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Speech of the President, Anna Rurka, at the 125th Session of the Committee of Ministers, Brussels, 19 May 2015

Ladies and gentleman,

Today I have chosen to talk about the role of the NGOs in combating extremism, for two reasons. Firstly because the report drawn up by the Secretary General on the state of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Europe places democratic security at the centre of our concerns and secondly because of his stated intention to involve civil society in activities included in the Action Plan to combat violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism.

It cannot be denied that current times are marked by a decline in freedom for the sake of security. The fight against terrorism cannot be at the price of violating human rights. To vanquish terrorism, democracies must, on the contrary, become more pluralistic and constantly reinvent themselves.

Civil society wishes most of all to be taken into account in the democratic governance process and live in a context where the fair redistribution of resources and high-quality public services are available to all. That is the constant challenge never yet met.

Only yesterday, at a meeting with the NGOs in Brussels, I heard the fears expressed by young Muslims that they could be stigmatised and seen as a threat to national security in different European countries. Do we respect the ethnic minorities characterised by a specific identity, the immigrant minorities that are referred to today as new minorities? Do we capitalise on their skills and their contribution to the host culture? Can we envisage national media campaigns focusing on these issues?

If young people become radicalised, it is because they can no longer find their place within society. It is ordinary young people who are leaving to fight jihad, young people who are looking for bearings and meaning, who feel outraged and revolt against injustice. Do we have forums where these young people can express their dissent, areas where conflicts would be about giving structure rather than destruction?

Extremism leading to hate crime, preceded by hate speech, is a sign of a non-pluralist society or country. It is not only society that is becoming radicalised but political forces too. Isaac Newton said that we build too many walls and not enough bridges. This is an old issue that is still with us today.

The NGOs provide governments with cutting-edge expertise but are also local players serving communities. Stronger trust in the NGOs' know-how on the part of public authorities is an important component of an environment where skills transfer can thrive. Partnership between the public and private non-profit sectors requires forums for consultation and joint decision-making. The effective participation of civil society in the decision-making process is a key factor in success for any State claiming to be democratic.

Mr Chairman, Mr Secretary General, the Conference of INGOs, with its 320 INGOs enjoying participatory status, is ready to act alongside you to expand the margin of freedom that is shrinking today and build inclusive societies where dignity and respect for everyone's individual characteristics will be the watchwords.

Anna Rurka