

**Submission to the PACE Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights
in the context of the preparation of the report
“Civil society and the Parliamentary Assembly: towards greater transparency and engagement”**

[The Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe – CURE](#) highly appreciates an opportunity to provide an input to the Parliamentary Assembly’s report “Civil society and the Parliamentary Assembly: towards greater transparency and engagement” prepared by Ms. Azadeh Rojhan (Sweden, SOC).

Civil society has always perceived the Assembly as a Council of Europe’s body that is much more transparent and open for cooperation than the Committee of Ministers. Many NGOs representatives traditionally visit Strasbourg during the Assembly’s part-sessions as this is supposed to give them opportunity to engage with the widest range of CoE stakeholders. However, over the last several years, the Assembly (or the CoE in general) have introduced a series of restrictions to the rules governing access in response to:

- the “caviar diplomacy” corruption scandal;
- a series of terrorist attacks committed at the territory of France;
- the COVID-19 pandemic.

These measures, which were intended to enhance the security and prevent unwanted intervention in the Assembly’s work, at the same time, have, adversely, significantly restricted NGOs’ access to the Assembly and, consequently, their opportunities to meaningfully engage with its members and Secretariat. Since 2023, this tendency has been further exacerbated by the temporary arrangements put in place due to the renovation of the Assembly’s Hemicycle and holding its plenary sittings at the European Parliament premises.

In line with the Reykjavik Declaration¹, the **introduction of a transparency register at the Assembly** should not become yet another step restricting civil society’s participation in its work, but **provide a way of removing the existing barriers and creating additional opportunities** for such engagement, in particular, regarding:

- NGOs’ access to the CoE premises;
- their access to working facilities;
- access to information;
- opportunities to organize side-events;
- other opportunities for them to present their views and disseminate information at the Assembly.

Access to the CoE premises

Formerly, the INGOs enjoying the participatory status with the CoE had an opportunity to register a limited number of their representatives to attend an Assembly’s part-session for its entire duration by filling in a simple online form, without any vetting or selection conducted. Currently, only those INGO representatives who are holders of permanent photo-badges (one or two persons per INGO, usually its president/CEO and the permanent delegate to the Conference of INGOs) can freely access the premises during the Assembly’s sessions, which effectively excludes any representatives of NGOs working at the national and local level.

The options of access to the Palais currently available to all the other NGO representatives include:

- participation as experts in the hearings / exchanges of views held by the Assembly’s committees at the invitation of these committees (provides them with an “expert” badge valid for the day of the event);
- participation as speakers at “unofficial” side-events organized by the Assembly members (a badge valid for the event duration only; the person needs to be met by a Secretariat staff member at the entrance and escorted around the premises);
- bilateral meetings with the Assembly members or Secretariat staff (similar to the previous point);
- observation of plenary sittings from the visitor’s gallery (a badge that only gives access to the gallery).

¹ CM(2023)57-final, para. 40: “We also call for a review and further reinforcement of the Organisation’s outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations and national human rights institutions”, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680ab364c>

For the NGOs that are interested in actively engaging with the Assembly, the opportunity to reach out to it to share their expertise and views at their own initiative, when they themselves consider it necessary and important, not only when they are expressly invited to do so, is often crucial for the success of their advocacy efforts. The opportunity for them to attend hearings / exchanges held by the committees (the ones that are open to the public) and to interact with the Assembly's members informally during the breaks, at the parliamentarians' bar, etc. can hardly be overestimated. Unfortunately, as described above, such opportunities are currently very limited. In this situation, some NGO representatives opt for seeking an accreditation with the CoE as media representatives, as it provides them with a much better access.

In case the PACE transparency register is created, registration in it should enable NGOs **to request badges for their representatives providing them access to the CoE premises** for the entire duration of the Assembly's part-sessions (and, if possible, also for the committee meetings).

Access to working facilities

Unlike media representatives, NGOs currently do not have a dedicated space inside the CoE premises that provides them with access to working facilities (desks, computers, printers / scanners, etc.) during the Assembly's meetings. As there are no commercial co-working or printing facilities in close proximity to the CoE premises, this creates practical complications for NGO representatives coming from outside Strasbourg.

NGOs included in the register could be provided with the **access to working facilities along with accredited media representatives** (e.g., by reserving a number of workplaces for them in the media room at the Palais).

Access to information

NGOs could be provided with an **extended access to Assembly's documents and other information**, such as:

- working documents of the committees (introductory memoranda for the reports under preparation, minutes of the hearings, etc.);
- contact details of the Assembly members (currently, only contacts of the Secretariat staff is publicly available on the Assembly's website).

This can be done by giving them the credentials for a limited access to the Assembly's intranet resources.

Opportunities to organize side-events

The opportunity to present their information, views and proposals at side-events during the Assembly's part-sessions has always been an important advocacy tool for NGOs. Unfortunately, the current modalities for holding the "non-official" side-events (formally organized by the Assembly's members) are quite restrictive:

- the number of rooms available for side-events (only 1 or 2 rooms in parallel) is insufficient – it does not meet a much high demand and creates a severe competition between potential event organizers;
- the deadline for booking the slots for events (a month in advance) is too early to allow for organizing the events addressing the most urgent issues, the ones related to the most recent developments;
- the opportunities to disseminate information about the side-events / advertise them are strictly limited (e.g., no event posters are allowed in the common areas of the premises, etc.).

The **rules for holding "non-official" side-events during the Assembly's sessions should be reviewed to allow for a greater availability and flexibility**. An option for NGOs included in the register to organize side-events on their own (without an obligation of being sponsored by Assembly's members) could also be considered.

Other opportunities to present views and disseminate information

The Assembly could also explore providing registered NGOs with a number of **additional opportunities to present their views and disseminate information**, which would be similar to the ones already provided to them by other international bodies (UN HRC, OSCE human dimension meetings, etc.), such as:

- asking questions / making comments at the committees' hearings / exchanges of views that are open to the public (e.g., a reserved time slot at the end of the meeting);
- intervening at the current affairs and urgent procedure debates (e.g., a reserved time slot at the end);
- disseminating their materials (reports, appeals, etc.) for the Assembly meetings electronically (sent or made available on the Intranet to all the members taking part in the meeting) and physically (on the information stands near the Assembly's meeting rooms, on special bulletin boards, etc.).

Procedure for entering the register

In the case a transparency register for the PACE is created and NGOs are obliged to register in it along with commercial entities, **the procedure** for this **should be simple and clear**.

The INGOs enjoying participatory status with the CoE should be included in the register automatically, as they have already passed an accreditation-like procedure (in line with the Resolution CM/Res(2016)3²), in which they provide detailed information about their objectives, structure, governance, funding and activities to the Secretariat³, and then a decision to grant them this status is subject for a tacit approval by the CM, the Assembly and the Congress. Asking these NGOs to go through another accreditation-like procedure separately with the Assembly would seem to be excessive, burdensome and unfair.

Besides, the register's procedure should seek to **avoid an unnecessary duplication with other similar arrangements**, including a recent Secretary General's proposal on creating "an organization-wide database" of NGOs engaging with the CoE⁴.

The CURE team hopes that both the rapporteur and the Assembly as a whole will give a due consideration to its suggestions listed above, although we understand that their implementation would, in most cases, require changes to the Assembly's rules of procedure and / or allocation of additional resources. We remain at your disposal for providing the necessary clarifications or further details and for any follow-up discussions.

Contact us: info@cure-campaign.org

² See: Resolution CM/Res(2016)3 "Participatory status for international non-governmental organisations with the Council of Europe", 6 July 2016, https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168068824c

³ See: <https://coe-ngo.org/#/ingos>

⁴ See: SG/Inf(2023)28 "Secretary General's Roadmap on the Council of Europe's Engagement with Civil Society 2024-2027", 12 September 2023, https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680ac8ded, para. 20