



CONFERENCE OF INGOs  
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Address by Annelise Oeschger**

**President of the Conference of INGOs**

**1021st meeting of the Ministers' Deputies**

**12 March 2008**

Chair,  
Deputies,  
Secretary General,

Allow me to begin by thanking the Chair very much for providing the Ministers' Deputies with our 2007 activity reports and a series of other documents reflecting the work of the INGO Conference and the growing recognition it enjoys both inside and outside the Council.

I should also like to thank the Secretary General, Terry Davis, for the regular dialogue he maintains with the INGO Conference.

My statement here today will focus on three areas that illustrate the political role which the INGO Conference can play, complementing the action of the Council of Europe's other pillars:

- Supporting civil society in Europe;
- Implementing the Council of Europe's fundamental values;
- Stepping up the partnership with Council of Europe bodies and the European Union.

I will conclude by giving some details of the ongoing reorganisation of the INGO Conference and its thematic activities.

## **1. Supporting civil society in Europe**

Among other things, we seek to ensure that national and local NGOs benefit from the advances we have achieved at European level.

We have therefore recently set up an Expert Council on NGO law tasked with supporting both NGOs and the authorities in their efforts to create an environment conducive to the activities of organised civil society. The first subject it is addressing concerns the issues related to setting up NGOs. In October, it is due to submit a report to the INGO Conference, which will then decide on any action to be taken. I will keep you informed of developments. Naturally, your Recommendation Rec(2007)14 on the legal status of NGOs will be an essential guide here.

As you are aware, following the Third Summit, we launched regional conferences of NGOs aimed mainly at leaders of national NGOs, the first of which were held in Warsaw in 2006 and Kyiv in 2007. Their purpose is to involve more NGOs in implementing the Council of Europe's core objectives, while also facilitating networking and the exchange of best practices.

In this connection, I would urge you to visit the website of the brand new Communication Platform for NGOs ([www.non-gov.org](http://www.non-gov.org)), a powerful tool available in English and Russian designed to enable NGOs to publicise their activities, establish partnerships and boost the impact of the Council of Europe's work.

At these regional conferences and other more specific meetings, we will draw up the Code of Good Practice for Civic Participation, further to the request made to the INGO Conference at the Forum for the Future of Democracy in Stockholm/Sigtuna last June.

Support for civil society in Belarus is an area where we continue to be active on a regular basis. This has involved welcoming representatives to our sessions, organising seminars in neighbouring countries and the adoption of a resolution last January calling for support for human rights defenders in the country. In this connection, I should like to thank the countries which support our work here through voluntary contributions and other specific efforts.

It is with particular commitment that I now turn to the last subject which I wished to mention under this heading, namely our action in the Russian Federation. In October 2003, we began organising seminars in various regions of Russia bringing together national and international NGOs with representatives of the authorities. The focus of the discussions was always the issue of improving the relations between NGOs and the authorities, on the basis of practical experiences, in particular in the social and education sectors. From 2006, the seminars looked particularly closely at Russian legislation on NGOs. Last December, together with our main partners, ie NGOs, including both organisations traditionally close to the authorities and also other more critical ones, and representatives of the highest Russian authorities, we took stock of the ten seminars that had taken place. There was unanimous agreement that the process had been a success – because all partners had had the courage to be frank, take account of the experience and views of the others and take a step forward together towards an ever-larger area of freedom where all parties can act without fear for the common good. The participants therefore agreed jointly to draw up a three-year activity programme to ensure the continuity and consistency of the INGO Conference’s action in Russia.

## **2. Implementing the Council of Europe’s fundamental values**

Here our role is to make our position clear and take practical action to defend and promote the Council’s values through direct involvement of civil society – and have no qualms about tackling controversial issues.

One such issue was the question of sects and cults, which was the subject of a study day held in June 2007 on my initiative. The meeting showed that the activities of some organisations pose a threat to the core values defended by the Council of Europe. What is particularly dishonest is the way in which the very same groups invoke freedom of conscience, expression and association to protect their practices. As the INGO Conference, we have a duty to be particularly vigilant with regard to such groups – but, without your clear-sightedness and your determination to protect the Council of Europe and its member states from the harmful influences of sects, our possibilities would be very limited.

You invited us to play a very active part in the preparation of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, for which we are grateful. The co-operation has been very fruitful and I therefore sincerely hope that the White Paper will be adopted as soon as possible. We are going to continue our efforts here through practical projects to promote intercultural dialogue such as the study day on the rule of law and intercultural dialogue on 26 June.

Promoting social justice in Europe remains one of our priorities. On 17 October, World Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty, we organised a working seminar on human rights and extreme

poverty with participants – most of whom were themselves facing poverty and exclusion – from Alsace and southern Baden, as well as Moldova, Romania and Russia. There is no need for me to tell you how shocked the guests from those three countries were to discover that, even in the Strasbourg region, individuals and families were living in utter destitution and suffering isolation and, indeed, contempt.

### **3. Stepping up the partnership with Council of Europe bodies and the European Union**

Here I will begin with our partnership with the Committee of Ministers: I am particularly pleased about these annual exchanges with you and this year I should also like to thank the Chair of the GR-DEM, Ambassador Eberhard Kölsch, for inviting me to carry forward the discussions at the rapporteur group's meeting on 12 June.

Since 2005, the INGO Conference has helped raise the Council of Europe's profile by organising a meeting with and for civil society in the country holding the Chair of the Committee of Ministers. The next such meetings will be held in Bratislava on 25 and 26 April 2008 and in Stockholm in autumn 2008.

Likewise, at your request, the INGO Conference is playing an active part in organising the first Annual Exchange on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue to be held in Strasbourg on 8 April.

We also have the task of expanding our co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly, further to its adoption on 23 November 2007 of Resolution 1589 and Recommendation 1820 on co-operation with the Conference of INGOs, which we regard as a key stage in the recognition of our position within the Council. I have already been able to discuss their implementation with the Assembly President, Luis Maria de Puig.

With the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, we are in the process of drawing up a memorandum of partnership on relations between NGOs and local and regional authorities.

In its own way, the INGO Conference is also helping to implement the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and the European Union as regards civil society. For instance, it is playing an active role in the process of setting up the Fundamental Rights Platform of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. I must say that I greatly appreciate the dialogue we have with the European Union, which is represented in Strasbourg by Ambassador Luisella Pavan-Woolfe.

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Having described the three areas which I wished to bring to the Committee of Ministers' attention, I will now give you some details of the reorganisation of the INGO Conference.

I do not wish to hold you up with the ins and outs of our internal projects. I would just say that, at the end of 2006, I initiated a major process of restructuring the INGO Conference, which we will have to vote on at our sessions in April in June. The aims are as follows:

- to make the action of the INGO Conference clearer and more effective;
- to confirm the INGO Conference's role as a political player in Europe;
- and to strengthen the ties between the Council of Europe and civil society in the member states.

It is obvious that if these measures are to have a real impact the INGO Conference needs a secretariat with more staff and a substantial budget for action on the ground. I would ask you to take that into consideration during the negotiations on the 2009 budget.

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This will be my last address here. Next year, you will be able to welcome my successor. I should therefore also like to take the opportunity to thank the Directorate General of Democracy and Political Affairs for its constant support for the INGO Conference.

In conclusion, I should like to make three suggestions to you:

- Have the strength and the imagination to make your capitals understand that Europe needs a dynamic and respected Council of Europe.
- Also have the courage to defend the independence of the European Court of Human Rights. As we are all aware, that independence is determined not only by its budget but even more so by the integrity of its officials and your will as the Ministers' Deputies.
- Lastly, take advantage of the fact that NGO representatives are at your sides in the various committees, working groups and conferences, and do not hesitate to approach them and work with them.

Thank you for the excellent co-operation we have had over the last few years. You may like to know that, wherever I have gone, I have mentioned our frank and constructive discussions, which has always impressed everyone.