

Civil Society is crucial to the Council of Europe, candidates for Deputy Secretary General say

In an online Q&A event on 18 June, the two final candidates for the position of Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe affirmed the important role of civil society in fostering and protecting democracy and human rights and the need for a more open, transparent and responsive Council of Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will elect the Deputy Secretary General on 23 June.

Both candidates - Tanja Gonggrijp, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the Council of Europe, and Marja Ruotanen-Bourdages, Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity at the Council of Europe - underlined that civil society is crucial to the Council of Europe's work and to the Organisation's ability to respond to today's democratic challenges.

Marja Ruotanen-Bourdages stressed that civil society is not just an actor external to the Council of Europe, but an essential part of how the Organisation functions across its different sectors: "None of the Council of Europe sectors can work without civil society." She emphasised the specific value that civil society brings to the Council of Europe's work, including in standard-setting, monitoring and cooperation: "Civil society has the very key role of often being maybe the most knowledgeable expert in certain areas. (...) Civil society is shedding light on areas that we might not get in other ways."

She further noted that the Council of Europe's work can only have real impact if it reaches beyond institutions and is implemented at the level of society: "All the actions and decisions, for them to have concrete impact, have to be implemented also at the level of civil society, local level, and every level."

Tanja Gonggrijp also presented civil society as central to the Council of Europe's effectiveness. She argued that the Organisation has a strong tradition of civil society engagement, but that this engagement must become stronger and more meaningful: "The weakness is that the engagement of civil society is not strong enough and not meaningful enough, and that is something we have to work on."

Referring to the shrinking of civic space as an early warning signal for democratic decline, she stressed: "Civil society and civic space are the canary in the coal mine. If civic space is under pressure, we know that democracies are under pressure." She added that: "We should engage much more closely with civil society to actually see these early warning signals."

She also pointed to the need for clearer and more accessible ways for civil society to engage with the Council of Europe: "We have to make sure that civil society knows when to engage, how to engage."

Beyond civil society engagement, the discussion addressed the role and mandate of the Deputy Secretary General, reform of the Council of Europe, the Organisation's transparency and accessibility, democratic security, and the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

The candidates were asked whether the New Democratic Pact can become a real operational tool for strengthening democracy, rather than only a political declaration, and whether it should include dedicated and flexible funding for civil society actors working on democracy and civic space. Tanja Gonggrijp argued that the New Democratic Pact can become a real tool if it is translated into implementation, priorities, timelines and responsibilities. Marja Ruotanen-Bourdages described the Pact as an important example of consultation with civil society and highlighted deliberative democracy as an area where the Council of Europe should be innovative, particularly in engaging young people and different parts of civil society.

Questions from the audience raised a broad range of concrete issues, including closer links with human rights activists from Belarus and Russia; the Istanbul Convention and backsliding on obligations to combat violence against women; sexual and reproductive health and rights, including access to safe abortion; LGBTI equality; interreligious and interconvictional dialogue; the effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms; and civil society access to collective complaints under the European Social Charter.

On Belarus and Russia, both candidates underlined the importance of continuing engagement with democratic forces and human rights activists, while recognising the different contexts of both countries and the sensitivity and security risks involved. On the Istanbul Convention, Tanja Gonggrijp drew on her experience as Chair of the Committee of the Parties and described the Convention as the “gold standard” in combating violence against women and girls. Marja Ruotanen-Bourdages stressed the importance of showing the practical benefits of the Convention, including through accessible country factsheets and grassroots-level work to correct misinformation.

The discussion also touched upon the effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms. Tanja Gonggrijp argued that recommendations can be more effective when taken up by civil society at national level and supported through multi-level governance, including cooperation with the European Union, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress. Marja Ruotanen-Bourdages stated that monitoring mechanisms cannot be fully effective without support from the Committee of Ministers and national authorities, because implementation ultimately requires political dialogue and action by states.

The Q&A session offered people active in civil society and academia a direct opportunity to hear how both candidates understand the future role of the Deputy Secretary General and how they would approach the need for a more effective, transparent and responsive Council of Europe. It was organised by CURE - Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe and the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. The session was moderated by Goran Miletic, Member of the Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs, CURE Steering Committee Member, Founder of the Balkans Forward Foundation. A more detailed report of the candidates' responses to questions will be available soon on the CURE website: <https://cure-campaign.org>.

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