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ICANN should strengthen its mechanisms to respect freedom of expression and privacy, says Council of Europe

Strasbourg, 03.06.2015 – The Council of Europe has called upon its 47 member states to ensure that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers ([ICANN](#)), which manages Internet domain names globally, creates adequate mechanisms to identify, prevent and mitigate possible breaches to human rights in its work, notably the rights to freedom of expression and privacy.

In a [Declaration](#) adopted today, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers recalls that ICANN, as a private non-profit corporation should respect international human rights law, notably the [UN Resolution 17/4](#) on human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, and welcomes its commitment to operate in conformity with relevant principles of international law.

The Committee of Ministers underlines that ICANN decisions on the use of certain words or characters in top level domain names and name strings (TLDs) raises issues concerning the rights to freedom of expression and to association. It stresses that, when taking decisions on the allocation of TLDs, ICANN should ensure that an appropriate balance is struck between economic interests and other objectives of common interest, such as pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity and the needs of vulnerable groups and communities.

[Close to 1000 TLDs](#) are in use today. More than 600 of them are new generic TLDs created following a process launched by ICANN in 2011 to increase their number from the few that were available before (such as ".com", ".info", ".org" or ".int"). Some decisions taken by ICANN to accept controversial domain names, such as ".xxx" or ".sucks", had relevant implications for freedom of expression and access to information. An ICANN decision on some 600 requests for new generic TLDs is pending; these include TLDs such as ".gay" which several applicants have requested.

In addition, the Committee of Ministers points out that ICANN's contractual policies and services should fully comply with human rights standards, for example when dealing with the processing and retention of personal data of domain name holders. This addresses the fact that, for example, personal data of domain name holders - such as the name and postal address - is publicly available in the WHOIS online database without adequate safeguards, and that domain registrars can keep this personal information for over two years after the domain contract has expired.

In a separate [Declaration](#), the Committee of Ministers reaffirms its support to the multistakeholder governance of the Internet – based on co-operation between governments, business, civil society and the technical community. It also calls for the extension by the United Nations General Assembly of the mandate of the Internet Governance Forum until 2025.

The Council of Europe has observer status with ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC).

[Additional information on the Council of Europe and the Internet](#)

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