

THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT FOR EUROPE IN TIMES OF RUPTURE



*Report
of the Secretary General
of the Council of Europe*

2026

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French edition

*Le Nouveau Pacte démocratique
pour l'Europe en temps de rupture*

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Alain Berset
Secretary General of the Council of Europe

MESSAGE BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL

The other day, someone said to me: “What Europe needs right now is not a democratic pact, it’s a security pact.”

I understand the urge. In times of rupture, it is easy to mistake force for strength.

But that is dangerously misleading.

Europe doesn’t have to choose between security and democracy. It never did. And it cannot afford to start now.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has entered its fifth year, with no end in sight. Another war at Europe’s immediate borders is sending shockwaves through the global economy. A longtime ally is testing the limits of the transatlantic relationship, going so far as to threaten the sovereignty of one of our member states by force.

Each unchallenged threat or use of force pushes the international legal order closer to the brink.

There is a boomerang effect. What happens on the international stage doesn’t stay there. When force begins to replace law between states, the same logic works its way back into our democracies, weakening the rule of law from within.

This report lays bare the damage already being done.

One of the first victims is trust. Foreign information manipulation and interference reach into our minds, distorting how we see each other and what we take to be real. Free and fair elections are a prime target, but so are courts, parliaments, schools, media and everywhere else democracy depends on facts and trust.

The damage runs wider still. With tens of millions of Europeans at risk of poverty or social exclusion, social vulnerability becomes democratic fragility. Minority groups are turned into scapegoats. Civic space shrinks under foreign influence laws.

All this is unfolding in the middle of a technological revolution, driven by digital technology and artificial intelligence that move faster than democratic safeguards.

The answer is not to resist this transformation. There’s no going back. It is to make transformation responsible, in line with human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Europe is often told there are only two options: abandon legal constraints in the name of control or defend principles while ignoring concerns about security and public safety. But that is a false choice. Faced with crises this complex, the right answers are rarely black and white.

This moment demands a new playbook. It calls for broad partnerships, with the European Union among others. We can’t be afraid to seek out diverse voices and perspectives, including from outside Europe.

In these pages, you will see that the Council of Europe takes an innovative but balanced approach, combining protection with prevention and investment in education.

One example is the new legal instrument being developed on foreign information manipulation and interference, designed to protect democratic choice without policing speech. Ministers are also preparing a political declaration on migration within the framework of the European Convention on Human Rights, demonstrating that security and legality can move together.

The Convention is Europe’s democratic compass. It lies at the heart of the checks and balances our member states have built together. Across Europe, its authority rests on the European Court of Human Rights and the full execution of its judgments.

The Court has guided European states through threats to judicial independence, political turmoil and even war. As Europe rearms on a scale not seen since the Cold War, we should ask what we are really defending, and whether force alone will ever be enough.

That is where Europe's current security model falls short, and where democratic security must begin.

For too long, we have underestimated the strategic value of social rights, health, education and institutional trust, dismissing them as "soft" security. But that distinction belongs to the last century. It no longer fits the Europe we live in.

As this report makes clear, real security begins with institutions people can trust and democracies that can withstand pressure.

Democratic security protects people and democracy by keeping power subject to democratic accountability. It's not a luxury for calmer times. Without it, hard security begins to crack, even when it looks strong.

The ambition of the New Democratic Pact for Europe is to rebuild trust in institutions and strengthen democratic resilience in an age of permanent crisis.

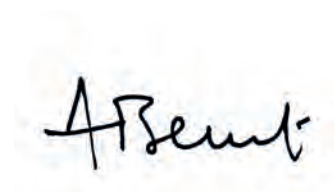
Nowhere is this more evident than in Ukraine. There, the Council of Europe is helping build accountability for Russia's war of aggression, where none existed before, while placing democratic resilience at the centre of recovery and reconstruction.

This is the kind of long-term engagement now too often missing.

Yet as crises accelerate, politics is collapsing into the ultra-short term. The Pact pushes in the opposite direction. It forces us to look beyond the next crisis and to confront what the Council of Europe must become.

Our task is not to settle for what's politically achievable, but to build what Europe needs: a legal and democratic framework lasting European security can depend on.

The Council of Europe was created for times when the rules of the established order cease to be self-evident, even to those who wrote them. For times when the balance is shifting. When the force of law must take precedence over the law of force.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "A Berset". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The background is a light, textured grey.

Alain Berset

Secretary General of the Council of Europe

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This report is structured around six chapters, each devoted to a strategic transversal area of intervention selected for its critical relevance to strengthening democratic resilience. Each chapter combines an overview of ongoing work with emerging orientations and concrete initiatives, connecting analysis, policy directions and implementation.

These chapters do not constitute the content of the future New Democratic Pact for Europe (the Pact). Rather, they highlight the relevance of existing Council of Europe work and indicate emerging directions for reflection and possible future action.

The chapters are each organised around three complementary pillars – learning and practising democracy, protecting democratic systems and innovating for democratic resilience – reflecting the breadth of both existing and potential future action.

While many of the activities and instruments presented are already in place or under development, this report does not simply repackage existing work. The six areas of intervention provide a new transversal structure, designed to strengthen coherence and clarify direction across the Organisation's activities.

In each area, this report also introduces new ideas and initiatives emerging from the Pact consultation process, including proposals related to the use of technology and to addressing evolving and increasingly complex threats to democracy.

The selection of actions presented is not exhaustive. Indeed, the strength of the Council of Europe remains grounded in the full scope of its *acquis*.

The Pact is expected to shape how the Council of Europe works in the future. However, its objective goes beyond institutional adaptation. The proposals aim to support a broader transformation in how democratic systems are equipped to respond to current and emerging challenges. The report should be read as a contribution to an ongoing process, aimed at informing discussion and supporting the identification of strategic priorities.

New initiatives presented in the report point to areas for further development. Their implementation will depend on decisions and sustained commitment to follow through by member states.

THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT FOR EUROPE: STATE OF PLAY

A strategic process to renew democratic governance

The New Democratic Pact for Europe has been conceived as a strategic and political process to identify integrated responses to democratic backsliding and to renew democratic governance across Europe. Launched as a call to action in early 2025 and endorsed by the Council of Europe member states the same year, it brings together governments, parliamentarians, local and regional authorities, international partners, civil society, academia, the private sector and citizens to renew their commitment to and engagement with democracy.

The first phase of the Pact, running until December 2026, is structured around an extensive consultation process. Within its first year, the initiative has mobilised engagement across all 46 member states and beyond. This includes 85 dedicated initiatives by Council of Europe entities, outreach to over 120 international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and broad public visibility through media coverage across member states.

To date, the Pact has generated over 200 contributions from more than 100 contributors, spanning formal submissions, thematic discussions, expert exchanges and policy proposals. These contributions are structured around three pillars: learning and practising democracy; protecting democratic systems; and innovating for democratic resilience. While many contributions relate to several pillars, the most common one is learning and practising democracy, followed by protecting democratic systems – this reflects a strong focus among contributors on participation, rights and institutional safeguards. Contributors include a broad range of actors, notably Council of Europe networks and member states, international organisations and civil society actors.

During his official visits to member states in 2025 and 2026, the Secretary General has systematically engaged with high-level officials, students and civil society to discuss the New Democratic Pact for Europe. These consultations have stimulated the reflection on solutions to address democratic backsliding, and they underscore the crucial role of the Council of Europe in safeguarding democratic security across the continent.

Emerging orientations for democratic resilience

The consultations are beginning to reveal strategic orientations, both in terms of priority areas and in the way democratic governance is approached.

First, there is a strong convergence around the need to strengthen democratic participation as a whole-of-society endeavour. Pact contributions highlight the importance of civic space, democratic and digital citizenship education and new forms of engagement that complement traditional democratic processes and respond more effectively to citizens' expectations.

Consultation respondents emphasised intergenerational dialogue and the need to equip citizens with the critical thinking and competences needed to navigate increasingly complex information environments and to resist disinformation, manipulation and hybrid threats. This reflects a shared understanding that democratic resilience depends on informed, inclusive and meaningful participation.

Second, the consultation participants underlined the centrality of public trust in institutions and democratic safeguards. A broad consensus has emerged around the need to reinforce the professionalism and integrity of public administration, uphold the independence of the judiciary and the media, ensure an enabling space for civil society and protect academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Indeed, there is increasing attention being paid to strengthening safeguards against foreign interference and undue influence, as well as to tackling disinformation and hate speech, both online and offline. Contributions to the Pact also point to the importance of developing shared parameters and indicators that allow for a more comparative, forward-looking and context-sensitive assessment of democratic resilience across member states.

Third, innovation is emerging as a key condition for democratic resilience. Contributions emphasise the opportunities and risks associated with emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI). This includes exploring AI-enabled democratic practices, addressing challenges such as algorithmic bias and the societal impact of technological change and strengthening governance frameworks to counter threats. At the same time, forms of democratic practice – deliberative processes, multilevel governance and enhanced peer-to-peer exchanges among member states – are increasingly seen as instruments to rebuild trust, prevent institutional fatigue and respond to evolving democratic expectations.

The consultations have highlighted the need to strengthen the political framing of democratic resilience. The concept of democratic security is emerging as a central reference point, increasingly framed as a core component of European security, particularly in a context of instability and pressure on democratic systems.

While security continues to be predominantly understood in military or economic terms, Pact contributions underline the need to place human rights, democracy and the rule of law at the centre of security thinking. Strengthening the visibility and operational relevance of democratic security is therefore not only a policy objective but also a way of reaffirming the centrality of democratic governance in addressing contemporary risks.

From consultation to action

The diversity of proposals made in the contributions and by consultation participants reflects the openness of the process and its capacity to integrate a wide range of perspectives. It also highlights the potential of the Pact to move beyond consultation towards concrete policy orientation and implementation.

In the next phase, the Pact process will focus on two objectives. First, it will expand participation to additional actors, including think tanks, the private sector, multilateral organisations and the European Union, as well as groups of citizens less engaged in existing Council of Europe networks or in public life. Second, it will test, refine and operationalise proposals through targeted initiatives and milestone events, including thematic workshops, hackathons and the World Forum for Democracy, using forward-looking methodologies such as collective foresight.

This phase will be critical in translating the outcomes of the consultation into concrete orientations for the future work of the Council of Europe. Final outcomes and commitments are expected in 2027, marking a transition from consultation to implementation and providing a basis for sustained action to strengthen democratic resilience across member states. Consolidating the outcomes of the consultation phase will help identify priorities for the next Programme and Budget (2028-2031) and clarify the Organisation's strategic positioning in the field of democratic security.

FROM DIAGNOSIS TO ACTION: THE REYKJAVIK PARAMETERS AND DEMOCRATIC SECURITY

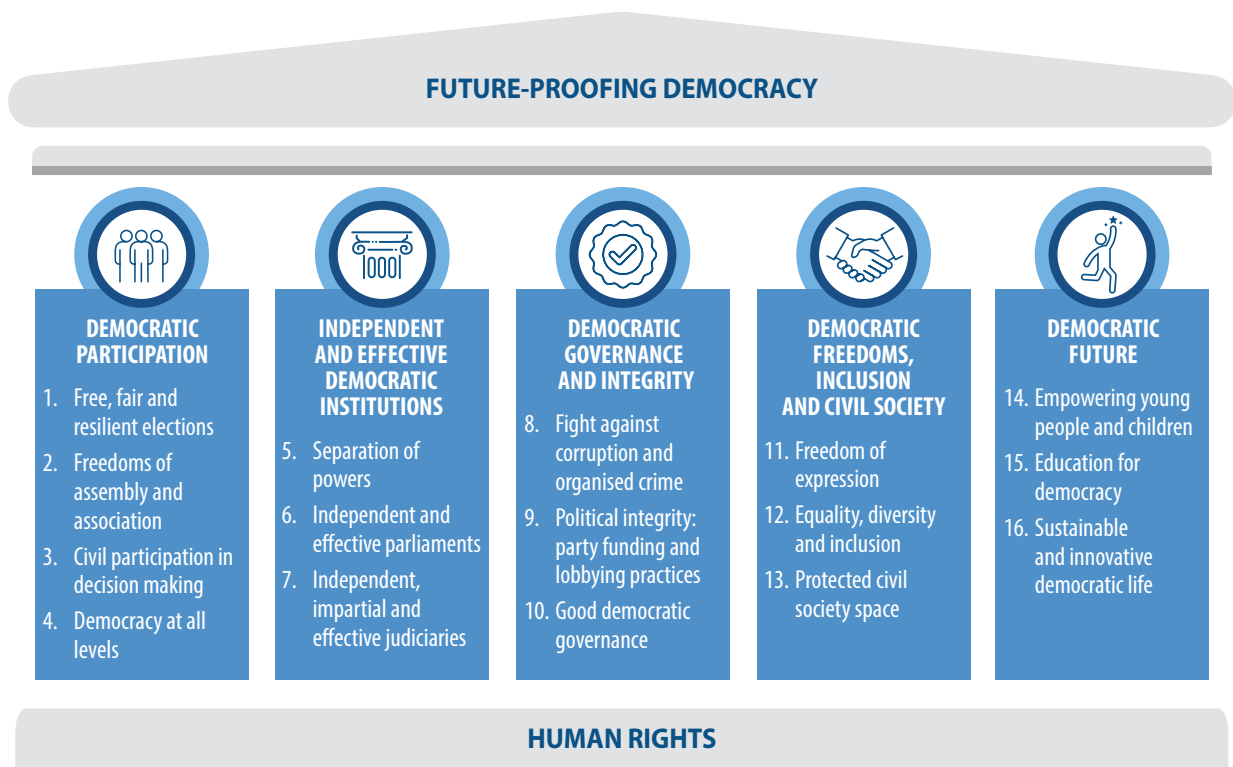
At the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik (Iceland) in 2023, the Council of Europe member states renewed their resolve to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law and to prevent and resist democratic backsliding, including in times of crisis and conflict.

The Reykjavik Declaration, “United around our values”, confirms the concept of democratic security as being “key for member States to address current and future challenges together and to secure peace and prosperity in Europe” and considers the Council of Europe “uniquely placed to bring together on an equal footing, all countries of Europe to protect democratic security in Europe”.

Europe’s security cannot rely on defence alone. The Council of Europe’s contribution to “democratic security” comprises a three-part structure: human rights as the foundation, democracy as the structure and the rule of law as the protective roof that always safeguards the continent. Upholding the rule of law and ensuring human rights is the best protection against totalitarianism and threats to international law and multilateralism.

As part of the resulting Reykjavik Declaration, the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy articulate and reinforce the essential foundations of Europe’s democratic order.

Five interconnected pillars form the core of the Reykjavik Parameters, covering 16 vital areas of democratic life



Building on this renewed political commitment, the Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM) of the Council of Europe developed the Parameters for the Application and Implementation of the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy (the Reykjavik Parameters; the Parameters). The Parameters translate the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy into a more structured and operational framework, reflecting existing democratic norms and standards that member states have committed to uphold.

The Reykjavik Parameters are an integral part of the New Democratic Pact for Europe. They are expected to provide a common reference point for democratic standards, while the Pact may help identify policy and practical pathways for their application, moving from diagnosis to action.

Designed as indicators of well-functioning democracies, the Parameters offer member states – and other interested actors – a structured framework to identify both strengths and vulnerabilities within their democratic systems. The Parameters will be complemented by a methodological framework to support their use in voluntary self-assessments, enabling member states to identify areas for improvement and take action to strengthen democratic resilience.

There are five pillars form the core of the Reykjavik Parameters, covering vital areas of democratic life.

- ▶ Democratic participation:
 - ensuring free, fair and resilient elections
 - empowering civil involvement
 - guaranteeing democracy at all levels.
- ▶ Democratic institutions:
 - fostering independent, effective parliaments and judiciaries
 - upholding the separation of powers.
- ▶ Democratic governance and integrity:
 - fighting corruption
 - promoting good governance
 - ensuring transparency in political integrity, party funding and lobbying.
- ▶ Democratic freedoms and civil society:
 - safeguarding freedoms of expression, assembly, association and the space for civil society
 - promoting inclusion, diversity and equality.
- ▶ Democratic future:
 - empowering young people and children
 - promoting education for democratic citizenship
 - fostering sustainable, innovative democratic lives at all levels of society.

The Reykjavik Parameters are primarily intended for Council of Europe member states, as the guarantors and protectors of democracy. At the same time, they offer a valuable reference for all those committed to reflecting on the state and future of their own democracies. By facilitating structured and evidence-based analysis, the Parameters can support national policy choices and encourage states to engage in mutual learning and innovation.

Starting in 2027, the Council of Europe will support the pilot implementation of the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy in volunteering member states and facilitate exchanges among interested countries, enabling them to identify needs and develop policy responses to strengthen democratic resilience. Member states are invited to champion democracy assessments, whether through comprehensive reviews of the full set of Parameters or more targeted thematic exercises.

The goal is clear: to safeguard and future-proof democracy for generations to come.

UKRAINE: DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN ACTION

The Council of Europe has intensified its support to Ukraine, placing democratic resilience at the centre of its co-operation in a context marked by war, recovery and reconstruction. It combines immediate responses with longer-term reforms, strengthening democratic governance and the protection of human rights.

Accountability and the rule of law

The Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine (the Register of Damage for Ukraine) is operational and recording claims and evidence of damage, loss and injury. The Convention establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine (CETS No. 229) was adopted and opened for signature in December 2025 and has been signed by 35 states and the European Union. Work is under way to establish the commission once the required ratifications are reached. Progress continues on establishing a special tribunal for the crime of aggression, to be supported by an advance team. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe advocates for the full realisation of the compensation and accountability framework, including the tribunal.

With Council of Europe support, justice sector reforms have strengthened the independence, integrity and effectiveness of key institutions in Ukraine. The authorities there have aligned selection procedures for judges and Constitutional Court members with European standards and improved disciplinary frameworks and oversight. The prosecution service has developed strategic approaches to war crimes, supported by the Victims and Witnesses Support Coordination Centre.

Ukraine continues to engage actively with the European human rights system. In 2025, 97 cases, including 11 leading cases, were closed through the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (the Court). Ukraine lifted the time limit for reopening domestic cases following Court rulings. The Committee of Ministers reviewed inter-state cases related to Crimea and to *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* (Applications Nos. [8019/16](#), [43800/14](#), [28525/20](#) and [11055/22](#), judgment of 9 July 2025).

Through monitoring by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) – the Council of Europe’s anti-corruption body – and targeted assistance, Ukraine has advanced anti-corruption reforms. It completed the fourth GRECO evaluation round in March 2026 and strengthened its framework on anti-money laundering, corporate transparency, sanctions, whistle-blower protection, asset recovery and the independence of specialised anti-corruption institutions. Ukraine has also enhanced law-enforcement capacities to investigate cyberattacks and use electronic evidence in war crimes and human rights cases.

Protecting rights and strengthening institutions

Co-operation has focused on access to rights and services for those most affected by the war, including internally displaced persons, returnees and war-affected populations. Ukraine has developed protection frameworks and practical guidance on access to services such as housing and shelters and is advancing a modern legal framework for housing reform.

The Ombudsman's Office has strengthened its monitoring capacities, including systems for tracking places of deprivation of liberty. Ukraine has reinforced the protection of veterans, military personnel and their families, and advanced legislation on psychological assistance and accessibility.

With Council of Europe support, Ukraine has promoted diversity, equality and inclusion, including through policies in public institutions such as the public broadcaster. Work has addressed the rights of national minorities, Roma and Travellers¹ and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) persons, including through local initiative groups and structured consultations to reflect minority perspectives in policy making.

Social resilience and recovery

The Council of Europe Development Bank has approved €673 million for projects in healthcare, housing and support for displaced populations, with €460 million disbursed, alongside grants and technical assistance. It has reinforced implementation capacity through the opening of a liaison office in Kyiv.

With Council of Europe support, Ukraine is aligning social, labour and employment policies with the European Social Charter, strengthening social protection systems, labour market reforms, social dialogue and support for vulnerable groups, including young people not in education, employment or training.

The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe promotes a human rights-based approach to recovery, with a focus on social rights, inclusive participation and the protection of those most affected by the war, including displaced persons, detainees and children.

Participation and democracy

With elections suspended under martial law, alternative forms of participation have been developed. Citizens' assemblies at the local level contribute to maintaining democratic dialogue and public trust. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (the Congress) supports governance reforms, decentralisation and dialogue on the future organisation of elections.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is actively supporting preparations for post-war elections, working with the Central Election Commission, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), national authorities and civil society, and drawing on the European Commission for Democracy through Law of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission) expertise. It also supports key recovery and reform efforts, including in the context of Ukraine's path towards European Union integration.

Programmes such as Intercultural Cities support municipalities in inclusive and forward-looking reconstruction, including for internally displaced persons. Youth programmes support displaced and war-affected young people in accessing their rights and participating in decision making. A five-year Framework Programme (2026-2030) with the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine focuses on resilience, inclusion and reintegration, including for young veterans.

Strengthening the information space and democratic continuity

Strengthening the information space and countering disinformation remain central priorities. With Council of Europe support, Ukraine has advanced media reforms, aligning legislation with European standards and strengthening the capacities of public-service media, regulators and journalists.

Education remains a pillar of democratic continuity. Ukraine participates in Council of Europe initiatives supporting access to education for displaced persons, including through the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. Work on history teaching, language education and education in crisis contexts strengthens resilience and the continuity of learning.

1. The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of the terms Roma and/or Travellers.

Particular attention is being given to the protection of children. The Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine supports co-operation on guardianship, psychological support, access to education and protection from trafficking. Projects strengthen child protection systems and promote child-friendly justice.

The Council of Europe's engagement in Ukraine illustrates how democratic resilience can be sustained under conditions of extreme disruption. By combining accountability, institutional reform, social support and inclusive participation, it reinforces the functioning of democratic institutions and the protection of human rights.



CHAPTER 1

COUNTERING INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION, AND STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE

Introduction

Today's challenge is not sourcing information. It is knowing what to believe.

Fact and fiction blur as technology accelerates. We can no longer be sure whether a distinctive voice belongs to a politician or a bot, or if footage of crowds waving in the streets is real. Anyone can create and transmit an online fake in seconds, making it almost impossible to distinguish truth from lies.

But the integrity of the information space is essential for democratic participation. When citizens cannot trust what they read and hear, informed public debate erodes, alongside confidence in institutions.

Foreign information manipulation, disinformation campaigns and rapid advances in artificial intelligence drive polarisation and erode trust in political processes, public health and the rule of law. Even free and fair elections have come under attack.

The Council of Europe's response spans education, youth, cultural policy, media, gender equality, anti-discrimination, minority rights, health, environment and parliamentary action.

Twenty-five years ago, recognising that digital power without rules would undermine trust and security, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185, Budapest Convention). Addressing the legal and criminal aspects of digital threats, this convention sets standards for prosecuting cyber-enabled attacks and online exploitation.

In 2024, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS No. 225, Framework Convention on AI), building rights into the application of technology, transparency into systems and confidence into public debate. But countering attacks comes with its own minefield, which must be navigated carefully to ensure fundamental freedoms are not affected.

The Council of Europe has completed a feasibility study and is taking further steps to develop a new legal instrument to address foreign information manipulation and interference. Anchored in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5, the Convention), it will not police speech but protect democratic choice. Member states will decide on the preferred instrument to guide its further development during the 135th Session of the Committee of Ministers in Chişinău (Republic of Moldova) in May 2026.

The Council of Europe's cross-sectoral approach sees national, regional and local authorities working with the Council's entities and liaising with national experts to draft legal standards and enable rapid, evidence-based action. The Organisation has designed safety protocols for journalists and members of civil society to protect them from violence and intimidation and to uphold freedom of expression and freedom of association.

Fundamental to the New Democratic Pact for Europe, education is a crucial pillar of democratic security. Education counters the lies and hate on which disinformation thrives. The Council of Europe's vision encompasses a new European space for democratic culture: an integrated ecosystem for citizenship, human rights and digital citizenship education.

Trust in education systems is vital. The Council provides resources for curriculum development, teacher training and classroom practices that build critical thinking and ethical judgment, in tandem with encouraging transparency and institutional ethics across primary, secondary and higher education.

The Council of Europe's many youth initiatives provide training, while at the same time encouraging active participation in policy and decision making. And in the Organisation's school-based programmes, children are encouraged, not only to learn, but to engage directly with local government. Meanwhile, governments themselves can use Council of Europe tools to guide members of parliament and civil servants in strengthening critical thinking and responsible digital citizenship.

The Council of Europe promotes cultural and heritage initiatives and encourages exchanges between countries. These foster critical engagement, mutual understanding and open debate, and contribute to the protection of freedom of artistic expression.

The Organisation's crucial work guides individuals, organisations and governments through the current tidal wave of information and disinformation. Through dialogue, education and critical thinking, alongside a robust regulatory framework, the Council of Europe is strengthening democratic resilience in the face of ignorance, lies and manipulation.

Pillar 1 – Learning and practising democracy

Democratic governance is increasingly being shaped by the digital information environment, where the boundary between fact and manipulation is becoming harder to discern. In this context, the ability to engage with diverse perspectives and participate constructively in public debate is essential to democratic resilience. Informed and empowered citizens are a first line of defence against disinformation, requiring sustained investment in education, participation and cultural engagement.

Strengthening education and media and information literacy

Resilience to information manipulation depends on citizens' ability to critically assess information and engage in informed democratic debate. Strengthening media and information literacy is therefore a strategic priority, requiring a shift from isolated initiatives to systemic integration across school curricula, teacher training and lifelong learning.

The European Year of Digital Citizenship Education² was a flagship project by the Council of Europe offering an operational response to disinformation and the need for resilience in 2025. It laid the groundwork for the draft Council of Europe Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education 2027-2031. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recommendation on AI literacy aims to ensure that all segments of society can engage with AI safely, responsibly and in full respect of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Council of Europe instruments such as the *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture*³ and the Reflection and Planning Survey Tool for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education⁴ help embed pluralist, evidence-based approaches in education systems. The Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTE)⁵ has complemented this work through comparative analysis and data-driven insights such as the data visualisation dashboard.⁶

Work led by the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) is reinforcing the wider information ecosystem in which these competences are exercised. At the policy level, frameworks such as the National Media and Information Literacy Strategies⁷ and "Resisting disinformation – Ten building blocks to strengthen information integrity"⁸ support more coherent national approaches. Ongoing work on a draft recommendation on history education in the digital age⁹ and the draft Council of Europe

2. Council of Europe, European Year of Digital Citizenship Education 2025, <https://go.coe.int/ITxVH>.

3. Council of Europe, *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture*, <https://go.coe.int/pBV15>.

4. Council of Europe, Reflection and Planning Survey Tool for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/survey-page>.

5. Council of Europe OHTE, <https://go.coe.int/EBkot>.

6. Council of Europe OHTE, Data Visualisation Dashboard, <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/observatory.on.history.teaching.in.europe/viz/Economiccrisesinhistoryteaching/Teachers>.

7. Council of Europe CDMSI, "National media and information literacy (MIL) strategies – Practical steps and indicators", <https://go.coe.int/bdThG>.

8. "Council of Europe Steering Committee on Media and Information Society adopts new policy document to strengthen information integrity", <https://go.coe.int/Wtzyz>.

9. Council of Europe, "Steering Committee for Education sets directions for 2026-2027 and advances key standard-setting work", <https://go.coe.int/kNlf4>.

Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education 2027-2031¹⁰ is expected to strengthen the integration of these competences across education systems.

Strengthening youth participation

Disinformation thrives where disengagement is high – addressing it requires creating opportunities for the participation of young people.

The Council of Europe Youth Sector advances this objective through the Youth for Democracy programme,¹¹ the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest (Hungary), the European Youth Foundation and by supporting youth participation, democratic engagement and more inclusive and responsive public policies. These efforts are complemented by a quality label for youth centres, youth information networks and research on young people's experiences, which together support more inclusive and responsive democratic policies.

Strengthening culture and pluralism

Cultural participation supports pluralistic debate and resilience to information manipulation.

The Council of Europe is advancing this agenda by strengthening both the evidence base and the enabling environment for cultural participation. The development of an Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy¹² is expected to support more informed policy making by clarifying the links between cultural engagement and democratic resilience. The Free to Create – Create to be Free digital exhibition¹³ seeks to safeguard artistic freedom and expand space for diverse expression, while work on audiovisual co-production contributes to shaping a more pluralistic and resilient media and cultural landscape.

The Convention on the Co-Production of Audiovisual Works in the Form of Series (CETS No. 230)¹⁴ establishes the first international legal framework dedicated to independent co-production for television and streaming. By facilitating cross-border co-operation, reducing administrative barriers and clarifying rules on rights and revenue sharing, it strengthens independent producers and supports the development and circulation of culturally and linguistically diverse series across Europe. This, in turn, promotes pluralism, sustains linguistic diversity and contributes to democratic resilience.

Protecting and empowering children online

Children face heightened vulnerabilities in digital environments, requiring both protection from harmful and manipulative content and support to participate safely and meaningfully in democratic life. Strengthening this dual approach is essential to building long-term resilience to information manipulation.

The Council of Europe supports member states through a combination of tools and targeted initiatives, including:

- ▶ child participation toolkits, notably an assessment tool,¹⁵ and guidance on national participation strategies,¹⁶ which help embed children's voices in policy making;
- ▶ targeted initiatives addressing specific vulnerabilities,¹⁷ including the work of the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine;¹⁸

10. Council of Europe, "The way forward: a new direction shaping the future through digital citizenship education", <https://go.coe.int/PrYJo>.

11. Council of Europe Youth Department, Youth for Democracy programme, <https://go.coe.int/Famrl>.

12. Council of Europe Culture and Cultural Heritage Department, Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy (IFCD), www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/indicators-culture-and-democracy.

13. Free to Create digital exhibition, www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/free-to-create-create-to-be-free.

14. Council of Europe Convention on the Co-production of Audiovisual Works in the Form of Series, www.coe.int/en/web/programme-for-series-co-productions/convention.

15. Council of Europe Children's Rights, Child Participation Assessment Tool, <https://go.coe.int/FJ5fZ>.

16. Council of Europe Children's Rights, Child Participation Assessment Tool – Implementation Guide, <https://go.coe.int/88Tr6>.

17. "Council of Europe publishes guidance on how to better protect children against sexual exploitation and abuse in crisis and emergency situations", <https://go.coe.int/IPZxu>.

18. Council of Europe Children's Rights, Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU), www.coe.int/en/web/children/cgu.

- ▶ forthcoming policy guidance on children’s rights and social media, aimed at addressing the impact of algorithm-driven platforms and emerging technologies and forthcoming recommendation on risks and harms of online and digital addictions.¹⁹

These efforts aim to ensure that children are not only protected in digital environments but empowered to engage critically with information and participate meaningfully in democratic life.

Further, this work is complemented by initiatives addressing risks such as online and digital addictions, AI-related inequalities²⁰ and access to reliable information. Initiatives under the Reykjavik Process contribute to strengthening access to information and countering misinformation and disinformation in areas such as environmental governance or health protection, while support to environmental human rights defenders reinforces the integrity of public information spaces. Capacity building, including courses in the Council of Europe Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP) on freedom of expression, data protection²¹ and combating hate speech, strengthens the ability of legal professionals to uphold democratic standards in practice.

The Council of Europe’s priorities in this area are to integrate media and information literacy systematically across education systems, deepen meaningful participation, particularly among young people, and ensure that cultural and civic spaces remain open and pluralistic. Achieving these priorities is essential to enabling citizens to engage critically with information and contribute actively to democratic life.

Pillar 2 – Protecting democracy

Protecting democratic societies from information manipulation requires effective safeguards, strong institutions and coherent regulatory frameworks. The New Democratic Pact for Europe provides an opportunity to strengthen the governance of the information environment while upholding freedom of expression and other fundamental rights.

Addressing foreign information manipulation and interference

Foreign information manipulation and interference pose a growing threat to democratic resilience – undermining trust, distorting public debate, stirring up hatred and affecting electoral processes. Strengthening responses to foreign information manipulation and interference is increasingly important for democratic security.

The Council of Europe is pursuing analytical and standard-setting work in this area, including a feasibility study examining existing gaps and possible responses. This work aims to support member states in developing effective and proportionate measures, while ensuring full compliance with human rights standards. Drafting a new international legal instrument in this area is thus both desirable and necessary.

Strengthening digital governance and platform accountability

The governance of the digital information environment, including the transparency and accountability of online platforms, is central to protecting democratic debate and resilience to disinformation. Addressing these challenges requires frameworks that ensure responsibility of digital actors while safeguarding freedom of expression. Enhanced governance is equally central to ensuring that digital platforms are safe to engage in for all, especially women, girls and others who are who are easily driven away by online violence and hate.

The Council of Europe is advancing this agenda through normative instruments and analytical work. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec (2026)4 on online safety and empowerment of users and content creators, adopted on 8 April 2026,²² and the guidance note on generative AI and freedom of expression²³ address systemic risks linked to emerging technologies and platform-based communication.

19. Council of Europe Pompidou Group, Drafting Committee on Risks and Harms of Online and Digital Addictions, www.coe.int/en/web/pompidou/bio-ai-n.

20. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)1 on equality and artificial intelligence, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09125948802acd7f>.

21. Council of Europe, HELP Course on Data Protection and Privacy Rights, <https://go.coe.int/8OUew>.

22. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)4 on online safety and empowerment of users and content creators and its explanatory memorandum, <https://go.coe.int/EqhCu>.

23. Council of Europe CDMSI, “Guidance note on generative AI implications for freedom of expression”, <https://go.coe.int/kJTau>.

Work is under way to examine the role of media regulators in platform-based environments²⁴ and the protection of media pluralism online,²⁵ while a dedicated study on how social media and other platforms shape opinion and action will strengthen the evidence base for future policy responses. Co-operation activities are strengthening the capacity of regulators and public authorities to address disinformation in line with human rights standards, including through a bespoke methodology to assess societal vulnerabilities and strengths across key areas such as media, education, culture and youth.

Strengthening journalism and media sustainability

Independent journalism is essential to informed public debate and resilience to disinformation, yet it faces increasing legal, economic and online pressures, including strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), harassment and targeted campaigns. Strengthening the sustainability and safety of journalism is therefore key to democratic resilience.

The Council of Europe has reinforced its standards, notably through The Committee of Ministers recommendation on countering SLAPPs²⁶ and the recommendation on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists,²⁷ and supports their implementation through guidance and co-operation activities, including the Journalists Matter campaign.²⁸ The Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists²⁹ plays a key role in identifying press freedom challenges and alerting the Council of Europe and member states to emerging risks. Alerts are submitted by press freedom organisations that are partners of the platform, based on their methodologies and verification methods, with the Council of Europe providing a platform for their dialogue with member states.

Addressing these pressures also requires sustained attention to the economic conditions of the media sector, including safeguarding editorial independence and adapting funding models, with public-service media remaining a central pillar of pluralistic information ecosystems.³⁰

Countering hate speech and protecting vulnerable groups

Disinformation increasingly targets specific groups, fuelling hate speech and discriminatory narratives that distort public debate, undermine social cohesion and discourage participation. Women and girls are specifically targeted, resulting in their disengagement. Therefore, addressing these dynamics is essential to safeguarding inclusive democratic discourse and resilience.

Practical tools, including toolboxes on non-legal measures against hate speech, support member states in developing coherent strategies, training and counter-narratives in line with human rights standards.³¹ In parallel, reflection is advancing on the possible development of a binding international instrument on preventing and combating hate speech and hate crime. In the meantime, the Committee of Ministers recommendation on hate crime³² was adopted in 2024 to provide guidance to member states on preventing and combating this form of crime and on supporting victims.

Co-operation activities are also supporting the development and dissemination of practical tools and capacity-building activities for media and journalists, with the aim of strengthening professional standards and promoting inclusive, rights-based reporting.³³

24. Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Media Regulators in a Platform-Based Environment, <https://go.coe.int/B5asM>.

25. Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Safeguarding Media Pluralism in the Online Environment, <https://go.coe.int/g7glw>.

26. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2 on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and its explanatory memorandum, <https://go.coe.int/9KaBe>.

27. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, <https://search.coe.int/cm/?i=09000016806415d9>.

28. Council of Europe, Journalists Matter campaign, <https://go.coe.int/IQfQq>.

29. Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, <https://fom.coe.int/en/accueil>.

30. The CDMSI has been tasked with delivering a “Practical guide on building independent, sustainable and pluralistic public service media (PSM)” by 2027.

31. “Combating hate speech: Council of Europe publishes a compilation of promising practices at national level and [a] self-assessment tool”, <https://go.coe.int/NbRSn>; see also the Council of Europe’s work on combating hate speech: www.coe.int/en/web/combating-hate-speech/home.

32. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)4 on combating hate crime, <https://go.coe.int/5x2Jv>.

33. For example, a set of “Guidelines for media and journalists on ethical reporting on LGBTI issues” is expected to be published by the end of 2026.

At the local level, initiatives such as Intercultural Cities promote inclusive policies and intercultural dialogue, helping to reduce polarisation and strengthen resilience to harmful narratives. Complementary efforts addressing discrimination against LGBTI people³⁴ and countering anti-gender discourses further support more inclusive and resilient public debate.

Addressing emerging challenges

Disinformation increasingly affects policy areas such as migration, public health, gender equality, combating violence against women, LGBTI equality and environmental governance, with tangible societal consequences including mistrust, polarisation and reduced adherence to public policies. It also increasingly targets electoral processes, seeking to erode public trust and democratic legitimacy.

The Council of Europe is working to address these risks by strengthening institutional resilience and integrity, including through the work of GRECO, the Venice Commission and the supervision of the execution of judgments of the Court. In parallel, initiatives promoting fact-based communication and ethical reporting, particularly in sensitive areas such as migration, are supporting more balanced and responsible public debate.

Emerging challenges linked to digital environments, including manipulative online practices, fraud, abuse of financial technologies and the risks and harms of online and digital addictions³⁵ underline the need for adaptive and forward-looking responses.

Ensuring effective responses requires maintaining a careful balance between regulation, human rights and freedom of expression. Weak safeguards may allow manipulation to spread, while disproportionate restrictions risk undermining democratic debate. The Council of Europe's approach to the governance of the information environment provides a framework for navigating these tensions.

Strengthening democratic resilience in the information environment requires a shift towards more effective implementation. This includes reinforcing platform accountability, protecting journalists and the media ecosystem, and ensuring a sustainable and pluralistic information space. It also calls for more co-ordinated responses to disinformation from all levels of government, targeting vulnerable groups and continued efforts to safeguard electoral integrity and institutional trust, firmly grounded in human rights and democratic principles.

Pillar 3 – Innovating for democracy

Responding to information manipulation in a rapidly evolving digital environment requires continuous innovation in tools, approaches and partnerships. Drawing on insights from the consultations on the New Democratic Pact for Europe, the Council of Europe is developing responses to emerging risks, particularly those linked to artificial intelligence and evolving digital ecosystems. Innovation in this context must be guided by democratic principles, ensuring that new technologies strengthen the integrity of democratic processes.

The governance of artificial intelligence is emerging as a defining challenge for democratic resilience, as generative AI reshapes how information is produced and consumed, and it introduces new risks to public debate. The Council of Europe is developing a rights-based approach to ensure that technological innovation supports transparency, accountability and democratic processes. This work is addressed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Strengthening early warning and anticipatory responses

Information manipulation is becoming more targeted and adaptive, making early detection and co-ordinated response essential to preventing escalation and safeguarding democratic processes. These dynamics are closely linked to broader risks, including declining institutional trust, polarisation and pressures on electoral integrity.

The Council of Europe is developing more structured and anticipatory approaches to identifying emerging threats across governance levels. These efforts are supported by data-driven tools such as the dynamic

34. Council of Europe Intercultural Cities programme, "New manual empowers municipalities with intercultural tools for LGBTI+ inclusion", <https://go.coe.int/bTfhk>.

35. Pomidou Group of the Council of Europe, Online and Digital Addictions, <https://go.coe.int/IPB8x>.

database of European judicial systems maintained by the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ),³⁶ which contributes to judicial transparency in Council of Europe member states and strengthens public trust as a key condition for resilience.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are both focusing activities and support to member states on safeguarding participatory processes, particularly election processes, from manipulation, as well as on assessing and countering the impact of disinformation on electoral integrity. The Risk-Alert Dashboard on Local and Regional Democracy,³⁷ an initiative led by the Congress, aims to detect early signs of democratic backsliding, including disinformation-driven polarisation, declining trust and interference in electoral processes. It is expected to support timely alerts, political dialogue and targeted responses.

Protecting democratic actors and civic space

Civil society organisations are key in countering disinformation through fact checking, advocacy and public engagement, yet they are increasingly targeted by co-ordinated negative campaigns and transnational forms of repression. Safeguarding civic space and protecting democratic actors is therefore essential to maintaining resilient and pluralistic information environments.

The Council of Europe is strengthening this environment through normative and policy development, including work towards a Committee of Ministers recommendation on the legal status of civil society organisations³⁸ and initiatives addressing transnational repression. Proposed tools include an early-warning and response framework for civic space aimed at identifying systemic threats such as disinformation-driven erosion of civic space and measures to strengthen protection for organisations operating across borders.

Further initiatives focus on protecting those individuals who are most exposed to disinformation-related threats, including proposals to establish a platform for the protection of human rights defenders and work by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe³⁹ and the Congress to address hate speech and violence targeting politicians. Together, these efforts aim to ensure that those who contribute to democratic debate can operate safely and effectively.

Advancing inclusive and rights-based innovation

Ensuring that innovation does not reinforce existing inequalities is an essential dimension of responses to information manipulation. Disinformation often intersects with discrimination on grounds such as gender, ethnic origin or sexual orientation, and can be amplified by algorithmic systems, exacerbating exclusion from public debate.

The Council of Europe is developing rights-based approaches to address these risks through new policy tools and governance frameworks. Work led by the Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) includes a Guide and Checklist for Equality Mainstreaming,⁴⁰ aimed at integrating equality considerations across policy areas, including information governance, and an implementation toolkit for the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)1 on equality and artificial intelligence,⁴¹ designed to prevent discriminatory bias in AI systems, while the gender equality sector of the Council of Europe is developing tools to strengthen positive narratives and counter anti-gender rhetoric.

36. European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice of the Council of Europe, Dynamic Database of European Judicial Systems, www.coe.int/en/web/cepej/cepej-stat.

37. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe Monitoring Committee for the Implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and Respect for Human Rights and the Rule of Law at Local and Regional Level, "Terms of reference for a committee activity", page 4: Risk-alert dashboard on local and regional democracy, <https://go.coe.int/s3Q1P>.

38. Council of Europe, "Meeting in Strasbourg on new recommendation on the legal status of civil society organisations", <https://go.coe.int/91CUh>.

39. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy", <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/35907/html>.

40. Council of Europe CDADI, "Equality mainstreaming", <https://go.coe.int/1Pkk6>.

41. "Council of Europe adopts two new recommendations: on equality and AI and on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls", <https://go.coe.int/ck1uG>.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION AND EMERGING DIRECTIONS UNDER THE PACT

	Thematic area	Current action	Planned developments	EMERGING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE PACT CONSULTATIONS	
PILLAR 1: LEARNING AND PRACTISING DEMOCRACY	Education systems and media literacy	Digital citizenship education initiatives; Observatory on History Teaching in Europe; <i>Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture</i> ; HELP capacity building	Council of Europe Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education (2027-2031); recommendations on AI literacy and on history education in the digital age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Assessing and strengthening deliberative democratic practices, with a focus on countering disinformation, promoting inclusive participation and reinforcing democratic learning processes ▶ Mainstreaming media and information literacy across education systems as a core competence ▶ Reinforcing the role of culture in fostering pluralism and critical engagement ▶ Enhancing protection and empowerment of children in digital environments 	
	Youth engagement and participation	Youth training programmes; youth centres and networks; youth-led initiatives and research	Further development of democratic culture programmes		
	Culture, heritage and public debate	Cultural co-operation frameworks; audiovisual co-production mechanisms; Council of Europe Convention on the Co-production of Audiovisual Works in the Form of Series	Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy; follow-up to artistic freedom initiatives		
	Children's rights in the digital environment	Child participation tools; targeted initiatives for vulnerable groups	Policy guidance on children's rights and social media; national participation strategies		
	Cross-cutting risks (environment, digital, equality)	Environmental governance work; equality and AI tools; HELP courses	Work on countering disinformation in environmental and digital contexts		
PILLAR 2: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY	Digital platforms, AI and information governance	AI and freedom of expression guidance; financial integrity guidelines; co-operation with regulators	Recommendations on online safety and on deepfakes; Media pluralism frameworks; platform governance tools; analytical studies; bespoke methodology to assess societal vulnerabilities and strengths in the face of disinformation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Developing guidance to address the impact of digital platforms and emerging technologies on children's rights and democratic participation ▶ Detecting and responding to risks affecting democratic institutions, including those arising from disinformation, institutional capture, abuse of financial technologies or external interference ▶ Strengthening the electoral cycle in times of crisis – measures to reinforce the resilience and integrity of electoral processes, including safeguards against manipulation and disruption in crisis contexts ▶ Development of standards governing democratic electoral processes, including transparency, fairness and resilience to information manipulation ▶ Strengthening transparency and accountability of online platforms ▶ Reinforcing protection against hate-based and discriminatory narratives ▶ Binding instrument on hate speech and hate crime
	Journalism, media freedom and sustainability	Recommendation on countering SLAPPs; Journalists Matter campaign; alert mechanisms	Implementation support and policy guidance		
	Foreign information manipulation and interference	Analytical work and monitoring	Development of legal and policy responses		
	Electoral integrity and democratic institutions	Anti-corruption monitoring; electoral standards; judicial transparency tools	Strengthening of institutional safeguards		
	Hate speech, discrimination and inclusion	Monitoring mechanisms; anti-discrimination tools; intercultural programmes; database on hate crime tools; programmes on combating hate speech	Guidance on hate crime, AI and discrimination; instrument on intersectional discrimination		
	Sectoral vulnerabilities (migration, health, environment)	Fact-based communication initiatives; environmental governance; public health-related actions	Further development of targeted responses		
PILLAR 3: INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY	Artificial intelligence and democratic governance	Analytical work on AI and public debate	Instrument on public-interest AI innovation; World Forum for Democracy (2026); legal framework for civil society		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Deploying early-warning systems to detect democratic backsliding ▶ Reinforcing protection of democratic actors and civic space ▶ Establishing platforms to protect human rights defenders and elected officials ▶ Strengthening anticipatory governance and early-warning mechanisms ▶ Promoting inclusive and rights-based innovation
	Early warning, monitoring and democratic risks	Monitoring, transparency and risk assessment tools	Risk-alert mechanisms at local and regional levels; electoral integrity work		
	Protection of civil society and democratic actors	Ongoing support frameworks for civil society	Legal and policy frameworks on civil society and transnational repression		
	Equality, inclusion and AI	Existing anti-discrimination and AI tools	Equality mainstreaming tools; AI implementation frameworks		
	Strategic communication and narratives	Ongoing inclusion and anti-discrimination work	Tools for value-based communication and counter-narratives		
	Youth perspective integration	Developing practices, benchmarks and standards for youth policies and youth work	Youth perspective integration action plan and pilot frameworks		



CHAPTER 2

PROMOTING SOCIAL RIGHTS AS A FACTOR OF DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Introduction

Across Europe, more and more people feel “the system” is failing them.

Rising unemployment, the effects of war and investment in rearmament, demographic challenges, climate change, and the expanding use of AI are affecting standards of living. Tens of millions of Europeans are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. As the gap between rich and poor grows, citizens, especially young people, are becoming increasingly disillusioned with democracy. In a vicious circle, mistrust and disengagement with political processes and civil society further undermine democratic stability.

With so many struggling to hold onto jobs, homes and health, the Council of Europe is working to support the dignity, opportunity and resilience that underpin social justice: a crucial pillar of democratic stability.

The European Social Charter (ETS No. 35, the Charter) was designed to tackle inequality, protect workers and prevent the insecurity that fuels political backlash.

Protecting democratic security requires a harmonised legal framework across Europe, with rights that are both implemented and monitored. The standards set by the Charter should be used to shape national laws and public policy before crises emerge. It is therefore crucial that all member states ratify the revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163). The Council of Europe is working with member states to enhance national implementation of the revised Charter and to promote wider acceptance of additional provisions and the collective complaints mechanism.

Beyond the Charter, numerous Council of Europe initiatives reinforce social justice and support citizens in their quest for stability and empowerment.

The Council of Europe scrutinises the effects that social policy gaps, austerity policies and exclusion have on democracy. This work is supported by national enquiries and comparative research programmes in order to target reforms including improved social housing, minimum standards for youth employment, expansion of healthcare for minorities and addressing child poverty. The Council of Europe is seeking to increase engagement with businesses, recognising that business practices have a significant impact on civic engagement and political democracy.

The Council of Europe’s youth programmes empower young people to help reshape welfare by raising awareness of young people’s access to rights and long-term training to address the specific barriers faced by Roma youth, rural youth, LGBTI young people, young people with disabilities, war-affected youth and refugees transitioning to adulthood.

Further projects advocate for youth access to vocational education and training, employment, inclusion and social support, and address the needs of displaced people – most recently Ukrainian refugees or those affected by natural disasters. The Council of Europe monitors health inequality and undertakes projects that ensure rapid, youth-focused and minority-sensitive responses to recovery. The European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe supports youth-led projects tackling social rights, inclusion and mental health.

Education is vital to achieving the Council of Europe’s mission, and to promoting access to jobs and financial security. The Council of Europe has launched several initiatives aiming to ensure social rights, such as improving ethics and transparency in education; recognition of the qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees; students’ rights; and the social inclusion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in vocational education and training.

The Council of Europe provides training, guidance and integrity standards for national judges, and the supervision of the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights maintains and sets standards for lawmakers and practitioners across Europe.

The Council of Europe exists to ensure that Europe never has to choose between its values and its interests. But if fundamental rights are not accessible and enforceable, democracy is weakened and polarisation and discord are the natural results. Democratic security can only become a reality if social justice is reinforced at every level of every community.

Pillar 1 – Learning and practising democracy

Investing in social rights is essential to democratic stability and security. As reaffirmed in the Chişinău Declaration on Social Rights (2026),⁴² gaps in the protection and delivery of social rights are a key driver of distrust in democratic institutions. This pillar focuses on bridging the gap between formal rights and their effective enjoyment in practice, enabling individuals to access and exercise their rights and thereby strengthening trust and participation.

Strengthening education, youth engagement and participation

Strengthening awareness of social rights and enabling individuals, particularly young people, to participate in democratic life is essential to ensuring that rights are effectively exercised in practice. The Council of Europe supports this work through awareness raising, education and youth policies that embed social rights within learning, participation and inclusion, including initiatives to improve access to education, recognise learners as rights holders and support continuity of education in crisis contexts.

The forthcoming Student Rights Charter, developed in co-operation with the European Students' Union, aims to strengthen the recognition of students' rights within higher education systems in line with the European Convention on Human Rights.⁴³ The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees programme, implemented in 24 countries, has issued over 1 000 qualifications passports, allowing migrants and refugees with otherwise undocumented qualifications to pursue their studies and employment in host countries.⁴⁴

The recently adopted Committee of Ministers recommendation on qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees in Europe strengthens access to education and employment for displaced persons.⁴⁵ Work on ethics and integrity in education, including the newly launched Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud, helps combat fraud and ensure equal access to qualifications.⁴⁶ A forthcoming Committee of Ministers recommendation on developing a culture of democracy in vocational education and training will further support social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups such as minority youth, low-income learners and early school leavers.⁴⁷ Early childhood and democratic citizenship education, together with the draft Council of Europe Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education 2027-2031, aim to build awareness of rights and participation from the earliest stages of learning.

Targeted initiatives support Roma youth, young refugees, youth not in education, employment nor training, young people with disabilities and those in rural areas through awareness raising, training and participatory mechanisms. The implementation of recommendations and programmes is further strengthening this approach, including through:

- ▶ follow-up to the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)3 on access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights (the Enter! recommendation);⁴⁸

42. Council of Europe, "European countries reaffirm importance of European Social Charter at conference in Chişinău", <https://go.coe.int/Z7BXV>; Chişinău Declaration: <https://go.coe.int/E6EaG>.

43. "Council of Europe's Student Rights Charter gains momentum with strong democratic vision and student co-design", <https://go.coe.int/9Egtl>.

44. Council of Europe, European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, <https://go.coe.int/5qrf8>.

45. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)6 on qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees in Europe, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=091259488027d22e>.

46. Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education, <https://go.coe.int/g2dVi>.

47. Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, "Vocational education and training", <https://go.coe.int/yyMeF>.

48. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)3 on access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights, <https://go.coe.int/BFrNZ>.

- ▶ implementation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)4 on supporting young refugees in transition to adulthood (the Turning 18 with Confidence recommendation);⁴⁹
- ▶ the Council of Europe Strategy for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2026-2030)⁵⁰ and the Road Map for Roma Youth Participation;
- ▶ study sessions under the Youth for Democracy programme;
- ▶ support for youth-led initiatives through the European Youth Foundation.

Work in the cultural field continues to reinforce these efforts by linking social rights to participation in cultural life. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS No. 199, Faro Convention) promotes access to cultural heritage as a dimension of social inclusion and democratic participation, while the Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (CETS No. 221) contributes to safeguarding shared cultural resources as part of the broader social commons.

Advancing inclusive access to social rights

Ensuring access to and effective enjoyment of social rights requires addressing barriers affecting different groups. Tackling these challenges is essential not only for social justice but also for strengthening democratic participation and trust in institutions.

The Council of Europe supports this objective through tools and approaches that embed equality and inclusion across governance. Gender mainstreaming efforts including the production of diverse tools have triggered a shift of approach to make policies and programmes more adapted to the need of all women and men, improve the efficiency of policies and the use of resources.⁵¹ Work led by the CDADI, including the “Guidance document on strategies for inclusion”,⁵² a peer-learning and benchmarking tool on inclusion⁵³ and a guide and checklist for equality mainstreaming, aims to strengthen the capacity of member states and local authorities to address discrimination in a co-ordinated and systemic manner.

Targeted initiatives address persistent inequalities affecting specific groups. Council of Europe work on the rights of people with disabilities includes promoting inclusive access to vocational education and training and employment; while Council work on Roma and Traveller inclusion is focused on improving access to quality education and tackling antigypsyism, thereby supporting equal participation in democratic life. Meanwhile, Council efforts to advance the inclusion of LGBTI people include addressing disparities in access to healthcare and promoting inclusive education.

This work also responds to emerging pressures on social rights. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on vulnerable groups highlights the importance of ensuring that policy responses remain aligned with social rights standards. The European Committee of Social Rights, the Council of Europe’s body charged with monitoring the implementation of the European Social Charter, provides thematic guidance that is rooted in the Charter to support member states in upholding such standards in times of economic strain.

Addressing vulnerabilities and strengthening inclusive participation

Ensuring the effective exercise of social rights requires targeted action to address the specific barriers faced by individuals in vulnerable situations. Overcoming these barriers is essential to enabling meaningful participation and preventing exclusion from democratic life.

The Council of Europe International Co-operation Group on Drugs and Addictions (Pompidou Group) promotes human rights-based drug and addiction policies while ensuring that policy responses are inclusive and address the needs of children and young people, migrants and asylum seekers, and other vulnerable groups. The group’s forthcoming activities will focus on addressing drug use and homelessness, addiction

49. Council of Europe Youth Sector, “A practical guide to the Council of Europe Recommendation on supporting young refugees in transition to adulthood”, <https://go.coe.int/cShxH>.

50. Council of Europe, Strategy for Roma and Traveller inclusion (2026-2030), <https://go.coe.int/MIXx7>.

51. Council of Europe, Toolkit on gender mainstreaming in Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms, <https://go.coe.int/Ylh00>; online HELP course on gender equality and gender mainstreaming, <https://go.coe.int/QA05P>; Handbook for gender equality rapporteurs, <https://go.coe.int/alb34>; Gender mainstreaming toolkit for co-operation projects, <https://go.coe.int/IRUtV>.

52. Council of Europe CDADI, guidance document on strategies for inclusion in the fields under the responsibility of the Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI), <https://go.coe.int/7C0Vc>.

53. Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Intercultural Inclusion, “Summary of options for a peer-learning and benchmarking tool on inclusion strategies”, <https://go.coe.int/x8i6h>.

challenges among migrants and asylum seekers, and coherent and equitable policy interventions at the European level.⁵⁴ This is complemented by projects in the field of health, such as initiatives on health literacy and the involvement of young people in health governance.⁵⁵

Capacity-building activities by the Council of Europe reinforce this approach: initiatives such as the HELP courses on the European Social Charter, on labour rights as human rights and on business and human rights⁵⁶ contribute to strengthening understanding of social rights and human rights in the context of business activities among legal professionals and the wider public, supporting the effective implementation of these rights in practice.

Pillar 2 – Protecting democracy

This pillar focuses on the protection of social rights through legal standards, monitoring and institutional safeguards. In a context of rising inequalities and cost-of-living pressures, this focus is essential to sustaining trust in institutions and preventing social fragmentation.

Strengthening standards and monitoring of social rights

The effective protection of social rights depends not only on strong legal standards but on their consistent monitoring and implementation.

The European Social Charter remains the central legal framework for protecting social rights. Monitoring by the European Committee on Social Rights, including regular conclusions based on reporting, on decisions in collective complaints and on thematic reviews, provides a comprehensive assessment of compliance across areas such as labour rights, education, healthcare, housing and social protection, and increasingly frequently addresses emerging challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis, protection against poverty (including energy poverty) and social inclusion. Recent conclusions on labour rights highlight gaps in working conditions, fair remuneration and collective rights and guide member states in strengthening protection and addressing inequalities. Improved follow-up to collective complaints supports more effective implementation at national levels.

The effective protection of social rights is grounded in strong legal standards and their implementation, not only through the Charter and its procedures, including the important follow-up process carried out by the Governmental Committee of the European Social Charter and the European Code of Social Security, but also through the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, which ensures state accountability and the protection of Convention rights.

As reaffirmed in the Chişinău Declaration, effective implementation of the European Social Charter, including respect for the conclusions and decisions of the European Committee of Social Rights, is essential to addressing the impact of economic insecurity, rising inequalities and declining living standards. It also highlights the need to respond to emerging labour market challenges linked to digitalisation, demographic change and the climate transition, while prioritising protection for the most vulnerable groups.

Implementing the Charter includes giving due consideration, when applying the measures above, to the specific needs and situations of young people in all their diversity, including young environmental defenders and young people facing social inequalities or with fewer opportunities, those in vulnerable situations and those from disadvantaged groups.⁵⁷

Ensuring protection in practice: co-operation and crisis response

Translating social rights into effective protection requires targeted co-operation and responsive policy action, particularly in contexts of crisis and structural transformation. Such efforts are essential to maintaining trust in institutions and ensuring that rights are upheld where they are most at risk.

54. Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe Work Programme 2026-2029, <https://go.coe.int/56LnW>.

55. For example, the Council of Europe Conference on the Protection of Health (15 October 2025), <https://go.coe.int/qWk6J>; Outcome document: <https://go.coe.int/mdfh7>.

56. Council of Europe, Online HELP Course on Business and Human Rights, <https://go.coe.int/7ZTku>.

57. "Council of Europe urges measures for young people and climate change", <https://go.coe.int/H69Dh>.

In Ukraine, Council of Europe initiatives seek to facilitate access to essential services for internally displaced persons and returnees,⁵⁸ to advance housing reforms⁵⁹ and to strengthen judicial and non-judicial remedies.⁶⁰ These shall be achieved by modernising the legal framework and expanding access for war-affected and internally displaced persons, strengthening social protection systems in the context of reconstruction, reinforcing labour market reforms, enhancing social dialogue and collective labour relations and facilitating the implementation of general measures arising from relevant Court judgments.⁶¹ This work is complemented by mechanisms that reinforce accountability and access to remedies. The Register of Damage for Ukraine provides a framework for recognising harm and enabling future compensation, contributing to restoring trust and upholding rights in the context of Russia's aggression.⁶² The second step of the comprehensive compensation mechanism will take this initiative further. The Convention establishing the International Claims Commission for Ukraine was adopted and opened for signature on 16 December 2025 and has already gathered 36 signatories.

Council of Europe co-operation activities in countries such as Armenia, Republic of Moldova and Türkiye support the protection and inclusion of migrants and refugees, including in social protection systems and labour markets, while work on business and human rights strengthens the protection of social rights in economic contexts. Sector-specific discussions⁶³ on sustainable mining have highlighted the importance of dialogue and inclusivity as essential elements.

Meanwhile, financial instruments complement these efforts. The Council of Europe Development Bank supports, among others, programmes addressing housing, displacement and access to healthcare, including for internally displaced persons and populations affected by crises.

Ensuring effective and inclusive access to social rights

Ensuring access to social rights requires systems that are effective, inclusive and accessible to all. The Council of Europe supports this objective through standards and tools that reinforce access to essential services based on the European Social Charter.

In education, key measures include work on the recognition of qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees,⁶⁴ the development of frameworks for automatic recognition of higher education qualifications⁶⁵ and tools supporting continuity of education in crisis contexts.⁶⁶

In the field of health, a new Strategic Plan on Human Rights in Biomedicine and Health (2026–2030) will strengthen the rights-based approach to healthcare, including in response to technological developments.⁶⁷ The Council of Europe is giving priority to health literacy and forming a coalition of partners to make progress in this area, with a high-level conference scheduled for December 2026.⁶⁸

At the same time, Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms contribute to safeguarding public health and reinforcing trust in health systems. Work under the Council of Europe Convention on the counterfeiting of medical products and similar crimes involving threats to public health (CETS No. 211, Medicrime Convention) addresses the risks posed by falsified medical products and related crimes, while monitoring under the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs (CETS No. 216) continues to strengthen the integrity and accountability of organ transplant systems.

58. Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, "Facilitating access to human rights and essential services for internally displaced persons and returnees at the community level", <https://go.coe.int/yWEL4>.

59. Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, "Facilitating housing solutions for the war-affected people in Ukraine – Phase II", <https://go.coe.int/OSVrm>.

60. Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, "Further strengthening judicial and non-judicial remedies for the human rights protection of the war-affected people in Ukraine", <https://go.coe.int/LXEWc>.

61. Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, "Strengthening democratic stability through social rights: Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova advance reforms for social justice", <https://go.coe.int/nsPz5>.

62. Council of Europe Register of Damage for Ukraine, "Uniting efforts for justice and compensation of damages", <https://go.coe.int/EHSZ6>.

63. Council of Europe, "Sustainable mining: balancing human rights, environmental standards, and business growth", <https://go.coe.int/yyc5>.

64. Council of Europe, "Committee of Ministers adopts the Recommendation CM/Rec (2025)6 on qualifications and linguistic competences of refugees in Europe", <https://go.coe.int/o2q8q>.

65. "Council of Europe launches drafting of a new Convention to strengthen automatic recognition of higher education qualifications", <https://go.coe.int/xCtbz>.

66. "New Council of Europe toolkit strengthens education resilience in times of crisis", <https://go.coe.int/t13tC>.

67. "Council of Europe adopts new strategic plan on human rights in biomedicine and health for 2026-30", <https://go.coe.int/YlyDv>.

68. Council of Europe, "Health literacy", <https://go.coe.int/2WAD8>.

Protecting vulnerable groups

The effective protection of social rights requires targeted safeguards for vulnerable groups, alongside an enabling civic space that allows individuals and organisations to advocate for their rights. Ensuring both protection and participation is essential to inclusive democratic resilience.

The Council of Europe supports this objective through monitoring, standards and targeted action that addresses structural vulnerabilities. The European Committee of Social Rights monitors the rights of persons with disabilities, further informing targeted initiatives to promote equitable access to education, employment and public life for this group. Monitoring under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ETS No. 157, FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148, ECRML) contributes to equal access to services and the inclusion of persons belonging to minority communities in public life.

The Council of Europe is pursuing action against trafficking in human beings to strengthen protection against exploitation and ensure access to justice. Work on the implementation of relevant standards on the rights of LGBTI people further contributes to addressing inequalities in access to healthcare,⁶⁹ complemented by co-operation activities.⁷⁰ A new legal instrument in the form of a recommendation to deter and fight the smuggling of migrants is expected by the end of 2027.

For its part, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) carries out monitoring visits to assess conditions in places of detention and care, contributing to the protection of persons in vulnerable situations, including persons with disabilities and older persons, and promoting standards of dignity and rights protection.

Meanwhile, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe has been complementing these efforts by addressing systemic inequalities affecting vulnerable groups,⁷¹ through work on child poverty and access to essential services such as health, housing and education.

Pillar 3 – Innovating for democracy

This pillar focuses on developing innovative tools, governance models and participatory approaches to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of social rights policies. It emphasises inclusion and participation, recognising the need to adapt to societal change and emerging democratic challenges. In line with the Chişinău Declaration, these efforts aim to strengthen participation, improve policy co-ordination and foster cross-sectoral co-operation.

Advancing inclusive governance

Addressing evolving societal challenges requires more inclusive, adaptive and participatory approaches to policy making.

The Council of Europe supports this objective through tools and frameworks that strengthen inclusive governance in practice. The Intercultural Cities Index⁷² provides local authorities with a benchmarking tool to assess and improve inclusion policies, helping translate social cohesion into measurable governance outcomes.

In turn, the Faro Convention promotes participatory governance by encouraging public involvement in the identification, management and use of cultural heritage, thereby supporting dialogue and locally grounded decision making.

Meanwhile, the Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment (2025-2030)⁷³ reinforces a broad approach that links environmental protection with human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law. The strategy underscores the impact of environmental degradation on living conditions, public health and access to

69. Council of Europe CDADI, “Third thematic review on the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity”, <https://go.coe.int/7nqqx>.

70. Council of Europe, “A guide for the health sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina: equal access of LGBTI people to healthcare”, <https://go.coe.int/i5RuL>.

71. Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, “The unheard 12 million – Council of Europe Commissioner issues urgent wake-up call to act for Roma and Traveller rights”, <https://go.coe.int/UHdLV>.

72. Council of Europe, Intercultural Cities Index, www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/about-the-index.

73. “Council of Europe adopts comprehensive environment strategy highlighting human rights”, <https://go.coe.int/hH1Ut>.

resources, particularly for persons and groups in vulnerable situations or those exposed to discrimination, and supports integrated policies aimed at ensuring a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for present and future generations.

Strengthening participation and integrating youth perspectives

Youth participation remains a key driver of democratic innovation. The Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)3 on the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life establishes standards for meaningful youth engagement at local and regional levels, supporting authorities to create the conditions for effective participation, including through training, access to information and adequate resources.⁷⁴ At a local level, participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and youth councils provide practical avenues for involving young people in shaping social policies and public decision making.

Other work of the Council of Europe is focused on reinforcing inclusive participation more broadly. Guidelines currently under development will aim to enhance participation in elections, particularly among women, young people and groups at risk of discrimination, by identifying barriers and promoting enabling conditions for more representative democratic processes. This approach strengthens the conditions for more structured, sustained and impactful participation in democratic life.

Advancing platforms and tools for democratic innovation

Platforms and tools play a key role in developing, testing and scaling innovative approaches to democratic governance. They provide spaces for experimentation, learning and policy development, helping ensure that social rights remain responsive to evolving democratic challenges.

Platforms such as the World Forum for Democracy provide opportunities to explore new approaches, including the role of social rights in strengthening democratic resilience.

The 2025 edition of the Council of Europe Hackathon, titled Democracy's Firewall, fostered innovative approaches to countering disinformation, bringing forth ideas from young people and underlining the need to protect democratic processes, including as a precondition for the effective realisation of social and economic rights.

Efforts in this area also focus on making social rights more accessible, inclusive and responsive to technological and societal change. In the field of health, work led by the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health (CDBIO), including initiatives on health literacy⁷⁵ and the development of a dedicated road map, aims to strengthen access to understandable and inclusive health information and services, particularly for people in vulnerable situations. The development of a patients' rights charter will further equip individuals to navigate the implications of emerging technologies in health-care in line with human rights standards.

Strengthening the social-rights evidence base further complements these efforts. A partnership with the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is being explored to develop indicators linking socio-economic inequality with democratic resilience, supporting more informed and targeted policy responses.

This reinforces a shift towards more adaptive, participatory and evidence-based governance, enabling social rights to remain effective and trusted in a rapidly changing democratic environment.

The Council of Europe is seeking new ways to engage with private-sector actors, exemplified by the inaugural Business and Human Rights Forum⁷⁶ held in Strasbourg in October 2025, which brought together business leaders to discuss business and human rights. Discussions at the Human Rights and Business Academic Forum,⁷⁷ as well as through the Open Council of Europe Academic Networks (OCEAN),⁷⁸ facilitated conversations on how human rights standards can be effectively integrated into business operations.

74. Council of Europe Youth Department, "Adopted! The European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life", <https://go.coe.int/bG6SN>.

75. Council of Europe CDBIO, Guide to health literacy, Contributing to trust building and equitable access to healthcare, <https://go.coe.int/lfONY>.

76. "First Council of Europe Business and Human Rights Forum", <https://go.coe.int/4v4Fs>.

77. Council of Europe Human Rights and Business Academic Forum, <https://go.coe.int/9BwEl>.

78. Council of Europe Open Council of Europe Academic Networks Member Database, <https://go.coe.int/T210L>.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION AND EMERGING DIRECTIONS UNDER THE PACT

	Thematic area	Current action	Planned developments	EMERGING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE PACT CONSULTATIONS	
PILLAR 1: LEARNING AND PRACTISING DEMOCRACY	Education and digital citizenship education	▶ Youth access to rights programmes; refugee qualifications and linguistic competences; ethics, transparency and integrity in education; HELP training on the European Social Charter	Draft recommendation on conditions of transparency and quality assurance for automatic recognition of higher education qualifications; draft Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education (2027-2031); Recommendation on a culture of democracy in vocational education and training; Student Rights Charter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Developing a legal instrument of the Council of Europe on transparency and quality assurance for the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications, aimed at facilitating mobility and equal access to education as a component of social rights ▶ Reinforcing youth participation and access to rights ▶ Supporting community-based and participatory approaches to democratic engagement 	
	Youth participation and inclusion	▶ Enter! recommendation follow-up; Turning 18 with Confidence recommendation; Roma youth participation road map; youth study sessions and networks	Expanded youth participation frameworks and capacity building		
	Equality and inclusion policies	▶ Equality and inclusion tools; targeted measures for Roma and Traveller education; standard for addressing school segregation; action against antigypsyism, including support to public authorities to implement case law of the Court related to Roma and Travellers and of the European Committee on Social Rights; gender mainstreaming tools and activities	Peer-learning and benchmarking tool on inclusion; equality mainstreaming guide and checklist		
	Culture, participation and community engagement	▶ Implementation of the Faro Convention; cultural participation initiatives	Expansion of participatory heritage approaches		
	Addressing vulnerabilities and access to rights	▶ Development of standards on human rights in drug policies; youth engagement in health governance	Development of new standards on human rights in drug and addiction-related policies (demand and supply reduction)		
PILLAR 2: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY	Social rights standards and monitoring	▶ Monitoring of the European Social Charter; labour rights and cost-of-living review; execution of Court judgments; follow-up to collective complaints	Continued monitoring cycles on social rights (2025-2027); promoting acceptance of further provisions of the European Social Charter		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Developing policy guidance to address the intersection of drug use and homelessness, grounded in human rights and social inclusion ▶ Developing policy papers on tools and policies to address addiction challenges among migrants and asylum seekers, including gender-sensitive approaches ▶ Developing initiatives to reinforce patients' rights considering the technological developments in healthcare systems ▶ Establishing an early-warning and response framework to monitor and respond to threats affecting civil society ▶ Creating tools to address transnational repression ▶ Strengthening the implementation and practical impact of social rights and enforcement mechanisms ▶ Reinforcing the protection of persons at risk of discrimination and providing equal access to rights for all ▶ Improving the resilience of public health and social-protection systems
	Protection in practice and crisis response	▶ Co-operation projects in Armenia, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine (reconstruction, social protection, labour reforms); projects supporting migrants and refugees; business and human rights work	Further development of targeted co-operation		
	Access to education, health and social protection	▶ Tools for education in emergencies; health literacy initiatives; patient rights work; healthcare infrastructure projects (for example SHIFA);* housing support for displaced populations	Convention on automatic recognition of higher education qualifications; expanded health and social protection measures		
	Public health and integrity of systems	▶ Monitoring under the Medicrime Convention and the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs	Continued monitoring cycles and implementation support		
	Persons at risk of discrimination and equality	▶ Monitoring under the Charter in respect of persons with disabilities; Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; monitoring of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings; CPT monitoring of social care institutions; Commissioner's work on child poverty and vulnerable groups	Strategies on equality (for example the LGBTI strategy); Recommendation on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls		
	Civic space and democratic participation	▶ Work on legal status of civil society; protection of civic space frameworks	Recommendation on legal status of civil society organisations		
PILLAR 3: INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY	Inclusive governance and local innovation	▶ Intercultural Cities programme and index; local inclusion policies	Development of communication tools on inclusion and migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Developing innovative and inclusive forms of participation ▶ Streamlining the integration of youth perspectives across democratic processes ▶ Promoting evidence-based policy making on social rights and trust ▶ Ensuring that technological innovation supports democratic values and participation ▶ Developing a patients' rights charter 	
	Participation and democratic engagement	▶ Participatory budgeting; youth councils; youth participation road map; local participation mechanisms	Guidelines on electoral participation		
	Platforms and policy innovation	▶ Co-operation with Eurofound on indicators linking inequality and democratic trust	Development of evidence-based policy frameworks		
	Social rights and evidence	▶ Co-operation with Eurofound on indicators linking inequality and democratic trust	Development of evidence-based policy frameworks		
	Technology and democracy	▶ Analytical work on AI and democratic processes	Instrument on generative AI and democracy; health literacy road map		
	Cross-sector integration of youth perspectives	▶ Existing youth participation mechanisms	Action plan integrating youth perspectives and pilot frameworks		

* Council of Europe Development Bank, Strengthening Health Care Infrastructure for All (SHIFA).



CHAPTER 3

DEFENDING EQUAL RIGHTS AND PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

Introduction

Across Europe, minority groups are being made scapegoats for social neglect and economic decline, becoming collateral damage in an ongoing war of polarisation.

Resentment and hate undermine the ability of citizens and others to participate in democratic processes, creating a fertile ground for violence, both physical and digital. And technology has become both master and servant. Far from providing a level playing field, it perpetuates racism, sexism and all the other forms of discrimination.

Today, more than ever, Europe needs everyone, no matter their background, to feel secure and able to contribute to their full potential. Neither gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability nor faith should be a barrier to achievement or participation in European society.

Yet in 2026, worldwide, every 10 minutes a woman is killed by someone she knows. In Europe, one woman in three faces intimate partner violence. One in six experiences sexual violence. And these are just the reported cases.

Women and people from minority groups in politics and leadership roles are deliberately targeted online. Threats of rape and murder or other forms of digital violence have forced some out of office and discouraged others, particularly younger people and those from ethnic minorities, from running.

But human rights are universal. Steps to raise up those most at risk do not diminish rights for others, but strengthen cohesion and democratic security, because democracy relies on the fair representation and participation of all. When women, children, minorities or other groups face barriers through discrimination, hate or violence, their exclusion undermines equal opportunity, erodes trust in institutions and fuels polarisation and radicalisation.

The Council of Europe is proactive in countering stereotypes, algorithmic bias, hate speech and disinformation online, partnering with regulators, equality bodies, civil society and tech actors to transform digital space into the opportunity for equality and open participation that it should be.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, Istanbul Convention) strengthens the Organisation's collective framework for action to protect women and end discrimination. The Council of Europe is working with all relevant parties to debunk false narratives about the purpose of the Istanbul Convention. The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197) offers standards and guidance to protect people from trafficking and exploitation.

The Council of Europe works to ensure the continuation of language and culture, the protection of ethnic and religious groups and the prevention of violence against all, including women, children, Roma, Travellers and LGBTI people. The Secretary General has appointed a Special Representative on antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred and all forms of religious intolerance.

The Organisation provides guidance and legal frameworks for youth participation, and supported training, capacity building, dedicated funding, regular consultation and monitoring.

The Council of Europe sets standards to support academic freedom, disability inclusion and political participation for women, girls, Roma and Travellers, and young people, bolstered by strong civil society involvement. And children are protected through the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201).

Failing to promote equality and inclusion means failing the entire population. Every voice not only deserves to be heard, but must be heard, so that community needs can be understood and met. Democratic security cannot be divorced from human rights, which is why they are enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, and why the Council of Europe will continue always to play an active role to protect and promote them.

Pillar 1 – Learning and practising democracy

Ensuring equality in practice requires moving beyond legal guarantees to embed it in institutions, attitudes and everyday interactions across society.

Strengthening education as a driver of equality

Education is central to embedding equality in democratic life, equipping learners to participate on equal terms and fostering respect for diversity and inclusion from an early stage. The Council of Europe supports this approach by helping member states strengthen the inclusiveness and equality focus of their education systems. Its work on education for democratic citizenship, such as the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture⁷⁹ and the European Space for Citizenship Education,⁸⁰ provides a framework for fostering a culture of inclusion through a lifelong learning perspective. It includes targeted initiatives on vocational education and training,⁸¹ where learners are at risk of exclusion, and on early childhood education and care, which helps promote equality from the earliest stages.

Specific action focused on mainstreaming equality across policies and practices include practical instruments such as the *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture*, which provides practical guidance on fostering inclusion of students from ethnic minorities and with disabilities and student participation,⁸² and the recently launched Gender Equality in Education Scorecard, designed as a concrete self-assessment tool for member states on the implementation of the Committee of Ministers recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education.⁸³

Recent initiatives reinforce this direction. The Reflection and Planning Survey Tool for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education⁸⁴ supports schools in integrating inclusive approaches into everyday teaching, while the project “Empowering language learners – A motivation manifesto for the European Day of Languages” promotes linguistic inclusion and learner agency.⁸⁵ Initiatives such as the Romani Plurilingual Policy Experimentation⁸⁶ – a programme targeting the inclusion of the history of Roma and Travellers in education⁸⁷ – and revised policy guidelines address structural inequalities for Roma and other linguistic minority groups. These are complemented by actions aiming to support LGBTI-inclusive education in schools by addressing bullying and combating anti-rights narratives in education.

Empowering young people for democratic participation

The Council of Europe’s Youth Sector focuses on equipping young people with the competences needed to participate actively in democratic life and to recognise and challenge discrimination in all its forms, including through youth work, non-formal learning and peer-led approaches.

79. Council of Europe, Examples of policy and practice in vocational education and training, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.

80. Council of Europe, European Space for Citizenship Education, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/european-space-for-citizenship-education1>.

81. Council of Europe, Vocational education and training, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/vocational-education-and-training1>.

82. Council of Europe, *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/toolkit-for-an-inclusive-and-democratic-school-culture>.

83. Council of Europe, “Second meeting of the Gender Equality in Education Scorecard Working Group”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/second-meeting-of-the-gender-equality-in-education-scorecard-working-group>.

84. “Council of Europe launches new survey tool and policy toolbox to strengthen plurilingual and intercultural education”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/council-of-europe-launches-new-survey-tool-and-policy-toolbox-to-strengthen-plurilingual-and-intercultural-education>.

85. Council of Europe European Centre for Modern Languages, A motivation manifesto, <https://edl.ecml.at/en/About-the-day/Motivation-manifesto>.

86. Council of Europe, “The Romani–Plurilingual Policy Experimentation”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/romani>.

87. Council of Europe, “Capacity-building programme and tools supporting the implementation of CM/Rec(2020)2 on the inclusion of the history of Roma and/or Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/capacity-building-programme-and-tools>.

This work is anchored in a coherent framework for human rights education and democratic participation. It includes implementation of the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE),⁸⁸ the Human Rights Education Youth Programme, the continued development of the Living Compass training course and national and regional training courses based on Compass,⁸⁹ including through its translation into national languages.

The Human Rights Education for Youth programme⁹⁰ of the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre) expands this work by strengthening young people's capacities to act for human rights through online and peer-led learning. It equips participants with knowledge of human rights standards and supports a cascade model, whereby trained tutors transfer knowledge and implement human rights education activities within their communities.

These initiatives respond to a pressing democratic challenge: ensuring that young people can identify and resist sexism, racism, antigypsyism, anti-LGBTI narratives and other intersecting forms of discrimination. By framing human rights education as a core democratic competence, the youth sector translates principles of equality into lived experience and collective practice.

Strengthening inclusive participation and democratic belonging

Equality is shaped not only by legal guarantees, but also by the extent to which individuals can participate, be represented and feel a sense of belonging in democratic life. The Council of Europe promotes participatory approaches that embed equality in practice. The Faro Convention frames access to cultural heritage as a component of democratic inclusion. This will be reinforced by the forthcoming Committee of Ministers recommendation on the role of culture and heritage in promoting equality and non-discrimination.

At the local level, the Intercultural Cities programme supports authorities in assessing and strengthening inclusive policies in practice, complemented by initiatives on communicating inclusion and engaging diverse groups. These efforts recognise that equality is also shaped by local governance, public narratives and everyday institutional practice. This work is being extended through an LGBTI anti-rumours strategy to support public authorities and civil society in countering stereotypes and prejudices.

Tools such as the handbook on democratic governance and participation of Roma and Travellers and the peer learning and benchmarking framework on inclusion aim to translate commitments into concrete governance practices, reducing under-representation and strengthening inclusive participation.

Removing structural barriers to participation

Persistent discrimination, violence and unequal access to justice continue to limit participation and undermine democratic resilience. Addressing these structural barriers requires going beyond legal protection to ensure that institutions are equipped to prevent, respond to and redress inequalities in practice. The Council of Europe supports member states in strengthening this capacity.

The implementation of the Istanbul Convention remains central to addressing violence against women and its impact on participation, including for those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This is complemented by practical tools⁹¹ and targeted co-operation programmes to align national frameworks with European standards.

Capacity building is reinforced through the Council of Europe Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals, which provides training on anti-discrimination, gender equality, access to justice and combating hate and violence. New areas of work, such as the course on technology-facilitated violence against women and girls, address emerging risks that increasingly affect equal participation in society and in politics.⁹²

88. Road Map for Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education with Young People; 2024-2028, <https://rm.coe.int/roadmap-for-hre-2024-2028/1680ada599>.

89. Council of Europe, Living Compass training course, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-education-youth/living-compass>.

90. Council of Europe North-South Centre, Human Rights Education for Youth, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/north-south-centre/hey>.

91. Council of Europe, "Montenegro publishes Handbook for lawyers providing free legal aid to victims of domestic violence", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/podgorica/-/montenegro-publishes-handbook-for-lawyers-providing-free-legal-aid-to-victims-of-domestic-violence>.

92. Council of Europe, "Judges and prosecutors from across the EU met in Belgium to begin training on violence against women, including technology-facilitated forms", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/help/-/seminar-launch-help-course-violence-against-woment-and-domestic-violence-ifj-coe-brussels-belgium>.

Pillar 2 – Protecting democracy

When women, persons affiliated with minorities or other groups face barriers through discrimination, hate or violence, their exclusion undermines equal opportunity, erodes trust in institutions and can fuel radicalisation.

Treaty-based protection and monitoring of equal rights

Binding standards and monitoring mechanisms remain central to ensuring that equality is upheld in practice. They provide both a framework for state obligations and a means of assessing whether all individuals, including those affiliating with minorities, can participate in public life on equal terms.

The Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages play a key role in this regard. Their monitoring frameworks assess access to education, employment, public life, justice, administration, services, media and cultural participation, translating principles of equality into concrete obligations and country-specific recommendations. In doing so, they offer a critical measure of democratic quality.

The seventh country monitoring cycle of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe focuses on state action against hate speech, hate crime and structural inequalities in the fields of education and healthcare. The future updating of ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 10 on combating racism and racial discrimination in and through school education will strengthen the preventive dimension of action against racism and intolerance, while enhanced co-operation with national equality bodies supports more effective implementation of ECRI's recommendations at the domestic level.

Addressing discrimination, hate and violence

Persistent discrimination, hate and violence, amplified in digital environments, require co-ordinated and forward-looking responses. The Council of Europe supports member states through practical tools that strengthen prevention, accountability and protection across both offline and online spheres

This includes work on intersectional discrimination, hate speech, hate crime and artificial intelligence, such as the Toolbox for non-legal measures to prevent and counter hate speech, the updated manual on policing hate crime against LGBTI people⁹³ and guidance on upholding equality in the use of AI. A forthcoming manual for prosecutors and law enforcement will aim to reinforce criminal justice responses to criminalised hate speech and hate-based violence. The Istanbul Convention sets legal standards to prevent, protect against and prosecute violence against women, including in online and digital environments. These standards offer innovation and guidance for policy makers and prosecutors.⁹⁴

Monitoring of the Committee of Ministers recommendation on discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity⁹⁵ highlights evolving risks, including the rise of anti-gender and anti-LGBTI narratives. The recommendation was recently completed by the adoption of the first comprehensive international legal instrument specifically dedicated to protecting and promoting the human rights of intersex persons.⁹⁶ The forthcoming Strategy for the Equality of Rights of LGBTI People (2027-2032) is expected to provide a more structured and forward-looking policy response.⁹⁷ Based on a study on intersectional discrimination,⁹⁸ the Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion of the Council of Europe is developing an instrument on this topic.

Efforts also address discrimination in the digital sphere, with tools to counter online hate, ensure non-discrimination in algorithmic systems and strengthen accountability of relevant actors. Work on gender equality complements this approach by addressing new and emerging barriers to participation. The recent

93. Council of Europe, "Policing hate crime against LGBTI persons: training for a professional police response" (2025), <https://rm.coe.int/prems-020325-gbr-2575-policing-hate-crime-web-final-2755-5061-3516-1/488010e373>.

94. Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women.

95. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/rec-2010-5>.

96. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)7 on equal rights for intersex persons and explanatory memorandum, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=091259488028b934>.

97. Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (ADI-SOGIESC), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/committee-adi-sogiesc>.

98. Council of Europe CDADI, "Study on preventing and combating intersectional discrimination in Europe: a model for change", <https://rm.coe.int/feasibility-study-on-preventing-and-combating-intersectional-discrimination/48802a9b71>.

Committee of Ministers Recommendation on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls supports more effective legal and institutional responses, including through victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches.⁹⁹ The recommendation's emphasis on "accountability" reflects the joint work of gender and criminal law experts.¹⁰⁰

Preventing and combating all forms of religious intolerance

The appointment of the Secretary General's Special Representative on antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred and all forms of religious intolerance in December 2025 reinforces the Council of Europe's commitment to addressing religious intolerance and the risks it poses to democratic resilience.¹⁰¹ Building on the European Convention on Human Rights and existing standards,¹⁰² the Special Representative reinforces engagement with member states and relevant stakeholders, in particular international and national special envoys, to ensure conditions that enable individuals and groups to live together in their diversity.

The Special Representative leads co-operation with governments, international partners, religious communities and civil society to enhance dialogue, improve co-ordination and promote the implementation of Council of Europe standards. This includes supporting interreligious dialogue, Holocaust remembrance through education and engagement with young people and identifying new avenues for action to address evolving forms of religious intolerance, including online, while reinforcing pluralism, tolerance and mutual respect as core elements of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

Protecting groups exposed to structural inequalities

Persistent structural inequalities continue to limit participation and weaken democratic resilience. Addressing these challenges requires targeted and differentiated responses to ensure that those most exposed to discrimination can fully access rights and participate in public life.

The Council of Europe's Roma and Traveller inclusion work tackles educational exclusion, under-representation and antigypsyism through initiatives on inclusive education, participation and institutional capacity building. Work on migration and refugees highlights how barriers related to legal status, access to services and participation undermine inclusion, supporting more rights-based integration approaches.

The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe complements these efforts by addressing the situation of vulnerable groups, including Roma and Travellers, migrants, LGBTI people and older persons, linking individual experiences to broader structural patterns.

Action to combat trafficking in human beings adds a critical dimension, addressing exploitation at the intersection of gender, migration and organised crime and reinforcing its recognition as a serious violation of human rights through monitoring and follow-up co-operation activities.

Strengthening institutional safeguards for equal rights

Ensuring equal rights in practice requires institutions that are not only responsive but also capable of anticipating and addressing emerging patterns of discrimination. Strengthening institutional safeguards is therefore central to sustaining democratic resilience.

The execution of judgments of the Court plays a pivotal role in driving structural reforms across areas such as detention, migration, access to services and protection against discrimination. Work by the Consultative Council of European Prosecutors (CCPE), including Opinion No. 20 on diversity and inclusivity within prosecution services, reinforces the need for prosecution services capable of addressing discriminatory patterns in diverse societies.¹⁰³

99. Council of Europe, "Accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls: new Council of Europe recommendation", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/-/accountability-for-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-new-council-of-europe-recommendation>.

100. By the Gender Equality Commission and the European Committee on Crime Problems of the Council of Europe.

101. Council of Europe, "New Special Representative of the Council of Europe Secretary General on antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and all forms of religious intolerance, starts her mandate", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/new-special-representative-of-the-council-of-europe-secretary-general-on-antisemitism-anti-muslim-hatred-and-all-forms-of-religious-intolerance-starts-her-mandate>.

102. Notably, see "ECRI revised General Policy Recommendation No. 5 on preventing and combating anti-Muslim racism and discrimination", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.5>; "ECRI revised General Policy Recommendation No. 9 on preventing and combating antisemitism", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.9>.

103. Council of Europe CCPE Opinion No. 20 (2025) on diversity and inclusivity within prosecution services, <https://rm.coe.int/opinion-no-20-2025-of-the-ccpe/488028f8f9>.

Monitoring of places of detention and care institutions further reinforces these safeguards, focusing on the treatment of women and vulnerable groups. These assessments address critical equality challenges in contexts where individuals are particularly dependent on state protection.

The Council of Europe's Venice Commission contributes by embedding equality considerations in rule of law frameworks, notably through its updated Rule of Law Checklist.¹⁰⁴

Guidance on disengagement and reintegration programmes for women with links to terrorism highlights the importance of maintaining equality and human rights standards even in complex and highly securitised environments.¹⁰⁵

Pillar 3 – Innovating for democracy

Addressing evolving discrimination requires adaptive governance, with tools to embed equality in policy making and participation, support equality mainstreaming and respond to emerging challenges such as algorithmic bias and online hate.

Embedding equality in policy design and governance

Advancing equality requires moving beyond reactive protection towards systemic and anticipatory approaches that integrate equality across all areas of governance. This pillar focuses on embedding equality as a guiding principle in policy design, ensuring that institutions and public policies actively prevent discriminatory outcomes rather than addressing them *ex post*.

The Council of Europe supports this shift through tools that operationalise equality mainstreaming across sectors. The forthcoming guide and checklist for equality mainstreaming, developed by the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion, will aim to strengthen the capacity of public authorities to identify and address discriminatory outcomes across policy areas. The planned implementation toolkit for the Committee of Ministers recommendation on equality and artificial intelligence will extend this approach to the digital domain, ensuring that algorithmic systems and AI-enabled public administration are assessed against equality standards. Complementary analytical work and policy guidance further support authorities and equality bodies in preventing algorithmic discrimination and ensuring effective redress.

Council of Europe actions also reinforce inclusive participation in policy processes, including through the forthcoming handbook on democratic governance and participation of Roma and Travellers, and the Roma Political Schools.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, the proposed feasibility study on a binding international instrument on hate speech and hate crime will reflect a forward-looking assessment of whether existing frameworks remain adequate in the face of increasingly scalable and technology-driven risks.¹⁰⁷

Addressing emerging and evolving inequalities

Rapid societal and technological change is reshaping patterns of inequality, requiring more anticipatory and adaptive responses. This pillar focuses on emerging risks, particularly in relation to gender equality, children's rights, the rights of LGBTI people and the impact of digital transformation on participation and protection.

In the area of gender equality, current work aims to strengthen frameworks for balanced participation in political and public life, including through a forthcoming study on equal participation. This is complemented by initiatives addressing new forms of exclusion, such as a planned toolkit on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls and a toolkit promoting positive narratives around gender equality. Together, these efforts reflect a growing recognition that gender equality is both a democratic and security imperative, particularly in digital environments where participation is increasingly contested.¹⁰⁸

104. Council of Europe Venice Commission, the updated Rule of Law Checklist, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2025\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2025)002-e).

105. Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT), Guidelines on disengagement and reintegration programmes for women with links to terrorism, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=091259488029c42b>.

106. Council of Europe, Roma Political Schools, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/roma-political-schools>.

107. Council of Europe, "Gaps and policies in AI- and algorithm-driven discrimination in Europe", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/inclusion-and-antidiscrimination/-/gaps-and-policies-in-ai-and-algorithm-driven-discrimination-in-europe>.

108. Council of Europe, "Secretary General highlights gender equality as a democratic security imperative at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/secretary-general-highlights-gender-equality-as-a-democratic-security-imperative-at-the-un-commission-on-the-status-of-women-in-new-york>.

The children's rights sector combines tools on child-friendly justice, participation and survivor engagement with forthcoming guidance on children's rights and social media. This reflects a shift towards recognising children as rights-holders whose participation must be actively supported across justice systems, policy frameworks and digital environments. The recent launch of a child-friendly justice assessment tool, developed jointly with the European Union, supports member states in evaluating and improving the accessibility and responsiveness of their justice systems.¹⁰⁹

The future Strategy for the Equality of Rights of LGBTI People (2027-2032) will address challenges to non-discrimination and equality in digital spaces, including those linked to artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.¹¹⁰

Renewing democratic participation and accountability

The Council of Europe is advancing approaches that broaden participation while reinforcing accountability.

The revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, initiated by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, developed in co-operation with the Joint Council on Youth and adopted by the Committee of Ministers in March 2026, will now be implemented, establishing concrete expectations for local authorities to improve participation by young people from all backgrounds. The reflection on a deliberative democracy check and vetting mechanism aims to ensure that participatory processes are inclusive and do not replicate existing inequalities.

Reinforcing inclusion in democratic innovation

Innovation in democratic governance must include safeguards to ensure that participatory and governance approaches strengthen equality, inclusion and representation, supported by Council of Europe initiatives integrating inclusion into institutional practice.

The workstream on the integration of youth perspectives¹¹¹ seeks to embed youth participation within decision-making processes, moving beyond consultation towards structural inclusion. Similarly, the Roma Political Schools¹¹² support long-term leadership development, strengthening representation and participation in communities historically excluded from political life.

109. "Council of Europe and the European Union launch child-friendly justice assessment tool to protect kids in legal proceedings", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/how-can-europe-become-a-champion-of-child-friendly-justice->.

110. Council of Europe ADI-SOGIESC, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/committee-adi-sogiesc>.

111. 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth – Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective, <https://rm.coe.int/resolution-on-the-coe-reference-framework-on-a-youth-perspective-w-app/488028cf72>.

112. Council of Europe, Roma Political Schools, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/roma-political-schools>.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION AND EMERGING DIRECTIONS UNDER THE PACT

	Thematic area	Current action	Planned developments	EMERGING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE PACT CONSULTATIONS
PILLAR 1: LEARNING AND PRACTISING DEMOCRACY	Education, awareness and human rights culture	▶ Education for democratic citizenship initiatives; <i>Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture</i> ; plurilingual and intercultural education initiatives; human rights education programmes (Compass, Living Compass)	European Space for Citizenship Education; gender equality scorecard; further development of human rights education programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthen education for democratic citizenship and human rights education and awareness as a foundation for inclusive democracy ▶ Promote participation of groups exposed to discrimination, particularly young people ▶ Address structural discrimination through education, culture and local governance ▶ Support inclusive narratives to counter polarisation and exclusion
	Youth participation and inclusion	▶ Youth-led initiatives; training and capacity building for participation; support to youth NGOs	Expansion of youth participation tools and programmes	
	Equality and inclusion tools	▶ Intercultural Cities Index; Roma and Traveller participation tools; political participation initiatives	Peer-learning and benchmarking tool on inclusion; intercultural inclusion initiatives	
	Culture, heritage and inclusion	▶ Faro Convention; Free to Create initiative; cultural participation frameworks	Recommendation on culture and heritage for equality and non-discrimination	
PILLAR 2: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY	Anti-discrimination and equality monitoring	▶ ECRI monitoring cycle; monitoring of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; execution of CPT recommendations and Court judgments	Updated policy recommendations on racism and discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Development of guidance to ensure accountability for technology-facilitated violence, including online harassment and gender-based digital violence ▶ Feasibility study on a binding instrument on hate speech and hate crime, including in online environments ▶ Mechanism to identify and track threats or violence against politicians ▶ Establishment of a system to monitor threats and violence targeting political actors, with particular attention to gender-based violence, harassment and intimidation affecting women and under-represented groups in public life ▶ Establishment of a platform to strengthen protection and support for human rights defenders, including those working on equality, anti-discrimination and minority rights ▶ Strengthen protection against discrimination, hate speech and violence ▶ Address online harms and algorithmic bias affecting equality ▶ Protect civic space and human rights defenders ▶ Binding instrument on hate speech and hate crime
	Gender equality and preventing violence against women	▶ Implementation of the Istanbul Convention; monitoring of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Organs; protection against gender-based violence	New recommendation and tools on technology-facilitated violence against women	
	Hate speech, hate crime and online harms	▶ Tools on countering hate speech; AI and non-discrimination frameworks	Manuals and guidance for law enforcement and prosecutors	
	Inclusion of minorities and vulnerable groups	▶ Roma and Traveller programmes; migrant and refugee protection; Commissioner's work on vulnerable groups	Expanded inclusion strategies and targeted policy tools	
	Civic space and participation	▶ Guidelines on participation in elections; framework development of civil society organisations; human rights defenders support	Legal and policy frameworks for civic space	
PILLAR 3: INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY	Equality mainstreaming and governance tools	▶ Existing inclusion frameworks and participation tools	Equality mainstreaming guide and checklist; AI and equality toolkits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Developing tools to address discrimination in digital environments ▶ Reinforcing gender equality and children's rights in emerging policy areas ▶ Supporting anticipatory governance on equality and technology ▶ Developing deliberative democracy mechanisms
	Gender equality and new policy approaches	▶ Existing gender equality frameworks	Studies and toolkits on political participation of and digital violence against women	
	Children's rights and participation	▶ Child participation tools; child-friendly justice frameworks	Policy guidance on children's rights and social media	
	Democratic participation and deliberation	▶ Youth participation mechanisms; local participation initiatives	Youth perspectives integration frameworks and action plans	
	AI, equality and democratic integrity	▶ Existing work on AI and non-discrimination	Tools for ethical and rights-based narratives; AI governance tools	



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Council of Europe - Consiglio de Europa

CHAPTER 4

SAFEGUARDING ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Introduction

Free and fair elections are the beating heart of democracy.

Elections, however, are under threat across Europe. Digital interference, blurred campaign finance, restrictions on free press, attacks on civil society and the exclusion of young people and minorities undermine the very foundations of electoral and democratic security.

The Council of Europe offers means to counter threats and protect electoral processes.

In today's world, rapid technological advances enable large-scale manipulation of public opinion, distort truth and falsify information. We have seen this in recent elections across Europe, with potentially grave consequences for democracy. As the Council of Europe takes steps towards a new legal instrument to address foreign information manipulation and interference, ongoing programmes anchored in the European Convention on Human Rights continue to protect democratic choice.

The Council of Europe is exploring the development of a platform to monitor violence and hate speech directed against politicians, with a view to strengthening responses to such threats. By analysing incidents, reporting trends and raising awareness, such a tool could support authorities in addressing risks to political participation.

A crucial arm of the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission provides rapid legal opinions, codifies best practice, guides national reforms and assists courts across the continent, including on emerging issues such as digital electoral manipulation and AI-driven campaigning.

The Council of Europe, through the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, monitors national and local elections and develops best practice. Focusing on transparency and access, the Organisation ensures alignment with international standards of integrity. The Parliamentary Assembly's electoral co-operation projects support electoral management bodies with practical training, advice and peer exchanges. It also supports impartial electoral observers, enhancing their status and addressing emerging challenges.

Across Europe, recent studies have shown a surge in dissatisfaction with democracy, particularly among young people. We must work to gain trust and encourage civic engagement. Citizens should feel that they can play a part, express their will and influence public policies.

The Council of Europe places particular focus on "deliberative democracy", a form of engagement that allows citizens to participate beyond the polls. It is not intended to compete with representative democracy, but to involve ordinary people in democratic processes, thereby restoring confidence.

The Council of Europe encourages young people to engage with elections, including supporting pilot reductions in voting age. The Youth for Democracy programme provides civic education and support for youth-led advocacy and mobilisation. The European Youth Foundation funds projects promoting democratic literacy and participation. Collaboration with youth civil society strengthens the practice of democracy among young people.

Opaque political financing, whether on the donor or spender side, erodes trust, distorts democratic processes and breeds corruption.

The Council of Europe is committed to combating corruption, monitoring campaign financing and emerging risks that include abuse of financial technologies and illicit financial flows, fraud, crypto assets and social media manipulation. Instruments including the Convention on Cybercrime and the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer (CETS No. 226) are crucial to protecting electoral processes.

Genuine electoral competition requires the free and frank exchange of ideas, including through traditional and emerging media.

The Council of Europe promotes and protects freedom of expression and freedom of association through various campaigns and guidelines. Monitoring attacks on journalists creates the safety that is fundamental to the accurate distribution of information, enabling our citizens to be fully informed and involved in the electoral process.

Pillar 1 – Learning and practising democracy

Elections and their integrity cannot be reduced to rules and procedures. It ultimately rests on the capacity of citizens to engage critically, participate meaningfully and trust the democratic process. Where these conditions weaken, even well-designed electoral frameworks become vulnerable. This pillar focuses on strengthening democratic literacy, participation and resilience to disengagement.

Strengthening electoral literacy and democratic competence

Sustaining electoral integrity requires citizens who understand and can engage with electoral processes. Strengthening electoral literacy and democratic competence is therefore essential to ensuring meaningful participation and resilience to manipulation, exclusion and disengagement.

The Council of Europe supports this objective through targeted work on civic and democratic education. The development of education on local democracy for young learners, through co-operation between the Congress and the Education Department, is a proposal that aims to build understanding from an early age by explaining simply how local authorities are elected, how decisions are made and how public institutions shape daily life. Such initiatives are designed to contribute to countering disengagement and the spread of populist narratives.

This is reinforced by tools such as the Reflection and Planning Survey Tool for lower secondary education, designed for policy makers and education authorities to review how plurilingual and intercultural education is implemented in practice.¹¹³

Re-engaging young people in democratic processes

Sustaining electoral legitimacy requires rebuilding young people's trust through meaningful opportunities for participation and influence.

The Council of Europe is advancing this objective through targeted Youth Sector initiatives. The workstream on revitalising pluralistic democracy supports democratic youth structures, co-management and co-decision-making mechanisms, youth-led advocacy and broader participation initiatives. These efforts respond to declining trust linked to populism, shrinking civic space and crises, such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

This is complemented by the workstream on the integration of youth perspectives,¹¹⁴ which aims to ensure that institutional responses to democratic backsliding and electoral disengagement are informed by the experiences and expectations of young people. Together, these initiatives position youth participation as a core component of democratic renewal.

The Council of Europe's work on voting at 16,¹¹⁵ follow-up to the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life¹¹⁶ and the Youth for Democracy programme¹¹⁷ addressing polarisation and peaceful coexistence, strengthen opportunities for active engagement of young people.

These efforts aim to equip younger generations to participate in an informed and critical manner, strengthening resilience to manipulation and contributing to more credible electoral processes.

113. Council of Europe, "Council of Europe launches new survey tool and policy toolbox to strengthen plurilingual and intercultural education, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/council-of-europe-launches-new-survey-tool-and-policy-toolbox-to-strengthen-plurilingual-and-intercultural-education>.

114. 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth – Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective, <https://rm.coe.int/resolution-on-the-coe-reference-framework-on-a-youth-perspective-w-app/488028cf72>.

115. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, "Voting at 16, Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level", <https://rm.coe.int/en-vote-at-16-a6-web-collection-elections-democratiques/1680a8781c>.

116. See <https://rm.coe.int/cg-2025-49-14fnprov-en-european-charter-on-the-participation-of-young/488028e792>.

117. Council of Europe Youth Department, Youth for Democracy programme, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programme>.

Pillar 2 – Protecting democracy

Electoral integrity depends on strong, credible and adaptable frameworks. This pillar focuses on reinforcing safeguards, addressing vulnerabilities and ensuring elections take place in a trusted environment, supported by Council of Europe standards, monitoring and co-operation to address risks, such as integrity of political finance, foreign interference and digital technologies, while protecting civic space and media freedom.

Securing the framework for electoral integrity

The legal and institutional framework is the foundation of electoral integrity, providing the standards and safeguards needed to address both structural and emerging risks. The work of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, through its "Code of good practice in electoral matters",¹¹⁸ serves as a key normative reference. The Venice Commission's opinions and reports help member states address complex and politically sensitive challenges, such as the recent work on the cancellation of election results¹¹⁹ and legislative responses to electoral corruption.¹²⁰

This is reinforced by the supervision of the execution of judgments of the Court, ensuring effective protection of voting rights, and by the work of the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) on the right to vote and to stand for election.¹²¹

Protecting elections from corruption, interference and digital threats

Electoral integrity increasingly depends on the ability of institutions to prevent, detect and respond to corruption, abuse of financial technologies and illicit financial flows, foreign interference and digitally mediated manipulation. Strengthening resilience to these risks is essential to preserving fair competition and public trust in electoral processes.

Safeguarding electoral integrity requires stronger transparency and accountability in political finance. Through its anti-corruption and anti-money laundering monitoring bodies – GRECO and the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) – the Council of Europe addresses emerging vulnerabilities, including risks related to integrity and corruption at the sub-national level, as well as the use of digital tools, cross-border financial flows and new forms of opacity that may distort electoral competition and the infiltration of criminal proceeds affecting democratic institutions.

These efforts are complemented by targeted co-operation programmes, such as ongoing work in the Republic of Moldova, which supports stronger oversight of political financing, enhanced capacity of electoral authorities and the judiciary, and measures to address risks including disinformation and vote-buying.¹²²

The digital dimension of electoral threats is receiving increasing attention. The Committee of Experts on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference of the Council of Europe, working under the mandate of the European Committee on Crime Problems of the Council of Europe, completed its feasibility study on foreign information manipulation and interference,¹²³ while the Council of Europe's cybercrime sector contributes through capacity building on election interference¹²⁴ and work on the implications of cybercrime and virtual assets for democratic and electoral systems.

The Congress, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Venice Commission plan to hold a joint debate with member states in the Spanish Parliament in the second half of 2026 to identify gaps in legislation and practice in preventing foreign interference in elections and to explore possible solutions.

118. Council of Europe Venice Commission, "Code of good practice in electoral matters", <https://edoc.coe.int/en/elections/12110-code-of-good-practice-in-electoral-matters.html>.

119. Council of Europe Venice Commission, "Urgent report on the cancellation of election results by Constitutional Courts", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/opinion-1218>.

120. Council of Europe Venice Commission, "Republic of Moldova – Opinion on Law No. 100/2025 containing a set of legislative amendments aiming to combat electoral corruption", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/opinion-1253>.

121. Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, "Terms of reference of the Steering Committee for Human Rights", <https://rm.coe.int/terms-of-reference-of-the-steering-committee-for-human-rights-cddh-488029e9d5>.

122. Council of Europe, "Improving electoral practice in the Republic of Moldova (IEPRM), 2025-2028", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/chisinau/improving-electoral-practice-in-the-republic-of-moldova-ieprm-2025-2028>.

123. See <https://rm.coe.int/2024-2027-tor-pc-fimi-eng-extract-from-cm-2025-131-addfinal-2788-3377-4880297861>.

124. Council of Europe, "CyberEast+: countering election interference: cyber exercise and crisis communication in practice for Ukrainian election and cybersecurity professionals", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/-/countering-election-interference-cyber-exercise-and-crisis-communication-in-practice-for-ukrainian-election-and-cybersecurity-professionals>.

Strengthening election observation and democratic accountability

Effective electoral integrity depends not only on rules but also on robust oversight and accountability mechanisms that ensure standards are applied in practice. The Council of Europe brings a distinctive, multilevel approach by combining parliamentary, local and legal scrutiny.

Through the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Venice Commission, the Organisation brings coherence to standard setting, election observation, monitoring and co-operation.

The Parliamentary Assembly's work on elections in times of crisis, including its proposal¹²⁵ to reinforce the Council of Europe Electoral Cycle,¹²⁶ reflects a more integrated approach and opens the way for consideration of a new legal instrument on elections. This is complemented by the Congress's role in observing subnational elections, assessing the practical conditions of electoral administration and providing follow-up recommendations. Election observation by the Congress has grown in recent years, and member states are encouraged to continue extending invitations for such missions. It has also invited the Committee of Ministers to consider how the protection of the right to free elections might be extended to the subnational level.

A joint debate on trusted and inclusive electoral processes co-organised by the Congress, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Venice Commission in April 2026 identified the main challenges and potential solutions relating to the protection of election observers and thereby protect the integrity of the electoral process.

The Council of Europe is also addressing threats that indirectly undermine electoral integrity, notably violence and hate speech against politicians. These pressures can deter participation, limit political pluralism and weaken electoral competition. Reflection is under way to develop mechanisms to track these risks, thus strengthening the integrity of electoral processes.

Ensuring inclusive participation and equal access to electoral processes

Electoral integrity requires that all individuals can participate on equal terms, without structural or practical barriers. Ensuring inclusive access to electoral processes is therefore essential to the legitimacy and representativeness of democratic governance. The Council of Europe advances this objective through treaty-based monitoring frameworks, which assess the participation of those affiliating with national minorities in electoral processes and political life, reinforcing equality, representation and inclusion.

Ensuring gender parity

The Reykjavik Declaration reaffirmed the commitment to the full, equal and effective participation of women in public and private decision-making processes. Work of the Gender Equality Commission in this area notably aims to highlight promising practices on equal participation of women and men in decision making and to better protect women politicians against technology-facilitated violence.¹²⁷

This approach is complemented by the preparation of guidelines on enhancing participation in elections of women, girls, young persons and people at risk of discrimination,¹²⁸ which aim to support member states in identifying and removing barriers to participation, thereby strengthening the inclusiveness and credibility of electoral processes.

Protecting the wider democratic environment around elections

Free and fair elections depend on an enabling democratic environment, including respect for fundamental rights, a vibrant civic space and independent media. Safeguarding these conditions is essential to maintaining electoral integrity and public trust.

125. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2636 (2026) "Elections in times of crisis", <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/35846/html>.

126. The Council of Europe Electoral Cycle, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/elections/electoral-cycle>.

127. Forthcoming study on equal participation of women and men in political and public decision making and Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)2 on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls, <https://go.coe.int/vLbyl>.

128. Council of Europe, "Experts gather to discuss democratic standards, AI governance and inclusive participation in Europe", https://www.coe.int/en/web/steering-committee-on-democracy/news/-/asset_publisher/8XAJHa67q5Sc/content/experts-gather-to-discuss-democratic-standards-ai-governance-and-inclusive-participation-in-europe.

The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe brings a systemic perspective on democratic resilience and electoral integrity, including the impact of disinformation, AI-generated content and foreign interference. His work on civic space, the legal status of civil society organisations and media freedom reinforces the role of civil society actors, journalists and election observers as essential pillars of electoral scrutiny and accountability.

Pillar 3 – Innovating for democracy

Addressing evolving challenges to electoral integrity requires more adaptive and forward-looking approaches to democratic engagement. Alongside representative democracy, participatory, deliberative and technology-enabled tools can help strengthen trust and re-engage citizens, provided they are credible and have a meaningful impact.

This pillar focuses on developing such approaches, including new participatory mechanisms, responses to digital and AI-driven risks, and innovations in institutional practice that enhance transparency, accountability and public trust.

Advancing new tools for democratic participation and oversight

Renewing democratic participation requires complementing representative institutions with more participatory, deliberative and data-informed approaches. This strand focuses on developing tools that strengthen the credibility, inclusiveness and impact of democratic engagement, thereby contributing to electoral trust and institutional responsiveness.

The Congress, with input from the Steering Committee on Democracy of the Council of Europe, is reflecting on a deliberative democracy check and vetting mechanism to assess the quality and integrity of deliberative processes, distinguishing meaningful participation from approaches that are tokenistic or only loosely linked to decision making. Ensuring their credibility is essential to rebuilding trust in democratic institutions.

The 2025 edition of the Council of Europe Hackathon brought together young innovators from across Europe to develop practical solutions to counter disinformation and strengthen democratic resilience. The winners, the Fact-Checking Foxes (Italy), developed an educational platform that uses real-life news and social media claims to teach users how to spot disinformation. Through a gamified experience, users step into the role of a fact-checker, receive guided hints and obtain immediate, evidence-based feedback, including legal and media literacy insights.

Responding to AI-enabled and other digital electoral risks

Digital technologies and generative AI are reshaping electoral processes, creating both new risks and opportunities for democratic participation. Responding effectively requires moving beyond defensive regulation towards approaches that harness innovation in support of transparency, accountability and public trust.

The Council of Europe is advancing this agenda through the development of an instrument on public interest innovation in generative AI, aimed at promoting rights-based uses of AI in democratic processes, including elections and civic participation. By focusing on how technology can strengthen democratic engagement, this work reflects a more proactive approach to electoral integrity.

The World Forum for Democracy provides a platform to explore the implications of AI for democratic governance, while ongoing work by the Congress on a risk-alert dashboard on local and regional democracy¹²⁹ seeks to integrate digital and AI-related indicators into early warning systems. This is particularly relevant at the subnational level, where emerging risks may first materialise and where institutional resilience and public trust can be more fragile.

Extending innovation into justice, public administration and rights implementation

Adapting democratic institutions to technological change is essential to maintaining trust in electoral processes and democratic governance. This strand focuses on strengthening the capacity of justice systems and public administrations to respond to digital transformation in ways that support transparency, accountability and participation.

¹²⁹. See <https://rm.coe.int/terms-of-reference-for-a-committee-activities-mon/48802a9a4b>.

The Council of Europe supports this through initiatives that modernise public services and strengthen digital literacy, which contribute to more transparent and responsive institutions, critical to public confidence in electoral processes.

Innovation is advancing in the implementation of human rights standards. A digital initiative to support supervision of the execution of Court judgments is being developed to enhance transparency and effectiveness, reinforcing trust in the legal framework underpinning electoral rights. This is complemented by expanded digital rights literacy, such as the HELP-based resources on artificial intelligence and human rights,¹³⁰ children's rights in the digital environment, access to justice in the digital environment and data protection and privacy. These tools help ensure that citizens and institutions are better equipped to navigate digital risks that increasingly affect electoral participation and democratic engagement.

130. "Council of Europe HELP course on artificial intelligence and human rights launched for judges and prosecutors", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/-/council-of-europe-help-course-on-artificial-intelligence-and-human-rights-launched-for-judges-and-prosecutors>.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION AND EMERGING DIRECTIONS UNDER THE PACT

	Thematic area	Current action	Planned developments	EMERGING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE PACT CONSULTATIONS
PILLAR 1: LEARNING AND PRACTISING DEMOCRACY	Civic and electoral education	▶ Youth for Democracy programme; civic education tools; youth-led democratic initiatives	Education on local democracy for young learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthen civic and electoral literacy across all age groups ▶ Programmes addressing structural barriers to political participation ▶ Counter polarisation and disinformation affecting democratic engagement
	Youth participation and democratic engagement	▶ Youth co-management structures; youth participation instruments; youth-led advocacy and mobilisation	Further development of youth participation frameworks; initiatives on voting at 16	
	Inclusive participation and representation	▶ Roma and Traveller participation initiatives; Intercultural Cities Index; local inclusion methodologies	Equality mainstreaming tools; participation handbooks for under-represented groups	
	Countering polarisation and disinformation	▶ Local-level methodologies to address disinformation and strengthen inclusion	Expanded tools to counter polarisation in democratic engagement	
PILLAR 2: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY	Electoral standards and legal frameworks	▶ Venice Commission code of good practice; legal opinions; execution of Court judgments on voting rights	CDDH study on the right to vote and to stand for election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthen safeguards for electoral integrity across the full electoral cycle ▶ Enhance transparency and oversight of political finance, including digital dimensions ▶ Protect media, civil society and political actors from pressure and intimidation ▶ Ensure effective protection of voting rights ▶ Legal instrument on elections ▶ Platform to protect politicians from violence and hate speech, early warning mechanisms
	Electoral integrity and political finance	▶ Monitoring of political finance (GRECO); oversight and capacity building to address emerging risks (digital finance, cross-border flows)	Strengthened tools on political finance transparency	
	Digital threats and foreign interference	▶ Foreign information manipulation and interference work; cybercrime capacity building; preparedness against election interference	Expanded responses to digital interference and AI-driven campaigning	
	Electoral observation and institutional co-operation	▶ Parliamentary Assembly observation missions and election support projects; Congress observation missions; electoral cycle co-operation	Joint hearings and co-operation mechanisms	
	Civic space and protection of political actors	▶ Civil society support; monitoring frameworks; Commissioner's engagement		
PILLAR 3: INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY	Deliberative and participatory democracy	▶ Existing participation mechanisms; youth participation frameworks	Expanded participatory tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Develop credible and meaningful participatory and deliberative mechanisms ▶ Strengthen democratic resilience in the digital environment ▶ Promote innovative tools for transparency, accountability and engagement ▶ Protect democratic participation from emerging risks, including online harms ▶ Mechanisms to track threats; protection platforms for politicians
	AI and electoral processes	▶ Ongoing work on AI and democratic processes	Instrument on generative AI in electoral environments	
	Protection of political actors and participation	▶ Existing monitoring and awareness efforts		
	Democratic innovation and co-operation platforms	▶ World Forum for Democracy; cross-institutional co-operation	Expanded multistakeholder platforms and pilot initiatives; risk-alert dashboard on local and regional democracy	



CHAPTER 5

INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION, CIVIC SPACE AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Introduction

Respectful dissent, peaceful protest and sincere dialogue are the foundations on which to build an engaged and thriving society.

At the 2023 Reykjavik Summit, the leaders of Europe spoke as one, saying that “civil society is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy”. Civil society is one of our strongest lines of defence against democratic backsliding.

But civil society’s ability to play its crucial part in society is under growing threat. In recent years, civil society groups, journalists and activists – and especially women’s, youth and LGBTI organisations – find themselves targeted by restrictive laws, funding restrictions and outright hostility, leading to shrinking civic space across the continent.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation, or “SLAPPs”, are designed to silence journalists and others who speak out. Online campaigns, magnified by artificial intelligence and often driven by foreign actors, undermine politicians and the electoral process itself. Clamphdowns on protest are made in the name of security.

A clear ruling from the European Court of Human Rights has not stopped some countries from moving ahead with so-called “foreign agent” laws. These target organisations merely for receiving support from abroad.

Women’s rights groups, migrant defenders and those working with minorities are hardest hit.

Our fundamental freedoms – of the press, of association and of assembly – are being tightened and diminished.

The Road Map on the Council of Europe’s Engagement with Civil Society (2024-2027) ensures that civil society is part of everything the Organisation does, from standard setting to monitoring to co-operation. Civil society contributes its expertise to the work of independent bodies monitoring the implementation of measures to combat human trafficking, racism and intolerance, and supports the execution of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

The Council of Europe is developing and promoting legal instruments to prevent and respond to repression of civil society, including that targeting youth activists and those forced into exile. It focuses on protecting civic space and establishing clear and transparent rules and guidance to ensure the legitimacy of civil society. It is working to address barriers faced by civil society organisations and especially those working with youth, women, LGBTI, minority and migrant groups. Ensuring that young people with disabilities can exercise their democratic rights requires particular attention.

Education and support for young people are vital. The European Space for Citizenship Education will strengthen momentum and improve the quality of education for democratic citizenship across Europe. The Youth for Democracy programme and the European Youth Foundation support youth-led civil society, provide training on association and advocacy rights, and research the challenges of shrinking civic space.

Annual Council of Europe events, including the World Forum for Democracy and the Conference of INGOs, unite governments, civil society, youth and media to drive democratic innovation and resilience.

The Council of Europe is examining new legislation to strengthen protection for civil society organisations and human rights defenders forced into exile, so they can continue to operate and build accountability. And the Council is developing more instruments to harness the benefits of generative artificial intelligence in public debate and democratic processes, while defending democracy against AI-facilitated manipulation and autocratic control.

Vibrant civic space is key to democratic checks and balances. It is imperative to continue to support the civic life and genuine opportunities for participation that are fundamental to healthy democracies.

Pillar 1 – Learning and practising democracy

A healthy democracy depends on an enabling environment in which individuals and organisations can exercise their rights to expression, association and peaceful assembly. Civic space is therefore a core component of democratic resilience, yet it is under increasing pressure across Europe, with civil society, journalists and activists facing restrictive measures, funding constraints and intimidation, including online. In response, the Council of Europe is pooling together legal standards, monitoring, policy guidance and support for participation while strengthening protection against emerging threats and recognising the need for resilient civic actors and inclusive participation structures.

Building democratic capacities for participation

Fundamental freedoms are meaningful only if people have the knowledge, confidence and institutional pathways to exercise them.

Education is central to this effort. The development of a coherent and strong European framework for education for democratic citizenship, including the forthcoming European Space for Citizenship Education,¹³¹ aims to integrate democratic competences, human rights education, intercultural dialogue and critical media literacy across education systems. A forthcoming recommendation on developing a culture of democracy in vocational education and training¹³² is expected to address long-standing participation gaps affecting learners in vocational tracks. Complementary work extends this approach to early childhood education, ensuring that democratic learning begins early and reaches all groups.

Additional initiatives reinforce this shift by strengthening the role of learners as active participants in democratic life. The future Student Rights Charter¹³³ will work to recognise students as rights-holders within higher education systems, while instruments such as the *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture*¹³⁴ support the translation of democratic principles into educational practice. Targeted measures, including the promotion of Romani language and identity in education, contribute to reducing structural barriers to participation. This is complemented by approaches aimed at strengthening inclusive governance and participation, including peer-learning frameworks and initiatives to enhance the political participation of groups exposed to discrimination.

These initiatives reflect the principle that inclusive participation begins with early and sustained exposure to democratic values, pluralism and rights-based interaction, including for groups that may otherwise remain at the margins of civic and political life.

Strengthening youth participation as a driver of democratic renewal

Youth participation is a catalyst for democratic renewal. Across Europe, young people face barriers to participation, often compounded by shrinking civic space and declining trust in institutions.

The Council of Europe is strengthening youth engagement through a combination of support to youth-led organisations, participatory mechanisms and policy frameworks. Workstreams on safeguarding civic space and supporting youth civil society, as well as on young people's access to rights, aim to ensure that young people have not only formal rights but also the knowledge, resources and institutional support needed to exercise them. Related actions through the Youth for Democracy programme, the European Youth Foundation and the European Union–Council of Europe Partnership in the field of youth, alongside community-building initiatives, contribute to a more resilient and connected youth civic sector.

This is reinforced by the implementation of the Committee of Ministers recommendation on the participation of young people in local and regional life,¹³⁵ which calls on member states to ensure that young people have the means, space and support to participate effectively in democratic processes. It reflects a broader

131. Council of Europe, European Space for Citizenship Education, www.coe.int/en/web/education/european-space-for-citizenship-education1.

132. Council of Europe, "Second meeting on the development of the new Committee of Ministers Recommendation on a culture of democracy in vocational education and training", <https://go.coe.int/JQNOa>.

133. Council of Europe, "Development of a Council of Europe Student Rights Charter gains momentum", www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/development-of-a-council-of-europe-student-rights-charter-gains-momentum.

134. Council of Europe, *Toolkit for a democratic and inclusive school culture*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/toolkit-for-an-inclusive-and-democratic-school-culture>.

135. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)3 on the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09125948802ae9e6>.

shift towards systematically integrating the youth perspective into the design of democratic processes and institutions, recognising young people as active contributors to democratic life.¹³⁶

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has established a youth participation mechanism to ensure that a youth perspective is systematically integrated into its work. The mechanism integrates youth rapporteurs in the committees, strengthens structured exchanges with the Advisory Council on Youth and creates regular opportunities for young people to contribute to parliamentary deliberations. By embedding youth input in its processes, the Assembly aims to enhance the representativeness and long-term responsiveness of democratic decision making.¹³⁷

Advancing inclusive participation and democratic belonging

Ensuring that participation is inclusive requires addressing structural inequalities that limit access to civic and public life. Efforts under this pillar therefore focus on strengthening democratic belonging and reducing barriers affecting groups exposed to discrimination.

Targeted initiatives facilitate the participation of Roma and Traveller communities through leadership development, democratic governance training and improved access to inclusive education, recognising that exclusion from education often translates into exclusion from civic participation. Initiatives such as the Roma Political Schools contribute to building the institutional knowledge, confidence and leadership capacity necessary for effective engagement in public life.

The Council of Europe's work in the cultural field complements this approach by promoting participation in shared democratic spaces. Broader engagement initiatives, including European Heritage Days, further support inclusive participation by creating accessible opportunities for public involvement in cultural life.

The children's rights sector of the Council of Europe contributes by advancing participation from an early age. Child-friendly justice tools,¹³⁸ including guidelines and self-assessment instruments, support access to justice as a practical civic right. Participatory approaches, such as survivor engagement, provide models for inclusive policy making based on lived experience,¹³⁹ while forthcoming guidance on children's rights in social media environments will address how technological developments affect children's participation rights.

The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe has underscored the need to focus regulatory efforts on ensuring that digital platforms respect children's rights by design and by default, including through transparency, accountability and effective oversight, rather than on placing the burden of protection solely on children.¹⁴⁰

Extending participation across sectors of democratic governance

Democratic participation is increasingly extending beyond traditional political arenas into areas such as environmental governance, health policy and economic decision making. The Council of Europe supports this evolution by promoting participatory approaches across policy sectors.

These approaches reflect the growing recognition that participation is a cross-cutting principle of democratic governance, rather than a sector-specific activity.

For example, mechanisms such as the Bern Convention case-file system provide avenues for civil society and communities to engage in environmental governance and accountability. Related work on misinformation, disinformation and access to information on environmental matters highlights the growing importance of ensuring that participation in environmental decision making is supported by reliable and timely information.

Participation is also being strengthened in other policy areas. Human rights-based policies are helping to create an enabling environment for civil society and people with lived and living experience to shape drug and addiction responses. Council of Europe platforms, such as the Forum on Business and Human Rights¹⁴¹

136. Council of Europe, "Youth democratic participation – especially at local level – essential in times of stability and crisis alike", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/youth-democratic-participation-especially-at-local-level-essential-in-times-of-stability-and-crisis-alike>.

137. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2553 (2024) "Strengthening the youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly", <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33634/html>.

138. Council of Europe, Child-friendly justice, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/child-friendly-justice>.

139. Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-for-policy-makers-on-engaging-with-victims-and-survivors-of/1680af81c9>.

140. Council of Europe, "Commissioner for Human Rights urges caution over social-media bans", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/regulate-online-platforms-not-children>.

141. Council of Europe, "First Council of Europe Business and Human Rights Forum", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/first-council-of-europe-business-and-human-rights-forum-3>.

and the Human Rights and Business Platform,¹⁴² enable communities, trade unions and other stakeholders to engage with economic governance and corporate accountability. Discussions at the Human Rights and Business Academic Forum,¹⁴³ as well as through the Open Council of Europe Academic Network,¹⁴⁴ facilitate conversations on how human rights standards can be more effectively integrated into business operations.

These developments point towards a more integrated model of democratic governance, in which participation is mainstreamed across sectors and supported by concrete institutional pathways.

Pillar 2 – Protecting democracy

Protecting democratic societies increasingly depends on safeguarding the legal, institutional and information conditions that make civic participation possible. Across Europe, civic space is under pressure from restrictive measures, disinformation, online hostility and the growing influence of digital platforms on public debate. In this context, strengthening legal safeguards, monitoring and accountability mechanisms is essential to sustaining democratic resilience and public trust.

Protecting public debate and digital civic space

Civic space depends on the health of public debate and on the ability of journalists, civil society organisations and individuals to communicate freely and safely. This is increasingly shaped by digital platforms, algorithmic systems and evolving forms of information manipulation, which are transforming how information circulates and how citizens engage in public life.

The Council of Europe is adapting its response to this changing environment through a combination of normative, policy and analytical instruments. Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2 on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) addresses abusive litigation aimed at silencing journalists, NGOs and activists. Ongoing and forthcoming work on online safety, media pluralism and the role of regulators in platform-based environments aims to ensure that digital spaces remain conducive to free and pluralistic expression, including by addressing online harassment, algorithmic amplification of harmful content and restrictions on access to information. Analytical work on how social media and other platforms shape opinion and action is contributing to a stronger evidence base for future policy responses.

Monitoring discrimination, hate and structural barriers to participation

A second line of protection lies in accountability mechanisms that document how discrimination, hate and structural inequalities restrict participation in practice.

Monitoring by ECRI highlights how racist and LGBTI-phobic hate speech silence targeted communities and drive them out of public debate. The updating of ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 10 on combating racism and racial discrimination in and through school education will help build younger generations' resistance to structural forms of racism and intolerance.

Treaty-based monitoring under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages safeguards the civic space of people belonging to minority communities by protecting their access to media, cultural life and participation in public affairs, including through the protection of the freedoms of association, assembly and expression. The CDADI adopted a study on good practices regarding the use of new media and other initiatives for the promotion and protection of regional or minority languages.¹⁴⁵ The ongoing thematic implementation review of Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, focusing on hate speech based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, will provide useful guidance for strengthening responses in this area.¹⁴⁶

142. Council of Europe Online Platform for Human Rights and Business, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-intergovernmental-cooperation/online-platform-for-human-rights-and-business>.

143. Council of Europe Human Rights and Business Academic Forum, <https://go.coe.int/9BwEl>.

144. Council of Europe Open Council of Europe Academic Networks Member Database, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/open-academic-networks/member-database>.

145. Council of Europe CDADI, "Study on certain aspects of regional or minority language protection and identification of good practices in member states", <https://search.coe.int/cm/eng?i=09125948802ad239>.

146. Council of Europe ADI-SOGIESC, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/committee-adi-sogiesc>.

Tools and initiatives supporting inclusive governance and equality mainstreaming, including self-assessment frameworks,¹⁴⁷ targeted initiatives to enhance political participation of groups exposed to discrimination and forthcoming guidance on equality mainstreaming, help ensure that barriers to participation are identified and addressed across governance levels.

Practical instruments to counter hate speech and ensure equality in the use of artificial intelligence, such as guidance and capacity building for law enforcement and prosecutors,¹⁴⁸ contribute to protecting inclusive public debate.

Protecting those most exposed to civic space restrictions

Ensuring that civic space remains open and inclusive requires targeted protection for those most exposed to intimidation, exclusion and violence in public life. Without such safeguards, participation risks becoming selective, weakening democratic legitimacy and narrowing public debate. The monitoring of the Istanbul Convention has increasingly revealed restrictions on women's rights organisations and proposes tailored guidance to member states.¹⁴⁹

The Council of Europe is thus strengthening its response to both structural discrimination and emerging forms of harm, particularly in digital environments, where targeted harassment, disinformation and exclusionary narratives can limit participation. This includes the development of the new Strategy for the Equality of Rights of LGBTI People (2027-2032),¹⁵⁰ as well as initiatives aimed at promoting ethical narratives and countering exclusionary discourse in democratic debate. Efforts to address technology-facilitated violence, including against women and girls, and to promote equal participation in political and public life further contribute to ensuring that all individuals can participate safely and on equal terms.

Measures supporting the resilience of youth civil society and participatory structures aim to ensure that vulnerable groups retain the capacity to engage effectively in public life despite increasing pressures on civic space. The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe plays a critical role by raising awareness of civic space restrictions, supporting human rights defenders and reinforcing the normative framework for pluralistic civic space.

Ensuring access to justice, institutional integrity and accountability

Ensuring that civic space can function effectively requires that individuals and organisations are able to rely on accessible, independent and accountable systems of justice. Without effective remedies and institutional integrity, there is a risk that rights remain formal rather than actionable, weakening both participation and public trust.

The Organisation supports this objective by strengthening transparency, access to justice and the role of key accountability actors. The Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (ETS No. 205, Tromsø Convention)¹⁵¹ enhances transparency and enables public scrutiny, while the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer¹⁵² safeguards legal professionals as essential actors of democratic accountability. Other instruments aimed at improving the efficiency of judicial systems and access to justice, particularly for vulnerable groups, contribute to ensuring that rights can be effectively exercised in practice.

The need to secure the personal security of judges against attacks that seek to weaken judicial independence and undermine public trust in the judiciary, as underlined by the Consultative Council of European Judges (CCJE), is also of paramount importance for the integrity of justice systems.¹⁵³

147. Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Intercultural Inclusion, "Self-assessment tool on multilevel governance for intercultural integration", <https://rm.coe.int/self-assessment-tool-on-multilevel-governance-for-intercultural-integr/48802a7d57>.

148. HELP courses on hate speech and hate crime, <https://rm.coe.int/help-course-brief-on-hate-crime-and-hate-speech-2021/1680a57d78>; Training courses on AI and equality, <https://go.coe.int/z3pz4> and the programme on upholding equality in the use of AI, <https://go.coe.int/kqP1i>.

149. Council of Europe GREVIO, "New report indicates 'shrinking space' for women's rights defenders", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/-/new-report-indicates-shrinking-space-for-women-s-rights-defenders>.

150. Council of Europe ADI-SOGIESC, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/committee-adi-sogiesc>.

151. Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/access-to-official-documents>.

152. "Council of Europe adopts international convention on protecting lawyers", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-adopts-international-convention-on-protecting-lawyers>.

153. Council of Europe CCJE Opinion No. 28 (2025) on the importance of judicial well-being for the delivery of justice, <https://rm.coe.int/opinion-no-28-2025-of-the-ccje-published-/4880296bfa>.

Broader integrity frameworks reinforce these efforts by addressing systemic risks to democratic governance. The work of GRECO and MONEYVAL strengthens anti-corruption and financial accountability standards, helping to protect the institutional environment on which civic participation depends. At the same time, the execution of Court judgments is central to ensuring that the rights underpinning civic participation are effectively implemented and not merely guaranteed in law.

Strengthening the protection of civic space: instruments and systemic responses

The Council of Europe is also developing a set of interrelated instruments aimed at strengthening the systemic protection of civic space.

Work towards the forthcoming Committee of Ministers recommendation on the legal status of civil society organisations¹⁵⁴ is expected to provide a comprehensive framework for an enabling civil society environment and to address key issues such as registration, operation, access to funding, participation in public life and protection from undue interference. It responds to the increasing use of restrictive legal and administrative measures affecting civil society across Europe. This is complemented by proposed mechanisms emerging from consultations under the New Democratic Pact for Europe, aimed at addressing evolving and systemic risks to civic space.

An early warning and response framework for civic space would enable the timely identification of threats, such as restrictive legislation, harassment or funding constraints, and it would support co-ordinated responses. In parallel, work to address transnational repression aims to strengthen protection for civil society actors targeted across borders, including those operating in exile or within diaspora communities.

Emerging challenges linked to digital transformation are being addressed through work on artificial intelligence and public-interest innovation, ensuring that technological developments support, rather than undermine, democratic participation and civic space.

Pillar 3 – Innovating for democracy

Democratic resilience requires continuous adaptation of democratic governance to societal, technological and political changes. This pillar focuses on developing new forms of participation, governance tools and institutional mechanisms capable of strengthening trust, widening inclusion and ensuring that civic space remains relevant and effective in evolving contexts.

Designing credible and impactful forms of participation

One priority is to ensure that emerging forms of participation complement representative democracy while maintaining credibility, inclusiveness and real influence on decision making. The Council of Europe is advancing tools and standards to guide this evolution, with a growing focus on ensuring that participatory processes translate into meaningful democratic results.

Innovations in this area are being advanced through the Parliamentary Assembly¹⁵⁵ and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, in co-operation with intergovernmental structures. Work on a deliberative democracy assessment and vetting mechanism seeks to ensure that new forms of public participation meet standards of transparency, representativeness and real influence. It responds to a key risk that poorly designed participatory mechanisms become symbolic exercises, deepening public cynicism rather than strengthening trust.

Protecting democratic actors through new mechanisms

Innovation also involves strengthening the protection of those groups whose participation is essential to democratic life. Proposed mechanisms aim to move from ad hoc responses towards more structured support and visibility for democratic actors.

The proposed platform for the protection of human rights defenders could enhance co-ordination, monitoring and support for individuals and organisations exposed to pressure because of their civic engagement.

154. Council of Europe CDDM, "Meeting in Strasbourg on new recommendation on the legal status of civil society organisations", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/steering-committee-on-democracy/-/meeting-in-strasbourg-on-new-recommendation-on-the-legal-status-of-civil-society-organisations>.

155. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2552 (2024) "Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes", <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33633/html>.

Mechanisms to identify and track threats against elected representatives could address the growing risks faced by those engaged in democratic processes.

These developments reflect a broader shift towards recognising that the resilience of civic space depends on the protection of those who actively sustain democratic life.

Extending participation into new governance domains

Innovation also requires extending participation into domains where democratic governance is being reshaped, notably digital and environmental policy.

Work on artificial intelligence, including the development of instruments on public-interest innovation in generative AI, aims to ensure that technological systems support transparency, accountability and citizen engagement. A future Committee of Ministers recommendation on deepfakes is scheduled for the end of 2027. At the same time, efforts to strengthen participation in environmental governance and access to information help to ensure that individuals and organisations can engage effectively and meaningfully at all levels of governance and at all stages of environmental decision-making processes. As part of the Council of Europe Strategy on Environment,¹⁵⁶ the Council of Europe will host the first European Forum of Environment Human Rights Defenders in Strasbourg on 3 and 4 June 2026.¹⁵⁷

Related legal and policy instruments contribute to this objective by ensuring that participation rights remain effective in these evolving contexts. The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law (CETS No. 228), the Tromsø Convention and the development of tools to improve access to justice to help anchor participation in areas such as environmental governance, access to public information and digital justice.

Support for digital literacy and equitable access to digital public services, including through the work of the Council of Europe Development Bank¹⁵⁸ and other sectoral actors, contributes to ensuring that participation remains inclusive and accessible in increasingly digitalised societies.

Platforms for democratic innovation and global dialogue

The Council of Europe also supports democratic innovation through platforms that enable experimentation, exchange and policy development across sectors and stakeholders.

The World Forum for Democracy¹⁵⁹ serves as a key space for testing innovative approaches to participation and democratic governance, bringing together governments, civil society, youth and international actors, while intergovernmental co-operation and dialogue platforms contribute to developing and scaling new approaches to civic participation.

This “whole-of-society” approach recognises that sustainable democratic innovation cannot be driven by public authorities alone but requires co-operation across institutions, civil society and communities.

These efforts point towards a more adaptive and participatory model of democratic governance. By developing credible participation mechanisms, protecting democratic actors and extending participation into new domains, the Council of Europe is contributing to the renewal of civic space as a living component of democratic systems.

156. See <https://rm.coe.int/council-of-europe-strategy-on-the-environment-2025/1680b5d582>.

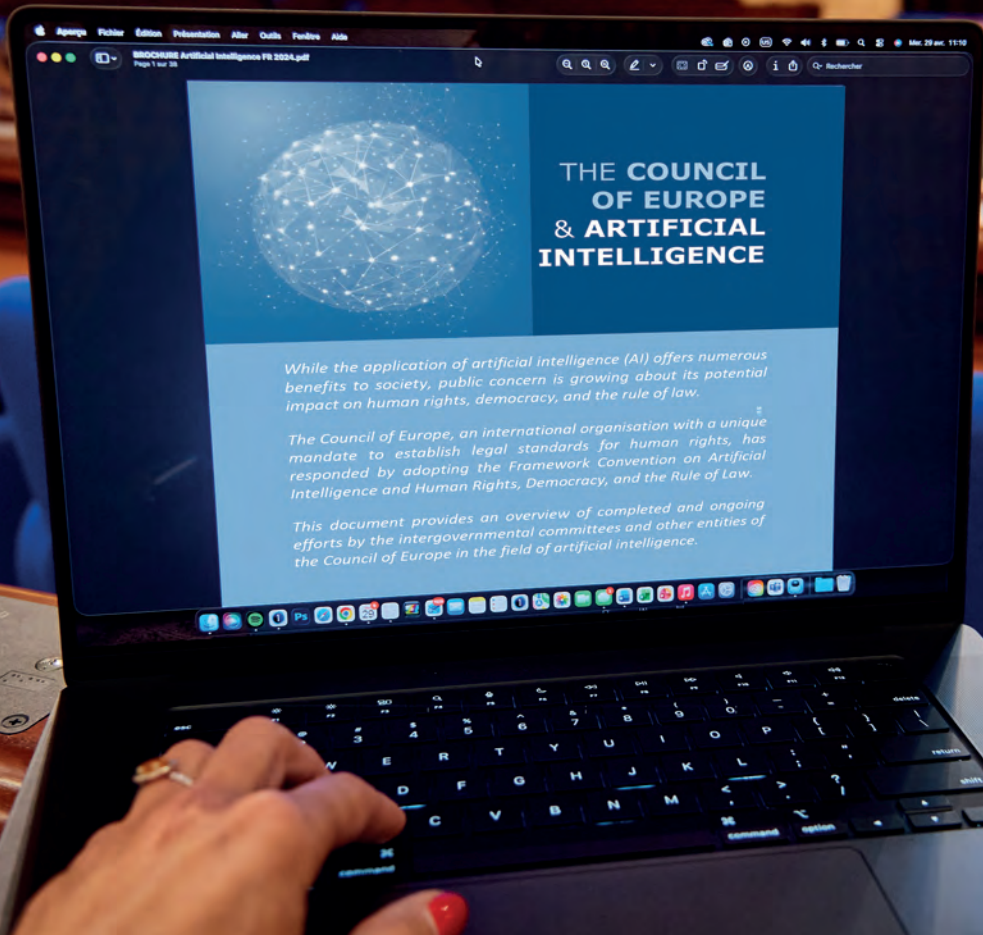
157. Council of Europe, “1st European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reykjavik-process-and-the-environment/-/1st-european-forum-on-environmental-human-rights-defenders-ehrd->.

158. Council of Europe Development Bank, <https://coebank.org/en/partnering-with-donors/projects-and-beneficiaries/sustainable-it-labs-in-albania/>.

159. Council of Europe, The World Forum for Democracy, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy>.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION AND EMERGING DIRECTIONS UNDER THE PACT

	Thematic area	Current action	Planned developments		
PILLAR 1: LEARNING AND PRACTISING DEMOCRACY	Education for democratic citizenship	▶ Education for democratic citizenship initiatives; Faro Convention; European Heritage Days; child-friendly justice guidelines and self-assessment tool	European Space for Citizenship Education; Recommendation on a culture of democracy in vocational education and training; education for democratic citizenship in early childhood education and care; child-friendly justice handbook; policy guidance on children's rights and social media	EMERGING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE PACT CONSULTATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthening the role of education in learning and practising democracy in schools and beyond ▶ Promoting the participation of under-represented and marginalised groups ▶ Reinforcing civil society capacity and resilience ▶ Expanding participatory approaches across policy sectors ▶ Supporting youth participation as a driver of democratic renewal 	
	Participation of under-represented groups	▶ Roma Political Schools; initiatives to boost political participation of people exposed to discrimination; self-assessment tool on multilevel governance for intercultural integration	Peer-learning and benchmarking tool on inclusion; equality mainstreaming tools		
	Civil society and youth participation	▶ Youth for Democracy programme; European Youth Foundation; workstream on safeguarding civic space and supporting youth civil society	Expanded youth participation frameworks and capacity-building tools		
	Participation across sectors	▶ Bern Convention case-file system; the inaugural Business and Human Rights Forum; Human Rights and Business Academic Forum	Review of disinformation, misinformation and access to information on environment-related matters; expanded participatory approaches in cross-sectoral governance		
PILLAR 2: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY	Legal protection of civic space and fundamental freedoms	▶ Tromsø Convention; Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer; CEPEJ access to justice tool; anti-SLAPP standard	Recommendation on the legal status of civil society organisations; draft recommendation on academic freedom; digital innovation and knowledge-sharing on the execution of Court judgments		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Feasibility study on a binding international instrument on hate speech and hate crime ▶ Tool to strengthen protection of civil society against transnational repression ▶ Strengthening legal protection of civic space and fundamental freedoms ▶ Safeguarding the integrity of public debate ▶ Protecting civil society, human rights defenders and vulnerable groups ▶ Reinforcing accountability, transparency and access to justice
	Media freedom, public debate and digital civic space	▶ media pluralism work; national media and information literacy strategies; policy advice and training on countering SLAPPs	Draft recommendation on online safety and empowerment of users and content creators; study on social media and opinion; draft recommendation on safeguarding media pluralism in the online environment; guidelines on media regulators		
	Monitoring and protection of vulnerable groups	▶ ECRI country monitoring; monitoring under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; Commissioner's work on human rights defenders and open civic space; youth workstream on safeguarding civic space; GRECO and MONEYVAL monitoring; Bern Convention case-file system	Guide and checklist for equality mainstreaming; manuals on hate crime and criminalised hate speech; Strategy for the Equality of Rights for LGBTI People; toolkit on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls; study on equal participation of women and men in political and public life		
	Civic space resilience and early warning	▶ Existing monitoring mechanisms; civil society engagement frameworks; World Forum for Democracy preparation	Early warning and response framework for civic space		
	Institutional integrity and accountability	▶ ETINED; Open School Data; Centre for Preventing and Countering Education Fraud; GRECO and MONEYVAL monitoring and related capacity building; execution of Court judgments; CCJE opinions	Strengthened co-operation and knowledge-sharing mechanisms		
PILLAR 3: INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY	Participatory and deliberative democracy	▶ Existing youth participation frameworks; European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life; local participation mechanisms; workstream on revitalising pluralistic democracy	Expanded participatory tools and frameworks		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Promoting innovative and credible participatory mechanisms ▶ Developing early warning and response mechanisms to address civic space restrictions ▶ Protecting civic space in digital and emerging governance domains ▶ Anticipating and addressing new risks to civic participation ▶ Democracy check and vetting mechanism ▶ Platform to protect human rights defenders; mechanism to identify and track threats against politicians
	Civic space and human rights defenders	▶ Existing monitoring and protection mechanisms; World Forum for Democracy as a platform for civic participation innovation	First Forum of Environmental Human Rights Defenders		
	AI, digital and civic participation	▶ Existing AI and governance tools; tools for upholding equality in the use of AI	Instrument to advance public-interest innovation in generative AI; future recommendation on deepfakes		
	Democratic innovation platforms and multistakeholder co-operation	▶ World Forum for Democracy; cross-sectoral dialogue platforms; co-management and youth co-decision-making structures	Expanded multistakeholder mechanisms and pilot initiatives		
	Inclusion and multilevel governance	▶ Self-assessment tool on multilevel governance for intercultural integration	Peer-learning and benchmarking tool on inclusion		



THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE & ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

While the application of artificial intelligence (AI) offers numerous benefits to society, public concern is growing about its potential impact on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The Council of Europe, an international organisation with a unique mandate to establish legal standards for human rights, has responded by adopting the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law.

This document provides an overview of completed and ongoing efforts by the intergovernmental committees and other entities of the Council of Europe in the field of artificial intelligence.

CHAPTER 6

USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND COUNTERING CYBER-ENABLED THREATS

Introduction

Digital technology has shaped our lives for years, and today artificial intelligence creates efficiencies at a scale about which we previously only dreamed. It has enabled scientific research to move forward in leaps and bounds. Precision medicine and the development of new drugs are saving countless lives.

But artificial intelligence also brings with it clear danger. AI can be used to create fake images – including pornographic images – of ordinary people, or politicians. Literacy scores are plummeting as children use artificial intelligence to do their homework and degree candidates use it to write essays. Increasing numbers of people use AI think for them, and young brains are wired to respond to tweets and likes: the highs of instant gratification over the rewards of research and informed discussion.

Digital platforms, smart networks and advanced surveillance tools can have a positive effect on participation, collaboration, administration and learning, but at the same time, they enable cybercrime, drive polarisation and exclusion, and create new and profound threats to fundamental rights and democratic processes.

The speed of change is phenomenal and presents a real danger to democratic security. And artificial intelligence can adjust its algorithms to keep us hooked.

The scale of AI's transformation of society requires constant review, adaptation and innovation. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law is the world's first international treaty for ethical and transparent AI use. It followed from the Convention on Cybercrime, now 25 years old. The Framework Convention is not about censorship, but responsibility, with human rights and transparency built into technology.

The Council of Europe has also developed practical tools such as the Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law Risk and Impact Assessment Guidance (HUDERIA), which identifies human rights risks – including those of manipulation and interference – before deployment of an AI tool.

Regulation is vital, but so too is investment in the skills and competences required to manage digital transformation based on democratic values. Innovation and the positive use of technology to strengthen democratic processes and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms are essential.

The Council of Europe provides and supports digital education, media and information literacy, and capacity building, and it is developing pilot projects and recommendations for digital safety, user rights and platform accountability with significant input from young people and education specialists. Moldova's media and information literacy strategy is an excellent model, now being expanded elsewhere. Several youth programmes aim to ensure that young people not only understand but can also contribute to internet governance, AI policy and digital literacy. Training courses and resources support the agency, digital safety and mental health of young people.

The Organisation is monitoring the development of digital threats and working on a platform to protect politicians against hate speech and violence by tracking incidents, collecting data and issuing risk alerts. At the same time, it is combating corruption and financial crime enabled by digital technology.

The Council of Europe recognises that innovation is our future. But human rights must be our bedrock, and technology should be a means to more resilient and just democracies. Europe must regulate and shape AI through governance. If we do not, AI will shape us.

Pillar 1 – Learning and practising democracy

As digital technologies increasingly shape how individuals access information, form opinions and participate in public life, democratic resilience depends on the ability of societies not only to understand these technologies but also to engage with them actively and critically.

This is not a purely technical challenge. The rapid and often unpredictable evolution of digital systems requires continuous adaptation and innovation, as recognised in the New Democratic Pact for Europe. At the same time, technological development is frequently instrumentalised to accelerate attacks on democratic processes. Addressing these risks therefore requires not only effective safeguards but also sustained investment in democratic skills, competences and institutional capacity. For this reason, digital transformation and AI are mainstreamed across the Organisation's work, with an emphasis on education, participation and capacity building.

Embedding artificial intelligence literacy as a democratic competence

One priority is to ensure that citizens develop the capacity to understand and critically engage with artificial intelligence and digital systems as part of democratic life. This requires moving beyond purely technical approaches and framing AI literacy as a core democratic competence.

The Council of Europe is building the normative foundation for this through the preparation of a Committee of Ministers recommendation on artificial intelligence literacy.¹⁶⁰ The forthcoming instrument places human rights, democracy and cultural diversity at the centre of AI literacy, emphasising critical thinking, informed participation and awareness of the societal implications of algorithmic systems. It reflects a broader objective: to equip individuals not only to use digital technologies but also to understand their impact on public debate, rights and democratic institutions.

This normative work is complemented by practical instruments to support implementation. The Council of Europe Compass for Artificial Intelligence and Education¹⁶¹ tool will provide guidance to education systems, teachers, learners and private actors on responsible and human-centric use of AI. The Committee of Experts on Artificial Intelligence and Education (EDU-IA) of the Council of Europe is translating the principles of the Framework Convention on AI into sector-specific guidance, ensuring that legal standards are effectively embedded in education systems.¹⁶²

Together, these efforts contribute to a common European approach to AI literacy that strengthens citizens' ability to exercise agency in increasingly AI-mediated environments.

Strengthening digital citizenship through education systems

Learning democracy in the digital age requires a systemic approach that integrates digital citizenship, media and information literacy and democratic participation across all levels of education, while fostering their practical application. The Digital Citizenship Education (DCE)¹⁶³ initiative leads efforts in this area, including through the landmark European Year of Digital Citizenship Education 2025,¹⁶⁴ which included high-level conferences, activities in 19 member states, the launch of the Digital Citizenship Education Planner, a poster competition and other events.

The DCE Planner¹⁶⁵ provides a practical framework for preparing learners for active and responsible participation in digital environments. Building on this, the forthcoming Council of Europe Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education 2027-2031 will provide a strategic framework for scaling up these efforts across member states.

This work extends to early childhood education, with a forthcoming instrument on education for democratic citizenship aimed at embedding competences for democratic culture in digital contexts from the

160. Council of Europe, "The Steering Committee for Education (CDEU) approves a landmark framework on AI Literacy", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/the-steering-committee-for-education-cdedu-approves-a-landmark-framework-on-ai-literacy>.

161. Council of Europe, "Ensuring quality education in the AI era - Introducing the Council of Europe Compass for AI and Education", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/artificial-intelligence-and-education-third-working-conference>.

162. Council of Europe, "First meeting of the Committee of Experts on AI and Education (EDU IA)", <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/first-meeting-of-the-committee-of-experts-on-ai-and-education-edu-ia->.

163. Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/digital-citizenship-education>.

164. Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/european-year-of-digital-citizenship-education-2025>.

165. Council of Europe, the Digital Citizenship Education Planner, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/dce-planner>.

earliest stages of learning. In parallel, the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe is strengthening critical engagement with information through its digital tools, thus promoting evidence-based communication and historical literacy - key capacities in an information environment shaped by algorithmic curation and contested narratives.

The Observatory on History Teaching in Europe's Histolab Digital Hub has launched the first tableau data visualisation dashboard, which stands out as an example of digital innovation in history education and a key Council of Europe digital tool for democratic learning.¹⁶⁶

By mainstreaming digital citizenship across education systems, the Council of Europe supports the development of informed and resilient citizens who are capable of participating in digital environments in democratic ways.

Empowering young people as actors in digital governance

Democracy in the digital age requires recognising young people as actors who are shaping its governance. The Council of Europe Youth Sector plays a central role through its workstreams on youth, AI and human rights, and on the integration of youth perspectives. These initiatives respond to the reality that young people's civic and political lives are increasingly mediated by digital platforms and AI systems, and that their experiences must inform policy responses.

Through training and co-operation with youth organisations, the Council of Europe equips young people and youth workers to engage with digital governance as a democratic issue. Future developments such as tools to support engagement with the Framework Convention on AI and the exploration of a future standard-setting instrument on young people and artificial intelligence aim to strengthen the agency of young people and ensure that digital transformation is shaped in an inclusive and participatory manner.

Safeguarding cultural participation and creativity in digital environments

Digital transformation is reshaping cultural production, access and participation, raising important questions for democratic life. Ensuring that cultural expression, artistic freedom and access to heritage are preserved and strengthened in digital environments is therefore key.

The forthcoming revised Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy will strengthen the evidence base on the links between cultural participation and democratic governance in digital contexts, supporting more informed policy responses.

Follow-up to the Free to Create initiative has addressed the impact of digital platforms and AI-generated content on artistic freedom and human creativity.¹⁶⁷ Council of Europe work on youth participation in culture and heritage in a digital world seeks to ensure that digital transformation expands, rather than restricts, access to cultural life. These efforts contribute to preserving a diverse and pluralistic cultural space in the digital age, which is essential for democratic debate, participation and social cohesion.

These initiatives reflect a shift from protecting cultural expression in digital environments to actively shaping the conditions under which it evolves. They aim to ensure that digital transformation supports, rather than constrains, artistic freedom, cultural diversity and access to heritage. They also underline that the future of democratic life is closely linked to the future of cultural participation. Preserving an open, pluralistic and accessible cultural space in the digital age is therefore not only a cultural objective but also a democratic imperative.

Pillar 2 – Protecting democracy

Under this pillar, the Council of Europe focuses on ensuring that digital technologies and artificial intelligence operate within clear human rights, democracy and rule of law constraints. As digital systems increasingly shape public debate, economic activity and institutional functioning, safeguarding democratic integrity requires a robust framework of legal standards, regulatory tools and accountability mechanisms.

166. Histolab Digital Hub, <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/observatory.on.history.teaching.in.europe/viz/Economiccrises/inhistoryteaching/Teachers>.

167. Council of Europe Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape, Policy guidelines, <https://rm.coe.int/cdcp-2024-3-en-coe-policy-guidelines-on-ai-in-culture-creativity-heri/1680b45c67>.

This pillar constitutes the core protective architecture of the chapter. It responds to a central strategic challenge: technological development is often instrumentalised to accelerate attacks on democratic processes – through manipulation of information, amplification of harmful content, cyber-enabled threats and the erosion of trust. Addressing these risks requires not only effective regulation but also co-ordinated institutional responses capable of keeping pace with rapid technological change.

Establishing a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework

At the centre of this work is the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law,¹⁶⁸ the first international treaty establishing a binding framework for AI governance anchored in human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Its implementation is supported by tools such as HUDERIA,¹⁶⁹ which enables public authorities to assess the risks and impact of AI systems on fundamental rights and democratic processes. The Council of Europe Steering Committee on New and Emerging Digital Technologies (CDNET) will ensure an overall coherent approach within the Organisation regarding these technologies. Work is also under way on a new Committee of Ministers recommendation addressing deepfakes.

This action is complemented by a broader legal and operational architecture designed to address cyber-enabled risks to democratic systems. Building on the Convention on Cybercrime and its additional protocols,¹⁷⁰ and criminal law conventions of the Council of Europe, this architecture enables co-ordinated international responses to increasingly complex threats, including those targeting electoral processes and the integrity of democratic institutions. By addressing emerging vulnerabilities – from AI-related cybercrime to illicit digital financial flows and corruption risks – it contributes to the safeguarding of democratic systems in an increasingly interconnected and technologically driven environment.

Additional safeguards will be increasingly focused on governing the use of personal data in political processes and address evolving risks such as online radicalisation, terrorism financing and foreign information manipulation and interference. This framework supports a more anticipatory approach to digital risks, strengthening the ability of democratic systems to adapt to an increasingly complex and fast-changing technological environment.

Protecting public debate and pluralism in digital environments

Another line of action focuses on safeguarding the integrity of democratic debate in an online environment shaped by platforms, algorithms and generative AI.

The work of the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Media and Information Society is central in this field. The “Guidance note on the implications of generative artificial intelligence for freedom of expression” addresses the structural risks posed by “synthetic” content to public debate.¹⁷¹ It is complemented by work on national media and information literacy strategies and forthcoming guidance for media regulators in platform-based environments.¹⁷²

Further instruments under preparation, such as a study on how social media and digital platforms shape opinion and action, and a draft recommendation on safeguarding media pluralism online, aim to equip member states with tools to govern complex digital ecosystems while protecting freedom of expression and pluralism.¹⁷³

This work is reinforced by broader institutional engagement, including parliamentary and local authorities’ monitoring of digital threats and support to public debate on platform governance. Council of Europe co-operation activities support member states in addressing disinformation, strengthening user rights and

168. Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/artificial-intelligence/the-framework-convention-on-artificial-intelligence>.

169. Council of Europe, “HUDERIA: new tool to assess the impact of AI systems on human rights”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/huderia-new-tool-to-assess-the-impact-of-ai-systems-on-human-rights>.

170. Council of Europe, The Convention on Cybercrime and its additional protocols, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/the-budapest-convention>.

171. Council of Europe, “New guidance note on generative AI implications for freedom of expression”, <https://go.coe.int/kJTau>.

172. Council of Europe, “A new committee of experts begins work on media regulators in a platform-based environment”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/a-new-committee-of-experts-begins-work-on-media-regulators-in-a-platform-based-environment>.

173. Council of Europe, “A new committee of experts begins work on safeguarding media pluralism in the digital age”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/a-new-committee-of-experts-begins-work-on-safeguarding-media-pluralism-in-the-digital-age>.

enhancing digital safety. These efforts reflect a clear message: the integrity of democratic participation increasingly depends on the governance of digital public spaces.

Addressing discrimination, exclusion and rights violations

Digital transformation is generating new forms of inequality and exclusion. AI systems and digital platforms can reproduce or amplify structural discrimination, while certain groups risk being marginalised from digital civic space.

The Council of Europe addresses these challenges through a range of equality and anti-discrimination mechanisms. Work on equality and artificial intelligence includes tools and guidance to prevent bias in public-sector AI systems and to integrate equality considerations into digital governance decisions. Ongoing work also explores the need for strengthened responses to hate speech and hate crime in online environments.

Specialised monitoring extends these protections to specific groups. An example is the monitoring under the Istanbul Convention which increasingly shows women's exclusion from online spaces or political office. Work on minority rights increasingly addresses digital inclusion, focusing on access to media, participation in online public debate and the representation of minority languages in digital systems. Initiatives addressing discrimination against LGBTI people highlight the role of AI and platforms in amplifying disinformation, while gender-equality work monitors progress and setbacks in ensuring perpetrator accountability for online violence against women, offering tailor-made guidance to its parties, identifies the growing scale of the issue and addresses technology-facilitated violence and harmful online content.

Another priority is to safeguard children and other vulnerable groups in digital environments, while addressing the use of digital technologies as enablers of exploitation, including trafficking in human beings.

Strengthening justice, oversight and democratic accountability

Ensuring that digital technologies remain subject to democratic control requires justice systems and oversight mechanisms to adapt.

The Council of Europe supports this through work on the use of artificial intelligence in judicial and prosecutorial systems, including guidance on generative AI, digital evidence and data sovereignty. The Council of Europe's CEPEJ Resource Centre on Cyberjustice and AI¹⁷⁴ and the work of the Consultative Council of European Prosecutors strengthen institutional capacity in this area.

Mechanisms for the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments will be enhanced through digital innovation and knowledge-sharing tools, reinforcing the effectiveness of human rights protection.

Independent oversight is further fostered through the work of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, whose engagement on AI, surveillance and digital rights provides a consistent human rights perspective on emerging risks.¹⁷⁵

Pillar 3 – Innovating for democracy

This pillar reflects the Council of Europe's effort not only to regulate digital transformation and artificial intelligence but also to actively shape their use in support of democratic governance. It is the most forward-looking pillar of the chapter, focused on developing tools, practices and institutional approaches that harness technology to strengthen participation, improve public institutions and reinforce public trust.

In a context where digital technologies are transforming societies at unprecedented speed – and are increasingly instrumentalised to undermine democratic processes – innovation becomes a democratic necessity. In line with the New Democratic Pact for Europe, this pillar contributes to ensuring that technological transformation is not only controlled but also directed towards public-interest objectives. It complements the protective framework of the previous pillar by advancing a positive agenda for the use of AI and digital technologies in democratic life.

174. Council of Europe CEPEJ Resource Centre on Cyberjustice and AI, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cepej/resource-centre-on-cyberjustice-and-ai>.

175. Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Digital technologies and human rights, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/thematic-work/digital-technologies>.

Advancing public-interest innovation in artificial intelligence

A central priority is to develop models of AI governance that prioritise democratic resilience, transparency and public value.

The forthcoming instrument to advance public-interest innovation in generative AI, developed by the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Democracy, will provide practical strategies for using generative AI in ways that enhance transparency, accountability, digital autonomy and citizen engagement. It reflects a broader ambition to ensure that AI innovation serves democratic objectives rather than reinforcing dependency or concentration of power.

Digital transformation is reshaping how democratic participation and oversight are organised. This pillar supports the development of participatory tools and mechanisms that maintain democratic standards in increasingly digital and AI-mediated contexts.

The Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress are considering ways to adapt oversight functions to digital realities, including monitoring online threats and platform governance, and exploring tools to track threats against elected representatives.

Strengthening institutional capacity

A further strand of innovation concerns the use of digital technologies to improve the functioning of public institutions and the delivery of democratic governance.

In the justice field, digital innovation is being explored to enhance the effectiveness and transparency of the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments, including through new information technology strategies and knowledge-sharing tools.

Additional work supports digital rights literacy and institutional capacity, including training and resources on artificial intelligence and human rights, access to justice in the digital environment, data-driven approaches to countering economic and financial crime and data protection. These efforts ensure that institutions are equipped to operate effectively in digitally transformed contexts.

In parallel, the adoption in 2025 of the Transparency Framework of the Council of Europe¹⁷⁶ marks an important step in strengthening the Organisation's own transparency standards, taking into account the opportunities and challenges of new technologies. The framework reinforces access to official documents, promotes the development of a public register of documents and supports more open deliberations, while safeguarding privacy and legitimate interests of member states. Its implementation, now under way, contributes to institutional renewal, strengthens accountability and helps build trust in the Organisation's work, while setting a benchmark for more transparent and responsive governance.

Fostering inclusive and rights-based innovation

Ensuring that innovation supports democratic values requires embedding equality, inclusion and participation from the outset.

The Council of Europe integrates these considerations through work on equality and artificial intelligence, including tools to prevent discrimination in digital governance. Youth-focused initiatives further support this approach by enabling young people to contribute to AI governance and digital policy through training, dialogue and multistakeholder processes.

Education initiatives such as the recently launched E-Democracy Lab¹⁷⁷ – a multilingual catalogue for digital citizenship, media literacy, youth policy, elections, equality and human rights education is a key digital innovation platform, alongside the Education Knowledge Hub (4 000+ resources) and the E-Learning Catalogue which represent digital infrastructure innovation for access to learning.¹⁷⁸

These efforts reflect a broader principle: innovation must be inclusive, participatory and grounded in human rights to be democratically legitimate and sustainable.

176. CM(2025)53-final, 134th Session of the Committee of Ministers (Luxembourg, 13-14 May 2025) Council of Europe Transparency Framework, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680b5b7cd>.

177. Council of Europe E-democracy lab, <https://edl.elearning.ext.coe.int/>.

178. Council of Europe Knowledge Hub, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/knowledge-hub3>.

Taken together, these initiatives contribute to a shift towards a proactive and coherent model of democratic innovation, aligned with the ambitions of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

Digital transformation must be governed and shaped in ways that strengthen democratic systems – broadening participation, reinforcing institutional capacity and sustaining public trust. Ultimately, the challenge is not whether technology will reshape democracy, but whether democratic institutions can shape that transformation in line with their fundamental values.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION AND EMERGING DIRECTIONS UNDER THE PACT

	Thematic area	Current action	Planned developments		
PILLAR 1: LEARNING AND PRACTISING DEMOCRACY	AI literacy and digital citizenship education	Digital Citizenship Education Planner; EDU-IA work translating AI standards into education; digital citizenship education initiatives; OHTE DataViz project	Committee of Ministers recommendation on AI literacy; Council of Europe Compass for AI and Education; Road Map for Digital Citizenship Education 2027-2031; early childhood citizenship education tools	EMERGING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE PACT CONSULTATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Mainstreaming AI and digital literacy as core democratic competences across education systems, recommendation on young people and AI ▶ Ensuring that citizens can critically navigate AI-driven information environments ▶ Strengthening the capacity of education systems to integrate democratic values into digital transformation ▶ Promoting cultural and creative participation as part of democratic life in digital environments ▶ Moving from passive digital use to active, informed and responsible democratic engagement online 	
	Youth engagement in digital governance	Workstream on youth, AI and human rights; participation in EuroDIG/ YouthDIG; training courses on AI, human rights and democracy	Further development of youth tools for AI governance engagement; follow-up to youth consultations and community of practice		
	Culture, creativity and digital transformation	Existing cultural standards integrating digital dimension; Free to Create follow-up	Revised Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy; guidance on youth participation in digital cultural environments; AI-related cultural policy guidance		
	Integration of democratic values in digital learning ecosystems	Existing education tools and participatory frameworks	European-wide frameworks embedding AI, ethics and democratic values into education systems		
PILLAR 2: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY	AI governance and legal frameworks	Framework Convention on AI; HUDERIA methodology; CEPEJ Judicial AI Observatory; CCPE study on AI in prosecution	Continued development of legal and operational tools for AI governance; expansion of AI-related judicial and prosecutorial guidance		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ensuring AI systems operate within human rights, democracy and rule of law safeguards ▶ Strengthening resilience against cyber-enabled threats, including election interference and disinformation ▶ Reinforcing data protection and privacy in democratic processes ▶ Addressing digital corruption, opaque financial flows and emerging risks linked to new technologies ▶ Protecting media pluralism and the integrity of public debate in the online environment ▶ Preventing and countering AI-amplified discrimination, hate speech and violence ▶ Equipping justice systems and regulators to respond effectively to digital transformation
	Cybercrime, electoral and security risks	Budapest Convention and protocols; criminal law conventions; assessing risk of abuse of financial technologies and regulatory practices; mapping of virtual assets and digitally enabled crime; capacity building on fraud and digitally enabled crime; capacity building on election interference	Further tools on AI in cybercrime and electronic evidence; enhanced preparedness frameworks		
	Data protection and digital rights	Guidelines on data protection in political campaigns and voter processes; Court execution supervision mechanisms; Commissioner's work on AI and surveillance	Digital innovation initiative for the supervision of the execution of Court judgments; expanded digital rights knowledge-sharing tools		
	Financial integrity and digital corruption risks	MONEYVAL work; GRECO monitoring; risk assessment tools; institutional capacity building to address corruption and financial flows, monitoring and co-operation work on virtual assets	Further methodological tools and protocols addressing emerging digital financial risks		
	Media environment and platform governance	Guidance Note on Generative AI and freedom of expression; national media and information literacy strategies; co-operation on countering disinformation	Guidance Note on media regulators; study on social media platforms and opinion formation; draft recommendation on media pluralism online		
	Equality, non-discrimination and digital harms	AI equality tools; ECRI country monitoring, monitoring of digital inclusion of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; Lanzarote work on the protection of children from online sexual abuse and exploitation; work on human trafficking facilitated by digital technology; Istanbul Convention and GREVIO's General Recommendation No. 1; youth anti-hate initiatives	Manual on hate crime and criminalised hate speech; toolkit on equality and AI; gender-equality tools on technology-facilitated violence; policy guidance on children's rights and social media; LGBTI strategy		
	Counter-terrorism and online radicalisation	CDCT work on countering violent extremism online	Further development of preventive and regulatory tools		
PILLAR 3: INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY	Public-interest AI innovation	Existing CDDEM work on AI and democracy; youth AI engagement activities	Instrument to advance public-interest innovation in generative AI; World Forum for Democracy (AI governance focus)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Promoting a public-interest and rights-based approach to AI innovation ▶ Using digital tools to enhance participation, transparency and accountability in democratic processes ▶ Developing anticipatory governance tools to identify and respond to emerging digital risks ▶ Strengthening democratic innovation at local and regional levels, including through digital monitoring tools ▶ Ensuring that innovation integrates equality, inclusion and human rights from the outset ▶ Supporting youth as co-creators of digital democratic solutions, not only beneficiaries ▶ Democracy check and vetting mechanism 	
	Digital participation and democratic tools	Existing youth participation instruments; European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life; digital engagement practices; innovative digital learning tools	Congress risk-alert dashboard integrating digital indicators		
	Digital innovation in justice and governance	Digital capacity-building projects; existing HELP courses on digital rights	Digital innovation initiative for Court execution supervision; expanded HELP resources on AI, digital rights and access to justice		
	AI and equality innovation	Existing AI equality tools and frameworks	Implementation toolkit for equality and AI		
	Youth-driven digital democratic innovation	Youth for Democracy programme activities; AI-related training and study sessions	Expanded youth-led initiatives on AI governance and democratic participation		

ABBREVIATIONS

Council of Europe

ADI-SOGIESC	Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
CCJE	Consultative Council of European Judges
CCPE	Consultative Council of European Prosecutors
CDADI	Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion
CDBIO	Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health
CDCPP	Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape
CDCT	Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism
CDDH	Steering Committee for Human Rights
CDDEM	Steering Committee on Democracy
CDEDU	Steering Committee for Education
CDMSI	Steering Committee on Media and Information Society
CDNET	Committee on New and Emerging Digital Technologies
CEPEJ	European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice
CGU	Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine
the Congress	the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
the Convention	the European Convention on Human Rights
the Court	the European Court of Human Rights
CPT	European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
EDU-IA	Committee of Experts on Artificial Intelligence and Education
ESCE	European Space for Citizenship Education
ETINED	Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
HELP	Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals
HUDERIA	Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law Impact Assessment
IEPRM	Improving electoral practice in the Republic of Moldova
IFCD	Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy
MONEYVAL	Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism
North-South Centre	European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity
OCEAN	Open Council of Europe Academic Networks
OHTE	Observatory on History Teaching in Europe
the Pact	the New Democratic Pact for Europe

the Pompidou Group	Council of Europe International Co-operation Group on Drugs and Addictions
the Register of Damage for Ukraine	the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine
SHIFA	Strengthening Health Care Infrastructure for All
Venice Commission	European Commission for Democracy through Law

General abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
DCE	digital citizenship education
Eurofound	European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
LGBTI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PSM	public service media
SLAPP	strategic lawsuit against public participation

COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONVENTIONS IN THE REPORT

Title	ETS/CETS No.
Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms or European Convention on Human Rights (the Convention)	ETS No. 5
European Social Charter (Charter or Social Charter) European Social Charter (revised) (revised Charter)	ETS No. 35 ETS No. 163
Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention)	ETS No. 104
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)	ETS No. 148
Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)	ETS No. 157
Convention on Cybercrime (Cybercrime Convention; Budapest Convention)	ETS No. 185
Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings	CETS No. 197
Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention)	CETS No. 199
Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention)	CETS No. 201
The Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention)	CETS No. 205
Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)	CETS No. 210
Council of Europe Convention on the Counterfeiting of Medical Products and Similar Crimes involving Threats to Public Health (Medicrime Convention)	CETS No. 211

Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs (Santiago de Compostela Convention)	CETS No. 216
Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (Nicosia Convention)	CETS No. 221
Second Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime on enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence	CETS No. 224
Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law	CETS No. 225
Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer	CETS No. 226
Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law	CETS No. 228
Convention establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine	CETS No. 229
Council of Europe Convention on the Co-production of Audiovisual Works in the Form of Series	CETS No. 230

This report, *The New Democratic Pact for Europe in times of rupture*, is structured around six transversal areas of intervention, selected for their strategic importance in strengthening democratic security and resilience. Each chapter brings together an overview of current and planned activities with forward-looking ideas and initiatives emerging from the Pact consultations, and is framed around three complementary pillars: learning and practising democracy, protecting democratic systems and innovating for democracy. Together, they provide a coherent framework linking existing Council of Europe work with emerging priorities.

The report contributes to an ongoing reflection by highlighting key directions for action and introducing ideas arising from the consultation process. These elements are intended to inform the development of the Pact and guide efforts to adapt democratic systems to evolving challenges, with a view to reinforcing trust in institutions in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment.

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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.