Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe

FOR A STRONG AND EFFECTIVE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

SUMMARY OF THE ONLINE DISCUSSION
"Strengthening Democracy: From Words to Action"

1. Background, context and objectives

This online discussion was organised by **CURE – Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe** as part of its ongoing effort to strengthen the effectiveness of the **Council of Europe (CoE)** and to ensure that commitments to **democracy** translate into **concrete, enforceable and timely action**. The event was explicitly framed as a civil society contribution to the Council of Europe's **New Democratic Pact**, an initiative launched by the **Secretary General** in response to growing **democratic backsliding**, declining **public trust** and increasing pressure on **democratic institutions** across member states.

The meeting was **moderated by Ana Sevortian**, human rights expert and member of the **Standing Committee of the Council of Europe's Conference of International NGOs**, who guided the discussion across its thematic blocs and ensured structured and inclusive exchange between speakers and participants.

From the outset, participants stressed that the value of a **New Democratic Pact** lies not in its existence but in its **implementation**, **enforcement**, **political consequences** and **speed of response**. **Civil society** was repeatedly described as an **essential democratic actor**, not an optional stakeholder, whose **meaningful and structured involvement** is required across all areas of the Pact.

The discussion followed the structure currently used by the Council of Europe to present the New Democratic Pact and focused primarily on two of its three pillars, **learning and practicing democracy** and **protecting democracy**. The third pillar, **innovating for democracy**, was acknowledged but remained underdeveloped in the discussion, a gap that participants later identified as both telling and concerning.

2. Setting the scene, the New Democratic Pact and the Council of Europe's democratic record

2.1 The Council of Europe's work on strengthening democracy – historical background

(Anca Ailincai, Professor of Public Law, University of Grenoble Alpes)

The intervention examines the historical evolution of the Council of Europe's approach to democracy and its impact on European democratic standards, highlighting a persistent gap between normative ambition and institutional practice. Democracy is formally recognised in the Statute as a foundational principle of the organisation and is referred to as "genuine democracy," alongside human rights and the rule of law. From the outset, however, these principles were not treated as equal. The prevailing assumption was that democracy would be best protected indirectly, through the effective protection of human rights and the rule of law. As a result, the Council of Europe invested primarily in developing strong human rights mechanisms and later in tools relating to the rule of law, while democracy itself was never addressed as an autonomous object of protection. Over time, this indirect strategy proved insufficient, and the organisation has never fully succeeded in protecting democracy as such.

A central difficulty identified is the long-standing inability to define the concrete requirements of "genuine democracy." This problem became particularly evident in the 1990s, when the enlargement of the Council of Europe made it necessary to clarify what membership entailed. Clear standards were required to decide which states could accede to the organisation and, subsequently, to monitor whether member states were complying with their obligations.

Without an agreed understanding of democratic requirements, effective monitoring is undermined and sanctions are difficult to envisage. While the Council of Europe eventually managed to clarify the content of the rule of law, most notably through the Venice Commission's Rule of Law Checklist adopted in 2016 and later updated, similar efforts in the field of democracy repeatedly failed. A notable example is the 1996 draft declaration on genuine democracy prepared by a working group of the Committee of Ministers, which summarised core democratic principles but was never adopted, reflecting the absence of political consensus.

The lack of clear democratic standards has had direct institutional consequences. Unlike human rights, and to a lesser extent the rule of law, democracy has never been the subject of a dedicated monitoring mechanism at European level, except for local and regional democracy. This weakness was already identified in the mid-1990s. Initially, it was thought that the Committee of Ministers' political monitoring, particularly its thematic procedure, could address issues not covered by specific monitoring mechanisms. During the 1990s, this thematic procedure did address matters directly related to democracy, but it gradually fell into disuse and has not been employed since 2007, leaving no equivalent mechanism in its place.

Several attempts to remedy this structural gap illustrate both awareness of the problem and resistance to institutional solutions. Armenia proposed the creation of an independent monitoring mechanism covering democracy and the rule of law, but this proposal was not accepted. More recently, the Parliamentary Assembly invited the Committee of Ministers to establish an early warning mechanism to respond to democratic backsliding. Although this proposal was not rejected outright, the Committee emphasised that such a mechanism would require prior agreement on normative markers against which national situations could be assessed, once again exposing the unresolved issue of defining democratic standards. During preparations for the Fourth Summit, the idea of an early warning mechanism briefly resurfaced in the form of a Commissioner for Democracy and the Rule of Law, but all references to such a body were ultimately removed from the final Reykjavík Declaration.

Against this background, the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy and the draft parameters for their application represent a significant step forward compared to earlier failed initiatives. They reflect renewed efforts to articulate democratic commitments within the Council of Europe framework. However, this progress remains constrained by a clear reluctance on the part of member states to create new monitoring bodies or to envisage sanctions. Instead, the preferred approach is to promote self-assessment by member states rather than external scrutiny. As a result, democracy continues to occupy an ambiguous position within the Council of Europe system: repeatedly affirmed as a foundational value, yet insufficiently defined, monitored and enforced, leaving the core structural deficit largely unresolved.

Answering to questions from the audience, Anca Ailincai stated that many issues faced by the CoE have been already identified, but are politically hard to address.

2.2 The New Democratic Pact, scope, ambition and process

(Konstantin Baranov, CURE team member)

Konstantin Baranov presented the New Democratic Pact as a flagship initiative launched by the current Council of Europe Secretary General shortly after taking office. Public references to the Pact first appeared in autumn 2024, followed by the publication of an initial concept document in February 2025. At that early stage, the initiative was framed as a dynamic process intended to revitalise democracy and to culminate in a high-level political pact endorsed by heads of state

and governments in May 2025. As the process developed, however, this level of ambition was significantly reduced. By April 2025, ahead of the annual ministerial conference, a revised roadmap had redefined the overall objective as restoring citizens' confidence in democracy, with the main concrete outcome now described as a publication meant to inform legal policy development, provide guidance and shape programme budgets. References to a summit or binding political agreement had disappeared, signalling a clear recalibration of expectations.

In terms of implementation, the Pact had so far been characterised mainly by communication and engagement activities rather than structural reforms. These included the Democracy Firewall campaign in May 2025, which combined discussions on technology with debates on democratic resilience, and a request in June 2025 for additional budgetary resources of close to one million euros, a substantial amount given that the initiative remained conceptually vague. In September 2025, the Pact entered a more public phase with the launch of a dedicated website and a broader social media communication campaign.

Substantively, much of what was presented under the Democratic Pact consisted of activities the Council of Europe had already been carrying out, such as trainings, seminars and the long-standing World Forum for Democracy. A small number of new elements had been added, including hackathons and foresight seminars, the first of which took place in Helsinki and was intended to facilitate forward-looking discussions on the future of democracy. These activities were organised under three overarching pillars: learning and practice in democracy, protecting democracy and innovating for democracy. The first pillar focused on fostering dialogue across divides, building a shared vision of democracy, strengthening civic education and promoting youth leadership and participation. The second pillar grouped together rebuilding trust in democratic institutions, transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, countering disinformation, supporting public debate and a free media environment, defending the rule of law and judicial independence, fighting corruption, promoting social rights and advancing equality and inclusion. The third pillar centred on innovation, particularly the use of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, democratic experimentation and participatory models, the exchange of promising practices, responses to interconnected crises including climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, and the mobilisation of what was described as collective intelligence.

Konstantin Baranov noted that this three-pillar structure appeared somewhat artificial, bringing together a wide range of topics for the sake of a coherent framework rather than reflecting a clearly articulated conceptual logic. Although the initiative formally claimed to involve all Council of Europe departments and a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society, academia and young people, he observed that one year into implementation, this inclusive approach had not yet been meaningfully implemented. The Pact was described as in a pilot phase, with a forthcoming review expected to assess outcomes and decide how to proceed.

From a civil society perspective, the discussion was framed using a different structure from that of the Pact. Instead of the three pillars, civil society relied on seven thematic areas derived from the Civil Society Declaration adopted at the Civil Society Summit in spring 2023. For the purposes of the event, these themes were loosely mapped onto the Pact's pillars, though this alignment was acknowledged to be somewhat arbitrary.

3. Bloc I: Learning and Practicing Democracy

3.1 Civic education, democratic literacy and participation

(Jack Hanning, Despina Syrri, Association of Schools of Political Studies)

Jack Hanning, President of the Association of Schools of Political Studies of the Council of Europe, opened the session on civic education and the New Democratic Pact. He introduced Despina Syrri, Secretary General of the Association and head of the Greek School of Political Studies.

Despina Syrri framed her intervention around the current state of civic education in Europe and its relevance for the New Democratic Pact. She began by noting a positive development: civic education had been undergoing significant renewal and was increasingly understood not merely as teaching about democratic systems, but as building democratic competences, strengthening common European values and preparing people for active participation in democratic life. She described key features of this shift, including the integration of European values and knowledge of democratic institutions, the blending of formal, non-formal and digital learning, the embedding of human rights and global citizenship, the strengthening of participatory school cultures and efforts to address contemporary challenges.

She stressed, however, that these policy frameworks often remained aspirational and were not consistently reflected in everyday practice. In formal education, civic education was unevenly taught, rarely embedded across subject areas, under-resourced and seldom linked to genuine democratic participation. Schools frequently relied on token structures, such as student councils without fostering meaningful engagement. Teachers often lacked training in human rights education, handling controversial issues, digital citizenship and participatory methods, while polarisation and digital misinformation were on the rise. Although European institutions emphasised critical thinking, media literacy, resilience to misinformation and dialogue across differences, implementation varied widely among states. Some countries promoted democratic culture in broad but vague terms, while others prioritised national citizenship over European citizenship. Time allocated to civic education differed greatly, it rarely ran throughout curricula, and in certain states, education was highly centralised, limiting local initiative.

She also highlighted growing difficulties in non-formal civic education, linked to shrinking civic space in several European countries and a declining appreciation by governments of civil society's role, alongside broader rule of law and human rights concerns, such as restrictions on freedom of expression. In this context, she underlined the importance of complementing formal education with non-formal, digital and civil society–led initiatives that foster democratic competences. She referred to long-standing Council of Europe efforts in this area, particularly the Schools of Political Studies Network, which had provided structured, non-partisan political education outside state systems since the 1990s. These programmes had trained young leaders, civil society experts and journalists in democratic governance, human rights and participatory practices, while strengthening resilience against disinformation and authoritarian narratives, even though such initiatives had not always been understood or welcomed by all governments.

Despina Syrri emphasised the role civil society could play in creating community-based learning environments, applying the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, adapting standards to local contexts, and developing digital and civic tech solutions. She questioned, however, how widely these tools were known or used in practice. While international platforms, such as the World Forum for Democracy existed, she raised

concerns about the limited monitoring of cross-border cooperation on democratic education and the insufficient advocacy for academic freedom.

She then turned a critical lens on civil society itself, asking why there had been so little collective effort to demand implementation of the Council of Europe's standards on democratic citizenship education. She identified several obstacles: shrinking civic space and regulatory constraints, lack of awareness and capacity among grassroots actors, competing priorities and resource limitations, fragmented engagement and weak strategic alliances, and the absence of strong frameworks for civil society participation in standard-setting and monitoring. She also noted that education for democracy was often treated as a specialised field rather than a cross-cutting priority, at a time when trust in elites was eroding and democratic systems were under increasing strain.

She concluded by observing that the network of Schools of Political Studies had declined from twenty to sixteen over the previous two years, which she presented as indicative of broader democratic regression. At the same time, she stressed that this record also reflected the personal costs borne by those working in democratic education, noting that several school directors had directly suffered from declining democratic standards in their respective Council of Europe member states. She cited, among others, Osman Kavala, who remained in detention despite Council of Europe efforts and binding court judgements, describing his case as emblematic both of the nature of their work and of the direction in which democratic standards were heading.

3.2 Civic space as a condition for practicing democracy

(Ana Mosiashvili, European Partnership for Democracy)

Ana Mosiashvili spoke about what the New Democratic Pact would need to deliver in order to protect, support and enable civil society. She introduced EPD as a network of organisations working to support democracy within and beyond Europe and briefly presented the European Democracy Hub, co-managed by EPD and Carnegie Europe, which brought together expertise on democracy and regularly published research and analysis.

She recalled that the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy recognised civil society as an essential pillar of democratic life rather than a secondary actor. However, she stressed that there was a growing gap between these commitments and reality. Drawing on CIVICUS data, she noted a rapid deterioration of civic space across Council of Europe member states, with six countries downgraded in their civic space ratings. Serbia and Georgia had moved from "obstructed" to "repressed;" France, Germany and Italy from "narrowed" to "obstructed;" and Switzerland from "open" to "narrowed." She described these developments as part of a structural and accelerating pattern rather than isolated incidents, emphasising that attacks on civil society often represented the first step in broader democratic backsliding towards more authoritarian forms of governance.

She explained that restrictions on civic space were increasingly justified through narratives of public order, security or foreign interference, including so-called "foreign agents" legislation. Certain organisations and activists were particularly exposed to far-right and exclusionary rhetoric, notably those working on climate justice, Palestine solidarity, LGBTQ+ rights, women's and youth rights, migration. At the same time, she observed that funding for civil society was shrinking, affected both by international developments such as cuts in US funding and by reduced budgets in several European countries, including the Netherlands, France and Belgium. These reductions affected not only domestic civil society but also development aid, which she argued was crucial for supporting democracy beyond Europe's borders.

Against this backdrop, she raised fundamental questions about whether the New Democratic Pact would be sufficient and effective in protecting civic space in a rapidly changing environment marked by growing autocratic appeal. She argued that democratic responses were often too slow and fragmented, while the legal order was increasingly challenged, including through non-compliance with European Court of Human Rights judgements. She stressed the need for stronger coordination between the European Union and the Council of Europe, particularly in relation to initiatives, such as the Democracy Shield, and for learning from other regions where civil society had developed resilient and adaptive strategies under sustained pressure.

Ana Mosiashvili also highlighted the importance of recognising informal civic movements, especially in contexts where formal civil society organisations were increasingly restricted. These informal movements often provided crucial spaces for democratic participation but faced obstacles, such as lack of funding and exclusion from formal consultation processes with European institutions. She argued that democratic systems needed to adapt to this reality and to changing patterns of engagement, including widespread distrust among parts of the population, in order to ensure that these movements could survive and contribute meaningfully.

She concluded by calling for a rethinking of how civil society was supported, combining emergency response mechanisms with long-term sustainability. This, she said, required flexible and accessible funding models, supportive legal frameworks, political recognition of civil society as legitimate and independent democratic actors, and safe digital and physical spaces. She emphasised the need for political allies willing to publicly defend civil society, noting that too many political voices currently questioned its legitimacy rather than recognising its watchdog role. Referring to the European Commission's new civil society strategy, she mentioned that EPD had developed recommendations that could also inspire the Council of Europe. She closed by underlining that while the New Democratic Pact itself was important, its implementation would be decisive, and that civil society would need to be meaningfully involved across all areas of the Pact if it were to succeed.

Across the discussion, **civic space** was consistently framed as a **precondition for democracy**, not a sectoral concern. Participants argued that the Council of Europe should strengthen civic space by being **exemplary itself**, including through a **stronger and more formal role for NGOs** within its own bodies, notably the **Committee of Ministers**.

Contributors called for clearer and more detailed articulation of **how civil society can participate in state administration**, including within the **judicial system**. Proposals included **rapid alert mechanisms** to respond to **attacks on civil society**, encompassing legal restrictions, disinformation campaigns, hostile rhetoric, surveillance and intimidation.

Participants also proposed that every **Secretary General country visit**, especially to states where democracy is under pressure, should include a **formal, public meeting with independent civil society and human rights defenders**, reinforcing their **legitimacy**, **visibility** and **political protection**. Strong concern was expressed about **backsliding on migration**, including the **criminalisation of humanitarian action**, which was described as directly undermining **democratic citizenship**.

4. Bloc II: Protecting Democracy

4.1 Elections and electoral integrity

(Boriss Cilevičs, formerly PACE member)

Boriss Cilevičs focused on strengthening the practical contribution of civil society to election monitoring under the New Democratic Pact, identifying synergy between actors as the central requirement. He argued that effective cooperation typically involved civil society working closely with members of parliament, members of the European Parliament, European Parliament and Council of Europe delegations, particularly short-term observers (STOs). This collaboration was often facilitated directly or through intermediary bodies, which he described as especially important.

He highlighted several key institutional partners. The PACE Elections Division was identified as a small but highly effective cooperation partner, with a strong emphasis on the need for permanent coordination rather than ad hoc engagement. Committee secretariats within PACE, including but not limited to the Monitoring Committee, were also mentioned, alongside designated contact points in PACE, the European Parliament and other international parliamentary bodies. According to Boriss Cilevičs, civil society actors and human rights defenders often succeeded in identifying politicians with a genuine interest in election integrity and maintaining sustained relationships with these individuals was presented as essential. In addition, heads of delegations were singled out for their role in ensuring continuity through long-term observation.

Boriss Cilevičs then outlined three concrete practical considerations. First, he stressed that short-term observers tended to function more as witnesses than as monitors, given their limited familiarity with local realities. For this reason, civil society input was described as crucial both before and during election missions, particularly in drawing attention to sensitive or high-risk issues.

Second, while STOs were generally effective in observing procedures on the election day itself, he emphasised that the most serious problems increasingly arose earlier in the electoral process. These included candidate registration, access to media, especially public broadcasters, the misuse of administrative resources and emerging challenges such as the abusive use of artificial intelligence, including deepfakes. Only civil society, he argued, was in a position to systematically gather evidence on these pre-election issues. Timely transmission of such information to election divisions, OSCE officers and STOs was therefore essential so that it could be reflected in briefing guidelines and in observer reports, which were often drafted extremely quickly, sometimes on the day of the vote or immediately thereafter.

Third, Boriss Cilevičs underlined the importance of addressing the problem of so-called fake observers at an early stage. While projects, such as ODF, maintained lists of such actors, these required constant updating. Fake observers were described as actively seeking to undermine election credibility, often by presenting themselves as legitimate civil society representatives. Early and structured information-sharing between civil society, election divisions, ODF and institutional contact points was seen as necessary to prevent last-minute competition and confusion during observation missions.

He concluded by presenting these measures as practical proposals for the New Democratic Pact, aimed at reinforcing the role of civil society in safeguarding free and fair elections through sustained coordination, early engagement and systematic information exchange.

4.2 Democracy benchmarking, inequality and crisis response

(Harry Hummel, CURE team member)

Harry Hummel addressed three related areas under the broader heading of protecting democracy: democratic benchmarking, inequality and rapid response to democratic crises.

He began with democracy benchmarking and the way existing standards were being applied. He referred to the Council of Europe's long-standing framework for democratic principles at local level, which had evolved into the European Label of Governance Excellence (ELoGE). Although this system had existed for more than two decades and was open to all Council of Europe member states, he noted that fewer than a half of them actually used it, and even within participating countries, only a limited number of municipalities had obtained the label. It was also unclear how many local authorities were denied certification. From a rights-based perspective, he argued that all municipalities should have the opportunity to apply and be assessed. He explained that ELoGE covered a wide range of criteria, including transparency, adherence to the rule of law, anti-corruption, citizen participation in local decision-making, respect for freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. He presented this framework as an important entry point for civil society to push for democratic standards at local level. One of his key practical suggestions was therefore that civil society should pay much greater attention to the use, uptake and implementation of ELoGE. More broadly, he stressed that civil society should not focus exclusively on national governments as guardians of democracy, particularly since national authorities were often themselves driving democratic erosion and that strengthening democratic practices at local and societal levels was essential.

He then turned to inequality, which he treated as a separate but closely connected issue. Referring to the Civil Society Summit declaration, he noted that social rights and social justice featured prominently in the New Democratic Pact discourse, sometimes accompanied by unusually strong rhetoric from Council of Europe leadership. In practical terms, he highlighted the European Social Charter as a key instrument, whose potential to advance social justice and reinforce democratic stability remained underused. He pointed to the upcoming event on the Social Charter in Chișinău, under Moldova's chairpersonship in the Committee of Ministers, as an opportunity for civil society to explicitly link social rights to the preservation of democracy. He emphasised that this was not only about reducing inequality, but also about ensuring equal treatment regardless of socio-economic status. He cited the work of organisations, such as ATD Fourth World, including campaigns to expand anti-discrimination legislation, and suggested that such initiatives could be scaled up and generalised across Europe.

Finally, he addressed the need for rapid response capacity in situations of democratic backsliding. Referring to a proposal by the Secretary General for a Democratic Resilience Fund, intended to enable the Council of Europe to act more quickly and prevent democratic damage rather than merely repair it, he observed that this idea had not been meaningfully taken up by member states. Drawing on recent developments in Georgia as an example, he argued that governments imposing restrictive measures were often far faster and more persistent than international institutions in reacting. While the Council of Europe typically responded through visits and reports, these mechanisms did not match the speed or scale of democratic regression on the

ground. He concluded that this imbalance needed to be corrected and suggested that a dedicated resilience fund could provide the capacity for quicker and more effective action, urging civil society to advocate for such tools within the framework of the New Democratic Pact.

4.3 Democracy and human rights monitoring

A substantial part of the discussion focused on **democracy and human rights monitoring**. Participants argued that the Council of Europe should prioritise monitoring the **quality of democracy**, not only elections, and **publicise findings widely**, including through cooperation with **European media**. Strong emphasis was placed on **enforcing judgements of the European Court of Human Rights**, including in emblematic cases, such as that of **Osman Kavala**.

Proposals included **regular democracy reports**, **peer review mechanisms** inspired by the **UN Universal Periodic Review**, and stronger use of the **Venice Commission**, potentially through a more **systematic monitoring mandate**. At the same time, participants warned that additional reporting requirements risked **overburdening civil society**, unless monitoring leads to **automatic follow-up** and **tangible consequences**.

5. Priority-setting and outcomes

In a polling exercise, participants were asked to identify priority areas for the New Democratic Pact. **Space for civil society** emerged as the top priority, followed by **democracy monitoring and benchmarking**, **civic education**, **inequality**, **crisis response**, **information ecosystem** and **elections**. Participants interpreted these results as confirmation that **civic space** is **foundational** to all other democratic measures.

6. Conclusions and next steps

The discussion concluded that the New Democratic Pact must move decisively from **rhetoric to action**, with greater emphasis on **implementation**, **prevention** and **enforcement**. **Civic space**, **democracy monitoring** and **civic education** emerged as the most urgent priorities. **Innovation for democracy** remains insufficiently developed and requires focused attention.

CURE committed to **processing and structuring all inputs**, sharing consolidated outcomes with participants and feeding civil society proposals into forthcoming **Council of Europe processes**, including the **2-3 February 2026 Strasbourg conference**.