

The Council of Europe and local and regional democracy

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The **1985 European Charter of Local Self-Government** entered into force in 1988. It is the first legally binding instrument whereby states, at international level, undertake to respect the principle of local self-government and formally declare local authorities to be ‘one of the main foundations of any democratic regime’. It was in response to an initiative of the *Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe*, which, in 1994, became the *Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe* (CLRAE), that the matter of states’ internal structure and organisation — a question traditionally a matter for national sovereignty — could be harmonised through a European treaty under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The principle of local self-government includes the political, administrative and financial independence of local authorities.

In 1997, in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the CLRAE drew up a **draft European Charter of Local Self-Government** which, for the benefit of regional authorities, supplemented the original text with regard to the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity. However, despite the CLRAE’s efforts to have the text granted the status of a European treaty at some future date, divergences between the Council of Europe’s member states have delayed signature thereof.

Other local democracy instruments were signed under the auspices of the Council of Europe, at the instigation of the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities:

- the 1980 European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities entered into force in 1981;
- the 1992 Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level entered into force in 1997;
- the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages entered into force in 1998.

In 1992, the Committee of Ministers set up the Steering Committee on Regional and Local Democracy in order to coordinate intergovernmental legal cooperation in this area. By identifying the standards and practices which were most appropriate for local and regional self-government to function properly, it particularly promotes reform of local administrations and public services in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe.