



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Address by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs at the meeting of the Conference of INGOs on 29 January 2016

Dear Representatives of the INGOs, dear Colleagues,

In 2015, the first year of office of the current Bureau showed that together we could identify our priorities and invigorate our exchanges with the other Council of Europe bodies, even if we sometimes have to insist in order to be heard. We, the Conference, and you as international NGOs must strengthen our links with civil society in member states. That is the basis of our legitimacy. The Bureau and the Standing Committee have embarked on a bottom-up work process with the INGOs which have participatory status and will continue to work in this way. The Conference of INGOs will continue to be a body that is committed to and shares the values upheld by the Council of Europe, a place for transmitting such values between generations and a place of innovation. We will continue to push back the boundaries within the Conference and the Council of Europe and we intend to enhance our position as active agents in Council of member states.

Participatory status commits us to doing our utmost to improve the situation of civil society, which we represent. In order to do so, we need a strong and readily understandable communication strategy, and a clear image that is easily identified from outside the Council. We need to create our brand image, to stand out from the other Council of Europe bodies, to set ourselves apart through our activities and to bring INGOs together and be their collective voice.

We are not entirely free in the choice of our priorities, as they are also dictated by the existing socio-political and economic context and the events taking place across the world are challenging democracy, human rights and the rule of law and bringing about lasting changes in society.

Terrorists are attacking not only institutions but also civil society; extremism and authoritarianism are gathering momentum and using the fight against terrorism as an argument to step up public surveillance. So what can we do? Within the parameters of our responsibility, quite a lot. First of all we must commit ourselves to doing something and show that it is possible to do things differently, in other words to set up a programme of positive action involving citizen initiatives and by establishing media that are based on solidarity and citizens' interest and offer an alternative to the existing politicized media.

This is urgent. There are a growing number of countries in which the civic space is narrowing. The political, religious and cultural pluralism which shapes public space and is a sign of freedom is disappearing and being replaced by a unidirectional and authoritarian approach. Our elected representatives must be reminded that they have the right to govern but not the right to change the regime without the approval of civil society. The shift from a

democratic state to an authoritarian state can take place very quickly – we have, alas, already witnessed a growing number of examples. The Council of Europe's convention system, which safeguards human rights, is becoming uncomfortable for authoritarian governments, which no longer tolerate the idea that an international system of justice can dictate their laws. If you look closely, you will see that one of the key elements of this shift is the exclusion of civil society and of NGOs from the democratic decision-making process.

You know as well as I do that the key to a stable democracy is conscience and citizen action. Yes, we need to work to safeguard the principles which we thought we could take for granted. Democracy makes sense when individuals commit themselves to taking control of their lives. Politics is a public activity which is carried out in the public interest. It is an obligation but also a pleasure, the pleasure of doing something with others for the common good.

I therefore open this plenary meeting with pleasure and with emotion as some very important events will be taking place during this meeting.

Anna Rurka
President of the Conference of INGOs