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Statement by the President of the Conference of INGOs, Anna Rurka, on the occasion of the 126th Session of the Committee of Ministers, Sofia, Bulgaria, 18 May 2016

Mr Chairman, Minister, Mr Secretary General, Ladies and Gentlemen, Your Excellencies,

Firstly, I would like to congratulate the Republic of Bulgaria on the achievements of its chairmanship. The Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe acknowledges Bulgaria's commitment to protecting vulnerable groups and social rights both within the Council of Europe and on its national territory. In Sofia I have seen the direct effects of de-institutionalisation on the quality of services provided for children and families. These high-quality services have also been bolstered by exchanges on professional practices within the member organisations of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. Yesterday, at the meetings organised by the Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitry Panitza", I heard about the quality of the research and activities carried out by Bulgarian NGOs acting with and for migrants, which is a fact that was borne out in my meetings with the representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Vice-Chair of the National Agency for Refugees.

These meetings now allow me to pass on a number of messages whose content has a collective dimension. If anything I say here seems inappropriate to you, I would ask you to consider this collective aspect and its role as a lever for joint action.

I would like to begin by stressing that the way in which we receive migrants and asylum seekers determines how they are integrated into host societies. The implication is that access to rights and fair procedures will have an impact on the person's trajectory in the country and in Europe. This is a key moment in their integration. I hope that Europe will have more friends than enemies among the civilian population when the war in Syria and the resultant exodus are over.

Restoring legal methods of migration can stop the use of illegal methods which put millions of people in danger. Ensuring that every asylum seeker has been able to prepare his or her application properly, offering free legal aid, shortening the length of procedures and checking that international standards are upheld in administrative detention centres and that case law on asylum rights is evolving are all recommendations which have been made on many occasions by various institutions. The NGOs call for them to be implemented in all the members states without discrimination.

All societies are based on two mutually reinforcing sources: solidarity and responsibility. These two principles of governance are tested in the management of the humanitarian disaster caused by the exodus of refugees fleeing from war and the way in which we, the international community, handle the crisis.

States must honour their undertakings under the European Convention on Human Rights, which reminds us that the recognition of people's legal personality and dignity is a source of freedom, justice and peace in the world. Freedom exists because rights exist. Today, in

some contexts, the case for respect for refugees' rights has become difficult for people to accept and sometimes even endangers NGOs which make it, exposing them in particular to hate speech and violence. Is this acceptable? How is it that governments so often fail to take action against the hate speech that is spread within our communities, sometimes even by the authorities? Media campaigns should be launched to help citizens understand migration, and not to stigmatise migrants or confuse them with terrorists.

I would make the following requests:

- that persons who undertake to help migrants fully enjoy their fundamental rights be protected by mechanisms to protect human rights defenders;
- that states set up joint reception and integration policies for migrants, with national features adapted to national contexts;
- that NGO activities for migrants be enhanced and made more enduring through proper funding.

If states disengaged from the obligations arising from the Convention on Human Rights and this resulted, in particular, in a failure to apply the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, the covenant binding governments to civil society and above all to the 325 INGOs of the Conference, which conduct activities throughout the Council of Europe member states, would be broken. I feel that, as President of the Conference, I have a duty to make this warning here and now.

At the core of today's democratic crisis is a crisis of participation in political decision-making. Many circumstances show that democracy is far from a reality. Citizens and NGOs have a deep feeling of political impotence when election promises are not kept. In many countries, demonstrations by civil society no longer have any effect, failing to result in any dialogue with decision-makers, while civil society organisations demonstrating in the street are ignored. The authorities must ensure that all the stakeholders have been able to express themselves fairly and equally in accordance with the rule of law.

Our organised civil society is not in such bad shape because the fact that it is calling for more power is a sign of confidence in its collective intelligence and sense of responsibility. Organised civil society is not defined solely by its capacity to organise itself. For it to be a factor for change with the potential to meet the democratic challenges it faces, it must have the feeling that its actions change public policies and the lives of the persons concerned. This is the basis upon which NGOs can become architects of change. It will always be their role to supervise the authorities in power, helping them to better themselves and ensuring that they do not forget the people in whose name they are acting.

I wish Estonia every success and confirm the Conference of INGOs' desire to contribute to the Estonian Chairmanship's priorities.

Thank you for your attention.

Anna Rurka
President of the Conference of INGOs