

Introduction

As we have seen so far, the Council of Europe is a complex and vast organisation. Its committees and expert groups serve purposes as varied as promoting the integrity of elections, upholding data protection standards and calling for greater transparency of public authorities.

In this instalment of our series, we take a whistlestop tour of some of the Council of Europe's most important human rights bodies. We begin first by exploring how Europe's most important human rights organisation protects particularly vulnerable groups, such as detainees and domestic abuse survivors. We then go on to explain how the CoE upholds and promotes the rights of civil society actors.

Protecting people from torture

One of the most vital functions of the CoE is performed by a group of experts who assess whether people deprived of their liberty are being treated humanely. This group is called the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (or "CPT" for short). The CPT visits places of detention, writes reports on the living conditions of detainees and makes recommendations to governments for improvement.

The CPT's mandate is relatively broad: it not only has the ability to visit traditional detention facilities like prisons or police stations. It also visits a range of institutions, from psychiatric hospitals to young offender institutes and immigration detention centres.

Prior to each country visit, the Committee informs the state undergoing examination that a fact-finding mission is due to take place in their country at some stage. But once a country is put on notice that a visit will take place, the CPT can turn up at *any time* and visit *any institution* it pleases. On arrival at a place of detention, it can move freely within the institution in question, interview detainees privately and enter into contact with anyone who might be able to provide relevant information (e.g. prison staff or medical personnel). Typically, the CPT checks for signs of deliberate ill-treatment; assesses whether detainees have enough living space, natural

light, medical care and contact with the outside world; and verifies that restraint measures are being applied appropriately.

The Committee for the Prevention of Torture is made-up of experts such as lawyers, doctors and police and prison professionals. The current president of the CPT is [Doctor Alan Mitchell](#), a former member of the Scottish Human Rights Commission and past-Chair of the Independent Prison Monitoring Advisory Group, Scotland.

The Committee recently visited Scotland in [June 2025](#). The focus of the visit was to assess conditions in Scottish prison establishments and secure accommodation for minors. Prior to this, the CPT visited Scottish prison facilities and police stations in [2018](#). During its 2018 visit, the Committee highlighted that prison detention facilities were largely safe environments and that prison officials treated inmates humanely. Its report nevertheless raised issues around overcrowding, inter-prisoner violence and the regime governing inmates who had been segregated from the prison population for security reasons.

Putting victims first

As mentioned in the [first part of our series](#), the CoE is responsible for three landmark treaties aimed at protecting victims of violent crimes. To recall, these treaties are: the [Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#) (Lanzarote Convention), the [Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings](#) (Anti-Trafficking Convention) and the [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) (Istanbul Convention).

Each of these treaties differ ever so slightly. Broadly speaking, however, they are about **preventing** violence from happening to victims in the first place; ensuring that victims are **protected** once an offence is committed against them; and making sure that there are criminal sanctions in place to adequately punish perpetrators (**deterrence**).

Let's break down each of these obligations:

1. Under the prevention umbrella, governments must make society as whole more resilient against specific crimes. For instance, under the Istanbul Convention, governments must help eradicate prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men (**Istanbul Convention, Article 12**).
2. The obligation to protect means giving victims adequate practical support such as access to emergency helplines, psychological counselling, protective accommodation (e.g. shelters for domestic abuse victims) as well as financial assistance. Using the specific example of the Anti-Trafficking Convention, governments must adequately train personnel to identify and help trafficking victims (**Anti-Trafficking Convention, Article 11**).
3. To ensure that potential perpetrators are deterred from committing illegal acts, governments must do two things. Firstly, they must ensure that specific offences are prohibited under the law e.g. soliciting children for sexual activities via the internet (**Lanzarote Convention, Article 23**). By way of illustration, the Istanbul Convention outlaws a range of offences including psychological violence against an intimate partner, stalking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Secondly, governments must ensure that perpetrators face effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions.

Each treaty mentioned above is supervised by a group of experts, who monitor whether states are adequately respecting their obligations. In June 2025, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) – the committee responsible for supervising the Istanbul Convention – published its [first overall assessment](#) of the United Kingdom. It received a wealth of evidence from NGOs and national institutions including the Scottish Human Rights Commissions, Scottish Women's Aid, the Equality and Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International UK.

GREVIO spoke highly of the UK's "innovative" approaches to tackling domestic violence, such as the criminal provisions on controlling and coercive behaviour and the Domestic Abuse (Protection) Act 2021 in Scotland. It even noted that long standing UK practices had inspired provisions of the Istanbul Convention. Nevertheless, the report raised concerns around the impact of austerity on the funding and staffing levels of women's rights organisations and noted that not all women around the UK benefitted from equal levels of implementation. These concerns were echoed in the evidence presented by Scottish Women's Aid: their [submission](#) highlighted the disproportionate impact of austerity on women, children and specialist services. Equally, Scottish Women's Aid noted that there were regional variations in the adequacy of specialist services in Scotland, with women and girls in rural communities facing disadvantages.

Promoting and protecting human rights defenders

NGOs have long played an active role within the Council of Europe. They not only provide vital information for the CoE's various monitoring mechanisms. International NGOs often sit as observers on the CoE's Steering Committees, helping shape recommendations, treaties and European policy guidelines.

However, the Council of Europe has also played a leading role in promoting a safe and enabling environment for civil society actors. The Council of Europe's [Recommendation on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe](#) calls upon governments to ensure that NGOs participate effectively in the formulation of public policy. Additionally, the [CoE Guidelines for civil participation in political decision making](#) lays out a series of principles and standards for ensuring that public authorities engage with NGOs and civil society in their decision-making process.

Twice a year, the CoE hosts a conference of international NGOs, bringing civil society actors together to discuss and address matters of common concern to human rights defenders in Europe (the International Conference of INGOs). This conference has established [committees](#) on matters as diverse as children's digital rights and migration policy.

In 2018, a delegation from the Conference of INGOs [visited the UK](#) to take stock of the laws and practices governing the UK's civil society sector and of the environment facing NGOs. The delegation's report commented that UK policymakers were open to direct, informal and pragmatic exchanges with civil society organisations. It nevertheless recommended that the UK make more use of citizens assemblies and to ensure consistent funding of NGOs post-Brexit.