

## Council of Europe Engagement with Civil Society: Call for a Genuine and Comprehensive Review

29 November 2023

The Reykjavik Declaration adopted by the 4<sup>th</sup> Council of Europe Summit of Heads of State and Government called for “a review and further reinforcement of the Organisation’s outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations and national human rights institutions” (para. 40). **The Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe (CURE) welcomed this call. We consider it very timely and necessary and believe that such a review should be conducted in a genuine and fundamental way for it to lead to “further reinforcement”.**

CURE has repeatedly pointed out the deficiencies in the existing framework for CoE’s engagement with civil society, in particular, with regard to barriers for interaction with the Committee of Ministers and lack of outreach to NGOs working at the national level in the member states, and suggested ideas for improvement<sup>1</sup>. Similar calls have also been made by other civil society actors<sup>2</sup>.

The latest attempts to explore changes in this field were prompted by the decisions of the annual ministerial meeting in Helsinki in 2019 on the “need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe”<sup>3</sup>, further echoed in the decisions of ministerial meetings in Hamburg in 2021 and in Turin in 2022<sup>4</sup>.

In practice, the implementation of these decisions has led to the creation of a “civil society portal” and a “Practical guide for civil society on working with the Council of Europe”, as well as introduction of the practice of informal thematic exchanges between NGOs and the three CM rapporteur groups (GR-H, GR-DEM and GR-J)<sup>5</sup>. These measures may have led to certain improvements in the visibility of CoE’s work for civil society, but their actual effectiveness has not been evaluated yet. It is clear, though, that they have not led (and in principle could not lead) to a radical change, since they did not address the main systemic issues involved. Unfortunately, a number of more far-reaching and systemic proposals that had been made in earlier discussions on the matter<sup>6</sup> were not picked up by the Secretariat and the CM for implementation at that stage.

One of the main elements of the Helsinki decisions, a request to the Secretary General to invite “the relevant human rights NGOs to a regular exchange with a view to further enhancing co-operation between civil society and the Council of Europe and enriching the discussions of the Committee of Ministers and other Council of Europe bodies”, was only implemented this year. On 15 September, about 100 civil society representatives from national and international NGOs gathered in Strasbourg to look at civil society role in three dimensions:

- participation in the Council of Europe standard-setting,
- the role of NGOs in monitoring of the agreed standards, and
- cooperation with NGOs on reforms needed in the member states to live up to the standards.

The meeting was well-prepared and brought together a good cross-section of civil society stakeholders, saw high-quality interventions by participants, and produced a large number of comments and ideas. On the occasion of the meeting, CURE distributed a discussion paper with its ideas and proposals on the matter.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Input for the High-Level Reflection Group of the Council of Europe, 29 July 2022, <https://cure-campaign.org/wp-content/uploads/Input-for-the-High-Level-Reflection-Group-by-CURE-Campaign.pdf> (part 3); “The Hague Declaration on Council of Europe Reform”, 1 March 2023, <https://cure-campaign.org/wp-content/uploads/CSSDeclarationFullFinal.pdf> (part 7).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: <https://humanrightshouse.org/statements/council-of-europe-member-state-leaders-must-use-the-4th-coe-summit-to-commit-to-stronger-role-for-civil-society-at-the-coe/>

<sup>3</sup> See: CM/Del/Dec(2019)129/2, [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168094787f](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168094787f)

<sup>4</sup> See: CM/Del/Dec(2021)131/2a, [https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a28ddc;](https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a28ddc;) CM/Del/Dec(2022)132/3ci, [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a68fab](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a68fab)

<sup>5</sup> SG/Inf(2022)13 “Follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society: implementation of the Secretary General’s proposals - Final Report”, 12 April 2022, <https://rm.coe.int/native/0900001680a62b47;>

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance: DD(2019)427 “Warsaw conference on “The Role and Position of NGOs in the Council of Europe”, 22 March 2019

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://cure-campaign.org/wp-content/uploads/RolesCivilSocietyRelationCoE14.09.2023Final.pdf>

Unfortunately, the organizers of that meeting failed to make it clear how (if at all) its outcomes will be used. The Private Office of the Secretary General produced a so-called “Roadmap on the Council of Europe's Engagement with Civil Society (2024-2027)” and shared it with the CM before that meeting. The meeting participants were familiarized only with the appendix to this document (a table summarizing the proposed measures). Whether and to which extent the conclusions of the SG’s meeting with civil society will be used to complement this “roadmap” or feed into its implementation, remains an open question. But what is clear is that this document cannot replace the “review of engagement with civil society” that the Reykjavík Summit called for (and any new strategic document in this field should have been produced as a result of this review).

**CURE calls upon the Committee of Ministers to initiate an actual comprehensive review of the matter.**

We believe that **such a review should:**

- be conducted by an independent (external) party (e.g., commissioned to a consultancy or an academic institution having relevant expertise) to ensure impartiality and allow for critical approach;
- go beyond a mere evaluation of how the existing structures work but also looks at whether other arrangements could lead to better results (including the questions of whether the existing “participatory status” for INGOs should be adapted, and whether reforms are needed in the functioning of the Conference of INGOs);
- assess channels for civil society participation across all the main aspects of the CoE work, including development, implementation and evaluation of standards, policies and strategies;
- seek and take on board contributions from actors both inside and outside the Conference of INGOs, and look into interaction of CoE bodies and institutions with civil society actors both active in Strasbourg and working at the national level in the member states;
- make comparisons with the way in which other intergovernmental organisations (such as the UN) relate to civil society.

Relevant thematic evaluations conducted by the Directorate of Internal Oversight<sup>8</sup> could be seen as one of the valuable sources for such review, but also cannot substitute it.

While launching this review, the Committee of Ministers should be prepared to further consider adopting decisions on procedural and institutional changes based on its outcomes and conclusions.

CURE is committed to providing its input to such a review and facilitating it in any other possible way.

---

<sup>8</sup> See: DIO 2016(17) “Evaluation of the contribution of NGOs to standard setting and monitoring in the Council of Europe”, February 2016, <https://rm.coe.int/09000016806bdb52>; DIO (2021)34 “Evaluation of the Council of Europe’s Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations”, April 2021, <http://rm.coe.int/0900001680a2c2c8>; DIO 2023(41) “Evaluation of the civil society participation in co-operation activities”, June 2023, <https://rm.coe.int/1680ac1d34>