

The President

133rd Ministerial Session, 17 May 2024

Text of the Intervention of the President of the Conference of INGOs

This Ministerial Conference takes place one year after the Reykjavik Summit at the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe. A given moment for taking stock. In Reykjavik so many heads of states pledged to stand united around our values. The Reykjavik summit declaration set out a clear framework for defending our liberal democracy. And now these promises must be implemented – the true test comes in the climbing of the mountain. Which is a long and strenuous process.

The Council of Europe has managed to implement reforms in the house to be better equipped for this challenge – and we really appreciate that effort. And still, there is frustration in civil society with the outcome of some important processes: a week reform of the Social Charter System, a Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, a feasibility study on new instruments for Environment and Human Rights – all started with a strong commitment that was watered down considerably during the drafting process.

The Reykjavik process does promise a stronger involvement of Civil Society and there are quite a few high-level events planned this year which offer the opportunity to re-energize that commitment. As Civil Society we stand prepared to support these efforts. Which need both a strong and dedicated Council of Europe – and most of all, the commitment of the member states, as pledged in Reykjavik. But unfortunately, two years after Russia had to be expelled from this institution for its outrageous act of aggression in contravention of all our values, anti-democratic and divisive forces are active in many parts of Europe.

We see new laws on so-called “foreign agents” or against independent as well as public media. And we see a new degree of polarisation of our societies, where violence seems to become more and more a means of political expression – police violence against peaceful demonstrators as well as individual violence against politicians or volunteers in election campaigns. We see criminalisation and stigmatisation of civil society organisations and individual activists in so many fields: migration, environment, LGBTQI+ -rights, or just plain defence of our liberal democracy.

This brings the Council of Europe into a difficult situation: an institution that wants to build bridges and heal wounds while defending its core values. This institution is dedicated to non-violent solutions through legal instruments. But in saying this, it has also to be consequential and consistent, when governments continuously flaunt these values and undermine our liberal democracy. When the Venice Commission, or our own Expert Council on NGO Law, must issue similar statements again and again, when judgements of the Court of Human Rights are persistently not implemented, when recommendations of our core monitoring mechanisms are consequently ignored, there needs to be consequences. An unenviable challenge for the Council of Europe but who else should do it? 75 years after it has been founded its mission has become more important than ever.