



AUTUMN SESSION CONF/PLE(2019)SYN4

MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs Draft Meeting Report Thursday 31 October 2019 9.30-13.00 Palais– Room 1

1. Opening of the meeting by Anna RURKA, President of the Conference of INGOs

Anna Rurka welcomed all INGO representatives, the members of the different Permanent Representations, and Mrs Snezana Samardžic-Markovic, Director General of Democracy. After a few general remarks, she highlighted the years of good collaboration with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, as shown during this session with the joint adoption of the revised Code of Good Practice. She also mentioned the growing cooperation with the Youth Department.

2. Nomination of the Rapporteur of the meeting
Rares Craiut was designated Rapporteur of the meeting.

3. Draft agenda – The agenda was adopted.

4. 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe (CoE):

European hymn performed by a young orchestra (initiative of the European String Teachers Association, member of the INGO Conference).

5. Exchange of views with Snezana SAMARDŽIĆ-MARKOVIC, Director General of Democracy.

Snežana Samardžić-Marković mentioned that the Council of Europe was “a better place” today than it was 70 years ago, underlining both the efforts of the member States and the work done by civil society: “We live in struggling times, with worrying trends and increasing inequalities. The role of NGOs is very important. I urge you to support the Council of Europe in challenging times, to reach the population of Europe. I congratulate you on your work to strengthening the work of the CoE, like for instance the Code of Conduct, and invite you to continue with the drafting of the new rules of procedure, for an even greater efficiency and value for money. We have a duty to look at ourselves.” She then highlighted that the CoE had welcomed a new

Secretary General, Marija Pejčinović Burić, explained that the Council of Europe was still in the middle of its reform process, and cited the work topics proposed by the Committee of Ministers at the Helsinki meeting: artificial intelligence, hate speech, migration challenges, violence against women and domestic violence.

6. Address by Anders KNAPE, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Anders Knappe mentioned the importance of monitoring for the CoE. He explained that the Congress had started to really follow what it produced, in terms of standards, which was not an easy exercise. For instance, concerning gender equality, despite striving for more inclusive and flexible standards, the best solution still seemed to be to impose quota.

Snežana Samardžić-Marković underlined that a lot still needed to be done in terms of gender equality. She mentioned that the Secretary General would focus on this issue and that the NGOs had an essential role to evaluate the backlash of the Istanbul Convention: NGOs can evaluate and give feedback on how the general directions proposed by the Secretary General were being implemented! This would really be a meaningful input from the Conference of INGOs.

7. NGO participation in political decision-making processes in the United Kingdom - Report on the visit to the United Kingdom presented by Anna RURKA: Comments by the Government presented by Christopher YVON, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the Council of Europe, NGO perspective presented by Dr Ruth ALLEN (CEO British Association of Social Workers, IFSW).

The Ambassador was accompanied by Mr Mark Gorey, Deputy to the Permanent Representation of the United Kingdom. The Ambassador mentioned that he was pleased to have supported the visit to the UK. He was particularly thankful for the recommendation that the Government should support the implementation of the Civil Society Strategy (p. 16 of the report).

The Ambassador underlined that the Government does keep civil society in mind. There were some particular concerns regarding campaigning but overall, challenges were welcome. The latest developments can be followed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-for-civil-society#content>.

Ruth Allen acknowledged that the UK had good grassroots activism and civil society organisations, but she deplored some policies that were restricting NGO activism. She insisted that it was important, in the context of the ongoing discussion on the revision of regulations for the NGO sector, to remember that civil society was much more than just the registered NGOs. Many innovators were asking themselves why they had even become a charity, instead of registering simply as a community interest company.

It appeared that the Charity Commission was reducing civil society's voice with more regulations. Charities were worried about what they could (and could not anymore) speak about. Moreover, in terms of smaller charities, the Government should question why grass

roots are not heard and not included in debates. So far, the Strategy has had a mixed reception.

The Ambassador acknowledged the difficulty with the Charity Commission and explained that taxpayers wanted to know what their money was being spent on. He reassured that the Strategy was a framework and that the Government was not trying to take out different strands of civil society.

8. NGO participation in political decision-making processes in Romania - Report on the follow-up visit to Romania presented by Anna RURKA: Comments by the Government presented by Răzvan RUSU, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Romania to the Council of Europe, NGO perspective presented by Andrei POP (Fundatia pentru Dezvoltarea Societatii Civile) and Alexandrina DINGA (Asociatia Civica)

Anna Rurka thanked both the Government and civil society representatives for their contribution to the organisation the visit.

The Romanian Ambassador thanked Anna Rurka and her team for the work, as the authorities were rather pleased with the report. The Ambassador was also pleased to announce that Law No. 129/2019 for the prevention and combating of money laundering and terrorist financing, as well as for the modification and completion of certain normative acts, had removed associations and foundations from the scope of the law. He thought that the role of civil society deserved more recognition by the Committee of Ministers. Meanwhile, better interaction and more trust between Government and civil society was desired.

Andrei Pop thanked the Conference for being a keen observer of Romanian civil society and for having been able to avert some negative changes in Romania affecting civil society. The overall feeling in Romania was that we have moved backwards in operating and in carrying out civil society tasks. The relationship with public authorities was very much about distrust and it was not easy to build public support on some topics.

Alexandrina Dinga introduced herself and presented the Civica Association. The Civica Association aims to improve civil participation in public administration in Iasi. In terms of participation there had been some progress locally. The biggest issue was the lack of infrastructure. There was a need for strong programmes for civil society organisations. Strengthening enabling environments for civil society and boosting local democracy were among some of the future main priorities.

The Romanian Ambassador believed that the fight against corruption was a major topic in Romania and that there was a need for increased dialogue between Ministers and civil society at both national and European level.

9. NGO participation in political decision-making processes in Italy - Report on the visit to Italy presented by Anna RURKA: Comments by the Government presented by Arturo ARCANO, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the Council of Europe

Anna Rurka presented the report from the visit to Italy. The main concern had been civil society and migration.

Mr Arcano spoke about the commitment to strengthen an inclusive dialogue with civil society and to identify gaps. The National Action plan was taking the contribution of civil society into account. Support for the follow up visit of the Conference of INGOs was also reaffirmed.

It was important to bear in mind that consultation alone was not enough, and that discrimination was evident at all levels: Roma, minorities etc.

10. Study on the impact of changing criminal law approaches or provisions in Council of Europe Member States on NGO activities, particularly humanitarian efforts targeting refugees and other migrants: presentation of the initial results of the research carried out by Carla FERSTMANN, Senior Lecturer, School of Law, University of Essex, member of the Expert Council on NGO Law of the Conference of INGOs

Carla Ferstmann presented, on behalf of the Expert Council on NGO law, the state of work on a report and thematic study detailing the use of criminal law to restrict the work of NGOs supporting refugees and other migrants in Council of Europe member states. The deadline for completion of the report was December 2019, after which it would be available on the Expert Council webpage. The report would be useful not just for NGOs but also for public authorities which were in dire need of guidance.

11. Upcoming events / activities of the Conference of INGOs: World Forum for Democracy (6-8 November 2019), fact-finding visit to Armenia (26-28 November 2019), International NGO Day (28 February 2020) - registration for the World Forum for Democracy was still possible until 3 November.

12. Date of the next meeting: 24 April 2020

The meeting was closed.