



## Information documents

CM/Inf(2011)41

27 October 2011

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# Priorities of the United Kingdom Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (7 November 2011 – 14 May 2012)

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### Priorities and objectives

The United Kingdom is proud to be assuming the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe from 7 November 2011. As a founder member of the organisation and the first country to ratify the European Convention on Human Rights, the UK takes the responsibility of the Chairmanship, which it last held in 1993, very seriously. We see it as an opportunity for the UK to play a leading role in the vital work of the Council of Europe in promoting human rights, democracy and rule of law across the continent.

The overarching theme of our Chairmanship will be the promotion and protection of human rights. We will have a particular focus on developing practical measures in the following areas:

- a. reforming the European Court of Human Rights and strengthening implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights;
- b. supporting Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland's programme of reform of the Council of Europe as an organisation;
- c. strengthening the rule of law;
- d. internet governance, including freedom of expression on the internet;
- e. combating discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity;
- f. streamlining the Council of Europe's activities in support of local and regional democracy.

In addition to these priorities, the UK Chairmanship will of course work to progress other areas of important Council of Europe business.

### **A – Reform of the European Court of Human Rights and strengthening implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights**

The Court is an essential part of the system for protecting human rights across Europe. But it is struggling with its huge, growing backlog of applications – now 155,000. This is undermining the Court's efficiency and authority.

Reform is more urgent than ever before: we cannot wait any longer before taking concrete and effective action. The UK will give this issue the highest political importance. The entry into force of Protocol 14 in 2010 had a positive effect but it is insufficient.

We must learn from that and ensure that this time we are sufficiently forward looking and agree effective and enduring solutions. The UK Chairmanship will seek consensus on a package of measures in the following areas, agreed at Interlaken and Izmir:

- **a set of efficiency measures**, which will enable the Court to focus quickly, efficiently and transparently on the most important cases that require its attention;
- **strengthening the implementation of the Convention at national level**, to ensure that national courts and authorities are able to assume their primary role in protecting human rights;
- measures to **strengthen subsidiarity** – new rules or procedures to help ensure that the Court plays a subsidiary role where member states are fulfilling their obligations under the Convention;
- improving the procedures for nominating suitably qualified **judges to the Court**, and ensuring that the Court's **case law is clear and consistent**.

The UK will aim for a package of measures to be agreed by means of a Declaration at a Ministerial conference in the UK on reform of the Court. Further details of this conference will be presented in due course. The Declaration will provide the basis of a Decision of the Committee of Ministers to be adopted at its annual meeting on 14 May 2012.

In accordance with the deadline set by the Interlaken declaration, the package should include proposals for reform which require amendment of the Convention. In addition we will aim to provide the Court with political support from the Committee of Ministers for the measures it is already taking to prioritise and better manage its workload, and to provide a wide margin of appreciation to member states' authorities in its judgments.

In response to the call in the Izmir High level Conference on the future of the European Court of Human Rights to pursue 'long term strategic reflections on the future role of the court', the UK will host a conference at Wilton Park on a "2020 Vision for the European Court of Human Rights" on 17-19 November 2011.

#### **B – Supporting Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland's programme of reform of the organisation**

The UK will actively support Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland's programme of reforms of the Council of Europe. We will work towards implementation of measures which will help to deliver more focused, streamlined and effective organisation and a more efficient use of resources.

#### **C – Strengthening the rule of law**

The UK chairmanship attaches great importance to strengthening the rule of law in Europe. The UK will host a meeting of the Venice Commission and member state representatives to discuss the recently adopted Venice Commission report on the Rule of Law. The UK chairmanship will present the conclusions of the meeting to the Committee of Ministers, thereby providing an opportunity for their concrete follow up.

#### **D – Internet governance, including freedom of expression on the Internet**

The UK strongly supports an open internet, not only in terms of access and content but also freedom of expression. Our Chairmanship will work towards the adoption of the Council of Europe Internet governance strategy by the Committee of Ministers. We will also give impetus to the principles that the Council of Europe has developed to uphold freedom of expression on the internet and provide support to other initiatives, to ensure that all member states live up to their international obligations in this area.

#### **E – Combating discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity**

Too many people still suffer outdated prejudices, discrimination and violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The United Kingdom Chairmanship will work to maintain the momentum generated by the Council of Europe recommendation on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity<sup>1</sup>, and will work with the Secretariat on their implementation. We will encourage steps to end acts of violence, criminal sanctions and related human rights violations committed against individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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<sup>1</sup> CM/Rec(2010)5E: Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 31 March 2010 at the 1081st meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

## **F – Streamlining the Council of Europe’s activities in support of local and regional democracy**

The UK Chairmanship will work towards a more effective and efficient role for the Council of Europe in supporting local and regional democracy. The UK supports the Council of Europe’s significant programme of activities in this area, including monitoring and sharing of expertise, but wants to see it streamlined and more carefully targeted as a result of the work being led by the Spanish Deputy Prime Minister, Manuel Chaves.

Our aim is to reach agreement on the creation of a Single Programme of Council of Europe activity on local and regional democracy during our Chairmanship. The activities of the numerous actors in the field of local and regional democracy should be streamlined into a single coherent programme of work, overseen by the Committee of Ministers. This will provide greater value for money, and enable a targeted and focussed approach, eliminating the potential for duplication and inefficiency and delivering the outcomes member states want. The Single Programme will have one pooled budget and will be supported by a single unified Secretariat.

### Shared priorities of the Ukrainian, United Kingdom and Albanian chairmanships on reform

#### **Reform of the European Court of Human Rights**

Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Albania agree that our consecutive Chairmanships of the Committee of Ministers will each continue to support and drive forwards the Interlaken process on the future of the European Court of Human Rights, building on the accomplishments of the Turkish and preceding Chairmanships, including the agreements as set out in the Izmir Declaration.

The Court is an essential part of the system for protecting human rights across Europe. However, there is a clear case for reform to ensure it works as effectively as possible. To ensure the momentum of reform is maintained and any additional issues are identified and addressed as soon as possible, the three Chairmanships will cooperate to ensure timely delivery of the reports required under points 3, 4 and 5 of the Implementation section of the Interlaken Action Plan.

#### **Council of Europe reform**

Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Albania agree that our consecutive Chairmanships will each strive to prioritize, with Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland, the implementation of the ongoing programme of institutional and operational reform of the Council of Europe. It is appropriate that the Committee of Ministers is reviewing and rationalizing the Organisation’s structure, work and budgetary priorities. This will ensure the Organisation is best placed to have maximum impact through its unique pan-European work protecting and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

#### **Local and regional government**

The Ukrainian, UK and Albanian chairmanships in the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will work together to deliver the local and regional government initiatives agreed at the Conference of Ministers for Local and Regional Government in Utrecht in November 2009, following the report by Mrs Mari Kiviniemi. The overall objective is to raise the efficiency of the Council of Europe work on local and regional democracy and good governance, and to ensure it meets the expectations of citizens in the member states.

We look forward to the report on the working arrangements between Governments and the Congress, and on the reviews of Congress’s assessments of local and regional democracy, to be presented by Spanish Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Manuel Chaves, at the Kyiv ministerial conference in November 2011. The three Chairmanships will deliver the agreed outcome to ensure that Council of Europe work on local and regional democracy is more cost effective, visible and has impact, focussing on good governance, effective transfrontier cooperation and delivering the best possible outcomes for citizens in Europe.

Calendar of events

- **7 November 2011**: Meeting of the Committee of Ministers – handover ceremony from Ukraine to the United Kingdom, Strasbourg
- **17-19 November 2011**: Experts' conference on a 2020 Vision for the European Court of Human Rights. Wilton Park.
- **March 2012** (date to be confirmed): Meeting of the member states and the Venice Commission on the Rule of Law. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London.
- **April 2012** (date and venue to be confirmed): Ministerial meeting on Reform of the European Court of Human Rights.
- **14 May 2012**: Committee of Ministers meeting – handover from United Kingdom to Albania, Strasbourg