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## OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

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| From:           | General Secretariat of the Council                                                           |
| To:             | Delegations                                                                                  |
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| Subject:        | Council conclusions on EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe in 2025-2026 |

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Delegations will find in the annex Council conclusions on EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe in 2025-2026, as approved by the Council on 17 December 2024.

**Council conclusions on EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe in 2025-2026**

1. The 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2024 was an important occasion to raise awareness of the Organisation's positive impact on people's daily lives and its considerable achievements in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe over three-quarters of a century.
2. In 2025, as the EU marks the 25th anniversary of proclamation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the CoE marks the 75th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights, protecting and promoting fundamental rights will remain of utmost importance in our joint work.
3. The EU remains fully committed to the effective functioning of the Council of Europe Convention system and the implementation of the CoE's conventions it has adhered to.
4. In the current context of continued pressure on the multilateral institutional system, the EU will aim to further position the strategic partnership with the CoE as a key example of effective multilateral cooperation on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, while promoting regional peace, stability and prosperity.
5. The EU is the CoE's main institutional partner in political, financial and legal terms, as reaffirmed in the May 2023 Reykjavík Declaration. The EU will cooperate closely with the CoE to ensure its effective implementation. In line with the Reykjavik Declaration, the EU will support the Council of Europe in continuing the reform process to achieve greater transparency, efficiency and effectiveness, including by focussing on activities where the CoE has comparative advantages.
6. The EU reaffirms its commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the European Court of Human Rights, including the effective and timely execution of its judgments. It remains determined to accede to the Convention and looks forward to further advancing this important goal, enshrined in Article 6(2) TEU.

7. Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine poses an enduring challenge to European peace and security, as well as to the democratic values and human rights, which are the foundation of the European Union. The EU will continue to work closely with the CoE in pursuing full accountability of Russia and its leadership for waging a war of aggression against Ukraine and for other most serious crimes under international law, as well as for the damage caused by its war. Both organisations remain committed to victims' rights to justice and reparations, as well as guarantees of non-repetition. They will continue to work together for the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine, ensuring that the evidence collected by the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression can be transferred to and used before the Special Tribunal. The EU, as a fully-fledged Participant in the Register of Damage for Ukraine, and the CoE will continue to work together to establish an international comprehensive compensation mechanism.
8. The EU will continue to be actively involved in the CoE's activities in support of Ukraine and its people, including the CoE implementation of the Action Plan for Ukraine "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction" 2023-2026 and the work of the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU).
9. EU enlargement is a strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity across the continent and a powerful tool to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, on which the EU and the CoE are founded. The EU will continue to closely cooperate with the CoE and its experts and monitoring bodies in providing guidance in these areas. Through the EU-CoE Joint Programmes, both organisations will continue to support the reforms aimed at meeting the EU's membership criteria related to the fundamentals of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
10. The EU welcomes the cooperation between the CoE and the Belarusian civil society, democratic forces, independent media and journalists, and human rights defenders, including in the framework of the CoE Contact group and the establishment of the Council of Europe Information Point for Belarusian People in Vilnius.

11. The EU will also engage with the CoE to find ways to strengthen cooperation with Russian independent civil society actors, independent media and journalists, and human rights defenders, active both inside and outside Russia.
12. The Council of Europe's Southern Neighbourhood Policy and the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity have been key in strengthening dialogue and cooperation between North and South, fostering solidarity and promoting stability in Europe and its neighbouring regions. The EU will continue to support the work of the CoE North-South Centre.
13. Today, the CoE's impact reaches well beyond the European continent, as many of its conventions are open for global signature and several of its mechanisms extend around the world. The EU will continue to promote the accession of non-European States to the most relevant CoE conventions. A particular focus will be on those conventions through which judicial cooperation with third countries can be strengthened in the fight against serious cross-border crime, especially organised crime.
14. The Union will continue to act in partnership with the CoE in the implementation of the EU's priorities in its external relations, as guided by the EU's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2027).
15. The EU is the largest donor to the extra-budgetary resources of the CoE. The total cumulative envelope of our joint programmes has increased from EUR 95 million in 2013 to EUR 245 million in 2023. In 2025-2026, in addition to our regional facilities in the candidate and potential candidate countries and the Union's neighbourhood, the EU intends to further support the design, development and implementation of growth-enhancing institutional, administrative and structural reforms in its Member States through the Technical Support Instrument.

16. The EU will strive to improve the visibility of and communication on the concrete results achieved through EU-CoE cooperation, including through joint statements and high-level events on topics of common interest. Continued civil society involvement can also contribute to improve such visibility.
17. In the next two years, the EU-CoE beneficial cooperation will continue along the three main pillars of the strategic partnership - political dialogue, legal cooperation and programmatic cooperation, focusing on the following inter-linked and mutually reinforcing priorities in the fields of human rights, democracy and the rule of law:

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

18. The abolition of the death penalty and the eradication of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment are essential to ensure human dignity and uphold the right to life. The EU will continue to support increased awareness-raising and advocacy activities to foster an open, transparent and democratic debate towards the full abolition of death penalty, including through an annual Joint EU-CoE Declaration against death penalty. The EU also remains committed to eradicating all forms of torture and ill-treatment, including promoting justice and reparation for victims and strengthening survivor engagement.
19. The EU reaffirms its commitment to the promotion and protection of freedom of expression, including media freedom and the safety of journalists and media workers, both online and offline. This includes inter alia supporting independent and pluralistic media and ensuring accountability for crimes against journalists. The EU will follow closely the work of the CoE's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists to monitor threats and enhance protections, with a focus on those reporting from conflict zones, investigating corruption and reporting on human rights violations and abuses.

20. The EU will continue to support the work of national human rights institutions, human rights defenders and civil society organisations. Cooperation with the CoE is also important regarding EU mechanisms such as Protect Defenders. The EU will be a leading actor in the promotion of a safe and enabling online and offline environment for civil society and human rights defenders, including those in exile. It will pay special attention to unlawful online surveillance and oppose legal and administrative measures which reduce civic space. The EU will condemn any form of reprisals against HRDs who cooperate, seek to cooperate or have cooperated with the Council of Europe.
21. The EU will deepen its work to promote gender equality and to prevent and combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, including where relevant through the implementation of the “Istanbul Convention”. The “Istanbul Convention” on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence has been ratified by the EU as regards matters falling within its exclusive competence, related to institutions and public administration of the Union, and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement. The EU will also forge synergies between the different political and legal frameworks on women’s and girls’ enjoyment of human rights and gender equality, with focus on their enhanced implementation.
22. Both organisations will pursue joint efforts aimed at advancing the respect, protection and fulfilment of the rights of the child, as set out in the EU and CoE respective strategies. Particular attention will be given to child participation, integrated child protection, child-friendly justice, digital empowerment and protection, inclusion of children in need and to children in conflict areas in line with the recently updated EU Guidelines on Children and Armed conflict. The EU and the CoE will also continue joint efforts aimed at the well-being and protection of the children of Ukraine, especially those who have been unlawfully deported, forcibly transferred and illegally adopted in Russia, demanding their safe return and accountability of perpetrators, supporting the activities of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.

23. The EU will continue to strengthen its cooperation with the CoE as it moves forward with the implementation of its Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse and exploitation, covering three core aspects, namely prevention, support to investigations, and assistance to victims. It will continue to promote the Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (“Lanzarote convention”) and uphold its effective collaboration with the Committee of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.
24. The EU will also continue to engage in the CoE’s activities with respect to the human rights of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in particular the fundamental right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement. In this connection, the EU will pay special attention to women and persons in vulnerable situations such as unaccompanied children, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities or those facing discrimination or violence, as well as the instrumentalisation of migrants. The EU is committed to upholding human rights and procedural safeguards in relation to all asylum seekers and refugees and migrants regardless of their status in line with our international obligations and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Temporary Protection Directive.
25. The EU will continue to engage with the CoE and its Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), in line with the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings and the revised Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, with the aim of enhancing the prevention of and response to trafficking in human beings, improving the protection, support and empowerment of victims and strengthening regional cooperation on the international dimension of this crime.

26. While the EU remains in favour of the CoE strengthening its actions in the area of migrant smuggling in line with the existing framework of the 2020 CoE Action Plan on Fostering International Cooperation and Investigative Strategies, the EU believes that the emphasis needs to be on revision and monitoring of existing legal frameworks at UN and EU level, instead of the preparation of a new CoE Convention in this area.
27. The EU will cooperate with the CoE in stepping up action to combat discrimination with attention to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including on grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, property, birth, disability, age, sexual orientation and gender identity. It will continue the exchanges on policies and initiatives to combat racism, antigypsyism, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred. The EU will also promote the full and equal enjoyment of human rights by LGBTI persons in line with the Court's case-law and applicable standards. It will cooperate closely with the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and all other specialised departments and functions.
28. In line with the relevant articles on non-discrimination of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the EU and the Council of Europe will work together with a view to promoting respect for diversity by protecting and promoting human rights of persons belonging to national minorities in accordance with applicable Council of Europe norms, standards and Venice Commission recommendations.
29. Joint activities to counter the spread of hate crime and hate speech (online and offline) will also be given particular attention. The CoE remains a privileged partner of the EU in the context of the High-Level Group on combating hate speech and hate crime, and the implementation of relevant CoE recommendations.



30. Close cooperation will continue with respect to the rights to privacy and data protection, including by promoting the Modernised Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to the Processing of Personal Data (“Convention 108+”) and contributing to the work of the CoE Consultative Committee of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (T-PD).
31. Moreover, engagement will continue to uphold the rights of individuals concerned by criminal proceedings, in particular the right to a fair trial and the rights of defence. The EU will continue to promote the CoE’s instruments on judicial cooperation in criminal matters to further enhance common understanding of the applicable international standards in this area. The 2022 Recommendation on the procedural rights of suspects and accused in pre-trial detention and on material detention conditions lays down minimum standards as regards the imposition of pre-trial detention, cell sizes, outdoors time, nutrition and healthcare conditions, as well as initiatives with a view to reintegration and social rehabilitation. The EU will continue to work closely with the CoE on these matters in the context of funding provided under the Commission’s Justice Programme for the Network of Prison Monitoring Bodies.
32. In addition, the EU will further strengthen its cooperation with the CoE to promote high international standards for the rights of victims of crime, as highlighted in the EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025). This collaboration is particularly valid in light of the adoption of the Council of Europe Recommendation on rights, services and support for victims of crime on 15 March 2023 and the adoption of the Commission’s proposal for the revision of the Victims’ Rights Directive on 12 July 2023. Working together in this area will help to enhance the framework for support and protection of victims of crime, strengthen victim-centered justice and as a result - increase the security of all citizens.

33. In the context of economic and social rights, the EU will work jointly with the CoE on respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights in line with the European Social Charter and revised European Social Charter, taking into account commitments under the Vilnius Declaration. The EU will also continue cooperating with the CoE on Roma inclusion and the implementation of the commitments made at the EU's 2021 Social Summit in Porto.
34. The EU follows closely possible new normative developments regarding the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This includes strengthening the EU's coordination in fighting climate change and building resilience to its impacts as well as discussions on the need for and feasibility of a further instrument or instruments on human rights and the environment, and takes into account increasing case law. The EU will support the implementation of the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on human rights and the protection of the environment, together with stronger mainstreaming of environmental issues. Furthermore, the EU acknowledges the crucial role played by environmental human rights defenders and will support their efforts in addressing environmental crimes.
35. The fight against environmental crime is another key priority for both organisations. The text of the new Convention on the Protection of Environment through Criminal Law was agreed by experts on 7 June 2024. The Convention contains a comprehensive and up-to-date list of offences and provisions on sanctions and enforcement, and has potential to promote international cooperation to further strengthen the fight against environmental crimes. The EU and the CoE will work together to get political support for this ambitious text and promote the Convention to international partners.
36. As a Party to the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats ("Bern Convention"), the EU will continue to work towards the mainstreaming of nature protection and restoration into the broader environmental agenda of both the EU and CoE, and contribute to the efforts to ensure the long term financial stability of the Convention.

37. In line with the EU AI Act, the EU will continue to work with the CoE to ensure a responsible, human rights-centred and sustainable approach to the development, design and use of artificial intelligence. Following the signature by the EU of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (“Vilnius Convention”), the Union will aim at its timely ratification. Acknowledging the global standard-setting role of the Council of Europe, exemplified by the Framework Convention, the EU will contribute to its promotion and will participate in the development of a CoE recommendation on equality and artificial intelligence, while striving to ensure compatibility with the EU AI Act and other EU norms and standards. The EU will continue to advocate for the promotion and protection of human rights in digital contexts.
38. The EU will continue to promote a global, open, free and secure internet, as well as responsible platform governance and content moderation, while condemning internet shutdowns, online censorship and unlawful online surveillance, combating disinformation and promoting information integrity and protection of minors online.
39. In line with the increased focus on questions of business and human rights at international level and the recently adopted Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, the EU will cooperate with the CoE in strengthening the responsibility of companies for the adverse human rights and environmental impacts of their activities, including in their value chains, and the effective access of victims to justice.
40. Convinced of the substantive value that the Commissioner for Human Rights’ work brings for the fulfilment of the CoE mission, the EU is ready to collaborate more closely with his office in the implementation of the EU-CoE cooperation priorities.

## **DEMOCRACY**

41. The EU will continue to engage with the CoE to strengthen democracy throughout Europe. Both organisations will cooperate to counter foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation campaigns and distortion of history. Furthermore, they will work together to address existing challenges and attacks to democracy, by fighting strategic lawsuits against public participation and supporting free and fair elections, and greater transparency and inclusiveness of democratic processes and frameworks, and increased citizens' engagement.
42. The EU and the CoE will cooperate to safeguard the freedoms of association and assembly, which are key for an enabling environment for civil society and ensuring active democratic participation by citizens. Meaningful engagement by and with civil society remains an issue of crucial importance for the EU. The CoE Secretary General's Roadmap on civil society engagement provides several good ideas, such as the inclusion of a civil society pillar in the work of the new Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM). The EU is ready to contribute to the work of the CDDEM, including on the operationalisation of the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy.
43. The EU and the candidate countries for EU accession benefit significantly from the expertise of the Venice Commission in improving constitutional standards and electoral law. The EU will seek to further strengthen its cooperation with the Venice Commission in fostering electoral reforms, including those based on the recommendations of EU Election Observation Missions.
44. In the field of education, the EU and the CoE will work together to develop an inclusive, innovative, and interconnected European Higher Education Area, focusing on the protection and promotion of fundamental academic values, such as academic freedom. They will continue to support the recognition of qualifications throughout the area and the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its principles. The EU and the CoE will also continue to promote quality citizenship education.

45. Highly developed linguistic competences are essential for learning, integration, employability and social cohesion. The EU will continue its collaboration with the European Centre for Modern Languages of the CoE to promote excellence and innovation in language teaching, and the implementation of effective language education policies. It also aims to quality education for migrant learners - highly developed linguistic competences become key transversal competences to support learning, integration, employability and social cohesion. Multilingual education is important in supporting democracy and the inclusive participation of all citizens, including persons belonging to minorities.
46. The EU and the CoE have a longstanding and impactful cooperation in the field of youth with the Youth Partnership, fostering synergies and cooperation on issues of common interest benefitting youth work, youth policy and youth research. In 2025-2026, the EU will focus on youth mainstreaming in policy and the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda. It will also carry research projects on young people's mental health and well-being, youth participation, and rural youth.
47. Constructive cooperation will also continue on topics of mutual interest in the field of **sport**, such as the fight against hate speech and discrimination, safe sport and the promotion of gender equality. The EU supports the main objectives and principles of the *Macolin Convention on manipulation of sports competitions* and reaffirms the importance of pursuing the fight against the manipulation of sports competitions.
48. The enjoyment of cultural rights is a key factor in achieving sustainable development. The EU will continue to cooperate with the CoE in promoting access to cultural and artistic activities, artistic freedom, cultural diversity, creativity and recognition of the rights of authors, artists and cultural and creative professionals.

49. Our established cooperation in the area of cultural heritage will continue with the next editions of the European Heritage Days. Further cooperation will be explored in areas such as the contribution of cultural heritage to horizontal societal themes such as intergenerational fairness and youth's access to culture, high-quality living environment, and safeguarding heritage against natural and human-made disasters.
50. The EU will continue to promote the potential of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the CoE for cultural cooperation, sustainable territorial development, social cohesion and European unity.

## **RULE OF LAW**

51. The CoE's expertise, standard-setting and monitoring role is crucially important in the context of the EU's annual Enlargement package and the Rule of Law Cycle, including the preparation of the annual Rule of Law Reports, the EU Justice Scoreboard and the continuous improvement of EU tools aimed at protecting the rule of law, not least the anti-corruption package. Cooperation with the Venice Commission, GRECO, MONEYVAL, CEPEJ and all other relevant bodies of the CoE will remain a top priority for the coming years. In the same vein, the EU looks forward to continue our cooperation on judicial training policy as a competent and efficient judiciary stands at the forefront to safeguard the rule of law and citizens' fundamental rights.
52. The EU will continue to respect and promote the implementation of standards and measures against corruption and money laundering, including on protection of whistle-blowers reporting breaches in these areas, in EU Member States and in the Enlargement and EU Neighbourhood areas. The European Commission will, as mentioned in the 2023 Communication on the fight against corruption, continue discussing with the other institutions the possibility of moving towards full participation of the EU in GRECO.

53. In line with the EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025, the EU Drugs Action Plan 2021-2025 and the Council Conclusions on human rights-based approach in drug policies, setting out the political framework and priorities for the EU's drug policy, the EU will continue its close cooperation with the CoE International Co-operation Group on Drugs and Addictions (Pompidou Group) to provide knowledge, support and solutions for effective, evidence-based drug policies, which fully uphold human rights.
54. The EU is committed to work closely with the CoE to promote respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by recommending and promoting rights-compliant counter-terrorism legislation and policies. The EU will also aim at improving its criminal justice response in areas such as radicalisation and the reintegration and rehabilitation of terrorist offenders. Counter terrorism measures, including measures to combat terrorism financing, must uphold human rights and must not be instrumentalised to limit civic space, in violation of international law.
55. In the area of judicial and police cooperation in criminal matters, the EU will continue to engage with the CoE on matters related to mutual assistance and other forms of judicial cooperation, including through promoting the Convention on Cybercrime (“Budapest Convention”) and its Second Additional Protocol on enhanced cooperation enabling the preservation and exchange of electronic evidence. The EU will also continue to engage with the CoE on matters related to the Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism (Warsaw Convention), in particular in the context of the ongoing negotiations on an Additional Protocol to the Convention, intended to enhance the effectiveness of criminal asset recovery while effectively safeguarding the fundamental rights of affected persons.
56. The EU will also work together with the CoE in the field of cultural goods trafficking, notably in the context of the upcoming EU Action Plan on Trafficking in Cultural Goods. It will continue to promote the CoE Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (“Nicosia Convention”), which aims to prevent and combat the illicit trafficking and destruction of cultural property.