



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

Meld. St. 20 (2024–2025) Report to the Storting (white paper)

Promoting democracy, rule of law and human rights in Europe

Norway's work in the Council of Europe



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*Recommendation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 4 April 2025,
approved in a cabinet meeting of the same date.
(Støre Government)*

1 Introduction

1.1 Europe at war: Our values under attack

We are living in a period of geopolitical upheaval and rapid changes, where much seems uncertain. Three decades ago, we experienced a strengthening of democratic values and multilateral co-operation. Today, the situation is starkly different. Globalisation has stalled amidst rising great power rivalry and deepening polarisation. We are witnessing authoritarian political forces gaining ground – even in allied and closely aligned countries. The rules-based world order, which has served Norway well, is now under intense pressure. All of these developments are affecting Europe, which is undergoing changes in step with the geopolitical upheavals unfolding in the world around us.

The challenges to human rights are also evident. Freedoms are weakened and democratic institutions are being eroded and pressurised. Democratic rules and the rule of law are being undermined by internal and external forces. We recognise that the combined military and non-military instruments employed by foreign states have both a direct and indirect impact on Norwegian interests and security.

Our security, economy, freedom, and prosperity depend on safeguarding the system we have been building since the Second World War from

erosion. At the same time as the NATO defence alliance was established in 1949, the Council of Europe was founded, in the belief that democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are the best defence against another war on the European continent. The forerunner of the EU, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), was established three years later to foster peace through integration, based on a strong shared community of values.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union shortly thereafter, the former Eastern Bloc countries were invited to become members of the Council of Europe. At the same time, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was founded, based on the principles of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, as an extension of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). The aim was to promote security through a comprehensive approach that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human security aspects. At the time, the prevailing perception was that adapting to common values and commitments would be a gradual process and that the challenges stemmed mainly from limited resources and capacity. However, we are now seeing that many of the challenges are more closely tied to a lack of political will.

Russia's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 pose a threat to international peace and security and marked a watershed moment both globally and for Europe. Russia's attack on Ukraine violates the principle of sovereignty, a pivotal principle of international law. Russia's aggression primarily affects the Ukrainian people, but also puts the European security architecture under pressure and undermines existing co-operation agreements. What is at stake in Ukraine is not only the rule of law, democracy, and territorial integrity, but Ukraine's very existence as a free and independent nation and state. Norway's security, prosperity and freedom of action are based on respect for international law in a rules-based international order. The outcome of Russia's aggression in Ukraine will have a direct impact on European and Norwegian security.

We are now witnessing a new urgency in Europe – a reversal of 1989. In 2022, Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe. In recent years, the world – and our neighbouring regions – have grown more perilous. We face a range of unpredictable and complex threats that undermine the values and principles on which we have built our societies. Several countries across Europe are introducing restrictive laws that limit the democratic space of NGOs and political opposition, for example, through anti-terrorism or other security legislation. This diminishes the space for seeking peaceful solutions to conflicts.

This situation is compounded by the three major global environmental crises – climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution – which we also require both global and regional co-operation to solve. These crises are intensifying, and the search for solutions is hindered by the unpredictable and complex threats we now face. They also impact human rights, democracy and the rule of law, all of which are critical to solving the crises.

An important measure to combat the above-mentioned threats and crises is the white paper on total preparedness (Meld. St. 9 (2024–2025)), which aims to ensure that Norwegian civil society is equipped to deal with a crisis or war. The Government also wants to highlight how we can promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights – and thereby security – in Europe, with a primary focus on the efforts and priorities of the Council of Europe. That is the purpose of this white paper. A policy update in the Council of Europe is needed to provide guidance and political direction on how to use our membership in the organisation to best support democracy and the

rule of law in Europe. This endeavour is more important than ever.

The EU plays a central role in protecting fundamental values and defending democracy in Europe. Norway co-operates closely with the EU and its member states in various forums and through various co-operation structures to support this, including through EEA and Norway Grants. Closer co-operation with the EU to protect our values is necessary.

Thus, the timing of this report is particularly apt. The Government is deeply concerned about how human rights, democracy and the rule of law are being undermined in Europe. Russia's brutal war has triggered a profound security crisis. We also see that Russia is using a wide range of destructive means – major intelligence activities, influence campaigns, cyberattacks, infiltration and sabotage against targets in Europe. These are targeted activities aimed at undermining our interests. In doing so, Russia – and others – contribute to weakening the international legal order and multilateral institutions.

Against this backdrop, Norway's foreign policy objectives remain firm: it is in Norway's interest to contribute to stability and predictability in the world. Compliance with international law, democratic values, and human rights are crucial to realising this objective. Although Norway can influence developments, it is essential that our policies develop in step with changes at the international level.

1.2 Democracy and security

Security, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are interrelated and interdependent. Democracies depend on the rule of law and human rights to function, and human rights are best safeguarded in democracies. Human rights form the foundation of individual freedom and dignity, the rule of law ensures that rights are upheld fairly and impartially, and democracy empowers people to influence the governance of society. Citizens should not have to fear the authorities, but should be able to safely work for the betterment of society – and exchange ideas, goods and services with neighbouring countries. Collectively, this lays the foundation for both just and stable societies – as well as peaceful relations among states.

Norway has many allies and friends, countries that are committed to protecting the same values we hold dear: democracy, freedom of expression, the rule of law and human rights. In a security

situation marked by considerable uncertainty, it is important that we maintain close ties with those who share our commitment to these values.

Being surrounded by well-functioning democracies is key to our security. European history post-World War II has demonstrated that democracies do not go to war against each other. The Council of Europe was born out of this conviction.

While NATO and military co-operation constitutes the hard power of our security policy, part of our soft security is derived from stable democratic neighbouring states.

The Council of Europe's approach to securing sustainable peace in Europe is grounded in legal standards for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, centred around the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In comparison, the OSCE has adopted a comprehensive concept of security based on three dimensions in which democracy and human rights, security and military issues and economy and climate are considered in relation to one another, but without legal standards.

Norway's work in the Council of Europe is supported by substantial development assistance and the EEA and Norway Grants. The Government believes it is important to initiate a discussion on how international co-operation can be used most effectively to advance our objectives.

1.3 Delimitations

This white paper is centred on our efforts in the Council of Europe. It highlights how we can best

strengthen Norwegian efforts to promote our interests in international co-operation for democracy, the rule of law and human rights as part of our efforts to promote peace and security in Europe. The Government is thereby seeking to ensure a strategic and targeted engagement that strengthens both Norway's position and the European response to some of the present challenges.

When work on this report commenced in 2024, the plan was also to review our efforts in the OSCE. Due to the considerable geopolitical uncertainty in the winter of 2025, the Government does not consider this to be the most appropriate course of action at this time. The OSCE's broad approach to security and its future role in the European security architecture will be subject to more thorough consideration at a later stage.

In addition to clarifying Norway's priorities, the Government wants to strengthen Norway's ability to harness synergies between the European organisations in which we participate. The OSCE's comprehensive approach to security and democracy, as well as military co-operation and NATO, will be addressed where relevant to the main theme of the white paper. The same applies to the EU and the EEA co-operation.

Chapter 2 describes our current threat landscape, while Chapter 3 outlines the most important European institutions. Chapters 4 and 5 present the Government's priorities and how Norway is working to address the threats.

2 The threat landscape

2.1 Complex threats

While political propaganda, fake news, and disinformation are by no means modern phenomena, new technology has provided even greater opportunities to influence individuals and larger segments of the population. The opportunities to influence an entire society by influencing individual citizens have grown. Such operations threaten national security and civil protection. Openness in society and individual freedom are fundamental values, constituting a source of strength – but also a vulnerability that can be exploited.

Examples of complex threats include influence through fake news and disinformation on social media, cyberattacks, strategic acquisitions, migration as a policy instrument, espionage and sabotage. Public administration, critical infrastructure, military targets, the business sector and other societal functions are all potential targets for such threats. These policy instruments can be applied individually or in combination, thereby reinforcing one another.

Energy supply, communication networks and other critical societal functions form the backbone of Europe's safety and well-being. In recent times,

several incidents have shown how vulnerable such infrastructure can be to complex threats in the form of physical attacks, sabotage, cyberattacks and other forms of influence. Sabotage of pipelines and energy facilities can have far-reaching regional consequences, both economically and socially. At the same time, communication networks are increasingly digitised and connected to global systems, rendering them particularly vulnerable to cybersecurity threats. The disruption of critical infrastructure can affect everything from economic value chains to ordinary citizens' access to electricity, transport, health services and channels of communication. Physical attacks and sabotage can also threaten a clean, healthy and sustainable environment with well-functioning ecosystems. To strengthen European emergency preparedness and resilience, it is therefore crucial to focus on preventive measures, rapid crisis response and effective international co-operation.

Illegitimate influence operations often unfold covertly and at a low intensity over time, making them difficult to detect and defend against. The use of such illegal means is likely to increase. States or non-state actors will increasingly seek to influence other states or decision-makers.

Box 2.1 Disinformation and complex threats

Disinformation

Disinformation is often defined as false or deliberately misleading information that is presented to influence a person, group, organisation or country. Disinformation is distinct from misinformation, which, while also false or misleading, is not deliberately intended to influence.

Complex threats

The term 'complex threats' is used by Norwegian authorities to refer to foreign states' com-

bined military and non-military use of policy instruments that directly or indirectly affect Norwegian security. The Government defines complex threats as «a term for strategies for competition and confrontation below the threshold of direct armed conflict, which can combine diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence and legal means to achieve strategic objectives».

Using digital tools and artificial intelligence, misinformation and disinformation are increasingly being spread by both state and non-state actors, including violent extremists and terrorist groups, with political, ideological, commercial or other motives. Disinformation and influence campaigns undermine the public's trust in democratic processes and institutions, have a polarising effect, and fuel intolerance and hatred.

At the same time, search engines and social media are using opaque algorithms and artificial intelligence to control what news and other content is searchable, visible and available. What is made available is determined by users' personal preferences and what drives engagement and revenue for the companies that own the platforms. This creates self-reinforcing filter bubbles. For some individuals, such as those experiencing social exclusion, this can hinder their exposure to other perspectives. An open exchange of information and opinions is necessary in a democracy.

Globalisation and digitalisation have resulted in the increased dominance of multinational corporations within the world economy. This emergence of large, dominant companies poses democratic challenges: Considerable economic power can enable companies to influence policy formulation and seek special treatment. This may be detrimental to economic efficiency, while weakening the legitimacy of economic policy.

2.2 Democracy under pressure

Weakening of democratic institutions

In recent years, several European countries have experienced a gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions. This is reflected in the weakened distribution of power, reduced judicial independence and shrinking civic space. In many cases, these processes are initiated by democratically elected leaders. While accusations of abuse of power and personal enrichment were previously directed primarily at leaders outside Europe, they are now increasingly being made against European leaders as well.

Changes in legislation and practice are leading to the marginalisation of critical voices, while state authorities consolidate their influence. The aim is often to remove judicial and parliamentary control mechanisms, and to prevent political opposition from winning future elections. Millions of people are affected, with consequences for both populous countries and small states. Taken together, these

Box 2.2 Democracy

Democracy is a system of government where power is vested in the people, who can influence political decisions through free and fair elections. Freedom of speech, press freedom and the opportunity to participate are essential for the functioning of democracy. The system of majority rule must always be limited in order to protect the rights of the minority. Democracy serves as a platform for popular governance while ensuring accountability and restraint of power, often through the principles of the rule of law. The interaction between human rights, the rule of law and democracy thus forms the foundation of a just and stable society.

developments threaten fundamental democratic values such as transparency, the rule of law and respect for human rights. When such authoritarian tendencies emerge in countries previously considered to have strong democratic traditions, it undermines the stability and trust on which European co-operation is based.

Since the 2000s, Russia has developed in an increasingly authoritarian direction. Today, the country is characterised by a deeply authoritarian political system with totalitarian features. Internal repression and external aggression are part of a mutually reinforcing dynamic. This is manifested in the militarisation of society, extending down to elementary school age. This negative trend is ongoing and is reshaping the country in the long term. The vision of influencing developments in Russia in a different direction through integration into the fabric of European organisations has failed and is no longer a realistic prospect.

Even in countries where democratic backsliding is evident, we see individuals and organisations continuing the struggle for freedom and justice. A 2024 report from the renowned international democracy index, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), titled *Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot*, highlights that several countries experiencing severe democratic decline have made a 'democratic turnaround,' returning to previous levels of democratic quality ('U-turn' countries). At the same time, there are countries that have yet to recover from such a decline.

Box 2.3 Democracy cannot be taken for granted, even in Norway

The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development has launched an independent assessment of the ‘state of health’ of Norwegian democracy. A research group at the University of Oslo has analysed the strengths and weaknesses of democracy at the national, regional and local levels (cf. Knutsen et al. 2023). Among other things, the assessment points to social imbalances in the recruitment of political parties and elected politicians’ lack of influence over important policy areas.

Election manipulation and digital influence

In 2024, 74 national elections were held globally, with 1.6 billion registered voters and a voter turnout of around 61 per cent. Technological developments have a major impact on the conduct of elections. The use of digital technology in the conduct of elections has contributed to greater inclusion and increased accountability. At the same time, new technology has given authoritarian regimes new and effective tools for surveillance, censorship and repression of their own citizens. Digital technology and AI-generated content make disinformation cheap and effective, heightening the risk of manipulation of elections and political processes. This has led to deep polarisation and accusations of foreign influence in several European and Central Asian countries.

Local and regional democracy

Local democracy is often the first point of contact between citizens and the authorities, and thus crucial for building trust and legitimising public decisions. At the same time, local democracy is vulnerable because it often lacks resources, expertise, and independence, rendering it particularly susceptible to corruption, pressure from national authorities, disinformation and polarisation.

Anti-corruption

Many undemocratic leaders of our time have risen to power precisely through the use of corruption. The combination of political corruption and the

monopolisation of power creates an environment in which those who wield authority are seldom held accountable for violations of democratic rules or human rights. Thus, corruption serves as a gateway for undemocratic forces and enables the strengthening of authoritarian models of governance without significant resistance from societal institutions. When corruption erodes democracy, there is a risk of backsliding, both in emerging democracies and in established rule of law-based societies.

2.3 Rule of law

The courts

In many countries, judicial independence is weak. There are many causes behind the challenges to the rule of law. There may be a lack of capacity, expertise or financial resources. Furthermore, inadequate legislation, ineffective administration, a lack of reform, and political or economic pressure are increasingly significant challenges. In some cases, the political or economic pressure is so intense that the judiciary is perceived as being controlled by political or economic elites. The risk is that the courts are used as a means of suppressing the opposition, independent media and human rights defenders.

Organised crime

As a result of increased globalisation and digitalisation, there has been a significant rise in trans-

Box 2.4 Rule of law-based societies

In rule of law-based societies, the exercise of power and authority is regulated. Everyone – including the authorities – is subject to the same law. This protects the individual against the arbitrary use of force through principles such as equality before and under the law, the right to a fair trial and protection against arbitrary deprivation of liberty. The separation of powers between the legislative, executive and judicial branches prevents abuse of power and ensures fairness and predictability. The rule of law is therefore a fundamental mechanism for upholding human rights and building trust in society. A well-functioning judicial system is essential for a true democracy.

national crime. According to Europol, the threat posed by organised crime in Europe has never been higher. According to the Norwegian National Criminal Investigation Service (Kripos), this also applies to Norway.

Several highly profit-driven criminal networks are operating in Europe, many of which are involved in the sale, distribution and importation of drugs. Revenue from illegal drug trafficking/activity is one of their primary sources of income. This enables criminal actors to invest large sums in property, business activities, and the like, thereby becoming part of the formal economy.

At the same time as the formal economy is under pressure, criminal networks are threatening individuals and authorities through corruption and various forms of violence and extortion. This ultimately poses a threat to the rule of law, democracy and public safety.

2.4 Human rights

Freedom of speech and independent media

Freedom of expression is being curtailed in many countries. Political bias in the media is on the rise, and journalists are subjected to threats, harassment and surveillance. Digital technology is being used for censorship, influence campaigns and various forms of online violence, targeting human rights defenders, artists, minorities and women, among others. Underreporting and widespread impunity for such abuse has a chilling effect on both those affected and others, discouraging participation in the public discourse. This represents a significant threat to freedom of expression.

Box 2.6 Journalists Matter

Journalists Matter, the Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists is an initiative aiming to promote press freedom and protect journalists from violence, threats, and harassment while performing their duties. Norway has designated a representative from the Norwegian Union of Journalists as National Focal Point for the campaign. In collaboration with a number of press freedom organisations, the Council of Europe operates a platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists (The Safety of Journalists Platform). The platform receives alerts regarding attacks, threats, and other serious concerns, and Member States are required to address such issues. The platform's annual report provides important information on the status of freedom of expression in Europe.

Women journalists and media workers are particularly vulnerable to gender discrimination, sexual harassment and other abuses. This poses a threat to gender equality in the media and in society at large. When perpetrators are not held accountable, this fosters a permissive environment for abuses and increases the likelihood of their recurrence. Widespread impunity also leads to self-censorship and limits freedom of expression in society.

Box 2.5 Human rights

Human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability or other differences. Human rights are often divided into two principal categories: civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other. These two categories of rights are mutually reinforcing. It is only when all rights are respected that the protection of human rights is complete and effective. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) of 1950 and the UN's core international human rights instru-

ments are legally binding treaties intended to ensure that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. Various international mechanisms have been established under the auspices of the UN, the Council of Europe, and other international organisations to ensure that human rights are effectively upheld at the national level. The ECHR is the foremost human rights instrument in Europe, with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) tasked with monitoring states' compliance with the Convention.

Journalists who uncover abuse of power, corruption and other improper conduct are particularly vulnerable. Dangerous rhetoric targeting journalists and the press, including from political leaders, fuels intolerance, harassment, and violence.

In several countries, political leaders have introduced restrictions that curtail press freedom and contribute to the concentration of media power. In authoritarian regimes, the combination of dangerous rhetoric and stricter laws curtail the press's role as society's watchdog. New media habits and global competition are weakening the revenue base for traditional media, putting media pluralism and diversity under pressure.

Civic space

In several European states, the room for manoeuvre of civil society and democratic opposition is being restricted. Several countries use restrictive legislation to hinder the registration of non-governmental organisations, often under the guise of anti-terrorism laws or other security legislation. Civil society is subject to limitations, undue reporting obligations and conditions and restrictions related to foreign funding.

Several recognised human rights organisations report a trend in Europe whereby freedom of assembly is increasingly being undermined and peaceful protests suppressed. Democracy activists, human rights defenders, trade union representatives, editors, journalists and bloggers are subjected to harassment, arbitrary detention and summary proceedings.

Gender-based violence, discrimination and hate speech

Vulnerable minorities and other groups in society are subjected to discrimination. Women and girls often have poorer legal protection and physical safety, health and education than men. Traditional values and religious dogma are increasingly being invoked as arguments to restrict individual freedoms, particularly in relation to sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQ people. Similarly, discrimination against various minorities continues to be prevalent, occasionally justified on national security grounds.

Gender-based violence and harassment is a widespread problem and represents a serious structural threat to gender equality and security under the law for women, girls and trans persons. Domestic violence is a serious societal problem

throughout Europe. Both men and women are subjected to this form of violence. At the same time, research shows that women are far more likely than men to experience domestic violence, particularly aggravated violence and intimate partner homicide. Norway is bound by the international legal obligations set forth in the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), which requires, among other things, that States Parties allocate adequate financial and human resources for the prevention and combatting of violence against women and domestic violence.

The prevalence of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda online can deepen polarisation in society and undermine trust in democratic institutions and values. Online search engines and social media control what speech, news and information are available and visible to users. This can contribute to curbing public discourse and raises issues related to the manipulation of public opinion.

Pressure on organised labour

In recent years, there has been a retrogression in the protection of workers' rights and trade-union related rights in several countries. When democracies are under pressure, workers' right to freedom of association and the right to form trade unions may also be at risk. Both sides of industry, particularly trade unions, play a crucial role in defending against authoritarian tendencies, both within individual countries and internationally. Therefore, it is important to support international organisations that work in favour of good working conditions and freedom of association in working life, and to strengthen organised labour in the face of increasing pressure and challenges.

Climate, nature and pollution

The Norwegian National Security Authority recognises climate change as a significant security threat. The climate, nature and pollution crises are creating challenges for democracy, human rights, security and the rule of law – all of which are crucial to finding effective and fair solutions to the crises, ensuring broad support, and facilitating proper follow-up.

More frequent and prolonged extreme weather events – such as torrential rains, droughts and wildfires – can threaten life, health and food security, destroy critical infrastructure, cause displacement and exacerbate underlying causes of conflict.

Humanity depends on a diverse range of well-functioning ecosystems that provide clean water, clean air, and stable access to food, contribute to emissions reductions and climate change mitigation, while also remaining an essential condition for continued development and value creation in society.

The consequences of pollution, climate change and loss of nature are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, pollution can contribute to ocean acidification, depletion of the ozone layer, and impair the Earth's ability to reflect sunlight. Climate change can impact the release and spread of environmental contaminants, while reductions in air pollution can also contribute to lower greenhouse gas emissions. Globally, pollution causes serious illness and death, poor living conditions and ecosystem destruction.

A stable climate, well-functioning ecosystems and a clean environment are necessary to be able

to enjoy human rights such as the right to life, health and the right of indigenous peoples to practise their cultural traditions and customs. At the same time, measures to achieve these objectives can affect rights such as property rights, non-discrimination and the needs of various groups.

Therefore, societal stability and security at the national, regional and global levels hinge on solving the climate, nature and pollution crises in an effective, feasible and just manner. Procedural human rights such as freedom of expression and association, including the right to information and participation, as well as the right to a fair trial, are crucial to ensure legitimacy and respect for various rights when implementing necessary measures.

Environmental defenders are among the human rights defenders most vulnerable to murder, harassment and other forms of persecution. This is also the case in Europe.

3 The institutions

3.1 Introduction

NATO membership is the cornerstone of Norwegian security policy. Norway has been a member of NATO since the alliance was established in 1949. NATO's purpose is to guarantee the freedom and security of its members and safeguard their democratic values and institutions. Since the Cold War, NATO has expanded to include a number of countries in Central and Southeast Europe and today consists of 32 members.

NATO and the Council of Europe were established in the same year. The OSCE, as we know it today, came into being later as a continuation of

the *Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)*, which was established during the Cold War when Europe was divided between East and West.

During the same period, the EU emerged as the dominant political actor on the continent.

3.2 The EU

The EU's work to strengthen democracy and the rule of law

The European Union currently has 27 Member States. EU co-operation covers several policy

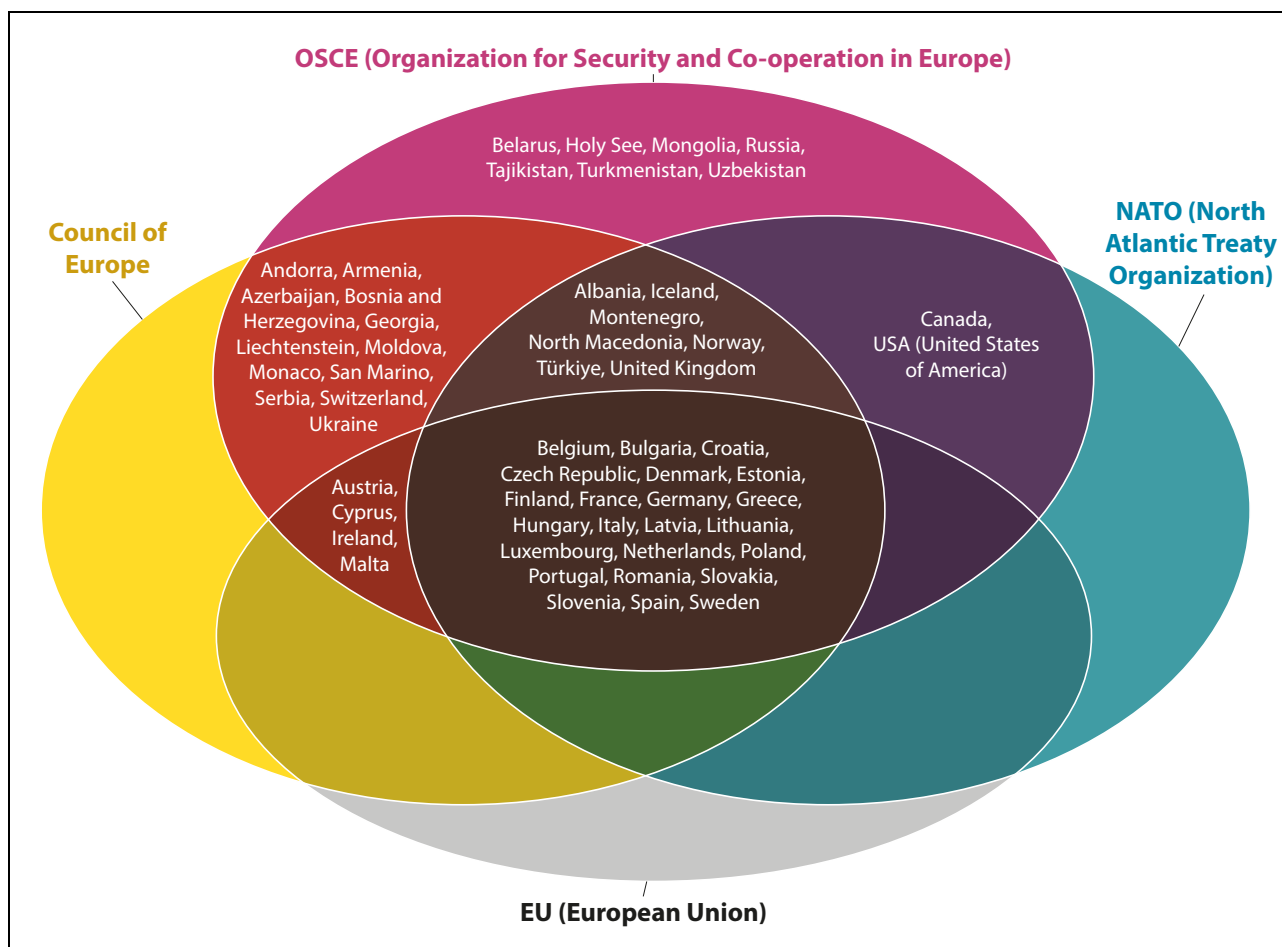


Figure 3.1 Membership of the Council of Europe, EU, OSCE and NATO

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Box 3.1 Article 2 of the TEU

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

areas and involves both supranational and inter-governmental governance. EU co-operation is based on the rule of law and the EU has developed its own legal system in which the European Court of Justice is responsible for interpreting EU law.

EU co-operation is based on a shared community of democratic values. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) defines its foundational values and establishes the rules that are to govern co-operation. In addition to the values mentioned in Article 2, the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) are also considered foundational principles of EU law (Article 6 TEU).

The EU's efforts to protect and strengthen democracy take place in three areas: in foreign and development policy, in enlargement policy, and internally through co-operation between Member States and the various EU institutions.

Recognising that democracy is under threat in various ways, the EU has in recent years developed a number of mechanisms and new policies to promote and monitor democracy and the rule of law, both internally and externally.

Foreign and development policy

In its external action, the EU is to promote the same democratic values on which the EU itself was founded (Art. 21, 3(5) and 8 TEU). In bilateral co-operation with individual countries, this is done using the same policy instruments we know from Norwegian foreign and development policy, including diplomacy, capacity building and conditional funding for both governments and civil society. The EU also organises and coordinates election observation through its European External Action Ser-

vice (EEAS) in many parts of the world. These efforts involve some geographical division of labour between the EU and the OSCE/ODIHR. The EU has also adopted an Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for the period 2020-2027 and developed several publicly available guidelines for its representations around the world for work on human rights in various contexts. The EU also publishes annual reports on the global situation for human rights and democracy.

The EU is not, in its organisational capacity, a member of international organisations such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, but has its own accredited delegations that coordinate Member States' positions and efforts in order to strengthen the influence and impact of common values and interests.

Enlargement policy

When the European Coal and Steel Community, the forerunner of today's EU, was established in 1952, the majority of European countries were under authoritarian rule. As these countries transitioned away from authoritarian rule – Spain, Portugal and Greece in the 1970s, Central and South-east Europe from 1989 and the Baltics from 1990 – the goal of EU membership provided direction for democratisation, and membership itself had a stabilising effect during the vulnerable initial phase. The EU's contributions to reconciliation and democratisation through enlargement was the Nobel Committee's main reason for awarding the EU the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.

The enlargement policy's requirements for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights have become increasingly comprehensive. Membership in the Council of Europe and compliance with its standards for democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights is a prerequisite for EU membership. The pace of the membership process is now determined by progress in adapting to the EU's accession criteria related to an independent judiciary, respect for human rights, and standards in justice, freedom, and security. Negotiations in these areas are the first to open and the last to close during the accession process. If a candidate country fails to meet the interim benchmarks in these areas, the EU will not open or close other negotiation chapters until the benchmarks are met. This gives the EU considerable influence over the development of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the candidate countries.

Climate and environmental policy

Sustainable development and protection of the environment are integral parts of the EU's treaty basis and form part of all EU policy areas, including foreign and development policy. Norway co-operates closely and extensively with the EU on climate and environmental issues through the EEA Agreement and the Green Alliance we have established with the EU. This also provides a backdrop for Norway's co-operation with the EU in the Council of Europe insofar as this is covered by the mandate and work of these organisations.

Promotion of democracy in the EU

EU co-operation is based on democratic values, defined in Article 2 TEU. A separate sanction mechanism, set out in Article 7 TEU, addresses breaches of Article 2 TEU, but has rarely been invoked. Legal proceedings against Member States that undermine the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights have taken place through the EU's ordinary infringement procedure laid down in Article 258 TFEU. In addition, the EU has developed, particularly since 2020, several preventive and sanctioning measures.

Article 7

Article 7 TEU addresses the failure of EU Member States to respect the common values set out in Article 2 TEU. According to Article 7(1), the European Council, acting by a four-fifths majority and with the support of the European Parliament, may determine that there is a «clear risk of a serious breach» by a Member State of the common values of the Union. Before a decision is made, the Council shall seek the views of the Member State concerned and may make recommendations on how the situation can be rectified.

This preventive procedure has been initiated twice: first in 2017 against Poland, and then in 2018 against Hungary. Once the procedure is activated, the Council is required to regularly review the situation. In the spring of 2024, the case against Poland was closed following the submission of a detailed action plan by Donald Tusk's government to restore the rule of law in Poland. The procedure against Hungary remains ongoing; however, the Council has not yet determined that there is a clear risk of a serious breach of the EU's fundamental values. Nor has the Council adopted

any recommendations on what Hungary must do to rectify the situation.

Article 7(2) TEU constitutes the sanctioning phase of the procedure. It allows for the Council (by qualified majority) to suspend a Member State's rights, including voting rights in the Council. This can only happen when the Council (unanimously, less the country concerned) determines the existence of a «serious and persistent breach» of the EU's values by the Member State in question. To date, Article 7(2) TEU has never been invoked. However, the European Parliament has repeatedly called for its application in relation to Hungary.

Actions for failure to fulfil obligations (infringement procedure)

The Commission monitors Member States' compliance with EU law and may bring a case before the European Court of Justice should a Member State fail to fulfil its obligations (Article 258 TFEU). If a Member State fails to comply with a judgment of the Court of Justice, the Commission may bring the case back before the Court, which may impose financial penalties on the Member State concerned (Article 260(2) TFEU).

Such treaty infringement proceedings, particularly in relation to the EU's internal market, have been an important means of indirectly protecting fundamental rights and values. For example, the Commission has used the competition rules to safeguard media pluralism in Member States, state aid rules to address cases where public funding is systematically channelled to certain media outlets, and public procurement rules to tackle nepotism and corruption.

Member States have traditionally been reluctant to intervene in proceedings against other Member States, unless the case directly concerns clearly defined national interests. Member States now appear to increasingly view breaches of values in other Member States as a shared concern, with direct detriment to their own citizens. A recent example is the infringement proceedings against Hungary's 'anti-LGBTIQ+ Law' where 16 countries intervened in support of the Commission's legal action. A similar engagement can be expected in the upcoming proceedings against Hungary's 'national sovereignty law'.

The European Court of Justice, for its part, has increasingly incorporated the EU's fundamental values into its case law, confirming that these values are legally binding.

Rule of law dialogue

In 2020, the EU launched the annual Rule of Law Dialogue, which has since become the EU's most far-reaching tool for monitoring developments in Member States. The dialogue, which takes place both centrally in Brussels and nationally in each Member State, involves governments, national assemblies and civil society, as well as the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament. The dialogue is based on the Commission's annual Rule of Law Report, which provides an assessment of the state of the rule of law in each Member State. Assessments by the Council of Europe's bodies provide a frame of reference. Since 2022, the report has been expanded to include country-specific recommendations. Since 2024, the candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are also subject to the review. From 2025, the report will be expanded to include assessments of rule of law issues of importance to the single market, and in particular small and medium-sized enterprises. The dialogue, now in its sixth year, has meant that rule of law issues are almost constantly on the Council's agenda. It is clear from developments in the majority of Member States that awareness of the rule of law and institutional and legal frameworks have been strengthened as a result of the annual follow-up. The report and methodology are widely accepted among Member States, but the governments of Hungary and Slovakia rejected the 2024 report outright, believing the findings to be politically motivated.

Withholding of funds

The most recent additions to the EU's toolbox are three regulations: the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, the Common Provisions Regulation for the cohesion funds, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility recovery package post-COVID-19. Each of these regulations enables a financial response to value-related shortcomings and breaches within Member States. In December 2022, action was taken against Hungary on the basis of all three regulations, and against Poland on the basis of two of them. The measures implemented against Poland were lifted in the spring of 2024 as a result of the Tusk Government's Action Plan on the rule of law, which included measures to remedy precisely the shortcomings that caused the EU withhold payments. In December 2023, the Commission found that Hungary had complied with some of the requirements under the

Common Provisions Regulation for the cohesion funds and decided to unblock EUR 10.2 billion in frozen funding under this regulation. This decision was highly controversial, and the European Parliament has since referred the matter to the European Court of Justice for a judicial review (pending). In total, around EUR 21 billion remains frozen.

A much-discussed measure for the upcoming negotiations on the long-term budget for 2028-34 is to make EU payments conditional on whether Member States fulfil requirements for necessary reforms and adhere to fundamental values. The Commission has clearly indicated that these measures will feature in the long-term budget proposal. Such an arrangement would enable a more stringent response to rule of law backsliding. The Commission has also announced that already under the current budget it will prioritise closer monitoring to ensure that EU funds are spent in accordance with fundamental values.

Other policy instruments

The *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* (FRA) was established in 2007. The FRA's mandate includes delivering evidence-based advice on human rights to inform EU policy-making. The FRA has considerable analytical and research capacity, but does not have the authority to systematically monitor Member States' compliance with the EU's values, although this was considered during its establishment. The European Parliament has on several occasions, most recently in 2024, requested that the FRA's mandate be strengthened to include monitoring the conditions for fundamental rights in Member States.

Modelled on, among other things, the EEA and Norway Grants, the EU has established the *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values* (CERV) programme to support civil society and promote democratic values and human rights. CERV's budget for the period 2021-28 is EUR 1.1667 billion. EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection Michael McGrath has also been tasked with establishing a platform for closer dialogue with and increased support for civil society, activists and human rights defenders.

The latest preventive measures in the EU's toolbox is the *Defence of Democracy* package, which aims to prevent foreign interference and the undermining of democratic institutions and processes. The Commission has announced that the regulatory framework will be further bolstered through

the upcoming *European Democracy Shield*, a new package of measures specifically designed to strengthen and protect information integrity. This is a consideration that has already partially been addressed by the Digital Services Act (DSA), which has been identified as being EEA-relevant.

3.3 The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe emerged from the ashes of World War II, based on the belief that unity around common values – democracy, the rule of law, and human rights – would foster European integration, thereby ensuring that such a conflict would never occur again.

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation mandated to promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in its 46 member states. Norway was among the 10 states that signed the Treaty establishing the Council of Europe in London in May 1949. At its first summit in Vienna in 1993, the Council of Europe decided to open its doors to all Central and Eastern European countries that shared its values. Since then, almost all European states have become members, with the exception of Belarus and Kosovo (candidate country), and Russia, which was excluded on 16 March 2022.

The Council of Europe is headed by a Secretary General, a committee of representatives of Member States (Committee of Ministers) and a

Parliamentary Assembly (PACE). The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg rules on cases in which Council of Europe Member States are accused of violating the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Other key actors are the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

The Council of Europe’s working method is based on a strategic triangle consisting of: (i) standard-setting (conventions), (ii) monitoring compliance with the obligations arising from these standards, and (iii) providing technical assistance to Member States to support the fulfilment of these obligations.

The conventions are drafted and adopted by Member States through the Committee of Ministers, with input from sub-committees and working groups, and are legally binding agreements to which Member States may accede. While some conventions require endorsement by all Member States, most are left to the discretion of each individual Member State. Many of the conventions allow for endorsement beyond the Council of Europe Member States, thereby facilitating the dissemination of these standards outside of Europe. In addition to legally binding conventions, the Committee of Ministers, and its sub-groups and working groups, produce a number of recommendations, guidelines, and other texts aimed at Member States.

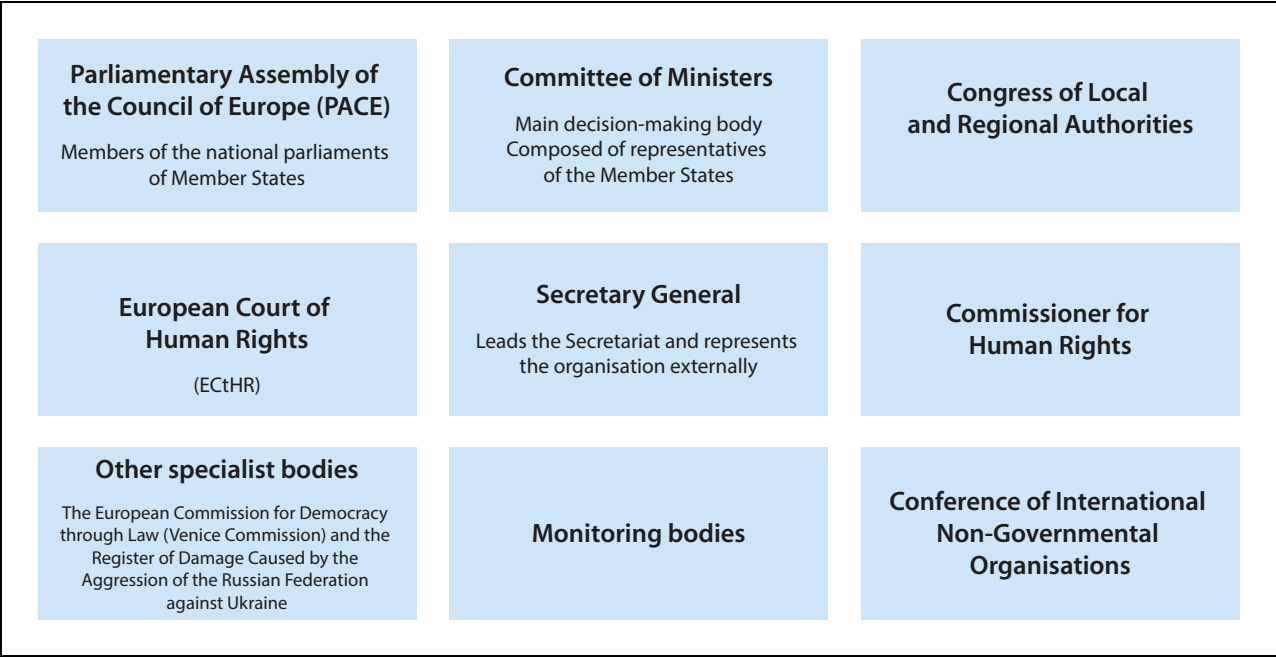


Figure 3.2 Structure of the Council of Europe

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In addition to its standard-setting and monitoring work, the Council of Europe provides assistance at the country level to Member States seeking technical guidance and practical assistance with legislation, and expertise and institu-

tion building. At the heart of these efforts is the Venice Commission, which offers legal advice to Member States and others, particularly in relation to constitutional, electoral and human rights legislation.

Box 3.2 Key Council of Europe conventions

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was adopted in 1950 and entered into force in 1953. It is the Council of Europe's first convention and the cornerstone of all its activities. Its ratification is a prerequisite for joining the organisation.

The ECHR sets out absolute rights that do not allow for any derogation by the High Contracting Parties. In addition, it protects certain rights and freedoms that may only be subject to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) oversees the implementation of the Convention in all Member States. Complaints of human rights violations may be brought before the Court once domestic remedies have been exhausted.

The Court's judgements are binding on Norway, and the ECHR is incorporated into the Norwegian Human Rights Act.

The European Social Charter was adopted in 1961 and revised in 1996. Norway ratified the Revised European Social Charter in 2001.

The European Social Charter guarantees fundamental social and economic rights, thereby complementing its counterpart, the ECHR, which guarantees civil and political rights. It guarantees a wide range of rights related to employment, housing, health, education, social protection, and welfare.

The Social Charter lays specific emphasis on the protection of vulnerable persons and requires that enjoyment of the above-mentioned rights be guaranteed without discrimination.

The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) monitors compliance with the European Social Charter. This is done through the submission of national reports and a collective complaints mechanism that 16 countries have accepted, including Norway.

The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities is the first legally binding multilateral instrument of its kind.

Norway ratified the Convention in 1999. As a State Party, Norway has committed itself to promoting the conditions necessary for national minorities to maintain and develop their identity, language and culture. The principles concerning full and effective equality between national minorities and the majority population are pivotal. A key principle of the Framework Convention is that minorities shall be ensured effective participation in cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs, in particular those affecting them.

The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law is the first-ever international legally binding instrument in this field. The Framework Convention is designed to ensure that artificial intelligence upholds common standards in human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and to minimise the risk of those rights and principles being undermined as a result of the use of artificial intelligence.

The Framework Convention is complemented by sector-specific work throughout the Council of Europe.

Norway was one of the first countries to sign the Framework Convention on 5 September 2024. The Framework Convention enters into force once five states have ratified it.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as **the Istanbul Convention**, entered into force for Norway in 2017. It is based on the understanding that violence against women is a form of gender-based violence that is directed against women because they are women. The state has a duty to combat violence against women and domestic violence fully in all its forms, and to introduce measures to prevent violence against women, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators.

Box 3.2 (continue)

The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) is the independent monitoring body of States Parties' compliance with the Convention. Its first report on Norway was published in 2022.

The European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment was adopted in 1987 and entered into force for Norway in 1989. It is based on Article 3 of the ECHR, which states that «[n]o one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment».

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) visits to places of detention to how persons deprived of their liberty are treated. Such places of detention include prisons, juvenile detention centres, police stations, holding centres for immigration detainees, psychiatric hospitals, and social care homes.

After each visit, the CPT produces a detailed report containing recommendations, comments and requests for information.

Source: Council of Europe and [regjeringen.no](https://www.regjeringen.no)

3.4 Interaction between Norway, the Council of Europe and the EU

The European community of common values forms the basis for the close co-operation between Norway, the Council of Europe and the EU.

Although the EU is not, in its organisational capacity, a member of the Council of Europe, it participates in many of the organisation's processes, including negotiations for accession to the ECHR and specialist committees such as the Steering Committee for Human Rights.

The Council of Europe and the EU have a common interest in addressing challenges related to human rights, democracy and the rule of law both in member states and in neighbouring countries. Co-operation takes place through joint programmes and financial contributions. Among other things, the EU contributes to funding the Venice Commission, which provides legal advice on constitutional matters and democratic standards, as well as the Council of Europe's action plans in non-EU member states.

The EU works to strengthen the rule of law in its Member States both through internal EU mechanisms and in co-operation with Norway, as a contributor through the EEA and Norway Grants. The EU's efforts to promote human rights and democracy extend beyond its own Member States to encompass candidate countries, neighbouring countries and third countries. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and bilateral action programmes aim to strengthen the rule of law, human rights and democracy. This work is

complemented by the co-operation between the EU and the Council of Europe at the country level.

Through voluntary contributions to the Council of Europe's programmes, Norway strengthens efforts in EU candidate countries or countries on the periphery of Europe. Norway's assistance is aligned with the requirements of the ENP to minimise and simplify the requirements and standards involved for beneficiary states.

This comprehensive co-operation between the Council of Europe and the EU, with Norway as a key contributor, provides a strong foundation for defending democracy, human rights and the rule of law both within and beyond Europe's borders. Together, these organisations ensure broad and effective co-operation for peace, stability and support for common values.

EU co-operation with the Council of Europe

All EU Member States are members of the Council of Europe and have ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). When the Treaty of Lisbon, amending the Treaty on European Union, entered into force in 2009, the EU itself was required to accede to the ECHR (Art. 6(2) TEU), thereby enabling the prosecution of allegations of human rights violations by EU institutions. Norway has been facilitating negotiations between the EU and the Council of Europe for several years. The first draft agreement was rejected by the European Court of Justice, which ruled that the draft agreement would be incompatible with the EU treaties. A new draft agreement was finalised in 2023. This draft addressed all of

the European Court of Justice's concerns with the initial draft, except for the issue of the extent of the Court's jurisdiction within the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This issue has hopefully been resolved following a ruling by the European Court of Justice in the autumn of 2024. The next step is for the Commission's Legal Service to send the new draft agreement to the European Court of Justice for an opinion, likely by summer 2025. It is difficult to estimate how long the Court will take to issue its opinion, but it is assumed that it could take anywhere from 6-18 months. Subsequently, all 46 Council of Europe Member States must ratify the amending agreement, meaning that the process may still take several years to complete.

According to the Council of Europe's Reykjavík Declaration (see figure in Box 5.1), the EU is the main institutional partner of the Council of Europe in political, legal, and financial terms. The EU is the largest contributor outside the joint budget, and the co-operation between the two organisations is close and good – underscored by various joint programmes, events and statements. The EU's priorities for co-operation with the Council of Europe are set out in separate Council conclusions every two years. The priorities for 2025-26 were adopted in December 2024. Therein, the EU reaffirms its ongoing commitment to the effective functioning of the Council of Europe's conventions and builds on its decision to accede to the ECHR. The conclusions also highlight EU enlargement as a strategic investment in peace,

security, stability and prosperity across Europe, with the EU and Council of Europe joint programmes playing an important role in supporting reforms related to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

For Norway, as a non-EU member, it can be challenging that the EU's continuous expansion of its Union competence leads to a corresponding narrowing of the Member States' competence within the Council of Europe. We will gradually see more areas in which the Commission will speak on behalf of Member States, or where EU Member States are required by EU law to coordinate. Examples of this are the recent negotiations on artificial intelligence and the protection of the environment through criminal law.

Relations between the EU and the Council of Europe are good, and the EU generally plays a positive role in the Council of Europe's work. On the other hand, EU Member States will, in some cases, be required to coordinate their positions and, in certain instances, vote in unison. The views of the EU and its Member States are coordinated in Brussels. The EU now has 27 Member States, but a further expansion by at least four countries would grant the EU a two-thirds majority in the Council of Europe. The EU and its Member States will then become a dominant actor on many issues, which will alter the dynamics of the Council of Europe. Norway will make it clear that we seek effective participation by non-EU countries in the Council of Europe's standard-setting.

4 Norway's priorities for the Council of Europe

4.1 Obligatory and voluntary financial contributions

Norway's contributions to the Council of Europe consist of obligatory and voluntary contributions and the secondment of personnel. In 2025, the obligatory contributions will amount to around NOK 90 million.

In recent years, Norway has given more than NOK 60 million per year in voluntary contributions to the work of the Council of Europe, mainly in the form of assistance funds for the work at the country level, as described below, but also to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the Department for the Execution of Judgments and the Venice Commission. Norway has also been a driving force for real growth in the Council of Europe's regular budget, a goal that was achieved for the 2024–2025 budget period.

4.2 Support for Council of Europe projects and action plans

The Council of Europe has six country-specific action plans for Member States (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and four neighbourhood co-operation programmes (Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Morocco and Tunisia). These are partly funded under the ordinary budget, but the majority of the funds derive from voluntary additional contributions from EU or Council of Europe member states. Norway is one of the largest contributors to these action plans and neighbourhood co-operation programmes, with particular emphasis on Ukraine and Moldova through the Nansen Support Programme.

The largest action plan, the Action Plan for Ukraine 'Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction' 2023–2026, focuses on supporting the country's stability, security, and welfare during and after the war. Implementation of the Action Plan is crucial for Ukraine's future as a stable European state. The Council of Europe's expertise contributes to necessary judicial reforms, combating

corruption, safeguarding minority rights, and ensuring media freedom.

Norway does not make voluntary contributions to the work in Azerbaijan. Funding for the Council of Europe's work in Georgia was suspended in late 2024, partly as a reaction to the government's conduct following the parliamentary elections on 26 October.

4.3 EEA and Norway Grants and co-operation with the EU

Through the EEA and Norway Grants, Norway contributes to promoting democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Europe. For 20 years, the grants have had a clear objective of supporting beneficiary states' democratic institutions, the judiciary, civil society and fostering inclusive societies.

In the new agreement for the 2021–2028 programme period, the importance of these common values has been further reinforced. In the agreement with the EU, which is described in Prop. 119 S (2023–2024) and Innst. (Recommendation) 21 S (2024–2025), Article 1 sets out the objectives and common values and principles that apply to EEA and Norway Grants. This entails that compliance with fundamental values is required in order to receive funding.

In the upcoming period, the 15 EU countries covered by EEA and Norway Grants will receive funding in relation to three overall thematic priorities: European green transition; democracy, rule of law and human rights; and social inclusion and resilience.

Co-operation has been opened across a range of sectors considered important to strong and resilient democracies. This includes the justice sector, education, research, culture, local development, minorities and non-discrimination, gender equality, increased efforts to combat disinformation and prevention of gender-based violence, as well as general capacity building. Here, Norwegian actors will have an important role in capacity building and exchange of experience. This

includes co-operation with, among others, the Norwegian Courts Administration, the Directorate of the Norwegian Correctional Service and the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

In addition to the country-specific allocations, a separate Civil Society Fund of more than EUR 300 million has been established for the programme period, which will be distributed to selected Fund Operators for further distribution to civil society in each country. Funding for civil society over time through the EEA and Norway Grants has arguably been the most impactful aspect of Norway's contribution to democratic development in Europe following the 2004 EU enlargement.

A dedicated fund has also been established to facilitate closer co-operation with international organisations. This effort seeks to strengthen co-operation with the Council of Europe, the OECD and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) to enhance expertise and knowledge transfer on European standards and values to beneficiary states. Through the Council of Europe's participation as an advisor in programmes funded through EEA and Norway Grants, Norway contributes to consolidating, strengthening and improving democratic resilience in Central and Southern European beneficiary states.

In the Council of Europe, there is also close coordination between the permanent delegations, which involves joint statements, joint initiatives and ongoing co-operation to ensure that Norway's positions are aligned with those of like-minded countries and contribute to strengthening European security and stability.

Norway also supports the EU's enlargement policy and prioritises support for the candidate countries' European integration.

4.4 Key partnerships (Nordic and Nordic-Baltic co-operation etc.)

The Nordic (N5) and Nordic-Baltic (NB8) co-operation has been strengthened following Russia's full-scale invasion, with European security policy as a key focus. Swedish and Finnish NATO membership has reduced the divide between the Nordic and Baltic states. NB8 convenes annually at both prime ministerial and foreign ministerial level. Enhanced NB8 co-operation contributes to bringing the Baltic States closer to their Nordic counterparts, and vice versa. This could pave the way for more joint positions and statements in multilateral forums such as the Council of Europe and the UN.

At the same time as Norway continues its close NB8 co-operation within the Council of Europe, these are also good arenas for close contact and co-operation with important European allies such as Germany, Poland and others. The organisation's work also creates opportunities for dialogue on the topics covered in this report with countries with which Norway does not have as close relations.

4.5 The role of parliamentarians and civil society participation

The Storting has a broad international commitment. Inter-parliamentary contact and co-operation strengthens democracy both in the Nordic co-operation and in the parliamentary assemblies of international organisations.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) holds a unique position, as it elects both the Secretary General of the organisation and the judges of the European Court of Human Rights, and is also responsible for several of the Council of Europe's largest initiatives and projects. PACE also undertakes election observation and has rapporteurs for various thematic and geographical areas, who prepare reports that lead to recommendations to the Committee of Ministers.

The parliamentary assemblies reflect the composition of national parliaments, encompassing the full spectrum of political parties, including the opposition. This means that it is not only the views and policies of the governing parties that are expressed. Parliamentarians tend to be able to go further in their statements and criticism, for example, regarding the work of Member States or lack of action in a particular area. Thus, parliamentarians add value to the Council of Europe and make an important contribution to democracy building in Europe.

A number of stakeholders have recently advocated closer co-operation between PACE and the Committee of Ministers to ensure better coordination between the two institutions. Norway can contribute to this effort through continued close dialogue with the Norwegian PACE delegation on the major challenges facing the Council of Europe and its Member States. Furthermore, Norway can contribute to PACE becoming a participating partner in the Council of Europe's efforts to implement the ten Reykjavík Principles for Democracy.

A vibrant and broad-based organised civil society has provided much of the foundation for

democracy and welfare in Norwegian society. Voluntary organisations, interest groups and academia are important contributors to diversity, quality of life, culture, politics and democratic attitudes. Norwegian civil society is also heavily involved in international organisations and processes related to human rights, the rule of law and democracy. This includes active participation in the standard-setting work of the Council of Europe and in various processes under OSCE institutions.

Although more opportunities are now provided for civil society participation than before, there is still room for improvement. As much of the Council of Europe's work and documents are not subject to public scrutiny, it can be difficult to access information. However, several projects are underway to enable greater transparency and accessibility, for example, with the Thematic Coordinator on Information Policy (TC-INF).

The Norwegian Permanent Delegation in Strasbourg will continue to be available to international organisations interested in meeting with Norwegian representatives. However, it is important to emphasise that a willingness to speak with everyone does not necessarily imply recognising the actors' agendas.

4.6 Coordination and strengthening of Norwegian efforts

By building and maintaining alliances with like-minded Member States and cultivating and further developing established co-operation with the EU and the Nordic-Baltic group, a small Member State such as Norway can make its voice heard in shaping European values.

It should be an objective for Norway to participate, take initiatives and hold leading positions in inter-governmental co-operation in committees in prioritised areas and to get more Norwegians into key positions in the Secretariat of the Council of Europe and field offices.

Development of Norwegian positions

To effectively promote Norwegian interests within the Council of Europe, close, structured coordination and information-sharing among relevant Norwegian public and private actors is essential. This is best accomplished by considering the use of voluntary contributions, EEA and Norway Grants, and participation in various forums within the broader context of Norwegian policies and

diplomacy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates Norway's participation in the Council of Europe and has extensive contact with other government ministries, agencies and civil society organisations involved in work related to the organisation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will emphasise Norwegian interests and the possibility of achieving our priorities in the preparation of positions for work in the Council of Europe.

Co-operation with civil society actors strengthens efforts to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law. A comprehensive strategy must ensure close information sharing and coordination of Norwegian contributions to relevant organisations, including the OSCE, such as election observation, rule of law development and support for civil society. A prerequisite for success in strengthening Norway's influence in key areas is the formulation of clear national priorities within the Council of Europe's areas of work, with defined objectives that are regularly updated to adapt to changes in the Council of Europe's agenda and the regional situation.

Norway co-operates closely with the Nordic and Nordic-Baltic countries in many areas. For example, the Nordic ambassadors in Strasbourg meet weekly. Where it aligns with Norway's interests, Norway also endorses statements from EU Member States.

Norwegian participation and employees in the organisations

Meld. St. No. 27 (2018–2019) *Norway's Role and Interests in Multilateral Co-operation* summarises how the multilateral system works and how it affects Norwegian interests. One of the policy instruments referred to is the recruitment of more Norwegian citizens to international organisations. Norway is underrepresented in most international organisations. Norway is a major contributor to international organisations, and there is a clear imbalance between our financial contributions and our presence. This also applies to the Council of Europe. Better recruitment is necessary in order to strengthen Norwegian influence in the organisations, and at the same time to develop expertise and networks for multilateral work in the Norwegian public administration.

Increased recruitment of Norwegian citizens will provide better opportunities to promote Norwegian views and values. It is important to ensure representation at all levels, including junior, mid-level, and senior management positions. In addition to employment in the Council of Europe's struc-

tures, secondment of employees from the Norwegian public administration is an important policy instrument. There is a need to raise awareness and visibility in Norway regarding the available opportunities and the eligible applicants. Clear financial and logistical framework conditions (pensions, membership in the Norwegian national social insurance scheme, etc.) are crucial. Norwegian employees' experience from international organisations is an important resource for our own public administration. Therefore, it is in Norway's interest to enhance the recruitment of Norwegians to the Council of Europe and to ensure that the expertise they gain is effectively utilised within the Norwegian public administration.

4.7 Norwegian leadership and responsibility in multilateral organisations

The Council of Europe possesses considerable professional expertise. The high level of professional expertise must be accompanied by political will in Member States in order to see positive results. As a small country that consistently honours its commitments, Norway possesses the credibility to speak out clearly against a lack of political will to uphold commitments, while also helping to build bridges between different actors and promote solutions.

Norway is also a major financial contributor to key functions in the organisation and the European Court of Human Rights, as well as to the work at the country level. This gives us leverage in terms of what can be done and where efforts should be focused.

Norway's extensive experience as an aid donor and its presence in Member States co-operating with the Council of Europe provide a solid foundation for taking a leadership role in ensuring that the work of these organisations produces results. Norway can also offer constructive criticism. We should leverage our influence to contribute to the implementation of reforms and re-prioritisations where necessary.

In May 2028, Norway will assume the presidency of the Committee of Ministers and will hold it until mid-November of the same year. During our presidency, the Government can direct particular attention to topics such as the Council of Europe's gender equality strategy, democracy, human rights, non-discrimination, artificial intelligence (AI), combating hate speech and strengthening the institution of ombudsman. Holding Russia accountable could be a key topic at any ministerial meetings, whether the war is still ongoing or has entered a post-war phase.

The presidency provides an opportunity to organise ministerial meetings (normally at least a Conference of Ministers of Justice) and promote new conventions or measures.

5 How do we approach the challenges?

5.1 Strengthening democracy and democratic institutions

The challenges to democracy in Europe are real and serious, and the Government has adopted a comprehensive approach to international democracy promotion, underpinned by the principles of individual freedom, participation, equality, non-discrimination, and the rule of law. Civil society, free media and trade unions are essential to inclusive democratic processes.

Norwegian efforts to promote democracy encompass national authorities, academia, NGOs and international forums. The Council of Europe is an important arena for this work. The Government will strengthen and expand co-operation within the organisation, including by better coordinating Norwegian efforts to promote democracy.

The Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Democracy (CDDEM) is working to implement the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy. Norway holds the Vice-Chair position of the CDDEM and will work to promote the practical and effective implementation of the principles. In addition to the exchange of good democratic practices between Member States, the implementation of the Reykjavík Principles should also entail mutual accountability, whereby Member States hold each other to account in cases of democratic backsliding. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) will be an important actor in promoting the implementation of the Reykjavík Principles in Member States.

Secretary General Berset has started work on a new Democratic Pact for Europe. He has expressed a desire to co-operate with Norway on the plan, which we have supported.

Box 5.1 The Council of Europe's Reykjavík Summit and the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy

The 2023 Reykjavík summit expressed common European solidarity with Ukraine and adopted a series of measures and action plans to support the country, and to hold Russia accountable for the war. A Register of Damage for Ukraine was established, and support was expressed for the creation of a comprehensive compensation mechanism, including an associated fund, as well as for the establishment of a special tribunal to hold the Russian leadership accountable for the crime of aggression.

The summit also focussed on measures to counter the undermining of democracy in Europe, internally and externally. The Heads of State and Government adopted the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy – ten key principles for democratic societies. In doing so, Member States pledged to uphold key democratic standards, including free and fair elections, freedom

of expression, freedom of assembly and association, independent and effective parliaments, the separation of powers, judicial independence, the fight against corruption, a free and independent civil society, and inclusive democratic participation.

The Summit also addressed the responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI), and a convention was subsequently drawn up on the use of AI in ways that do not undermine democracy, the rule of law or human rights. The Summit also resulted in a declaration affirming that environmental protection shall be a priority for the Council of Europe, highlighting the human rights implications of state action – or inaction – in response to the global climate and environmental crises (biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change).

Box 5.2 Election observation with Norwegian participation

The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is involved in election observation, legal advice, and capacity-building efforts in Participating States. The OSCE regularly sends observers to Participating States to assess election campaigns, voting, counting and dispute resolution. All OSCE Participating States have repeatedly committed to inviting – and facilitating – election observers from other Participating States, the ODIHR and the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE (OSCE PA). The purpose of election observation is to assess whether elections are conducted in accordance with the universal principles of free and democratic elections. In this regard, the ODIHR's methodology is regarded as the gold standard. The ODIHR's election observation missions are comprehensive, of

high professional quality, and of extended duration. The ODIHR also supports governments in improving election processes and following up on recommendations by reviewing legislation, providing technical expertise and supporting observer teams. In 2024, Norway sent 68 election observers through the Norwegian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights (NORDEM) to 11 different election observation missions in the OSCE region. In addition, Members of the Storting have participated in several election observation missions, including in Azerbaijan, North Macedonia, Georgia, Uzbekistan and the United States. Election observation missions are integral to the core activities of the OSCE PA and the Council of Europe/PACE, contributing to the protection of civil and political rights.

Elections and election observation

Independent election observation is crucial for elections to be trusted by the population. The OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe/PACE are key actors in this area. Norway will continue to prioritise support for the ODIHR's election observation activities, which is regarded as the gold standard for its methodologies and the confidence-building follow-up of election processes.

Local democracy

Both the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the OSCE's ODIHR monitor local elections in Europe and make recommendations. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities works to strengthen local and regional democracy. For example, the Council of Europe has assisted municipalities in Moldova and Ukraine in improving electoral processes and enhancing citizens' influence on local decisions.

The Government will continue to support efforts to promote local democracy through the Council of Europe. This is an important prerequisite for democratic development and social stability.

Anti-corruption

A well-known prerequisite for democracy and good governance is effective efforts to combat

corruption. Anti-corruption efforts – through the strict enforcement of laws, transparency in public processes, and genuinely independent oversight bodies – are among the most effective tools for preventing democratic erosion. The aim is to build strong institutions and a zero-tolerance culture toward corruption, in order to counteract authoritarian backsliding in both emerging and established democracies. This is an important reason why Norway prioritises anti-corruption efforts, both nationally and internationally, and supports measures that ensure greater transparency, accountability and good governance.

Education and democratic resilience

Both the Reykjavík Declaration and the Declaration of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe of September 2023 emphasise the central role of education for democratic values and resilience.

The Government will strengthen democratic resilience in Europe through education. Priority measures include strengthening democratic participation and values, promoting inclusion, preventing discrimination and radicalisation, and enhancing media and digital literacy in the face of disinformation. We will also increase our involvement and presence in initiatives to promote academic freedom.

Box 5.3 GRECO and MONEYVAL

The Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) was established in 1999 to monitor Member States' compliance with anti-corruption standards. Through a process of mutual evaluations and peer pressure, deficiencies in national anti-corruption policies are identified, prompting the necessary legislative, institutional and practical reforms. GRECO also provides a platform for the sharing of best practices in the prevention and detection of corruption. States outside the Council of Europe can also join GRECO, including any state which becomes party to the Criminal or Civil Law Conventions on Corruption. In addition to all Council of Europe Member States, Kazakhstan and the United States are also members, while the EU, OECD, UNODC, OSCE, ICEA, OAS and others are granted observer status.

Established in 1997, the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Lau-

ndering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) is a permanent monitoring body of the Council of Europe entrusted with the task of assessing compliance with the principal international standards to counter money laundering and the financing of terrorism. MONEYVAL encompasses Council of Europe Member States that are not members of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), whose Secretariat is administratively hosted by the OECD. The Committee makes recommendations to national authorities in respect of necessary improvements to their systems. Through a dynamic process of mutual evaluations, peer review and regular follow-up of its reports, MONEYVAL aims to improve the capacities of national authorities to fight money laundering and the financing of terrorism more effectively.

Culture and cultural heritage, as well as the free exercise of art and culture, play an important role in shaping society by promoting democratic values such as inclusion, diversity, gender equality and active participation in society. The Government will cultivate a free and independent cultural life and safeguard artistic freedom in Europe.

The Council of Europe plays a key role in ensuring Member States' compliance with the

rights of children and young people. The Government will continue to emphasise this work based on the following priorities: protecting children from violence, promoting social inclusion, ensuring safe use of technology, developing child-friendly legal processes and services, strengthening children's right to be heard and supporting children in emergency situations and crises.

Box 5.4 The European Wergeland Centre

The European Wergeland Centre was established in 2008 by Norway in co-operation with the Council of Europe. The Centre is a resource centre on education for democratic citizenship and human rights for Council of Europe Member States. The Centre works with a wide range of national and local authorities, teacher training institutions, schools, teachers, pupils, students, parents and civil society in Europe. Among other things, the Centre works with education authorities and schools in Ukraine to strengthen democratic values through education. More than 140,000 teachers have been trained since

the co-operation began in 2013. In Norway, the Centre is working with Utøya and the 22 July Centre on a national educational programme for pupils and teachers, focused on the terrorist attacks of 22 July 2011, with the aim of safeguarding and further developing democracy. The European Wergeland Centre is an independent organisation, established as a foundation under Norwegian law, with its headquarters in Oslo. The Centre's Governing Board is appointed by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research with members nominated by the Council of Europe and Norway.

5.2 Strengthening the rule of law

Judicial independence

The Venice Commission has highlighted many cases of power shifts between the three branches of government within the Member States, in particular where the executive branch (the government) has gained control of the judiciary. In countries with presidential systems, there have been instances where the president abolishes term limits to extend their time in office. The work of the Venice Commission and the Council of Europe's other monitoring mechanisms are important contributions to the EU's Rule of Law Reports for EU Member States and candidate countries. The Norwegian Courts Administration co-operates with the Council of Europe's Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) and already contributes to other parts of the Council of Europe's work and support to Member States in these areas.

Reykjavik Principles 4 and 5 address the separation of powers, balance of power, judicial inde-

pendence and effective control. In the Council of Europe's work on adherence to the Principles, the Government will emphasise measures that can effectively monitor compliance in practice. At the same time, the Government wants to strengthen the work of the Venice Commission in this area, including by enhancing its personnel resources.

The possibility of seconding Norwegian personnel, cf. below, will be considered. The Government will also use the opportunity to set conditions on respect for the rule of law in the use of voluntary contributions under the Council of Europe's action plans and in the use of EEA and Norway Grants.

Efforts to combat organised crime and human trafficking

To protect society against organised crime, all relevant institutions in a democratic state governed by the rule of law must be familiar with the various issues generated by organised crime and criminal networks. A number of Council of Europe initia-

Box 5.5 The Venice Commission

The European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) provides legal assistance and advice in the drafting of constitutions, other key pieces of legislation, electoral laws and systems in each Member State. The Venice Commission also advises on the reform of the justice sector in the Member States. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, national authorities, national assem-

blies, heads of state and certain other international organisations and Council of Europe bodies may request a legal opinion from the Venice Commission. The Commission's advice is not legally binding, but carries significant weight and is also used by the EU. In addition to all 46 Council of Europe Member States, 15 non-European states have joined the Venice Commission (from all continents except Oceania).

Box 5.6 Protection of lawyers

In 2024, the European Committee on Legal Cooperation (CDCJ) approved a proposal for a new Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer. The draft has now been approved by the Committee of Ministers, and the Convention will be opened for signature in May 2025 at the Council of Europe Foreign Affairs Ministers' meeting in Luxembourg. The background to this initiative stems from events of recent years in several European countries involving serious attacks on lawyers and viola-

tions of their rights. Norway has supported the drafting of a Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer and has contributed to the work on the Convention. Lawyers are central actors in the judicial system and play a key role in the work of strengthening the population's security under the law. The purpose of the Convention is to strengthen the protection of the legal profession and the right of lawyers to practise their profession independently and without discrimination or undue interference.

Box 5.7 Co-operation in criminal matters in Europe

The Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on the Operation of European Conventions on Co-operation in Criminal Matters (PC-OC) was established in 1981. The PC-OC is one of the subordinate committees of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee in the field of crime prevention and crime control, the European Committee on Crime Problems (CDPC). Key Council of Europe conventions on international judicial co-operation are the European Convention on Extradition, the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Mat-

ters and the European Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, along with their respective protocols. The PC-OC brings together experts from Member States, Observer States, and other participants to identify solutions to practical challenges encountered in the application of Council of Europe conventions in this field. It also works to further develop international co-operation in criminal matters, for instance, through additional protocols and recommendations.

tives and programmes are highly relevant and important to efforts aimed at preventing and combating various forms of crime. These initiatives and programmes should therefore be followed up.

The Council of Europe conventions on action against trafficking in human beings, mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, cybercrime and extradition of offenders are examples of judicial co-operation to combat serious and organised crime. Norway recognises that organised crime poses a threat to the rule of law and democracy, and will contribute to various Council of Europe programmes to prevent and combat this type of crime. Norway will also strengthen its efforts against human trafficking through a new national strategy.

Box 5.8 Efforts to combat human trafficking

All 46 Council of Europe Member States have ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. The Convention grants a number of rights to persons who are victims of trafficking. The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) monitors States Parties' implementation of the Convention. Norway must work to ensure that the Council of Europe makes the necessary resources available to GRETA. Norway must further strengthen its implementation of obligations under the Convention.

5.3 Protecting and promoting human rights

Implementation of the ECHR and ECtHR judgements

Member States' follow-up and implementation of the ECHR and the judgements of the ECtHR is crucial to the effectiveness of the convention system and an important contribution to safeguarding human rights and the rule of law in Council of Europe Member States. Norway contributes to this by faithfully complying with its judgements in relation to us and by submitting high-quality reports to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of

Box 5.9 The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

The Council of Europe Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights was established in 1999 to promote awareness of and respect for human rights in Member States. The Commissioner's Office carries out its work independently and without influence from Member States, based on its mandate. The Commissioner's Office does not act upon individual complaints of human rights violations, but conducts visits to Member States to assess key human rights challenges, makes recommendations to authorities and carries out information work on human rights.

Source: regjeringen.no

Europe. At the same time, there are challenges in several countries, often due to a lack of political will. Norway will raise issues at the highest level and urge like-minded countries to do the same, particularly in cases involving political prisoners.

Russia has been excluded from the Council of Europe, but there remain thousands of pending applications against Russia before the ECtHR. The Court aims to finalise these cases in 2025. The Secretariat of the Council of Europe has created an overview of measures that remain to be taken. Norway will support this work and emphasise that judgements in the ECHR constitute an international obligation.

Freedom of expression, independent media and disinformation

Norway gives high priority to protecting freedom of expression in its international human rights work. An independent, critical press is one of the most important institutions in any democratic society. In its political dialogue with other countries' authorities, Norway shall be a clear defender of freedom of expression. In the Council of Europe, Norway shall also be clear in its criticism of human rights violations in individual countries.

Disinformation and influence campaigns are a growing problem. This undermines the population's trust in democratic processes and institutions and has a polarising effect. Through its co-operation in the Council of Europe, Norway will contribute to countering the spread of disinformation by safeguarding freedom of expression and promoting open and informed public discourse. This includes supporting a free and independent press and strengthening critical media literacy among the population. It is also important to raise awareness of democratic preparedness and strengthen resilience to disinformation and influence operations throughout the population.

The Government will also contribute to strengthening the capacity of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RfOM). Established in 1997, the RfOM is the world's only inter-governmental «public watchdog», based in Vienna. The RfOM observes and advises on relevant media developments in all of the OSCE's 57 Participating States and also addresses serious issues concerning media freedom and the safety of journalists. The Representative works closely with both states and civil society to contribute to a framework in which independent media, including critical journalists and

human rights defenders, can carry out their work free from threats, harassment or violence.

International co-operation is essential to address the global challenges brought about by artificial intelligence (AI), especially in relation to human rights and democratic values. The Council of Europe has several ongoing processes pertaining to AI. Norway actively participated in the negotiations on a new Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This Convention was adopted in May 2024 and signed by Norway in September of the same year.

Media and technology companies play a major role in shaping the public sphere and influencing freedom of expression. Norway is advocating for increased transparency in the use of algorithms and content moderation. Disinformation spreads more readily in closed networks, highlighting the need for more effective international co-operation between governments, companies, and civil society. Therefore, Norway will contribute to strengthening global solutions for fact-checking, complement national regulations and promote corporate responsibility to respect human rights.

The crucial role of civil society

Civil society is often the decisive force driving democratic change. A strong civil society is a prerequisite for genuine democracy. Therefore, Norway will strengthen the participation of civil society in the Council of Europe and address instances where states restrict or penalise the participation of human rights defenders and civil society.

The Government will be a driving force in strengthening civil society's access to active and meaningful participation in the work of the Council of Europe. We will also work to strengthen the ability of organisations to respond when Member States are responsible for reprisals against civil society, human rights defenders and others due to their participation.

The Government will support regional initiatives for the protection of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders. Norway shall maintain a close dialogue with organisations working to protect human rights defenders on how best to prevent repression of civic space.

Gender equality

The Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategy for 2024-2029 emphasises equal treatment and

equal opportunities for women and men. It is a stated objective that a gender equality perspective and non-discrimination be incorporated in all Council of Europe policies and activities. It is also important to work to ensure that as many countries as possible ratify the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. In this context, information and awareness-raising about the Convention's purpose and scope are crucial to securing support for the work of the Convention's monitoring body, GREVIO. The notion of an equal Europe, with equal opportunities and rights for all citizens, is being challenged in Europe and beyond. Rollback policies entail a growing resistance to diversity, equality and inclusion. Measures that promote diversity, equality and inclusion are portrayed as forced, unlawful and immoral. Such trends erode human rights and threaten the right to equal treatment of individuals, irrespective of gender, disability, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. A European backlash against gender equality threatens to undermine equal opportunities for participation and representation in democratic processes. Therefore, the European fight for gender equality is about protecting democracy and preserving our values.

Norway prioritises efforts that promote gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, the human rights of LGBT+ people, prevent and combat racism, combat all forms of discrimination and violence, and counteract anti-gender narratives, conspiracy theories and gender-related disinformation. Together with like-minded countries, Norway and the Nordic Region will seek to strengthen the Council of Europe as a meeting place for constructive dialogue on opportunities and challenges in gender equality policy based on the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Protection of minorities

The Council of Europe plays an important role in safeguarding the cultural rights of national minorities, and Norway has ratified both the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which covers national minorities and the Sami as indigenous peoples in Norway. This framework covers areas including freedom of expression, cultural activities, cross-border co-operation and media access. Norway participates in the Council of Europe's steering committees on gender equality and non-discrimi-

nation, and supports the Gender Equality Strategy for 2024-2029.

To address challenges related to discrimination, hate crime and restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, Norway supports projects under the auspices of the Council of Europe that promote inclusion, equal treatment and social cohesion.

With the increase in immigration in recent decades, Norway has seen a significant rise in the number of religious communities and religious minorities in mainstream society. Greater awareness of the normative framework surrounding freedom of religion or belief, more strategic efforts to safeguard this freedom in a diverse democracy, and a deeper understanding of discrimination and polarisation based on religion or belief are essential for ensuring inclusion and broader participation from minority groups, which will, in turn, strengthen the resilience of democracy.

Economic and social rights

The European Social Charter guarantees economic and social rights, including rights related to employment, housing, health, welfare, and education. It places particular emphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups such as children, elderly persons, persons with disabilities and migrants. The Social Charter contains 31 different rights (principles) that are to be the aim of Contracting Parties' policies and which they must endeavour to achieve by all appropriate measures. The Charter sets out 31 articles containing provisions that impose obligations on the Contracting Parties to implement the rights concerned; however, the Parties have a degree of

Box 5.10 Legal instruments for the protection of minorities

Norway has ratified both the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The Council of Europe's Committee of Experts and the Advisory Committee monitor implementation. However, implementation has proven challenging in some Member States. Norway will continue to protect the rights of minorities, including through measures against prejudice and discrimination.

flexibility in choosing which articles to accept. The Social Charter builds upon the rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Compliance is monitored by the European Committee of Social Rights.

The importance of good tripartite co-operation

Tripartite co-operation between the government, trade unions and employers can make a significant contribution to strengthening democracy by ensuring that all stakeholders are heard in decision-making processes affecting working life. In turn, this contributes to building trust and co-operation between authorities and society. Decisions made through tripartite co-operation can enhance the legitimacy and accountability of the social partners, including during challenging times. The tripartite co-operation provides a platform for dialogue and negotiations between the parties even in crisis situations. This is particularly important in countries where democratic institutions are weak or under pressure.

A good and trusting social dialogue can contribute to resolving conflicts peacefully and prevent work-related unrest. This is an important contribution to maintaining stability and promoting economic development.

The Government will continue to pursue a coherent policy to protect and promote workers' rights and social dialogue internationally, including through the Council of Europe.

Climate, environment and human rights

The interrelationship between the environment, climate and human rights is an important issue at the national, European and global levels.

As a follow-up to the Reykjavík Summit, the Council of Europe has set up a working group to develop a new environmental strategy. The aim is to strengthen the Council of Europe's efforts to protect democracy, the rule of law and human rights in the context of the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises. Although the ECHR does not explicitly address the environment, the ECtHR has ruled in several judgements that serious climate and environmental damage may constitute violations of the right to life (Article 2) and the right to respect for private and family life and home (Article 8). Norway will contribute to the work of the Committee of Ministers and relevant steering committees on human rights aspects of climate and environmental issues.

In November 2024, the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Human Rights submitted a report to the Committee of Ministers on the need and feasibility of further Council of Europe instruments on human rights and the environment. The report presents various feasible instruments, both legally binding and non-binding. One of several proposals is to draft an additional protocol to the ECHR. The matter is currently being discussed by Member States in the Committee of Ministers.

5.4 Dilemmas relating to the community of common values

When ten countries came together to establish the Council of Europe in 1949, most European states were not yet democracies. There were several military dictatorships in Western Europe, and communist states in the East. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, all Central and Eastern European states were invited to join the Council of Europe, provided they supported the shared community of values, meaning that the states became democratic, guaranteed human rights and respected the rule of law.

Thus, the Council of Europe is based on a shared community of values – an organisation for like-minded states, or those on that trajectory. The Council of Europe's statutes stipulate that a state that seriously violates these values may be suspended from the organisation and, in extreme cases, expelled. This was the sanction imposed on Russia following the attack on Ukraine in 2022.

Authoritarian elected officials, as well as the threat of Russian hybrid warfare, now threaten the European project. In the areas of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, we are witnessing member states of the Council of Europe failing to comply with the rules, and the backlog in the implementation of judgments of systemic significance from the ECtHR is growing. In some countries, the authorities are more openly opposed to legislative compliance than before.

There is an ongoing debate, particularly among members of PACE, about what the threshold should be for membership in the Council of Europe. The debate was prompted by the situation in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh and the mass exodus of ethnic Armenians from the region in 2023, alongside the large number of political prisoners and the failure to implement judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, may be viewed as violations of the fundamental cri-

teria for the country's membership in the Council of Europe. The debate also involves Georgia following the elections in the autumn of 2024.

Council of Europe Member States do not hold a unified position on this matter, which may also be influenced by the geopolitical considerations of each individual country. The Government's position to date has been that maintaining dialogue with all Council of Europe Member States is important, as such dialogue provides an opportunity to influence the situation. This does not mean that there is no minimum threshold for what can be accepted from a Member State, but rather that this must be assessed specifically on a case-by-case basis and cannot be determined unequivocally in advance.

With regard to Azerbaijan, the Government believes that the Council of Europe must take further action and that suspension or exclusion cannot be ruled out if the situation does not improve. The Government adopts a principled stance on the need to uphold the shared community of values and the legitimacy of the Council of Europe. States that lack the political will to fulfil the obligations of Council of Europe membership should not be members of the organisation.

5.5 Accountability of Russia

The solidarity in support of Ukraine has been, and remains, strong within the Council of Europe, albeit with some exceptions.

The Register of Damage for Ukraine was established in 2023 under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe has demonstrated that its role as a 'home' for pan-European joint activities, in which states outside Europe can also participate, is useful when Europe is united and the UN is divided.

- *The Register of Damage for Ukraine*, where Ukrainians can report damage caused by Russian warfare, was established during the 2023 Summit. This marks a first step, and the Register has been operational since April 2024. As of December 2024, approximately 13,000 claims had been filed.
- A *compensation mechanism* has been proposed as the next step. There is a draft agreement on the establishment of a claims commission. The Council of Europe has offered to assist in the establishment of this commission, which will assess the claims submitted. The financing, whether from frozen Russian assets or other sources, remains a difficult issue.

- Norway participates in a *Core Group* of countries discussing the prosecution of those responsible for the Russian aggression against Ukraine. One possible option is the establishment of a special tribunal through an agreement between Ukraine and the Council of Europe, with other states acting as a steering committee through an enlarged partial agreement.

Secretary General Alain Berset is working to ensure that the Council of Europe has a role in both the establishment and operation of a compensation mechanism and a special tribunal. Norway is supportive of this.

5.6 Summary: «The Government will»

The Norwegian Government will:

Strengthening democracy and democratic institutions

- Strengthen the position of democracy in Europe by bolstering independent courts, free media, trade unions and other civil society organisations.
- Stand up for democratic values, the rule of law and human rights when they are challenged.
- Strengthen and coordinate Norwegian efforts to promote democracy in the Council of Europe.
- Strengthen the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' (ODIHR) election observation efforts, including in co-operation with other Nordic countries.
- Advocate for the implementation of the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy in a manner that promotes the exchange of good practices and provides support and guidance to member states in preventing and resisting democratic decline. Furthermore, be a driving force in ensuring that member states are effectively held accountable for democratic backsliding.
- Strengthen the dialogue with the European Commission and the presidency of the Council of the EU on initiatives to reinforce democracy and the rule of law in Europe.
- Use Nordic and Nordic-Baltic co-operation as forums to discuss the rule of law and democracy in Europe and communicate shared messages.
- Strengthen co-operation between the Council of Europe and the OSCE, particularly in conflict areas where the OSCE has an operational presence.

- Support the development of national legislation and institutions that safeguard media pluralism and diversity and editorial freedom, protect sources and prevent censorship and surveillance of the media.
- Be a driver of international co-operation to combat the spread of disinformation, enhance critical media literacy, and ensure greater transparency and better control of content moderation on the major social media platforms.
- Strengthening democratic resilience in Europe through education.
- Contribute to promoting culture and cultural heritage as a prerequisite for democratic societies based on mutual understanding and with favourable conditions for a free cultural life, artistic freedom and cultural diversity.
- Effectively deploy EEA and Norway Grants to support common binding standards and norms.

Strengthening the rule of law

- Continue efforts to strengthen and improve the efficiency of criminal justice co-operation in Europe, including through participation in relevant expert groups in the Council of Europe.
- Continue the Norwegian Courts Administration's work on collecting and contributing to good practices for independent courts through participation in European judicial co-operation.
- Promote the principles of the rule of law in all European co-operation, including by considering third-party interventions before the European Court of Justice in cases of fundamental importance to the rule of law.
- Be a driving force behind efforts to prosecute crimes against humanity.

Human rights

- Continue to support the legitimacy of the ECtHR, including by faithfully complying with its judgements in relation to Norway and ensuring that our reports to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the follow-up of judgments are submitted on time and of high quality.
- Use findings and recommendations from the Council of Europe's monitoring mechanisms and the ECtHR's rulings more systematically as a knowledge base in bilateral dialogue with member states.
- Be a vocal defender of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, including through

strengthened support for the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

- Support international efforts to protect journalists and media workers and combat impunity for abuses.
- Advocate for international regulation that ensures effective reporting and removal of illegal hate speech on social media.
- Support initiatives to map and combat digital violence against girls and women, as well as other vulnerable groups.
- Be a driving force for strengthening civil society participation in the work of the Council of Europe.
- Counteract the curtailment of democracy and human rights and oppose violations of international law, including international human rights law, wherever they may take place, with particular emphasis on freedom of expression, religion or belief and assembly.
- Make active use of the tripartite co-operation between the government, trade unions and employers and emphasise labour rights in efforts to promote human rights.
- Contribute to co-operation between Norwegian artists and artists in countries where human rights and freedom of expression are under pressure.
- Be a driving force for gender equality efforts in the Council of Europe, including the implementation of the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategy for 2024-2029.
- Work to strengthen the Council of Europe as a forum for constructive knowledge-based dialogue for equality and non-discrimination.
- Support international efforts to combat gender-based violence, including by promoting adherence to and implementation of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.
- Support measures that promote the inclusion and equal treatment of minorities, including through conflict-mitigating and dialogue-promoting measures between groups in society.
- Combat persecution and discrimination of people on the basis of sexual orientation.
- Support regional initiatives for the protection of human rights defenders.

Interaction between Norway, the Council of Europe and the EU

- Pursue an active and comprehensive European policy to safeguard Norwegian interests.

- Promote the Council of Europe as a platform for co-operation and accountability and as an instrument for upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law throughout Europe.
- Continue efforts to recruit more Norwegians to the Council of Europe.
- Use the work of the Council of Europe to strengthen regional and bilateral co-operation with prioritised European countries.
- Through the Council of Europe, assist countries and regions that are particularly vulnerable to disinformation, attacks on democracy and the undermining of human rights and the rule of law.
- Contribute to promoting a mutually reinforcing interaction between climate and environment and security, democracy, rule of law and human rights, in co-operation with the EU and like-minded countries.
- Strengthen contributions to the Council of Europe's action plans, with a particular focus on Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia. Contribute to improving the efficiency and impact of the Council of Europe's work at the country level to develop the rule of law and democracy.
- Actively deploy EEA and Norway Grants as a unique foreign policy instrument with a clear profile that promotes civil society, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, including increased resilience against foreign malign influence.
- Continue to set requirements for the use of EEA and Norway Grants.
- Strengthen strategic co-operation with the Council of Europe, the OECD and the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) through EEA and Norway Grants.

Accountability of Russia

- Use the Council of Europe to build resilience against Russian subversion of fragile states.
- Use the Council of Europe to hold Russia accountable.
- Coordinate with like-minded countries and build alliances with more distant countries on weakening Russian narratives and attempts at subversion.

6 Economic and administrative consequences

It is assumed that the measures and policies set out in this white paper will be within applicable budgetary limits. Any increased allocations required to meet new challenges and requirements relating to our foreign policy will be submitted in connection with the ordinary budget process.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

r e c o m m e n d s :

The recommendation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 4 April 2025 on Promoting democracy, rule of law and human rights in Europe be sent to the Storting.

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