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Speech by Anna Rurka at the session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Strasbourg on 30 October 2019

President,
Elected representatives,

Civil participation is an active process by which individuals, NGOs and civil society take part in the decisions made by public authorities. This process is implicitly and explicitly rooted in the recommendations, guidelines and resolutions of the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress but, above all, it is inherent in Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Conference of INGOs, an organ and one of the pillars of the Council of Europe, represents the international non-governmental organisations which hold participatory status with the Organisation. It is the practical embodiment of this civil participation at this great institution. When we look at how the work carried out by the various component bodies of the Council of Europe has evolved, it becomes clear that the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation has been one of the first operational instruments geared towards helping the stakeholders put in place participation, thereby strengthening the relationship and interactions between the civil component of society and the authorities, drawing on the principles of transparency, accessibility, non-discrimination, inclusion and accountability. This requires a clear democratic mandate for everyone so that the exercise of representative democracy dovetails with that of participative democracy.

It became necessary to revise the Code for several reasons, in particular because of changes in Council of Europe standards and the adoption by the Committee of Ministers in 2017 of the Guidelines for civil participation in political decision-making. The resolution adopted by the Congress in 2015 invited the Conference of INGOs to review the document, bearing in mind developments in democratic practices (brought about, in particular, by technological advances), and to facilitate the implementation of the Code through concrete examples aimed at producing political effects on the collaboration between public authorities and civil society. We therefore plan on backing up the Code with a toolbox, comprising concrete, contextualised and informative examples.

A high level of trust in public institutions is a key indicator of a healthy democracy. To strengthen or regain public trust, the voice and contribution of civil society, through the direct participation of citizens and NGO participation, must be taken into account at each stage of decision-making processes. This democratic imperative is priceless. Only combined efforts to constantly improve public policies at all levels can ensure a sufficient level of well-being for all citizens. Participatory processes really make sense when we are dealing with issues or even decisions which have a direct impact on our lives. I would like to stress the importance of anchoring participation at local level, which is meaningful for the inhabitants of individual regions and communities, for which you, Ladies and Gentlemen, are responsible.

On behalf of the Conference of INGOs and Mr Gerhard Ermischer, who co-ordinated its contribution, I would like warmly to thank the Congress and its rapporteur, Mr Thomas Andersson, for the joint work. This process has led step by step to the adoption of the Code by the Conference of INGOs this morning and to the preparation the draft resolution that you will discuss today. I hope that the Congress and the Conference of INGOs will bring the results of this work to the attention of the other Council of Europe bodies to garner their support.

Thank you for your attention.