



CONFERENCE OF INGOs  
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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**Speech by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs  
to the 1242nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies**

Madam Chair, Ministers' Deputies,

I should like to begin by thanking you for giving me this annual opportunity to discuss the activities and priorities of the Conference of INGOs with you.

Since my election in January 2015, the Conference and its thematic committees have met twice: in January and June 2015. The Standing Committee, the Conference's decision-making body, has held four meetings (in January, April, June and September). During this period, there was intensive discussion concerning the establishment of the Conference's Action Plan adopted in June. The plan focuses on 10 strategic priorities, some of which I will mention in this statement. The table presented sets out the Conference's recent action. All the activities were carried out with the support of the Civil Society Division and in most cases with its involvement.

To start with the protection of human rights defenders, three days before his first trial, we appointed Intigam Aliyev as an expert on our Expert Council on NGO Law. I do not need to describe Intigam's merits; you are well aware of them and of his international standing as a lawyer and human rights defender. Perhaps you know that Intigam Aliyev recently turned 53 in prison. We will maintain a robust dialogue with the Ambassador of Azerbaijan and the national authorities in order to improve Intigam's detention conditions and, I hope, secure his release. I therefore urge the highest authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan to display their willingness for dialogue with organised civil society, which forms the basis of democracy.

Human rights are indivisible and interdependent. The social rights enshrined in the revised European Social Charter, which have been promoted actively by the Conference for many

years, cannot be effective without political and civic freedoms for individuals and NGOs. We seek to make human rights available and effective for everybody, but if we come up against a brick wall on the part of the authorities, NGOs will be destroyed and, with them, democracy.

That brings me to freedom of association and assembly. I thank the Secretariat for distributing the Conference's contribution to your thematic debate. In that contribution, I propose holding a substantive debate on the nodal issue of the political activities of NGOs and access by NGOs to a wide range of sources of funding. That debate should involve all stakeholders: NGOs, funders (foundations, donors, companies), national authorities and international policymakers. The definition of political activities covers many situations; in many countries' legislation, it is vague or non-existent. What political influence do NGOs have on public policies? What is meant by "authorised" political activities? The Expert Council on NGO Law has considered the issue and can provide some initial pointers here. The question is closely related to the funding of NGOs by foreign and national public bodies, private donors, political parties and companies. I therefore propose that, following the debate, an international overview be drawn up and the findings analysed with regard to Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Again with regard to those articles, I would inform you that following this year's World Forum for Democracy, we are working on a DIALOGUE PLATFORM FOR PROTECTING CIVIC SPACE. Given its role in preventing violations of rights through multilateral dialogue with the parties concerned, the platform would be a means of transferring best practice and gathering factual information suggesting violations of Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights which undermined the operation of NGOs in member countries. Consultations are in progress, but I can give no more details for the time being.

This year, the Conference started a new activity which involves it visiting the member countries and consulting national NGOs and public authorities about NGOs' actual participation in the decision-making process. This new activity has been funded from the Conference's ordinary budget, and I hope it will continue on a regular basis.

My very first visits to Moldova and Bulgaria showed me the extent to which national NGOs need the Council of Europe in order to be stronger and more relevant in their work and in their dialogue with public authorities and that the authorities want a vibrant civil society but that NGOs sometimes are unable or do not know how to respond to these calls. The NGOs do not need empty words and good intentions. They expect enacted legislation to be put into

effect. That is why we must make it easier for them to take part in the Council of Europe's activities here in Strasbourg. The obstacles to democracy are not confined to the denial of fundamental freedoms or the imprisonment of NGO leaders. Those are very serious issues and we must prevent them by fostering dialogue between Council of Europe bodies and national NGOs so as to ensure better understanding of the rules which govern democracy.

I congratulate the GR-DEM on the process of dialogue with the Conference, the exchange of views between members of the Conference of INGOs and the Permanent Representatives in June (discussion introduced by the Ambassador of Norway and the Chargé d'affaires of Poland) and the representation of the Committee of Ministers by the Ambassador of Norway at the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty event held by the Conference in October. I wish to thank all the diplomatic delegations who are engaging with us here. We would also like to see more interaction with you and more joint activities. That demands preparation, at least on our part. We are there to help you take the right decisions on account of being closest to the concerns of the players on the ground. But we cannot do so without being informed of your agenda and the subjects of your thematic debates in advance. Let us take the example of migration, for instance. Your thematic debate on migration took place a few days after my consultation of INGOs which work with migrants. I do hope that the findings shared by the INGOs, which are mentioned in the Open Letter sent to you, will enable the member states:

- to stop the unequal treatment of migrants;
- to take a stance on the humiliating medical examinations used to control migration flows of minors;
- to support NGOs which assist migrants;
- to support workers overwhelmed by the humanitarian crisis.

Dealing with the causes of migration remains vital and calls for resources to be released to enable the Council of Europe to play a part in integrating migrants in our societies. The Council of Europe can help states to honour their obligations at national level and, in so doing, support and strengthen democratic forces. The INGOs are there to contribute to the process.

Before heading to the 17th Human Rights NGO Forum being held by the European Union on protecting and promoting civil society space, I should like to tell you that the Conference's

next plenary session will focus on freedom of association and NGO participation in the decision-making process. Invitations will be sent to all diplomatic delegations. We have arranged our timetable so that the event will be held on Friday 29 January, as we know that your diaries are less full after the parliamentary session.

In conclusion, I should like to thank you for your attention. I should be glad to reply to any questions.

Anna Rurka  
President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe  
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