



Opinion 298 (2021)¹

Budgets and priorities of the Council of Europe for the period 2022-2025

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly's Opinion on the budget and priorities of the Council of Europe for the 2022-2025 quadrennial cycle is taking place in a particular context, when Europe and the world have been facing the Covid-19 pandemic for more than a year and are currently plunged into the uncertainty linked to the multiple and complex consequences of an unprecedented health and socio-economic crisis. For the Council of Europe, the year 2020 has been an opportune time for in-depth reflection and for proving the Organisation's added value for member States.
2. The Assembly welcomes the drafting by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejčinović Burić, of a new strategic framework, defining the priorities and concrete achievements expected for the next four years. It recalls that it formulated the idea of long-term planning in its [Recommendation 1812 \(2007\)](#) "Political dimension of the Council of Europe budget" and in its [Opinion 272 \(2009\)](#) "Budgets of the Council of Europe for the financial year 2010", which already recommended that the Committee of Ministers adopt a multiannual budgetary framework.
3. The Assembly is convinced that this new perspective of programming and prioritising activities over a four-year period, together with the implementation of a digital modernisation plan, will enable the Council of Europe to continue to respond to the needs of member States while maintaining what has been its strength for more than 70 years: its adaptability and flexibility in order to guarantee the cohesion, continuity, stability, transparency and predictability of its activities for the benefit of member States and their citizens.
4. The Assembly considers, however, that modern technologies, which have been widely used for videoconferencing or teleworking over the past year and have allowed for the continuation of the Organisation's core activities and greater flexibility, must be complementary to the working methods used until now. It is important for the Council of Europe to continue to base its activities on face-to-face meetings, which allow for rich and often fruitful exchanges and are essential for the efficiency of a multilateral organisation.
5. With regard to the guidelines set out in the Council of Europe's strategic framework, the Assembly refers to its [Resolution 2369 \(2021\)](#) and [Recommendation 2199 \(2021\)](#) "The Assembly's vision for the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe", adopted at its April 2021 part-session, which set out its positions on the priority issues it considers to be of strategic importance to the Organisation. The Covid-19 pandemic means that we must be prepared for social challenges and a difficult future for the people of Europe. This will undoubtedly require greater attention from the Council of Europe and its Assembly to ensure that the economic rights and social protection of Europeans are guaranteed.
6. The Council of Europe has demonstrated its relevance during the pandemic, as illustrated by the Secretary General's toolkit for member States entitled "Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the Covid-19 sanitary crisis". The Assembly has adopted several texts providing guidance on a wide variety of issues. Several protective measures have been taken by authorities and the Assembly has

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 28 May 2021 (see [Doc. 15282](#), report of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs, rapporteur: Mr Tiny Kox).*



especially underlined the need to ensure that these measures do not undermine the fundamental values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The Assembly has in particular drawn attention to the increased incidents of violence against women and domestic violence during lockdowns.

7. Analysing the budgetary challenges for the next 2022-2023 biennium, the Assembly recognises that the current health crisis, which has shaken the budgetary balances of member States, could make it more difficult to adapt financial resources to the level of the stated ambitions. Nevertheless, its [Resolution 2369 \(2021\)](#) is a strong appeal to the governments of the member States to guarantee the Organisation's sustainability and ensure its financial viability, so that it retains its full effectiveness and political relevance in a global context that makes it more indispensable than ever.

8. The Assembly welcomes the commitment of member States to a “zero real growth” policy for the current biennium while underlining that, in concrete and practical terms, this does not mean “growth”. It reaffirms its long-standing position that member States should resolutely invest more in democratic security as embodied by the Council of Europe, and therefore ensure better funding for the Organisation by supporting a real growth budget.

9. Furthermore, the Assembly, referring to the decision adopted by the Committee of Ministers at its 129th Session (Helsinki, 17 May 2019) entitled “A shared responsibility for democratic security in Europe – Ensuring respect for rights and obligations, principles, standards and values”, calls on the Committee of Ministers and the Russian Federation to seek the basis for a mutually acceptable agreement enabling the latter to settle the interest due to the Council of Europe.

10. The Assembly is also aware that, in order to meet their financial commitments, member States need to obtain tangible results from the Organisation. This will be enhanced not only by the Secretary General's four-year strategic framework, but will be complemented by the ongoing organisational reforms, of which the new human resources strategy is an integral part and aims to ensure that staff members have the skills, motivation and high levels of performance to achieve the objectives set for the four-year cycle, which is conducive to enhancing the credibility of the Organisation.

11. The Assembly hopes that this ambitious reform in the field of human resources will be carried out in full consultation with the Organisation's staff, whose support is essential to its success. Recalling its [Opinion 297 \(2019\)](#) “Budget and priorities of the Council of Europe for the biennium 2020-2021”, it expects the Council of Europe to put in place a staff policy that is sufficiently attractive to retain good candidates by also offering them career development prospects.

12. The alarming situation of the Pension Reserve Fund is another challenge for the next biennium 2022-2023. The Pension Reserve Fund, established in 2003, aims to stabilise member States' contributions over the medium to long term so that they can meet their obligations under the various Council of Europe pension schemes. However, the Pension Reserve Fund system, which was underfunded when it was set up, has to absorb the departure of large groups at retirement age and cope with the increase in life expectancy of retired members of staff. Its sustainability requires higher contributions from the States, as active staff members already sustained a sharp increase in their own contributions in 2020.

13. In order to ensure that member States meet their obligations, and to avoid an excessive impact on their contributions, the Assembly had suggested to the Committee of Ministers, in its [Recommendation 2124 \(2018\)](#) “Modification of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure: the impact of the budgetary crisis on the list of working languages of the Assembly”, several decisions of a budgetary and financial nature, in particular the setting up of a compulsory reserve account financed by all or a substantial part of the unspent balance identified at the closing of each financial year or budget cycle. In view of the situation, the Assembly reiterates its request and hopes that this recommendation will be duly taken into consideration.

14. The Assembly notes with interest the proposal to implement a results-based approach in the Council of Europe, which is one of the central points of the Secretary General's strategic framework. This approach aims to match the actions envisaged with the objectives set and should enable the Organisation to ensure that the actions undertaken contribute to solving the problems identified. Indicators will be put in place to assess the progress of the expected results. The Assembly believes that such an approach should enable the Council of Europe to demonstrate its usefulness and effectiveness and ensure that its work has a real impact. However, it considers that the visibility of the Organisation's activities can only be improved by strengthening its communication policy.

15. Finally, the Assembly calls for the work to modernise the Chamber of the Palais de l'Europe, which was foreseen in the Capital Master Plan and which was postponed indefinitely because of the 2017-2018 budgetary crisis and then the Covid-19 pandemic, to be undertaken rapidly, as planned, and completed before the Assembly sits there in full again.