



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE CONF/HR(2015)RAPACT

ACTIVITY REPORT FOR 2015

Saying that human rights are being flouted or violated is a pointless cliché, as defending human rights is more than a matter of complaining. In 2015, the Human Rights Committee therefore focused its work on both substantive and topical issues.

Defending and promoting human rights consists in raising the alarm and then understanding the issues so as to respond properly and, even better, anticipate developments. As that does not happen automatically, the Human Rights Committee is working in line with the Action Plan of the Conference of INGOs adopted in June 2015, one of the aims of which is to boost the relevance of civil society among Council of Europe bodies so that the relevant activities are as effective as possible.

The Human Rights Committee therefore took account both of the dual approach of effectiveness and the conduct of activities harmonised with the agendas of the Council of Europe's various bodies and also of the need to address substantive and topical issues in carrying out its work:

- It was a regular and active participant in the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) and its drafting groups preparing studies on:
 - Reform of the European Court of Human Rights (GT-GDR)
 - Human Rights and Business (CDDH-CORP)
 - Human Rights in Culturally Diverse Societies (CDDH-DC)
- Draft feasibility study on “The impact of the economic crisis and austerity measures on human rights in Europe”
Heightened awareness of the importance of civil society's role on the steering committees provides the impetus for this long-term co-operation.
- The No Hate Web, No Hate Speech symposium in May on combating hate speech both online and offline, which was opened by the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Battaini-Dragoni, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Ms Anne Brasseur, and the President of the Conference of INGOs, Anna Rurka, placed particular emphasis on school-age children. Experts from major Internet companies held discussions and exchanged good practices with secondary school pupils. Practical simulation exercises enabled the young people to receive training in the most appropriate practices for opposing hate speech.
The 2½-day seminar was not a one-off event, but was conducted in parallel with corresponding events of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).
- Under the chairmanship of Anna Rurka, a meeting was held in Paris with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), in particular with Waltraud Heller, communication officer, and Annica Ryngbeck, elected representative of the NGOs on the FRA's

governing body and policy officer on the social platform, helping to provide a basis for the organisation of joint activities.

- Participation, together with Anna Rurka, in the high-level conference on “Implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights: our shared responsibility” in Brussels on 26 and 27 March 2015.
- There was a particular focus on the European Social Charter and the Protocol on Collective Complaints:
 - Régis Brillat, Executive Secretary of the European Committee of Social Rights, held a long exchange of views with all the INGOs in the Human Rights Committee during the summer session.
 - Several members of the Human Rights Committee accompanied Anna Rurka at the [joint Council of Europe/EU training session on collective complaints](#) held in Brussels on 22 September. Human rights organisations must do their utmost to promote this procedure, whose collective nature makes it unique.

The particular interest which the Human Rights Committee has shown in the Social Charter and the collective complaints procedure over the years stems from the low level of awareness of them, which has the effect of penalising European civil society. The INGOs in the Conference have a duty to promote the Social Charter and the complaints procedure among states and local NGOs. This is particularly true since the Charter and collective complaints are unrivalled levers for ensuring account is taken of the indivisibility of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, which form a coherent and indissociable whole.
- The Human Rights Committee accompanied Anna Rurka to Brussels on 21 September for a meeting on migration with relevant INGOs which work with the European Union and the Council of Europe.
- As every year, 17 October, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, was marked by a major event, which was held this time at the Council of Europe. It was opened by Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General, accompanied by Ambassador Astrid Helle, Chair of the Committee of Ministers’ Rapporteur Group on Democracy, and Giuseppe Palmisano, President of the European Committee of Social Rights, and focused, in particular, on children in extreme poverty. Agnes Von Maravic, Secretary of the Committee of Experts on the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (DECS-ENF), provided information about the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, which the Committee of Ministers will adopt at the beginning of 2016.

Simultaneously, the Conference of INGOs was represented at Ulyanovsk (Russian Federation) on 16 and 17 October on the occasion of the general meeting of the federation of social workers of the Russian Federation. The two-day event included plenary meetings, round tables and thematic visits.

- Several INGOs from the Human Rights Committee were invited again this year by the Committee of Ministers to the annual Exchange on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue, where they presented contributions. The exchange took place in Sarajevo from 1 to 3 November. The themes were: “Building inclusive societies together”, “The role and place of religion in the public space”, “Teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs at school”.
- A recommendation [CONF/PLE(2015)REC2] on a new disability strategy was adopted by the Conference of INGOs on 25 June 2016. It drew the attention of Council of Europe bodies to the ending of the existing action plan for people with disabilities and stressed the fact that disabilities are multiple and that this diversity needs to be taken into account in a new dedicated action plan.

- A second text on “Violation of economic, social and cultural rights through austerity measures: a serious threat to democracy”, which was also presented in June with a view to urging the relevant political bodies to keep on implementing fundamental rights in Greece, which has come under great pressure in recent years and again did so during summer 2015, has undergone consensual amendments. It will be presented for approval during the January 2016 session.
- The Human Rights Committee and the Education and Culture Committee jointly set up a group entitled “Towards an inclusive Europe: learning to live better together with our different convictions”. Around 20 teachers and trainers of 13 nationalities took part in the inaugural seminar held in Strasbourg in early October. Similar seminars are planned in several countries for 2016.
- The disability working group was actively involved in preparing and organising the [Council of Europe Conference on Promoting Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Ambitions, Impact and Challenges Ahead](#) held in Dublin (Ireland) on 5 and 6 November. Under the direction of Marie-José Schmitt, the working group prepared a publication on [Article 15 of the European Social Charter in the light of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), which was presented in Dublin. Anna Rurka spoke at the conference.
- It would be wrong to end this activity report without mentioning the areas of dissatisfaction, which can never be wholly avoided:
 - We have still not found the appropriate processes for offering stronger support to the human rights defenders in eastern Europe;
 - Our committee was unable to be physically present at some ad hoc meetings with national human rights NGOs and with direct victims of rights violations.
- To end on a positive note, the good relations with the secretariat and the climate of trust within the Standing Committee are valuable sources of support for carrying out the joint task to which we are all committed.

Conclusion

Although they are regularly celebrated and proclaimed as sacred in many quarters, human rights are constantly being spurned, flouted and violated. For their part, INGOs and international and intergovernmental institutions dedicated to human rights are having difficulty in robustly opposing these denials of fundamental rights. What should be done? And how? These nagging questions are key concerns for the members of the Human Rights Committee.

In co-ordination with the various Council of Europe bodies, we must relentlessly continue the actions that fall within our areas of responsibility. At the same time, emerging challenges such as the spread of new types of social interaction resulting from the emergence of innovative technologies, migration trends, asymmetric armed conflicts and social tensions stemming from religious factors all mean that there is a need to step up the efforts to foster the participation of civil society in political decision-making processes, thereby helping to boost the quality and longer-term applicability of political initiatives and understanding of them.

The entire Conference is working towards this goal, and the Human Rights Committee is doing its utmost to contribute to the process.

Michel Aguilar
Chair of the Human Rights Committee