

To the Secretary General of the
Council of Europe
Mr. Alain Berset

CONTACT US

info@cure-campaign.org

WEBSITE

www.cure-campaign.org

CURE ON LINKEDIN

[@cure-campaign](https://www.linkedin.com/company/cure-campaign)

CURE ON X/ TWITTER

[@cure_coe](https://twitter.com/cure_coe)

CURE ON BLUESKY

[@curecampaign](https://bsky.app/profile/curecampaign)

30 October 2025

Subject: Open letter on the occasion of the end of the first year in office

Dear Mr Secretary General,

In September 2024, on the occasion of the start of your tenure as the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (CoE), the Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe (CURE) wrote to you on what we felt should be priority issues for you¹. CURE is an NGO coalition created in 2022 to advocate for strengthening of the Council of Europe in realising its mission to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law on our continent.

In this letter, we want to re-visit the issues we covered a year ago, look at the progress that has been made and at the next steps that can be taken. The calls we made were the following:

- (1) protect the rights of people suffering from armed aggression and occupation;
- (2) confront serious and persistent lack of political will to align with European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) standards;
- (3) strengthen follow-up of monitoring outcomes and recommendations by expert bodies;
- (4) set up an independent and well-resourced programme of engagement with civil society;
- (5) stimulate people in European non-member states to stand behind CoE values and principles.

We do realise that with regard to many of the steps that we advocate for, you depend to a greater or lesser extent on the political will of the CoE member states. This message is an open letter, and we will be also raising these points as relevant with representatives of the member states. However, we feel that these times call for bold initiatives in the defense of CoE values. As the person leading the day-to-day work of the organisation and the preparation of proposals for its future, and as the main spokesperson of the CoE, you can play a great role in this respect.

Your flagship initiative, the New Democratic Pact for Europe, had not been launched yet at the time we wrote our letter last year. We touch on it under points (2), (3) and (4), and are exploring how to further contribute in the future to discussions on the Pact.

¹ See <https://cure-campaign.org/wp-content/uploads/LetterSGSeptember2024Final.pdf>.

(1) Protect the rights of people suffering from armed aggression and occupation

We welcome the progress that has been made in support of the Ukrainian judicial system, on the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression and in the work of the Register of Damage for Ukraine (RD4U), as well as the preparations for a Claims Commission. At the same time, we want to point out that major uncertainty exists about **reparations for damage inflicted on inhabitants of Ukraine in the period of February 2014 – February 2022**. We urge clarity on how this will be dealt with – by an extension of the period covered by the Register and the Claims Commission and/ or by moving ahead on enforcing the just satisfaction to be awarded under European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgements against Russia.

ECtHR judgements against Russia are also relevant for reparations for human rights violations in Georgia, with large just satisfaction amounts outstanding. In our view, **unconventional steps to extract the funds from the Russian state** should be considered with regard to reparations to both Georgians and Ukrainians. We urge the CoE to stimulate further discussion on the steps that member states (and state parties to the RD4U and Claims Commission) can take to prevent the ECtHR just satisfaction allocations requiring payments by Russia, the RD4U and the Claims Commission from remaining merely existent “on paper”.

(2) Confront serious and persistent lack of political will to align with ECHR standards and (3) strengthen follow-up of monitoring outcomes and recommendations by expert bodies

The affirmation in the Reykjavík Declaration of the key role of the ECHR system has been followed by a certain strengthening of the Department for the Execution of Judgements. New initiatives have been taken, e.g. on the role of local authorities in the implementation of judgements. However, the **standards set by the ECHR and the Court’s judgements continue to be heavily challenged**. A number of states exhibits a chronic crisis of lack of political will to adhere to ECtHR judgements. Others question the application of the Convention in situations they find difficult to handle, with some political forces urging regressive amendments to or even departure from the Convention. Yet others are going through an acute crisis, developing at such a speed that Court judgements do not become available in time. In these situations, all tools available to the CoE must be used to the maximum.

One instrument that in our view merits and allows for an expanded use is the launching of inquiries by the Secretary General on the way, in which member states ensure ‘the effective implementation of the Convention’ (**Art. 52 ECHR**). In cases the result of these inquiries is not fully satisfactory, they could become the starting point for a dialogue on the effective implementation of the Convention. We would suggest that the level of leading judgements that are pending before the Committee of Ministers could be a key indicator of the need to set such a process in motion.

Public information activities explaining and highlighting the importance of the Convention system should be massively increased. Further discussion is needed on how civil society at large – not only the human rights groups – can contribute to this effort in the best possible way, and exchange of information on best practices in this field should be stimulated.

In the case of an **acute crisis**, we typically see the authorities speedily enacting measures that are at odds with Convention standards. This year, Georgia is a case in point. You yourself and other CoE actors have tried influencing developments in a more human rights compliant direction, but we see the authorities take worrisome steps every week, if not every day, and CoE mechanisms get overwhelmed. Resources seem to be insufficient for monitoring whether assurances obtained from the authorities are complied with, and for reacting when that is not the case. **Efforts to address this type of situation need to be stepped up immensely** with, for instance, the appointment of an SG envoy and/ or establishment of a special CoE task force including the Commissioner for Human Rights and other relevant actors. The capacity of such a mechanism should match the scale and speed of action of the state in question. We urge you to consider the creation of such an urgent reaction facility.

In the longer run, such a capacity could be found in a proposal that you floated in May 2025 in your opinion piece on the New Democratic Pact for Europe: the creation of a **‘Democratic Resilience Fund’** that ‘would

provide rapid support wherever democracy teeters, allowing us to prevent, rather than repair.² We consider this an excellent proposal that merits being carried forward.

(4) Set up an independent and well-resourced programme of engagement with civil society

A key proposition of CURE is that civil society forces that support the CoE are essential in realising the standards of the Council of Europe. They need to be actively involved in spreading awareness of those standards, and in monitoring of and advocating for their implementation. Civil society is key to upholding human rights standards and democratic principles. Active outreach and facilitation by the CoE will help greatly in harnessing this potential of civil society.

However, the recently published DIO Evaluation of the Implementation of the Reykjavík Declaration indicates that **the budget for civil society engagement has decreased³. This should be reversed**. Thinking outside the box is needed here, for instance by exploring how a level of attention and priority similar to that allocated to youth work could be applied to the CoE's "civil society pillar" in order to fully utilise civil society's potential and to fulfil the political promises made in Reykjavík.

Stimulating civil society mobilisation in favour of democracy, where necessary also in opposition to governments taking anti-democratic measures, should be properly incorporated into the New Democratic Pact for Europe. Democratic practices at local and community level should also be part of this push to engage civil society.

We also have some observations on **your own engagement with civil society that supports CoE values** – both in Strasbourg and during your visits to CoE member states or partner countries. In Strasbourg, the initiative of holding special regular exchanges with civil society representatives started by the previous SG now, unfortunately, seems to be either put on hold or abandoned⁴. The review of new requests for participatory status by INGOs is facing inexplicable delays, which hamper the ability of these INGOs to effectively cooperate with the CoE.

In the member states, **civil society actors that work at the promotion of the implementation of CoE standards should be publicly recognised** for their efforts. Such recognition, reflected in your official agenda and in the publicity surrounding it, can support their work under all too often difficult circumstances. In principle, every country visit carried out by the SG, in particular to those places where human rights and democracy are under threat, should include this component.

The situation of human rights defenders subject to repressive state measures merits particular attention. The Private Office procedure on human rights defenders interacting with the Council of Europe⁵, created to counter reprisals against human rights defenders as a consequence of their interaction with the organisation, is all but invisible, and which steps the SG takes to follow-up on reports of reprisals is completely unclear.

Beyond this special procedure on reprisals, the **shrinking of space for civic action** is an issue of increasing concern. Civil society groups in Brussels are pointing to the CoE Platform for the Safety of Journalists while calling for a similar mechanism for civil society to be created by the EU. We suggest there can be a role for the CoE in setting up and possibly hosting such a mechanism⁶, but this idea should be assertively promoted towards the EU.

² Euroviews. Democracy is Europe's first line of defence, www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/22/democracy-is-europes-first-line-of-defence.

³ Evaluation of the Implementation of the Reykjavík Declaration, <https://rm.coe.int/dio-eva-2025-03-rd-finalreport-en/1680b62501>, paragraph 51.

⁴ This initiative was part of the implementation of a 2019 Ministerial Council decision; see the reference at www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/secretary-general-s-roadmap-on-civil-society-engagement-with-the-council-of-europe; this webpage also contains the report of the one exchange that has taken place until now, in September 2023.

⁵ Private Office procedure on human rights defenders interacting with the Council of Europe: www.coe.int/en/web/secretary-general/procedure-human-rights-defenders.

⁶ See https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Civil-Society-Europe-Contribution_Consultation-on-the-Civil-Society-Strategy.pdf, page 21.

Finally, under this heading, we want to call for continuous attention for the situation of **Václav Havel Prize laureates**. Quite a number of them are behind bars; one of them is Anar Mammadli, the 2014 Václav Havel Prize winner. The prize is an initiative of PACE, but PACE is an integral part of the Council of Europe, therefore the fate of the prize winners should be of concern to the whole CoE.

(5) Stimulate people in non-member states to stand behind CoE values and principles

While the work of the CoE Contact Group on cooperation with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society is gaining some traction, there is no progress on the creation of a similarly structured and systematic framework for cooperation with Russian counterparts. The respective initiative by the Parliamentary Assembly, the “Platform for Dialogue with Russian democratic forces in exile”, is much more limited in scope and cannot fully substitute **structured cooperation with a wide range of Russian anti-war, human rights and democracy-oriented groups and initiatives** at the intergovernmental and Secretariat level. The Committee of Ministers needs to resume consideration of options for such a framework, and you could play a decisive role in this, as the previous SG did putting forward the proposal for the Contact Group on Belarus.

We hope this letter is a useful contribution to your efforts to promote the strength and effectiveness of the Council of Europe, and of ways in which civil society can assist in these efforts.

Yours sincerely,

CURE Steering Committee:

Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Oslo

Katerina Hadzi-Miceva Evans, European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, The Hague

Hanna Machińska, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Warsaw

Oleksandra Matviichuk, Center for Civil Liberties, Kyiv

Karinna Moskalenko, International Protection Centre, Strasbourg