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Krista Oinonen, CDDH Chairperson