



**Opinion 284 (2013)<sup>1</sup>**

Final version

## **Budgets and priorities of the Council of Europe for the biennium 2014-2015**

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The economic and financial crisis which several member States are currently experiencing poses a threat to the democratic stability of the European continent. The Parliamentary Assembly considers that the Council of Europe has the means necessary to preserve and strengthen this stability in Europe. It must be borne in mind that, at this time of crisis, member States need to work together and pool their efforts in order to preserve the democratic stability of the European continent and help those countries where tensions are strongest.
2. At a time when member States are having to accept deficit-reducing policies, the Council of Europe must strive to make savings and manage its resources better. The Assembly thus formally recognises the wish of a majority of member States that the Council of Europe, for the first time since its foundation in 1949, adopt a nominally zero-growth budget for the biennium 2014-2015.
3. The Assembly, mindful of the difficulties which such a decision must inevitably create during the preparation of the Council of Europe's budget for 2014 and 2015, agrees to a cut in its appropriations for the next two-year cycle and refers for further details to its [Resolution 1935 \(2013\)](#) on the expenditure of the Parliamentary Assembly for the biennium 2014-2015.
4. However, the Assembly regrets that the Secretary General of the Council of Europe submitted his priorities for the biennium 2014-2015 late – on 22 April 2013 – leaving the Assembly's general rapporteur on the budget insufficient time to prepare a detailed opinion on the budget and the programme of the Council of Europe for 2014 and 2015 in addition to the expenditure of the Assembly.
5. The Assembly nevertheless believes that the Council of Europe should not be weakened by a punishing budgetary policy which might lead it to make choices that are harmful to its medium- and long-term statutory functions.
6. The Assembly recognises that the decision of the Committee of Ministers to introduce a biennial programme and budget represents progress, but finds it unfortunate that the Committee of Ministers did not follow through and take the logical step of abolishing the principle of yearly budgets. The fact is that the Council of Europe is still governed by the principle of an annual budget, even though it has a biennial perspective.
7. Under these circumstances, the Assembly once again calls, as it has repeatedly done in previous budgetary opinions, for a change to Article 70 of the Council of Europe's Financial Regulations so that any surplus left over at the end of the year can remain available to the Organisation and be placed in a reserve account. The Council of Europe is not like a commercial business whose year-end profits have to be redistributed to the member States.

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1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 31 May 2013 (see [Doc. 13204](#), report of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs, rapporteur: Mr Salles).*



8. The Assembly endorses the Secretary General of the Council of Europe's choice to focus the Organisation's action on the three pillars of its operations, namely human rights, the rule of law and democracy, and to treat them on an equal footing. This equal treatment must, however, take account of the specific features of the human rights and democracy pillars, which include statutory bodies and bodies established under conventions (European Court of Human Rights, Parliamentary Assembly and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe).
9. The Assembly would like, as soon as possible, to have a full report on the three years of reforms, the purpose of which was to revitalise and give new political impetus to the Council of Europe.
10. As far as the Organisation's structures are concerned, the Assembly fully supports the strengthening of the Council of Europe's operating capacity on the ground, notably through the implementation of targeted programmes of co-operation with member States and countries in the Organisation's neighbouring regions.
11. The Assembly wants Council of Europe field offices to do more than simply manage co-operation programmes financed by the European Union – they should continue to be points of contact for the organisation of the Council of Europe's other operations in the countries concerned.
12. Given the difficulties of the current budgetary situation, the Assembly feels that a review should be conducted on whether or not it is appropriate to retain the Council of Europe's offices in Geneva, Vienna and Warsaw, since these have no direct role in implementing the Organisation's co-operation programmes or other operations.
13. Regarding priorities for 2014 and 2015, the Assembly notes the Secretary General of the Council of Europe's strategy choices for the following priority areas, all of which are also covered by the work programme and reports being drafted within the Assembly for 2014 and 2015:
  - 13.1. the fight against corruption;
  - 13.2. the fight against intolerance and hate speech;
  - 13.3. protection of minorities and vulnerable groups;
  - 13.4. consolidation of the Council of Europe's legal area.
14. The Assembly is in favour of finding synergies within the Council of Europe, provided they are consistent with the statutory rules of the Organisation. Following this line of thought, it believes that activities on democratic governance at local and regional levels might be grouped together under the authority of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, whose members are closely involved in developing standards for local and regional democracy.
15. On the matter of elections and given the importance of the Assembly's role through its election observation and monitoring missions, the Assembly suggests that there should be enhanced co-operation between the Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and, on the other hand, the other Council of Europe structures which operate in the area of election assistance. The Assembly is grateful to the Venice Commission and its experts for the excellent co-operation forged on the ground during the observation of parliamentary or presidential elections in member States.
16. The Assembly is gratified by the success of the first World Forum for Democracy, held in Strasbourg in October 2012, as advocated in its [Opinion 259 \(2006\)](#) on the budgets of the Council of Europe for the financial year 2007 and its [Recommendation 1886 \(2009\)](#) on the future of the Council of Europe in the light of its 60 years of experience. It would like this initiative to be a permanent fixture and for Strasbourg to be recognised as the "Davos" of democracy.
17. On the matter of human rights, the Assembly supports the initiatives for implementing the measures set out in the Brighton Declaration following the High-level Conference on the Future of the European Court of Human Rights (April 2012). It highlights in particular the launch in March 2013 of the European programme of Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (the HELP Programme).
18. The Assembly considers that priority must also continue to be given to measures to counter violence against women, as well as to the protection of children against exploitation and sexual abuse, measures to which the Assembly is strongly committed.
19. Regarding the fight against corruption and crime, the Assembly wants special attention to be paid to measures to combat counterfeiting of medical products. It will support the initiatives taken with a view to signature and ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Counterfeiting of Medical Products and

Similar Crimes involving Threats to Public Health (Medicrime Convention, CETS No. 211), together with all measures which may be taken to combat trafficking in human organs, as well as other forms of corruption, such as match-fixing; these are issues that have been addressed by the Assembly.

20. For many years, the Council of Europe has enjoyed constant support from the European Union for its various co-operation programmes (amounting to 25 million euros a year), together with voluntary contributions from member States (in addition to obligatory contributions) which are estimated at 10 to 12 million euros a year. The Assembly calls on the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to negotiate a partnership with the European Union for the establishment of a stable, sustainable system for financing joint programmes, as previously called for in Assembly [Opinion 281 \(2011\)](#) on budgets and priorities of the Council of Europe for the financial years 2012-2013, and urges for a parliamentary dimension to be included in new joint programmes.

21. Furthermore, given that a sizeable part of the Council of Europe's activity may be regarded as official development aid, the Assembly supports the initiative taken by the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe in starting talks with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to pave the way for the Council of Europe to apply for inclusion on the OECD's list of organisations eligible for official development assistance (ODA). It is instructing its Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy to support this initiative in its report on the OECD's activities.

22. In this context, the Assembly calls on the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to reinforce the existing in-house fundraising structure within the Council of Europe Secretariat and make it more professional, as previously suggested in its [Opinion 281 \(2011\)](#), or, alternatively, to consider outsourcing fundraising.

23. On the matter of staffing policy generally, the Assembly questions the justification of recent measures by the Committee of Ministers which appear to be dictated by one imperative only: the need to cut costs, at the risk of making the Council of Europe less attractive than other international organisations.

24. The Assembly recommends that the Secretary General and the Committee of Ministers put in place a contractual policy which will enable the Council of Europe to attract, train and retain the most competent individuals, so that the Organisation has the staff it needs to meet its current and future requirements, bearing in mind the need to safeguard the Organisation's institutional memory and taking into account the location of its headquarters.

25. The Assembly also asks the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to ensure that all bodies of the Secretariat General properly apply Article 12 of the Statute of the Council of Europe (ETS No. 1), which says that "the official languages of the Council of Europe are French and English". The Assembly cannot allow the quality of communication of the Organisation to become a collateral victim of a policy of budgetary austerity.

26. Finally, the Assembly takes note of the decision taken to stop inviting journalists from different European countries during its part-sessions.