

The Council of Europe's activities

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_council_of_europe_s_activities-en-2d65318f-7c2c-4711-9496-b1aa5174e00c.html

Last updated: 08/07/2016



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According to the Statute of the Council of Europe, the organisation's aim to achieve a greater unity between its members is pursued through its bodies, by **discussion of questions of common concern**, by **agreements** and by **common action** in economic, social, cultural, scientific, legal and administrative matters, as well as by **the maintenance and further realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms**.

Through its various bodies, the Council of Europe is, first and foremost, a meeting place and a forum for dialogue for its member states. The organisation's pursuit of a common approach to dealing with the major issues facing society — human rights, legal cooperation, local and regional democracy, social cohesion, health, bioethics, education, culture, heritage, sport, the environment — leads its bodies to adopt texts which act as non-binding recommendations to its member states, and, above all, results in agreements which are binding on the states which ratify them and become the basis for the harmonisation of European law. Amongst these agreements, the conventions adopted in the sphere of human rights have, since the organisation's inception, been at the very core of its activities.

Although the scope for securing partial agreements between a limited number of member states, such as extending agreements to include non-member states, has led to various forms of 'variable geometry' cooperation, harmonisation has continued apace on the basis of the growing number of new forms of cooperation.

At its Summit held in Vienna in 1993, the organisation adopted a strategy based on the concept of 'democratic security'. This strategy, which includes reinforcing the procedure for monitoring the obligations of those states that are party to any agreements and the implementation of assistance programmes, demonstrates the organisation's commitment to asserting itself as the reference framework for a democratic model that guarantees peace in Europe. The establishment, on 10 May 1990, of the *European Commission for Democracy through Law* as a partial agreement among the organisation's members was entirely consistent with this approach. This advisory body on legal cooperation was actually established as a 'fundamental instrument for the development of democracy in Europe', notably in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is, ultimately, the accession to the organisation of states currently engaged in the transitional process towards democracy that will provide the best chance of stability on the continent.