

Introduction

The Council of Europe is not an EU institution. It is not a part of the EU. The Council brings together 47 European states to discuss political issues that affect them, mainly regarding culture, the environment, ethics and law. It has also provided constitutional advice to the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe. It runs the European Court of Human Rights and was responsible for the European Social Charter. It presents a model of *intergovernmental* co-operation as opposed to the *supranational* model on which the EU operates.

History

Established under the Treaty of London in 1949, the Council of Europe represented one of the first attempts at European reconciliation and co-operation after the divisions and nationalism of World War II. The idea for establishing the Council of Europe emerged from the political debate after World War II on how to prevent another war. Particularly notable was the speech made by Sir Winston Churchill in 1946, when he called for a United States of Europe to encourage co-operation.

The Council's first success was the signing of Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in 1950, followed by the establishment of the European Court of Human Rights in 1959. However, with the establishment of the European Community in 1958, the role of the Council of Europe declined and for many years it was sidelined. But since the collapse of Communism in the late 1980s, it has done much to promote democracy in former Soviet Bloc countries and the Balkans, promoting the principles of democracy and human rights that have enabled many of these countries to join the EU.

How does the Council of Europe work?

The Council of Europe consists of the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), made up of representatives of the member states' parliaments, and a Council of Foreign Ministers. It has no law making powers but instead passes conventions and charters that recommend actions that its members should take. The proposals of the Council do not take automatic effect – instead members have to sign up to them. The parliamentary assembly is led by a President, Jean-Claude Mignon, who was elected in 2012, and supported by a secretariat of 1,800 civil servants.

Although the Council's recommendations in many areas are not binding, in some important areas – principally human rights – it does have legal jurisdiction. Under the Convention of Human Rights, all signatories are obliged to uphold the right to life, to protection against torture and inhumane treatment, to freedom and safety, to a fair trial, to respect for one's private family life and correspondence, and to freedom of expression. States and individuals, regardless of the ir nationality, may refer alleged violations to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Facts and figures

- ❖ Since its formation in 1949, the Council of Europe has passed over 200 legally binding European treaties and conventions.
- ❖ The Council budget for 2014 is over €400 million.

Arguments

For

- ❖ The Council of Europe brings together governments to discuss and promote principles that they might not support individually.
- ❖ The Council presents a good alternative to the 'ever deeper integration' of the European Union. The EU could learn from the Council how to operate a less centralised organisation.

Against

- ❖ The Council has so little power it is little more than a talking shop.
- ❖ The Council would have more influence if its members were directly elected by the people of Europe.
- ❖ By creating international agreements on issues such as human rights and crime, the Council interferes in the freedom of national governments to make their own laws.
- ❖ The Council has been too keen to expand and has lowered its admission standards. It allowed countries such as Serbia and Croatia to join that did not meet its standards on human rights and democracy.

"We must build a kind of United States of Europe."

Sir Winston Churchill, 1946

"I believe that through our common efforts we will make the greater Europe a united Europe."

Mikhail Gorbachev, 1989, to the Council of Europe

"The council is supposed to defend democratic values, but it has been so keen to embrace new members recently that it has let standards slip."

The Economist, May 2004

Technical Terms

- ❖ **Intergovernmental:** a form of international organisation where governments work together to achieve shared goals.
- ❖ **Supranationalism:** a form of organisation through which decisions are made by international institutions, not by individual states.

Links

- ❖ <http://www.coe.int/>