

# **Guide for Civil Society Organisations' Engagement with the Council of Europe**



*This report has been prepared within the framework of the collaboration between Sine Qua Non and Quorum.*

## QUORUM

A non profit organisation that aims to promote the fundamental rights on which the European Union is based, namely the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and respect for human rights, as well as the defence of and support for the defenders of these rights, in Belgium, in the European Union and elsewhere.



A human rights organization that focuses on building capacities for civil society organizations and activists and on creating strategies to seek accountability for human rights abuses through international strategic litigation.

## 1. The Council of Europe

Established in 1949 with the signature of the Treaty of London, the Council of Europe (CoE) was created to prevent such a catastrophe from ever happening again and to support the political reconstruction of Europe in the aftermath of World War II, on a foundation of shared fundamental values.

The organization's purpose was to bring together European countries to address common challenges, working together on rebuilding and sustaining peace across a war-torn continent.

Its main objective is to foster greater unity among its member states to safeguard and promote the ideals and principles that form their shared heritage, while also advancing their economic and social development.

The Council is an international organisation with the objective of protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe.



**The Treaty of London was signed by:**

Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK.  
Turkey and Greece joined three months later.

Distinct from the European Union, the Council of Europe's member states retain full sovereignty. Unlike EU members, who delegate some legislative and executive powers to the European Commission and European Parliament, Council of Europe members adhere to international law through conventions and treaties and cooperate based on shared values and common political agreements. These conventions and decisions are formulated collaboratively by the member states within the Council.



## Membership

Article 4 of the Council of Europe Statute specifies that membership is open to any European country, provided they meet specific democratic and human rights standards.

**Membership is open to all European states who seek harmony, cooperation, good governance and human rights, accepting the principle of the rule of law and are able and willing to guarantee democracy, fundamental human rights and freedoms.**

Nearly every country with territory in Europe is a member of the Council of Europe, with the exceptions of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Vatican City.

### Did you know?

No country has joined the EU without first joining the Council of Europe.

Though most of the Council's work applies to its 46 member states, more than 90 countries outside the region are parties to its treaties or involved in its activities.

Observers	Non-members
6: Canada, Holy See, Israel, Japan, Mexico and United States	More than 90 states are Parties to CoE treaties or participants in other CoE instruments.

The Council of Europe maintains strong relationships with observer states, which engage in nearly all aspects of its work. These interactions enable a valuable exchange of experiences and best practices, particularly in intergovernmental activities, and help extend the impact of the Council's standards and initiatives.

46 Council of Europe members – 27 European Union members

Albania	Estonia	Lithuania	San Marino
Andorra	Finland	Luxembourg	Serbia
Armenia	France	Malta	Slovak Republic
Austria	Georgia	Republic of Moldova	Slovenia
Azerbaijan	Germany	Monaco	Spain
Belgium	Greece	Montenegro	Sweden
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Hungary	Netherlands	Switzerland
Bulgaria	Iceland	North Macedonia	<u>Türkiye</u>
Croatia	Ireland	Norway	Ukraine
Cyprus	Italy	Poland	United Kingdom
Czechia	Latvia	Portugal	
Denmark	Liechtenstein	Romania	

# The European Convention of Human Rights

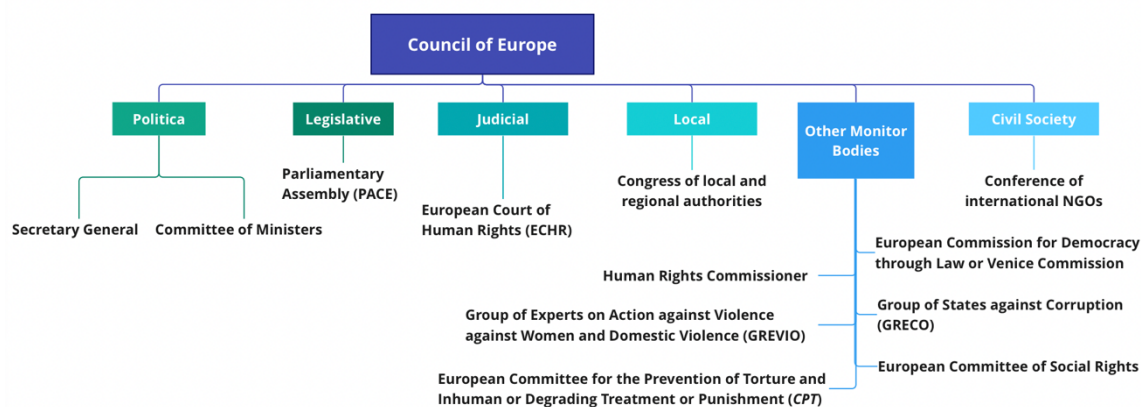
One of the Council's first task was drafting a treaty to secure basic rights for anyone within the borders of its member states, including their own citizens and people of other nationalities.

All Council of Europe member states have ratified the European convention of Human Rights (ECHR), making them legally bound by this treaty. The founding states were convinced that they shared a common heritage of political traditions, ideals, freedom, and the rule of law.

Originally proposed by Winston Churchill and drafted largely by British lawyers, the ECHR was based on the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[Here](#) you can consult the full text of the Convention.

## The structure



The Council of Europe is composed by different bodies.

### Political

#### Secretary General

Responsible for the strategic planning and direction of the Council's work programme and budget. It leads and represents the CoE.

### Committee of Ministers

It is the decision-making body and is made up of the ministers of foreign affairs of each member state or their permanent diplomatic representative in Strasbourg.



## Legislative

### Parliamentary Assembly (PACE)

Consists of 306 members of parliament from the 46 member states and it provides a democratic forum for debate. It monitors elections and its committees play an important role in examining current issues. The Assembly elects the Secretary General, the Human Rights Commissioner and the judges to the European Court of Human Rights.



## Local

### Congress of local and regional authorities

It is responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states and assessing the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. It works to foster consultation and political dialogue between national governments and local and regional authorities.



## Judicial

### European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)

It guarantees the rights safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights. Its judgements are binding on the country's concerned and can lead governments to alter their legislation. To access it you have had to exhaust internal procedures.



## Other Monitoring Bodies

### Human Rights Commissioner

It is an independent and impartial non-judicial body established in 1999 by the CoE to promote awareness of and respect for human rights in all its states members.

Human Rights  
Commissioner



## **Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)**

Its aim is to identify deficiencies in national anti-corruption policies and encourage states to carry out the necessary legislative, institutional or administrative reforms.



## **European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission)**

It is CoE's advisory body on constitutional matters. Its role is to provide legal advice to its member states.



## **Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)**

Independent expert violence against Women and Domestic Violence by the Parities.

## **European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT)**

It makes unannounced visits to places of detention in the 46 member states in order to evaluate the way in which people deprived of their liberty are treated.



## **European Committee of Social Rights**

It monitors compliance with the European Social Charter, overseeing the protection of economic and social rights.



## **Civil Society**

### **Conference of international Non-Governmental Organisations**

The Conference represents organised civil society at the Council of Europe and works to promote participatory democracy.

Over 300 INGOs currently hold participatory status and form the **Conference of INGOs**, which serves as the civil society pillar of the Council of Europe's "quadrilogue." This structure, established in 2005, includes the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

member states to assess how civic space is protected, with reports sent to the concerned member states for comment and discussed in plenary sessions with invited representatives. These sessions typically coincide with the regular meetings of the Parliamentary Assembly.



The Conference of INGOs **holds two plenary sessions each year** and organizes events linked to the Council of Europe's priorities. These include visits to

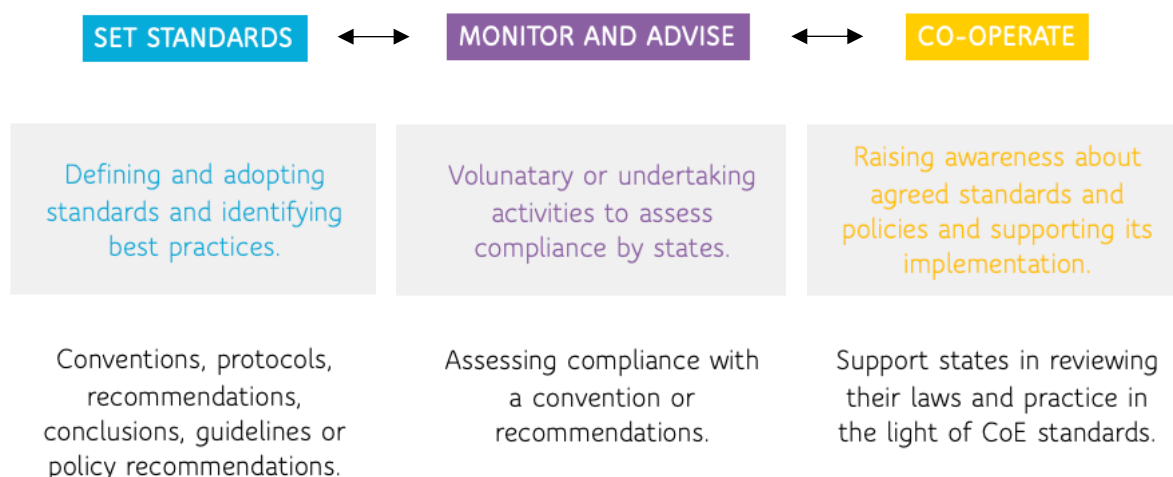
## The Work

The Council of Europe operates through three main functions: **standard-setting, monitoring and advisory, and co-operation.**

Standard-setting involves developing conventions, recommendations, and guidelines, which may be legally binding or serve as best practices.

Monitoring and advisory activities assess states' compliance with these standards, through formal legal obligations or voluntary commitments.

Co-operation focuses on raising awareness of standards, supporting states in aligning their laws and practices, and enhancing their capacity to address areas needing improvement based on monitoring findings.

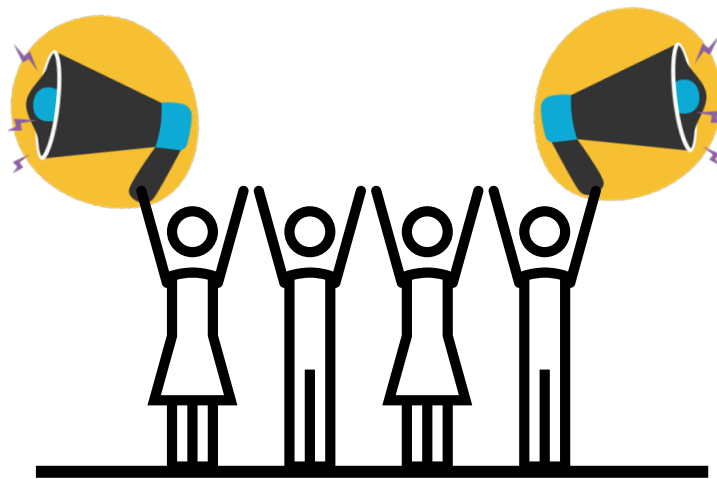




## 2. The role of civil society in the Council of Europe

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recognizes that an active civil society is a crucial component of democracy. These organizations are central to the exercise of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, assembly and association, which are guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights.

NGOs play a key role in a pluralistic democracy by providing a balance of power, promoting public engagement, and encouraging democratic citizenship grounded in human rights and gender equality.



### Participatory status for international NGOs with the Council of Europe

The system of cooperation between the Council of Europe and NGOs began in 1952 with the introduction of consultative status, later evolving into participatory status in 2003.

As European societies face new challenges, the system continues to evolve, allowing international NGOs (INGOs) to actively

participate in CoE policies and programs.

Participatory status enables INGOs to access intergovernmental committees and other bodies, helping to address emerging issues in Europe.

This cooperation has resulted in the creation of the "Quadrilogue", which brings together the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and NGOs.

The participatory status of INGOs is governed by [Resolution CM/Res\(2016\)3](#).

## Requirements

The Council of Europe can grant participatory status to INGOs that meet specific criteria. To qualify for this status, INGOs must:

- Uphold and defend the **values and principles** of the Council of Europe.
- Support the goal of **closer unity** as outlined in Article 1 of the Council of Europe's Statute.
- Be founded on **democratic principles**.
- Have a **democratic structure and governance**.
- Be **representative in their areas of expertise**, aligning with the Council of Europe's fields of action.
- **Operate at the European level**, with members in at least five Council of Europe member states.

- Have been **established for at least two years** before applying for participatory status.
- Already **maintain working relations with the Council of Europe**.
- Be capable of contributing to and **actively participating** in the Council's deliberations and activities.
- **Promote awareness** of the Council of Europe's work within broader society.

## Granting Procedure

Participatory status is granted once a year. The new application form for 2025 will be available and published on the Conference of INGOs website in September 2024.

An INGO wishing to obtain participatory status shall submit a request to the Secretary General which must contain the following documents, **in French or English, preferably in both of these official languages** of the Council of Europe:

1. The INGO's statute;
2. A list of its member organisations with a French or English translation of the title of these organisations as well as an approximate

number of members in the different countries;

3. An activity and a financial report covering the previous two years;
4. A declaration to the effect that it accepts the principles set out in the Statute and other basic texts of the Council of Europe;
5. The official application form on which it states clearly:

- why it is applying for participatory status with the Council of Europe;
- how it considers it will be able to contribute to and participate in the activities of the Council of Europe as set out in its current programme of activities;
- in what way it feels able to make such a contribution (studies, reports, previous work in the field concerned, expertise of its members in the area concerned, etc.);
- what working relations have already been established with the Council of Europe departments;

- by what means and to which audience it would publicize the work of the Council of Europe



For more details on the application procedure, consult [CoE's website](#).

### 3. Other ways to engage with the CoE without participatory status

Civil society organisations that don't comply with the requirements to get the participatory status, can still engage with Council of Europe, bringing input to their work.

#### Provide expert advice

CSOs can be invited to contribute to the drafting of treaties, conventions, and guidelines providing their expert advice or feedback during consultations on new legal frameworks or monitoring activities.

For example, representative of CSOs can organize meetings with parliamentarians or independent experts during drafting procedures or during country visits. They can also submit shadow reports signaling human rights violations and participate in thematic consultations.



#### Submit an Amicus Curiae

While only individuals or states can directly file cases with the **European Court of Human Rights**, NGOs can play a supportive role by submitting *amicus curiae* briefs to provide the court with additional perspectives or expertise relevant to specific human rights cases.

Practice directions for third-party interventions to the ECtHR can be found [here](#).

#### Participate in Conferences and Forums

The Council of Europe organises events open to civil society during the year, such as the [World Forum of Democracy](#).

These events offer CSOs opportunities to network, share best practices, and collaborate with national governments, other NGOs, and CoE institutions.

For further information on the participation of civil society organisation in the Council of Europe, please consult the following:

[GUIDELINES ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS' PARTICIPATION IN COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S CO-OPERATION ACTIVITIES](#)

[WORKING WITH THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY](#)