



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

CONF/PRES/SPEECH(2016)06

Presentation of the outcome of the June Session of the Conference of INGOs (20-24 June 2016) by Ms Anna Rurka (President) to the Rapporteur Group on Democracy (GR-DEM) – 28 June 2016

Madam Chair, Ministers' Deputies

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to report to you on the latest session of the Conference of INGOs. I hope you will not mind if I also include some information on the activities of the Conference before the session.

Firstly, in Sofia, the day before the Committee of Ministers' Session, I held a meeting with about twenty Bulgarian NGOs working for and with migrants. This was combined with another meeting with a representative of the High Commissioner for Refugees and the management of the National Refugee Agency. This enabled me subsequently to prepare the speech which was forwarded to the Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers.

At the beginning of June, the Conference of INGOs visited Warsaw. Our delegation was made up of a representative of the FIDH, a representative of the Expert Council on NGO Law, a member of the Secretariat and myself. We heard the views of some forty NGOs whose activities cover human rights, democracy and the fight against discrimination. We also met representatives of the Polish authorities. I would like to thank Mr Stańczyk, the Polish Ambassador for his support and advice on the choice of appropriate persons to interview from the government. Our report will be ready in September and will be prepared using the same working methods as the report on NGO participation in the decision-making process in the Republic of Moldova and Bulgaria.

Between September and November, we will visit Romania, Germany and Hungary. The initial preparatory meetings with permanent delegations have already been held. All the reports will be presented at the plenary meeting of 27 January 2017, where the ambassadors will be invited to make comments.

On 6 and 7 June, the Council of Europe was the setting for what was, I think, a major event for us, namely the debate on freedom of association, political activities of NGOs and foreign funding. 80 participants representing NGOs, governments, donors and international organisations took part in the debate. I would like to thank the Azerbaijani authorities for granting the special authorisation which enabled Mr Intigam Aliyev to open the debate, despite being banned from leaving the country. All my thanks go to Ambassador Astrid Helle for her participation in the opening session. An information note summarising the comments made and conclusions drawn over the two days was sent to you yesterday. I would like to draw your attention to how important is to uphold and protect the existence and the independent functioning of those NGOs which are most exposed to pressures. One point highlighted by the participants is that the mechanism to protect human rights defenders which the Council of Europe may set up should be multi-dimensional, focusing on protection

from reprisals for defenders who interact with the Council of Europe, but not disregarding the protection of the NGOs of which they are members or leaders. We should make a commitment alongside other donors to setting up a special fund to support national NGOs. Otherwise, our means of action and their impact will be very limited.

The Conference wants to be actively involved in protecting, supporting and promoting NGO participation in the decision-making process in Council of Europe member States. At the last session, we adopted a recommendation intended to protect the Moldovan association Promo Lex (an FIDH member), which does work in Transnistria to promote the inhabitants' fundamental rights. Our recommendation concerning the reprisals which this NGO is currently undergoing from the "de facto" authorities in Transnistria applies to all human rights defenders in this region. The document will be sent to the permanent delegations concerned and could be made available to the GR-DEM, if you so wish, Madam Chair.

In this context, we must strongly support and call on the Parliamentary Assembly to take forward the follow-up to its recommendations concerning the protection of human rights defenders and preventing inappropriate restrictions on the activities of NGOs in Europe.

To continue on the subject of protection, one of the major points raised during the current affairs debate, which some Deputies were able to attend, was the question of the "offence of solidarity" which is applied in some Council of Europe member States and penalises the work of NGOs which help migrants. It cannot, on the one hand, be claimed that NGOs have a key role to play in supporting and assisting refugees while, on the other, punishing them for what they do. I have asked the Chair of the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons to look into this subject within her committee, in co-operation with the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. It was also brought home to us through the statements of two Greek NGOs attending the debate how complex and occasionally difficult co-ordinating the work of international and national NGOs can be. I believe that, through its member organisations, the Conference of INGOs can make a contribution in this area.

Three other major events were held during our session. They included a conference on ageing and the challenge it poses to public health, attended by Ms Gabriela Battaini-Dragoni, Lord Foulkes of Parliamentary Assembly, and Mr Mendes Bota of the European Union delegation, and giving rise to a recommendation adopted by the participants.

Ms Rabasa Grau, the Andorran Ambassador addressed the Education and Culture Committee to inform the NGOs about the steps taken by Andorra to promote the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

A side event, bringing together religious representatives from all faiths and Parliamentary Assembly members, provided an opportunity to discuss the question: Are religions a place of emancipation for women?

We also invited about twenty youth NGOs or NGOs working with young people to an intergenerational forum.

In addition to the meetings of the three thematic committees and the side events I have just described, 13 working groups held their meetings.

Since the beginning of my term of office, I have been trying to make the Conference of INGOs stronger so that it can both meet external challenges and work to improve its internal functioning. With this aim in mind, we have made some amendments to our rules of procedure. We are also working on measures to improve our internal and external communication.

Thank you for your attention and your interest in our activities. I should now be glad to answer your questions and hear your suggestions.

Anna Rurka
President of the Conference of INGOs