

Strengthening Democracy: From Words to Action

Note for the discussion on civil society approaches to the New Democratic Pact for Europe (16 January 2026, 10am – 12pm)

This non-public discussion note aims to explore, which proposals NGOs working on or concerned about human rights and democracy might put forward for the [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#) proposed by Council of Europe (CoE) Secretary General Berset.

The discussion takes the outcome of the 2023 Civil Society Summit held ahead of the Reykjavík Summit as a starting point. Organised by the 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, and questions raised on possible positions or role of civil society in these areas:

- 1. Employing the principles of good democratic governance:** Listings of principles similar to the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy and the new '[parameters](#)' based on it date back to 2007, when they were defined for local governments. They cover a broad spectrum of subjects related to democracy, including observance of fundamental freedoms and guarantees for transparency and anti-corruption systems. 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. An assessment framework is also planned for the new Reykjavík parameters but primarily meant for 'self-assessment' by governments.

Related Discussion Questions:

- *Is the ELoGE scheme useful? Why has it been adopted in only half of the CoE member states and, even then, only in few municipalities?*
- *Has civil society worked to stimulate its use? Can best practice on civil society engagement and advocacy for application of the benchmark be defined and further developed?*
- *Could stimulating local level application of the benchmark become a symbol of resistance in a situation where the national government is moving towards authoritarianism?*
- *What lessons can be learnt for possible future application of a similar benchmarking system at the national level (based on Reykjavík parameters)?*
- *Should we push (despite government reluctance) for such a system to be put in place? And/or should civil society make an effort to conduct its own assessment based on the Reykjavík parameters?*

2. **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 been the subject of monitoring by the CoE, the EU and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which usually operate in a coordinated fashion. Civil society organisations, many of them united in the [European Platform for Democratic Elections \(EPDE\)](#), also have a tradition of election monitoring. The digital era has created new manipulation possibilities of elections, which require the adaptation of monitoring methodology to report during and after elections to secure their freedom and fairness.

Related Discussion Questions:

- *How is digital technology forcing a redefinition of traditional election monitoring methodologies?*
- *Can more be done to advocate for the follow-up to recommendations of official monitoring reports, in particular when these reports strongly question the freedom and fairness of elections?*
- *Which are the main strengths of civil society monitoring efforts? How are civil society monitoring outcomes being taken up by intergovernmental bodies?*

3. **Strengthening of democratic culture and civic education:** The CoE has a tradition of working on [democratic citizenship](#), [democratic culture](#), [citizenship education](#) and related concepts that have led to the creation of various standards. On some occasions, initiatives to monitor how these standards are implemented were initiated – see several reports related to [charters](#), [initiatives](#) and [frameworks](#) on the topic. However, civil society advocacy for closing gaps in the implementation seems to have been limited. The new [Directorate of Internal Oversight's evaluation on Education for Democracy](#) to be issued in the first half of 2026 could provide information of interest for an assessment in the field.

Related Discussion Questions:

- *Why has civil society made little effort to demand the implementation of the CoE's democratic citizenship education standards?*
- *Is there a way to escape governmental control over formal education content on democracy and human rights?*
- *What non-formal education initiatives can be used to disseminate democratic culture in environments outside of direct governmental control?*

4. **Promotion of a sustainable independent public information space:** The functioning and performance of democracies depend on the quality of information provision and on a fair exchange of opinions that is not manipulated by political or commercial interests. One side of this is the freedom of journalists to operate, addressed by the CoE's [Safety of Journalists Platform](#). Another side is to prevent quality journalism from being drowned in a flood of disinformation and misinformation. CoE Secretary General Berset has mooted the idea of a [Convention on Disinformation and Foreign Influence](#); also [citizen empowerment – directed initiatives](#) (media literacy, resilience in coping with mis- and disinformation) have been taken on board. Beyond journalism, the issue of the creation of a safe environment to manifest ideas and promote constructive political and societal debate remains on the agenda. Overturning the dominant role of commercial interests in the online information space might be part of this discussion.

Related Discussion Questions:

- *How can democracies guarantee the independence and non-manipulation of information?*
- *How can the need to protect the democratic process from deliberate manipulation be reconciled with the preservation of freedom of expression and the risk of state censorship?*
- *Given the polarisation in current debates, what would be the most effective model for creating an independent public information space?*
- *What resilience strategies can democratic institutions adopt against the rise of disinformation and misinformation, as well as the [potential manipulation of democratic decision-making](#)?*

5. **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 dedicated CoE Guidelines on [NGO legislation](#) and on [civil society space](#), which both heavily draw on ECtHR jurisprudence and Venice Commission opinions. CINGO's [Expert Council of NGO Law](#) uses the NGO legislation guideline as the main standard against which they report; however, their reporting gets a limited follow-up within the CoE system.

The [Hague Declaration](#) (Point 7.9) urges that a protection alert system 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 letter to the Secretary General](#) (Point 4). A [CoE conference](#) to be held on 2 and 3 February 2026 will deal with civic space in relation to sustaining and renewing democracy and therefore, might address the issue. Besides, 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.”

Related Discussion Questions:

- *Is the creation of a civil society platform similar to the one on Safety of Journalists a good campaigning subject?*
- *Which other ways could be used to upgrade CoE attention for space of civil society?*

6. **Increasing inequality:** 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.” The angle of ‘inequality’ raises issues not just of guaranteeing a minimum level of living standards for everyone but also of possible measures to put on maximum on wealth or income, a line of thought which is suggested by [development NGO reporting](#) on unequal wealth division and by some [academics](#), which has, however, limited traction in the work of human rights and democracy NGOs (and has not entered mainstream political debate).

The announcement of the next [High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter](#) (Chișinău, 18-19 March 2026) “will address selected topical issues, highlighting the clear link between social justice and social rights, democratic stability and security.” A number of civil society organisations has [responded](#) to a (now closed) call for contributions to this conference.

Related Discussion Questions:

- *Is strengthening the European Social Charter by more ratifications, less reservations, more NGO complaints to be considered an important element of a New Democratic Pact?*
- *Should the development of 'inequality'-related standards be pursued by civil society?*

7. **Early warning against democratic backsliding** is raised in point 9.5 of [The Hague Declaration](#) and closely linked with the general call for strengthening of existing monitoring and preventive systems, which is the subject of Section 3 of the declaration. Not allowing easy dismissal of advice by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) is a key point of Section 3 (Point 3.6).

The rhetoric of the New Democratic Pact greatly emphasises the need to counter democratic backsliding, but at the same time, member states on the whole reject (or at least have no consensus on) additional monitoring mechanisms. SG Alain Berset himself raised the idea of a 'Democratic Resilience Fund' that "would provide rapid support wherever democracy teeters, allowing us to prevent, rather than repair" in an [opinion piece in May 2025](#); CURE has suggested this could be operationalised by using this Fund for a greatly beefed-up reaction of existing CoE mechanisms after an alarm for backsliding has kicked in (see the [October letter to the SG](#), Points (2) and (3)).

Related Discussion Questions:

- *Should advocacy be prioritised for a Democratic Resilience Fund, as per described above? Which existing mechanisms could be strengthened through this?*
- *What could be alarm indicators for setting the process in motion?*