

Strengthening Democracy: From Words to Action

CURE input for the New Democratic Pact for Europe

31 January 2026

This paper presents a series of recommendations for shaping the [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#) (NDP, or the ‘Pact’). The overarching general direction of these recommendations is to move the discussion about the Pact from a largely rhetorical confirmation of the importance of democracy and an open-ended consideration of improvements in democracy towards setting up much needed concrete processes and structures that can help in preserving and strengthening democracy.

This is a first contribution from the side of CURE, taking the outcome of the 2023 Civil Society Summit held ahead of the Reykjavík Summit as a starting point. Organised by the Council of Europe (CoE)’s [Conference of INGOs \(CINGO\)](#) and [CURE – Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe](#), the Civil Society Summit produced [The Hague Civil Society Declaration on CoE Reform](#) (referred to below as ‘The Hague Declaration’, or the ‘Declaration’). Based primarily on the ‘democracy’ section of the Declaration, but also drawing on some of its other proposals, **seven areas of strengthening democracy promotion and protection by the CoE** are defined, resulting in tentative proposals for the NDP.

The seven areas were presented at a CURE online discussion event on 16 January 2026, in which several dozens of civil society representatives and a number of experts took part, with introductory inputs given by CURE Advisory Council members **Prof. Anca Ailincai** (University of Grenoble Alpes) and **Boriss Cilevics** (former PACE member), **Jack Hanning** and **Despoina Syrri** (Association of Schools of Political Studies), **Ana Mosiashvili** (European Partnership for Democracy) and CURE team members **Konstantin Baranov** and **Harry Hummel**. The seven areas could not be discussed in detail – each of them has a specialised set of experts and actors from civil society and academia who should be involved in further discussions on the respective elements of the Pact.

In this memo, the seven headings are organised in two of the blocs used in the NDP call for input: (I) Learning and Practising Democracy, and (II) Protecting Democracy. (The third bloc, Innovating for Democracy, remains uncovered here, but several of our proposals have a clear innovative character.)

Concern about the state of democracy around the world, including in Europe, is currently widespread. Discussions abound about the origins of democratic decline, countering anti-democratic forces, preventing backsliding and about innovations to adapt democracy to today's society. At the European level, civil society has engaged intensely in the discussion on the EU's [European Democracy Shield](#) and the closely related [EU Strategy for Civil Society](#); many ideas presented and not fully taken up by the EU (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)) merit being considered for inclusion in the Pact. In view of the central place of the concept of 'democracy' in the mandate of the Council of Europe, it definitely is possible to go deeper and broader in democracy promotion and protection initiatives than the more generalist EU. The CoE has been reluctant until now to equip the democracy 'pillar' of its mandate with serious monitoring and review procedures; now there is the need as well as the occasion to change this. A new CoE Summit, as [suggested at the start of the Pact process](#), would be an appropriate conclusion to present and launch such a strengthened democracy pillar.

Recommendation: take a much-needed ambitious approach, culminating in a CoE Summit, to upgrading of the Council of Europe's democracy standard-setting and monitoring and of its activities to maintain and improve the conditions for democracy

I. Learning and Practising Democracy

1. Strengthening of democratic culture and civic education

The CoE has a long-standing tradition of working on [education for democratic citizenship](#), [democratic culture](#), [citizenship education](#) and related conceptual and policy frameworks. This work has led to the development of various standards, mostly for formal education. In some cases, there have been attempts to monitor how these standards are implemented – see, for instance, reports on the implementation of the [Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#) (EDC/HRE) and the [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#). These reports have received little follow-up and as they are mostly based on information government ministries officially submit their value is probably limited. To turn them into more useful resources, a wider range of inputs needs to be collected, including from civic actors such as independent teachers' associations and NGOs.

Recommendation: develop the monitoring of CoE civic and human rights education standards with the involvement of civic actors, and create a mechanism for follow-up of recommendations arising from this monitoring.

In this context, collecting independent information on the way educational institutions are functioning is important. Preparing young people for active participation in democratic life needs building their democratic competences, not only teaching them about the functioning of democratic systems and institutions in theory. Democratic values should be reflected in the culture and everyday practice of educational institutions.

Recommendation: in formal education settings, give particular attention to fostering 'learning by doing', i.e. developing practices of real citizen participation, such as being

involved in co-management of educational institutions and volunteering with local CSOs.

The new [Directorate of Internal Oversight's evaluation of the Education for Democracy programme](#) to be issued in 2026 could provide a valuable source of information for reflection on this field.

As regards non-formal education, the existing CoE programmes and initiatives are mostly focused on: 1) [young people](#) and 2) specific social and professional groups, such as [lawyers](#), [political and civic activists](#), journalists, etc. What seems to be missing are efforts targeting wider adult population, which appears to be the main target of populist propaganda and disinformation. There are positive experiences in this regard in some member states, such as 'political education' programmes of German trade unions (see, for instance, ['Building blocks' manual for non-racist educational work](#)) or community-based 'study circles' in Sweden and other Nordic countries, which merit being studied and promoted.

Recommendation: in non-formal education, invest in promoting Education for Democratic Citizenship (including media and digital literacy) for general adult population as a component of lifelong learning initiatives.

2. Creation of a sustainable independent public information space

The functioning and performance of democracies depend on the quality of information provision and a fair exchange of opinions that is not manipulated by political or commercial interests. One side of this is the freedom of journalists and of media to operate independently, addressed by the CoE's [Safety of Journalists Platform](#) and its ['Journalists Matter' campaign](#).

Another side is to prevent quality journalism from drowning in a flood of disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and half-truths, and in an algorithm-driven preference for sensation, polarisation and ultra-quick messaging. Journalistic business models are being eroded by free-riding use of information on the internet and by artificial intelligence (AI) programmes. AI could presumably be used to [erase any distinction](#) between fact-based democratic debate and full manipulation of the shaping of opinions.

The SG has mooted the idea of a [Convention on Disinformation and Foreign Influence](#). Using any means available to minimise the degradation of our information ecosystem is important, and a Convention can and should define strict standards both for foreign and domestic information and for information systems run both by public and private actors.

Recommendation: give priority to setting in motion a process for drawing up a Convention on Disinformation and Other Forms of Perverting or Manipulating Public Information Provision and Debate.

Realistically, private actors in the 'tech sector' are unlikely to live up to standards defined by a Convention – quite the opposite, owners of companies in the sector, mostly from the US, have moved to openly espousing anti-democratic visions. So the creation of alternative digital infrastructure that serves the public interest is becoming extremely

urgent, based on the notion of [democracy as a public good](#). Discussions (co-)organised by the CoE in the recent past on [public service media](#) and on [internet governance](#) provide a basis for further Council of Europe action in this field.

Recommendation: take a decision to move towards the creation of a public interest information space and set in motion concrete steps to implement this vision.

3. Space for civil society

Freedom of civil society to organise includes the freedom of monitoring and reporting on government operations and of advocating for certain policies. European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) jurisprudence on freedom of expression and association is directly relevant here, as are a number of Venice Commission opinions and reports and dedicated Committee of Ministers' Recommendations on [NGO legislation](#) (currently [undergoing revision](#)) and on [civil society space](#), which both heavily draw on ECtHR jurisprudence and Venice Commission expertise. CINGO's [Expert Council on NGO Law](#) uses the NGO legislation Recommendation as the main standard against which it reports; however, its reporting gets limited follow-up within the CoE system.

The [Hague Declaration](#) (Point 7.9) urges that a protection alert system for civic space similar to the Platform on the Safety of Journalists should be created, and CURE has reiterated this proposal [a number of times](#), most recently in an [October 2025 letter to the Secretary General](#) (Point 4). A [CoE conference](#) to be held on 2-3 February 2026, which will deal with civic space in relation to sustaining and renewing democracy and therefore, may also address the issue.

Recommendation: create a rapid alert mechanism to respond to attacks on civil society, encompassing not only legal restrictions, but also disinformation campaigns, hostile rhetoric, surveillance, and intimidation.

In addition, point 9.11 of the Declaration addresses the strengthening of deliberative democracy by "supporting the implementation of CoE standards on citizens' engagement in political deliberations and decision-making at all levels." In this respect, standards for government transparency are important, such as laid down in the CoE's [Tromso Convention](#) on access to official documents, which has received only around a dozen ratifications until now.

The phenomenon of transnational repression by authoritarian regimes against opposition politicians, journalists, civil society activists and other dissidents living in exile, which [has been spreading across CoE member states](#), is a growing specific issue of concern. Since in pursuing such repressive acts, authoritarian authorities often try to employ existing mechanisms of inter-state legal cooperation (e.g., requests for information about individuals residing in other countries, extradition requests, Interpol 'red notices', etc.), many of which are based on (or regulated by) the CoE rule of law instruments, CoE bodies should pay particular attention to tracking and addressing this dangerous trend. Calls have been made for drawing up a CoE [recommendation](#) or even a new [convention](#) on the fight against transnational repression.

Recommendation: start the process of drawing up a separate CoE legal instrument on identifying and fighting transnational repression.

Apart from addressing the situation of civic space in the member states, the CoE should strengthen civic space by fostering the recognition of civil society as legitimate and independent democratic actors. There are currently many more political voices in Europe questioning its legitimacy rather than recognising its watchdog role, and there is a clear need for political allies willing to publicly defend civil society.

Recommendation: the CoE should further strengthen civic space both by promoting positive narratives on civil society and by granting it a stronger and more formalised role within the organisation itself.

The CoE has underutilized possibilities to emphasize the importance of civil society in contributing to its activities. Information provision by NGOs on the implementation of ECtHR judgements under the Rule 9 procedure or to monitoring bodies is often key, and giving explicit recognition for this is important. For instance, every Secretary General's country visit, especially to states where democracy is under pressure, should include a formal, public meeting with independent civil society and human rights defenders, thus reinforcing their legitimacy, visibility, and political protection (as also noted in our [October 2025 letter](#)).

II. Protecting Democracy

4. Employing the principles of good democratic governance

A comprehensive and detailed [set of 'parameters'](#) is currently being developed for the implementation of the ten Reykjavík Principles for Democracy. They cover a wide range of issues that directly or indirectly affect the quality of democracy.

In which way the parameters will be accompanied by an arrangement to evaluate the level of implementation remains to be discussed by the CDDEM. The most limited option, turning the parameters just into an instrument for 'self-evaluation' by states with no further reporting and accountability requirements, would be a huge missed chance for democracy protection. A process that includes some form of independent evaluation and a public discussion of that evaluation, both inside and outside the country in question, must be created to fulfil the potential of the Reykjavík Principles. It should be made attractive for civil society to provide input for and participate in the evaluation process. The ultimate stimulating factor for civil society to engage will be how profoundly evaluation outcomes will be discussed, and how strong the insistence will be with which authorities are required to follow up to the outcomes. Almost all the other points raised in this memo are covered by the Parameters, so investing in a serious monitoring mechanism for the Reykjavík Principles parameters will be of benefit in a wide range of areas affecting democracy.

Recommendation: set up a mechanism for monitoring of implementation of the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy and of continued CoE engagement in situations of serious lack of implementation.

The development of an evaluation scheme can draw inspiration from the already

decades-old CoE system of evaluating local government performance in implementing a set of [Principles for Good Democratic Governance](#), originally defined in 2007. They lay at the basis of the [European Label of Governance Excellence](#) (ELOGE), which recognises municipalities that achieve a high level of good democratic governance. ELOGE entails independent assessment of how the standards are applied. This system merits being developed further in its own right – currently only about half of CoE member states take part, and in many of these only a small number of municipalities have applied for the ELOGE label.

Even when national level democratic performance is backsliding, municipal governments can keep up, and even redouble, their implementation of democracy standards. Attention of civil society for this level of government in such situations becomes of particular importance.

Recommendation: expand the use of the ELOGE scheme to all member states and to in principle all local authorities.

5. Safeguarding of freedom and fairness of elections

Holding free and fair elections is a key element in the Principles of Good Democratic Governance and has become a [key activity](#) of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The CoE and the EU have also become active in the field, usually in coordination with the OSCE. Civil society organisations, many of them united in the [European Platform for Democratic Elections \(EPDE\)](#) and the [European Network of Election Monitoring Organisations \(ENEMO\)](#), also have a long tradition of conducting election monitoring.

In its most extended version, the OSCE/ODIHR monitoring process starts several months before the elections, so one-sidedness in the run-up to elections, for example in incumbents grabbing a disproportionate share of media attention, are also documented. Such intense observation processes are employed when there is reason to fear unfairness and irregularities. No clear practice has developed of international sanctioning or non-recognition of those elected in at least cases that pass a certain threshold.

Recommendation: a protocol should be developed for international follow-up to illegitimate elections, for cases where the freedom and fairness of elections has not been ascertained.

It is not just governments that should be held accountable for running proper electoral processes. Politicians and political parties are also responsible, not just around a narrow time window ahead of elections. [Codes of conduct for political parties](#) are one way to making explicit the need for them to commit to certain standards.

Recommendation: the role of political parties in regulating and exhibiting democratic standards should get further attention.

6. Making true on equality

The Hague Declaration (Point 9.14) says that “increasing inequality in our societies is one of the greatest dangers which undermines public confidence in democracy and the rule of law.” One argument often used is that if minimum standards for a decent life are not fulfilled (or are constantly under threat), people will lose faith in democratic governance and may become attracted by autocratic leaders who promise they can deliver.

This argument seems to be used also in the [announcement of the NDP](#), which mentions “tackling the impact of socio-economic inequalities that erode confidence in what democracy can deliver.” The next [High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter \(ESC\)](#) in Chişinău (18-19 March 2026) “will address selected topical issues, highlighting the clear link between social justice and social rights, democratic stability and security.” At this occasion, strengthening the ESC system – by completing ratifications, by states accepting more provisions, by recognising national NGOs standing to present complaints, by increasing resources – will be the clearest confirmation that states subscribe to this notion. Existing [civil society recommendations](#) on raising the profile and role of the ESC should be taken on board.

Recommendation: the process of raising the profile and role of the European Social Charter should be sped up and prioritised.

A more fundamental argument can also be made about the [link between equality and democracy](#) – that democracy can only function when reality supports the notion that people are equal. In recent years, the concern has grown [that wealth disparities have reached such an extent](#) that this is no longer the case. The active role of tech billionaires in support for Donald Trump and anti-democratic positions taken by a number of them has fuelled the concern. Apart from this recent political development, some [academics](#) have long been arguing for the principle of an upper limit on personal wealth.

From a yet different perspective, the notion is widespread that government processes are being run by an educated elite with skills, knowledge and contacts that allow them to dominate. International [opinion surveys show](#) that “people around the globe think representative democracy is a good system of government. At the same time, many are frustrated with political elites or feel their views are not truly represented in government.”

Recommendation: a process for mapping the wider links between (socio-economic) inequalities and the proper functioning of democracy should be set in motion.

7. Early warning against democratic backsliding

The rhetoric accompanying the New Democratic Pact strongly emphasises the need to counter democratic backsliding. This is in sync with Point 9.5 of The Hague Declaration that proposes to “develop an early warning mechanism to detect signs of democratic backsliding.” This idea is linked with a more general call to strengthen existing monitoring and preventive systems, the subject of Section 3 of the Declaration. The most potent mechanism of the Council of Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) system, covers a series of democracy safeguards – see their frequent mentions in the Reykjavík Principles’ parameters. But it too often takes a very long time for judgements

to be issued by the ECtHR – and even then, after many years of ever-stronger entrenchment of autocratic rule, governments will be able to postpone their implementation.

To counter democratic backsliding, more agile mechanisms need to be used with appropriate frequency – with speed that matches the actions of backsliding governments. These mechanisms do exist – take, for instance, (urgent) opinions issued by the Venice Commission, urgent statements by monitoring bodies, interventions and submissions to the Committee of Ministers by the Commissioner for Human Rights, Parliamentary Assembly resolutions and recommendations, initiatives by the Secretary General including the application of Article 52 of the ECHR. The outcomes of these mechanisms need to be pursued with persistence, with oversight of the Committee of Ministers. They should not be dropped from the agenda of the Committee until substantial progress has been made.

Recommendation: the CoE leadership should stimulate and coordinate the timely application of rapid response efforts by relevant CoE organs, and guarantee quick and persistent follow-up.

The ‘Democratic Resilience Fund’ proposed by the SG in an [opinion piece in May 2025](#) that “would provide rapid support wherever democracy teeters, allowing us to prevent rather than repair” could provide resources for a series of abovementioned steps, which require extraordinary efforts by a number of CoE bodies that need funding over and above current budgets.

Recommendation: further develop the concept of a Democratic Resilience Fund that will be used to bring CoE action to an appropriate level in situations of rapid decline of democratic standards.