



**800** The Council of Europe  
million Europeans

Guardian of human rights,  
democracy and the rule of law





## The Council of Europe: guardian of human rights, democracy and the rule of law

The Council of Europe occupies a unique place on the international political stage and is the oldest international organisation dedicated to fostering co-operation in Europe. It does this through the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Since its creation, the Council of Europe has successfully evolved in the pursuit of its goals. It has responded to major changes in Europe's political and social landscape and to the emergence of new threats to the human rights of the European population.

The Council was one of the first international institutions to open its doors to Eastern European countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall and it has introduced new treaties to tackle modern issues such as cybercrime, healthcare crime, international terrorism and trafficking in human beings.

Today, the role of the Council of Europe is more important than ever as it works to safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of the hundreds of millions of citizens in its 47 member states.

Its efforts to promote social cohesion, cultural diversity and democratic citizenship, to combat racism and intolerance, to promote intercultural dialogue and to find common solutions to major problems play a crucial part in helping to form a stable, functional and cohesive Europe.

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

## Death penalty

The Council of Europe has succeeded in making Europe the only death penalty-free region in the world. The abolition of the death penalty is a prerequisite for Council membership.

[www.coe.int/deathpenalty](http://www.coe.int/deathpenalty)



## Human Rights

The protection and promotion of human rights lies at the heart of the Council of Europe and has been a fundamental focus since its inception. The main foundation on which its work is based is the **European Convention on Human Rights**.

[www.coe.int/convention](http://www.coe.int/convention)

The Convention was established in 1950 and guarantees the right to life, liberty, security, a fair trial, family life and freedom of thought, conscience, religion and expression.

With ratification a condition of membership of the Council, the Convention has become a pan-European human rights protection system that symbolises not only its status as a unique and powerful propagator of civilised values and democratic growth, but also of the organisation's goal of common standards.

## Ensuring the protection of human rights

Ensuring the coherent and consistent protection of human rights across its 47 member states is a principle focus of the Council of Europe's work in the field of human rights. The institution that spearheads this activity is the **European Court of Human Rights**.

[www.echr.coe.int](http://www.echr.coe.int)

Established in 1959, the Court allows individuals, groups and governments, regardless of nationality, to contest alleged breaches of the Convention. The execution of Court judgements is supervised by the **Committee of Ministers**, which is the Council's decision-making body.

## Committee of Ministers

The Committee of Ministers is the Council of Europe's decision-making body (policies, activities and budget) and comprises the foreign ministers of all the member states, or their permanent representatives in Strasbourg.

[www.coe.int/cm](http://www.coe.int/cm)

Alongside the Court, the **European Committee for the Prevention of Torture** seeks to ensure that no one in Europe is subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment. The committee monitors the application of the **European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**, which was created in 1987.

[www.cpt.coe.int](http://www.cpt.coe.int)

## Promoting human rights

The promotion of human rights is a key responsibility for the Council of Europe. As well as striving to ensure effective implementation of the measures contained within the Convention, including the monitoring of compliance, the Council

advocates fair and equal treatment, raises public awareness and trains professionals.

The Council's range of activities helps it respond to the constant evolution of European societies and international legal systems.

**The Commissioner for Human Rights** plays a key role in monitoring and evaluating the protection and promotion of human rights in the member states. An independent and non-judicial institution created in 1999 to promote awareness of and respect for human rights, the Commissioner has a wide mandate and can conduct an active dialogue with member states on pressing issues.

[www.coe.int/commissioner](http://www.coe.int/commissioner)

## Equality, diversity and protecting the vulnerable

The Council of Europe is committed to protecting and empowering individuals, groups and communities whose social status makes them vulnerable to marginalisation, abuse and discrimination.

The Council operates programmes focused on the rights of the disabled and the elderly. In addition, Europe's Roma population, which continues to be marginalised and subject to human rights violations, is a key focus of its work to promote social inclusion and respect for human rights.

[www.coe.int/roma](http://www.coe.int/roma)

**Roma: promoting social inclusion and respect for human rights** is a Council of Europe programme whose aim is to meet the need for comprehensive national policies on the rights of Roma and to involve Roma communities in the drafting and implementation of this legislation.

This programme is supported by an initiative to train Roma mediators to give legal and administrative advice to Roma communities and the **Dosta! Fight prejudice towards Roma** campaign.

[www.coe.int/roma](http://www.coe.int/roma)

The **European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)** is the Council's independent monitoring body that specialises in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance. ECRI comprises an expert from each member state.

**ECRI** regularly publishes surveys on the extent of racism and intolerance in member states and provides advice to governments on how to tackle these problems. It also maintains dialogue with representatives of civil society.

[www.coe.int/ecri](http://www.coe.int/ecri)

National minority rights are protected by the **Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities** and the **European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages**.

[www.coe.int/minlang](http://www.coe.int/minlang)

The **Group of Eminent Persons** works to improve relations between Europe's ethnic and religious groups and produces reports on combining diversity and freedom.



The Council is active in addressing threats to human dignity, in particular trafficking in human beings and violence against women.

**GRETA** is the Council taskforce that monitors the implementation of the **European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings**, which came into force in 2008 and works to protect the victims of trafficking, to safeguard their rights, and to prosecute traffickers.

[www.coe.int/trafficking](http://www.coe.int/trafficking)

The Council works on many fronts to promote gender equality and to prevent and combat violence against women. The **Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence**, created in 2011, is the first treaty with the specific aim of protecting women against all forms of violence.

[www.coe.int/stopviolence](http://www.coe.int/stopviolence)

**Building a Europe for and with children** promotes children's social, legal, educational and healthcare rights, and helps to formulate national strategies to tackle these issues.

[www.coe.int/children](http://www.coe.int/children)

## Ensuring social rights

Alongside protecting and promoting civil and political rights, ensuring social rights is a main focus of the Council of Europe's human rights work. Its principal mechanism is the **European Social Charter**. Introduced in 1961 and revised in 1996, the Charter safeguards rights regarding housing, health, education, employment, social protection and non-discrimination, and helps to improve the day-to-day lives of millions of people.

[www.coe.int/socialcharter](http://www.coe.int/socialcharter)

The **European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine** safeguards ethical practice in biomedicine. It is aided by the European Conference of National Ethics Committees and by the Council of Europe's Bioethics Division, which is part of the 1997 Oviedo Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine.

[www.coe.int/bioethics](http://www.coe.int/bioethics)

The **Pompidou Group**, a taskforce against drug abuse and drug trafficking, is the Council's figurehead public health monitoring body. The group encourages co-operation between member states in the fight against drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking, bringing together policymakers, researchers, field workers, NGOs and international organisations.

[www.coe.int/pompidou](http://www.coe.int/pompidou)

The **European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines and HealthCare (EDQM)**, also known as the **Pharmacopoeia**, is another principal public health-related body. It works to guarantee high-quality standards for human and veterinary medicines, blood transfusions and organ transplantations. EDQM standards are recognised as a global scientific benchmark and it works in partnership with regional, national and international agencies, authorities and institutions.

[www.edqm.eu](http://www.edqm.eu)

The Council of Europe is active in the fight against counterfeit medicines. **The Convention to Fight against Counterfeit Medical Products**, or the **Medicrime Convention**, was adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 8th December 2010, and is the first international treaty to criminalise the manufacture, supply and trafficking of counterfeit medical products.

[www.coe.int/medicrime](http://www.coe.int/medicrime)



## Rule of Law

The protection and promotion of the rule of law is one of the main pillars on which the Council of Europe is built. Ensuring justice, strengthening the rule of law, developing common standards and countering threats to the rule of law form the basis of the Council's work in this field.

To meet these objectives across its 47 member states, the Council continuously develops and implements programmes to monitor, assess and improve the national systems charged with guaranteeing the rule of law.

[www.conventions.coe.int/](http://www.conventions.coe.int/)

[www.coe.int/monitoring/](http://www.coe.int/monitoring/)

## Ensuring justice

Ensuring independence and impartiality of justice is a principle focus for the Council of Europe in the field of the rule of law. It strives to achieve this goal by defining standards, measures and tools, and supporting professional bodies.

The **European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice**, the **Consultative Council of European Judges** and the **Consultative Council of European Prosecutors** are its main mechanisms in this regard. It also actively encourages national authorities to implement its standards in prisons and within police forces.

[www.coe.int/CDPC](http://www.coe.int/CDPC)

## Strengthening the rule of law

The Council of Europe strives to strengthen the rule of law and promote democracy through law. Its activity in this area is spearheaded by the **Venice Commission**.

Established in 1990, the Commission is an advisory body on constitutional matters that helps define common constitutional standards and provides legal advice on various subjects, such as democratic institutions, elections and the rights of minority groups. It is composed of independent experts in constitutional and international law and political science.

[www.venice.coe.int](http://www.venice.coe.int)

Developing common standards is another focal point of the Council's work in the field of the rule of law. It carries out various activities to promote the development of standards and policies and also maintains conventions underpinning judicial co-operation against transnational crimes in Europe.

## Countering threats to the rule of law

The Council of Europe is focused on countering threats to the rule of law. Combating corruption is a key mandate and its activity in this field is led by the **Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)**. Created in 1999, GRECO main goal is to improve the

member states' capacity to fight corruption. It monitors national anti-corruption policies and works to introduce reform where necessary.

[www.coe.int/greco](http://www.coe.int/greco)

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The Council tackles organised crime and terrorism through **MONEYVAL**, which has been responsible for ensuring that member states have effective systems in place to counter money laundering and terrorist financing since 1997, and the **European Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism**, which defines criminal activity and harmonises extradition and assistance between member states. The Convention was the first international treaty to establish as criminal offences activities such as incitement, recruitment and training that may lead to acts of terrorism.

[www.coe.int/moneyval](http://www.coe.int/moneyval)

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The Council is also active in promoting internet security and combating cybercrime through the **Budapest Convention on Cybercrime** and a number of other projects. The Convention is the first international treaty to address this type of crime and its implementation is monitored by the **Cybercrime Convention Committee**.

[www.coe.int/cybercrime](http://www.coe.int/cybercrime)

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Further protection for privacy and personal data is provided by the **Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regards to Automatic Processing of Personal Data**, which was created in 1981 and remains the only international treaty of its kind, and the **European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG)**, which is operated in collaboration with the European Union and other organisations.

[www.coe.int/dataprotection](http://www.coe.int/dataprotection)



## Democracy

Democracy is the third pillar of the Council of Europe and its work in this field is based on the belief that sound and thriving democratic governance is essential for the effective protection of human rights and the assurance of the rule of law.

The Council helps to protect and promote democracy and democratic culture at every level of society across its member states by setting and monitoring standards and providing an assistance infrastructure that is continually active.

## Parliamentary democracy

Promoting parliamentary democracy is a key focus for the Council of Europe and a leading objective in this area is the strengthening of democratic institutions by fostering political pluralism, promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law, and expanding monitoring activities in its member states.

Activity in this field is spearheaded by the **Parliamentary Assembly**, which provides political impetus to the Council's actions. The Assembly consists of parliamentarians from the 47 member states and sits four times a year. Its role is to discuss and

[www.assembly.coe.int](http://www.assembly.coe.int)

[www.assembly.coe.int](http://www.assembly.coe.int)

make recommendations upon any matter within the scope of the Council. The Council is also committed to supporting free and fair elections, the cornerstones of parliamentary democracy.

## Local democracy

The Council of Europe strives to promote local democracy, which it believes is the foundation for any democratic system and a prerequisite for democratic stability. The basis for its work is the **European Charter of Local Self Government**, whose implementation is monitored by the **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities**.

The Congress comprises political representatives from local and regional authorities in all of the Council's member states. It holds political dialogue, carries out observations and facilitates co-operation with the aim of nurturing local and regional democracy in Europe.

As part of its activity, the Council of Europe is focused on promoting good governance at the local level. It also encourages local and regional authorities to develop partnerships across borders, modernise their working methods, respect standards of ethical behaviour and promote dialogue with citizens.

[www.coe.int/congress](http://www.coe.int/congress)



## Promoting democratic governance and stability

As part of its work in the field of democracy, the Council of Europe is committed to promoting democratic governance and stability. A principle focus for its activity is the provision of a platform for co-operation on issues affecting democracy in its member states.

The Council works to support democracy in post-conflict and frozen-conflict situations where there is a threat to democratic stability, and its network of schools of political studies assists in the promotion of sustainable democratic governance.

The organisation is active in preserving, developing and revitalising democracy through the safeguarding of free, independent and pluralistic media and access to an open, universal and secure internet.

The Council is dedicated to developing the participation of international and national non-governmental organisations in its work in the field of democracy. Its principle mechanism for doing so is the **Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations**.

[www.coe.int/ingo](http://www.coe.int/ingo)

The conference, which comprises delegates from international non-governmental organisations, provides a vital link between politicians and ordinary citizens, and helps ensure that the voice of civil society is heard at the Council.

The Council helps nurture future political, economic, social and cultural leadership in countries in transition by supporting a network of 16 **Schools of Political Studies**. The schools hold seminars and conferences on European integration, globalisation, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

**The Forum for the Future of Democracy** brings together high-level representatives of governments, parliaments, local and regional authorities and civil society with the aim of strengthening democracy, political freedoms and citizens' participation in the democratic process.

[www.coe.int/democracy](http://www.coe.int/democracy)

The **Council of Europe Development Bank** plays a key role in promoting social cohesion and sustainability in European societies and was one of the first financial institutions to be established in Europe.

[www.coebank.org](http://www.coebank.org)

The **North-South Centre** works to raise standards of intercultural dialogue. The Centre, set up in Lisbon in 1990, raises public awareness of global interdependence issues and promotes the adoption of solidarity-based policies complying with the Council's aims.

[www.nscentre.org](http://www.nscentre.org)

The protection of cultural diversity, heritage and landscape is another key activity. Principal Council bodies include **Eurimages**, which supports the co-production, distribution, digitalisation and exhibition of European cinematic works and was the first

body of its kind in Europe, and the **European Audiovisual Observatory**, which promotes the development of European film and television industries.

[www.coe.int/eurimages](http://www.coe.int/eurimages)

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[www.obs.coe.int](http://www.obs.coe.int)

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The **Bern Convention** leads the Council's work to protect rare and endangered animal and plant species and natural diversity.

[www.coe.int/bernconvention](http://www.coe.int/bernconvention)

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**The European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA)** fosters co-operation in the field of major natural and technological disasters. Established in 1987, the agreement focuses on the prevention of such events and minimising their impact on people, heritage and the environment.

[www.coe.int/eur-opa](http://www.coe.int/eur-opa)

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## Building a democratic future

Supporting the development of a democratic future is a core tenet of the Council's activity in the field of democracy. It works to develop language teaching and learning as a means of fostering greater communication and co-operation through its **European Centre for Modern Languages** in Graz (Austria).

[www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at)

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Established in 1994 and operated by international teams of experts, the Centre is a unique institution which specialises in international language education projects. These projects primarily involve teacher trainers and researchers.

The Centre, in collaboration with **the European Wergeland Centre**, is also involved in the Council's **Education for Sustainable Democratic Societies** programme. The programme promotes the Council's standards and values through education practice and policies.

[www.coe.int/education](http://www.coe.int/education)

**The European Cultural Convention**, created in 1954, helps to promote and protect cultural diversity throughout Europe. It works to encourage appreciation of the many national identities that comprise Europe's common cultural heritage, with a focus on languages, history and society. Convention initiatives include European Heritage Days, the European Day of Language and the Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights programme.

[www.coe.int/culture](http://www.coe.int/culture)

The Council nurtures youth partnership and citizenship through its **European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest**, the **European Youth Foundation** and the **Youth Card** scheme. It prioritises democratic citizenship and participation, human rights education, the social inclusion of young people and their access to social rights.

[www.coe.int/youthcentres](http://www.coe.int/youthcentres)

[www.youth-partnership.net](http://www.youth-partnership.net)

The Council works to promote fair sport without doping and violence through its **Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS)**. The partial agreement works to establish international standards and develop a pan-European framework of co-operation.

[www.coe.int/epas](http://www.coe.int/epas)



## The Council of Europe in the international arena

Although other institutions have been established since 1945 that complement the objectives of the Council of Europe, the Council retains a unique place in the international political landscape.

It is distinct from its peers; however, it shares many of their values and goals and co-operates with them in numerous fields, in particular in relation to human rights, the rule of law and democracy.

The **Council of Europe** is a separate body from the **European Union (EU)**, which has 27 member states. However, the Council and the EU have implemented numerous joint programmes over the last 15 years. No country has ever joined the EU without first belonging to the Council.

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

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[www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu)

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The Council co-operates with the **United Nations** on a wide range of issues, including the promotion and protection of children's rights and the prevention of violence against women and torture, and with the **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe** on matters such as the prevention of terrorism and trafficking in human beings and the protection of national minorities.

[www.un.org](http://www.un.org)

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[www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org)

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Europe's international bodies – which is which

**The Council of Europe** is an international organisation focused on human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

*The Council of the European Union* is the main decision-making body of the European Union and comprises the ministers of member states.

*The European Commission* is the executive branch of the European Union. It ensures treaties are properly implemented.

**The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe** is the political driving force behind many Council of Europe initiatives.

*The European Parliament* is the parliamentary body of the European Union, comprising MEPs from the 27 member states.

**The European Court of Human Rights** is responsible for ensuring compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights.

*The Court of Justice of the European Communities* is responsible for ensuring that European Union law is observed.

*The International Court of Justice* is the judicial body of the United Nations and is based in The Hague, Netherlands.

**The European Convention on Human Rights** is the treaty that guarantees respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is the text adopted by the United Nations to strengthen human rights protection at the international level.

*The Charter of Fundamental Rights* is the European Union text on human rights and fundamental freedoms that was adopted in 2000.

*The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* is a Vienna-based agency of the European Union, established in 2007.

## List of members and year joined

Belgium (1949), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002), Bulgaria (1992), Croatia (1996), Cyprus (1961), Czech Republic (1993), Denmark (1949), Estonia (1993), Finland (1989), France (1949), Georgia (1999), Germany (1950), Greece (1949), Hungary (1990), Iceland (1950), Ireland (1949), Italy (1949), Latvia (1995), Liechtenstein (1978), Lithuania (1993), Luxembourg (1949), Malta (1965), Moldova (1995), Monaco (2004), Montenegro (2007), Netherlands (1949), Norway (1949), Poland (1991), Portugal (1976), Romania (1993), Russian Federation (1996), San Marino (1988), Serbia (2003), Slovakia (1993), Slovenia (1993), Spain (1977), Sweden (1949), Switzerland (1963), "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (1995), Turkey (1949), Ukraine (1995), United Kingdom (1949).

Candidate for membership: Belarus (1993)

## Council of Europe observer states

Canada, the Holy See, Japan, Mexico and the United States of America



## Our symbols

The symbols of the Council of Europe are its flag, anthem and logo. The **European flag**, with its circle of 12 gold stars against a vivid blue background, is one of the most famous in the world. Equally as illustrious is the **European Anthem**, the prelude to the Ode to Joy from Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

The Council of Europe adopted these symbols of unity in 1955 and 1972 respectively, with the European Union doing the same in 1986. They are now the emblems of a shared European identity. The e-shaped logo housing the European motif of 12 gold stars is the Council's own distinctive sign and was adopted on its 50th anniversary in 1999.

[www.coe.int/aboutcoe](http://www.coe.int/aboutcoe)

Although the Council of Europe and the European Union now share a common flag and an anthem, their roles, functions and aims are quite distinct.

## The Secretary General and the Secretariat

Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly for a term of five years, the **Secretary General** heads the Secretariat of the Council of Europe. The current incumbent is Thorbjørn Jagland from Norway.

[www.coe.int/secretarygeneral](http://www.coe.int/secretarygeneral)

The **Secretariat** is the Council of Europe's administrative body. It ensures that the Council's various offices function properly and fulfil their mandates, and implements internal policy.

## Our budget

The Council of Europe's work is funded by its member states, whose contributions are determined by their population and wealth. The budget for 2011 was €217 million.

[www.coe.int/memberstates](http://www.coe.int/memberstates)

## What is a convention?

A convention is in effect a set of laws created by a process of debate and agreement. Once a **Convention** has been adopted, member states can sign it, after which it passes to their national parliaments who decide whether or not to ratify it. If it is approved, then the rules and regulations contained within the Convention become part of their national laws. The Council monitors the implementation and application of conventions.

<http://conventions.coe.int>

## What is a partial agreement?

A **partial agreement** allows certain Council of Europe member states to work together in pursuit of goals that might not necessarily be relevant or acceptable to all countries. Only those member states involved in the agreements contribute to their financing and development.

[www.coe.int/partialagreements](http://www.coe.int/partialagreements)

## Council of Europe Major Conventions

- 1950** European Convention on Human Rights
- 1954** European Cultural Convention
- 1961** European Social Charter
- 1964** Convention on the Elaboration of a European Pharmacopoeia
- 1969** European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage
- 1977** European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers
- 1977** European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism
- 1979** Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats
- 1980** European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation
- 1981** Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data
- 1985** European Charter of Local Self-Government
- 1987** European Convention for the Prevention of Torture
- 1989** Anti-Doping Convention
- 1992** European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages
- 1995** Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
- 1996** European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights
- 1997** European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine
- 2000** European Landscape Convention
- 2001** Convention on Cybercrime
- 2005** Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
- 2007** Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse
- 2011** Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
- 2011** MEDICRIME Convention

<http://conventions.coe.int>

## The main Partial Agreements

- 1956** Council of Europe Development Bank
- 1964** Convention on the elaboration of a European Pharmacopoeia
- 1977** European Card for Substantially Handicapped Persons
- 1980** Co-operation Group to Combat Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Drugs (Pompidou Group)
- 1987** Co-operation Group for the Prevention of, Protection Against, and Organisation of Relief in Major Natural and Technological Disasters (EUR-OPA)
- 1988** European Support Fund for the Co-Production and Distribution of Creative Cinematographic and Audiovisual Works (Eurimages)
- 1989** European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre)
- 1990** European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission)
- 1991** Partial Agreement on Youth Mobility through the Youth Card
- 1992** European Audiovisual Observatory
- 1994** European Centre for Modern Languages (Graz Centre)
- 1999** Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)
- 2007** Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS)
- 2011** Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes

[www.coe.int/partialagreements](http://www.coe.int/partialagreements)

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[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

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Edited by the Public Relations and Branding Division,  
Directorate of Communication,  
Council of Europe

Design cover page and layout: Barbara Brink: [www.barbara-brink.com](http://www.barbara-brink.com)  
Produced by the Documents and Publications Production Department  
© Council of Europe: October 2011



