

What Does the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers Bring to Georgia?



Source: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/tirana/committee-of-ministers>

On November 27, 2019, Georgia began its six-month term as President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Internal political clashes and deep polarization within Georgian society have served as barriers to understanding the true meaning of the Presidency for the country. As the term of Georgia's Presidency drew near, the opposition rose speculation surrounding the rules of the election system and, following Georgia's ascent, the ruling party's celebratory rally. Unfortunately, the true meaning of the Presidency has not yet been properly explained to the public. So, what are the rewards of the Presidency? Should Georgia celebrate it with such fanfare?

To answer these questions, first we should examine the legal form and political role of the Council of Europe (CoE). In 1949, the CoE was established to achieve greater unity between its members to safeguard and realize the ideals and principles which are their common heritage, and to facilitate their economic and social progress. By its 70th anniversary, in 2019, the organization boasts 47 member states and serves as the chief guardian of human rights and rule of law in Europe. The European Convention on Human Rights is one of the main landmarks of the CoE and is the core of the European human rights system. The judiciary of the European Court of Human Rights has raised the philosophical and conceptual understanding of human rights to another level and solidified a standard of European values.

Human Rights is one of the organization's leading topics, however the rule of law, democracy and empowerment of self-governance are also crucial for the CoE. The following subjects are key discussion points at the Consultative Assembly, which is the main representative body and a useful platform for member states to make relevant political statements. The Consultative Assembly is an efficient means

for small states like Georgia to discuss openly issues such as the country's occupation by the Russian Federation. The assembly is also a useful instrument to remove Russia's mask of a democratic state and a peaceful actor in international relations. Additionally, the assembly holds Russia responsible for its internationally wrongful activities; a good example is the termination of its membership in the assembly in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

The main political and decision-making body of the CoE is the Committee of Ministers, which is composed of the foreign ministers of the member states. The committee convenes at the ministerial level once every year and at the deputy level once every week. Adoption of international conventions or agreements, supervision on the execution of the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, and adoption of common policy is a non-exhaustive list of the committee's competences. The President of the committee is held for a six-month term in turn by the representatives of the members according to English alphabetical order. The Presidency passes to a new President mid-May and mid-November, at a date fixed by the Council of Ministers based on a joint proposal by the incoming and outgoing Presidents. In addition to chairing the meetings and managing organizational issues, the President as an independent actor is eligible to make public statements. A president country sets priorities and the agenda, which guide the committee's work.

As President, Georgia outlined four priorities: Human Rights and Environmental Protection, Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, Child Friendly Justice – Converging Experience on Restorative Justice in Europe, Strengthening Democracy through Education, and Culture and Youth Engagement. Georgia described in detail its motivation for selecting the topics and the goal of the prescribed activities. So - why is the President's status important for Georgia? Georgia determined the major topics of discussion for 47 European states, drafted the agenda of the committee, and has the amazing opportunity to advocate for its priority topics. The President's status allows Georgia to share its experience of relevant reforms while advocating the priority topics; therefore, the country can export its successful reforms. Georgia has the chance to put pressure on Russia to execute the European Council for Human Rights' decisions on the interstate disputes in a timely fashion, and to create an environment that will bring Russia serious political discomfort in case of noncompliance. With the President's status, Georgia becomes not only a participant but now the guide of a major international dialogue. Furthermore, the cultural program created by Georgia is a great opportunity to demonstrate centuries old traditions, culture and history and utilize them as a soft power tool.

The President's status, although required through routine procedural change of guard rather than an international vote of confidence, is an opportunity that, if used wisely, can greatly benefit the country. The Presidency is worth to be cheered – though mildly. Georgia has hard work ahead, which shall make its Presidency remarkable and successful. Civil society, as well as political parties, can contribute to this process by providing ideas about how to make this Presidency beneficial for both Georgia and other European states.

By Bacho Tortladze, Researcher at Geocase

January 6, 2020