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Speech by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs, at the GR-DEM on 2 October 2018

Mr Chair, Ministers' Deputies, Excellencies,

Thank you for allowing me to report to you on the Conference of INGOs' summer session. We value your interest in our activities. I hope you do not mind if I also include some information about the variety of work running alongside the session, some of which is still on-going.

The summer session was marked by two major events. I will begin with the debate organised by the Education and Culture Committee, which – in the light of the rise of populism in Europe and the effects of globalisation – wanted to launch a discussion on the concept of European identity. With contributions from leading experts and representatives of Council of Europe member states, the aim was to lend colour to the definition so as to “reflect European plurality and perpetual construction, bringing together past and future”.<sup>1</sup> This is very much a work in progress, as several of the Commission's working groups are currently addressing the issue. On behalf of the Education and Culture Committee, I would like to thank the permanent representatives who accepted the invitation.

With the Finnish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly, we organised a side event on “Women's contribution to Global Peace in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security.” We were honoured to welcome Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury of Bangladesh, Former Under-Secretary General and High Representative of the United Nations, Initiator of UNSCR 1325 as President of the UN Security Council in 2000. I would also like to thank Ambassador Roeland A.A. Böcker, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the Council of Europe, the parliamentary delegations of Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriot Community and Finland for leading an open and sometimes tense debate with the representatives of Syrian Women for Peace and with the Cypriot Gender Advisory Team, whose

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<sup>1</sup> [Concept note introducing the debate](#) available on the Conference of INGOs' website.

members were the initiators of the declaration to include women in the peace process.

The Conference of INGOs is pursuing work on its Code of Conduct to prevent conflicts of interest and corruption risks, following up on the recommendations received from GRECO. After discussing the first draft of the Code of Conduct in June, the Bureau decided to launch a written consultation procedure to sound out all the INGOs. The drafting group is now analysing the submissions. We received more than 100: proof that this is both a crucial and extremely sensitive issue for the Conference of INGOs.

We were particularly delighted with the Parliamentary Assembly's adoption of Recommendation 2134 (2018) condemning new restrictions on NGO activities in Europe, which we discussed with Mr Yves Cruchten during the plenary meeting of the Conference of INGOs. This text illustrates the urgency here and the need for the Committee of Ministers to provide a political solution. We believe that the Conference's current activities mentioned in this recommendation are constructive but must be taken further. We need to step up our efforts to counter the shrinking civic space. Above all, civil society needs the Council of Europe to promote and uphold its values in its member states. In the light of the unjustified and disproportionate restrictions on the space afforded to them, NGOs need independent justice and, more particularly, dialogue at ministerial level here in Strasbourg. It is a tried-and-tested recipe: dialogue can flow more freely here in Strasbourg than in Europe's capitals thanks to you, Ladies and Gentleman, and your role as facilitators. With this idea in mind, we have continued our work on the project aiming to reinforce freedom of association in member states. The unique partnership established between intergovernmental organisations and civil society at the Council of Europe is a major driver for a pan-European approach to reinforcing freedom of association. To this end, the Conference has worked closely with the Secretariat of the Directorate General of Democracy to devise project 1797 set out in the Council of Europe's 2018-2019 Programme and Budget. This is a timely initiative given the increasing number of restrictions on this fundamental right, the Committee of Ministers' recently adopted guidelines on civil participation in political decision making and the importance of supporting a free and safe civil society able to contribute to a healthy democracy.

The project will particularly seek to draw on the knowledge of the Expert Council on NGO Law with the aim of assessing the extent of the problem. I would like to thank all the permanent delegations for helping us to disseminate the call for applications to reconstitute the Expert Council in April 2018. We received about 160 applications – all of a very high standard – for 15 positions. The Expert Council, currently presided by Jeremy Mc Bride, convened in its new form for the first time on 20 September.

Besides producing opinions and studies, the Expert Council contributes to reports sent to member states following our fact-finding visits on NGO participation in the

decision-making process. Without going into details, I would like to thank the Ambassadors of “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the United Kingdom for helping us to organise our visits to their countries. We would like to follow up on our 2016 visit to Romania, as the role of the civil society sector features high on the current government’s political agenda. We have initiated dialogue with the permanent delegation in this connection.

Our experts are also closely following the draft recommendation drawn up by the CDDH Drafting Group on Civil Society and National Human Rights Institutions (CDDH-INST) and encourage the Committee of Ministers to adopt this text.

Ladies and Gentlemen, your commitment to freedom of association and civil participation through dialogue and voluntary contributions is a commitment to civil society as a whole. Today, in order to bridge the gap between national civil society and democratic institutions, including the Council of Europe, the Council must act to prove that NGOS are legitimate democratic players. In my opinion, this is the only imaginable future.

I thank you for your attention and would be glad to answer any questions you may have.