

***President***

**To all Members of the Conference of INGOs**

Strasbourg, 25 October 2022

**ACTIVITY REPORT SINCE THE LAST EXCHANGE OF  
MR GERHARD ERMISCHER, PRESIDENT OF THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs  
WITH THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS IN JUNE 2022**

***Work of the Conference of INGOs and its Committees***

- Participation in the reform of the Social Rights mechanism of the Social Charter: This was one of our key priorities, as we do believe that the Social Charter is a key instrument of the Council of Europe to save-guard social rights as human rights. Its monitoring mechanism, the possibility for collective complaints are of the greatest importance for social peace in Europe. These mechanisms are in a reform process, and we have advocated to keep them strong, strengthen them even further, and make them a living tool for Civil Society. Key actor in this endeavour is our Committee on Action for Social Rights.
- Participation in the draft legal instrument on the protection of the best interests of the child and his/her rights in parental separation and/or care proceedings: one of the new legal instruments of the Council of Europe to strengthen Human Rights, especially the rights of children. Many strong contributions were made by our Civil Society Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- Participation in the Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAI): the follow up of the *Ad Hoc* Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAHAI) is a key priority for us. We believe that artificial intelligence needs to be regulated in a way that save-guards human rights and democratic freedoms. Our representatives at both groups fought and fight for a strong binding legal instrument that is driven by human rights and not by economic interest or so-called security interests (defence, national security and military use). We do so together with an alliance of Civil Society actors and are very outspoken, loud and visible in our demands and protests wherever we find proposals lacking the human rights edge we believe to be crucial. This has also been presented as a best practice example at the General Assembly of the Conference of INGOs.

- Intensive Co-operation of our Committee on Rights of persons who are migrants with the adequate bodies of the Council of Europe: This too has been presented as a best practice example at our GA. It shows how a committee can link up with Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the special rapporteur of the Secretary General, with relevant international organisations like the UN or EU to achieve a really strong impact and defend the rights of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in our society as well as fight for the key issues of our Conference: freedom of association and freedom of expression.
- Number of webinars organised by our committees on issues like Right of the Child, Environment and Human Rights, Interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, migration, human trafficking, equality, prevention of violence against women, situation of women in Ukraine... It is impossible to list all events and activities here, but our committees have been very active and done a great job in bringing forward so many issues and important themes.
- Expert Council on NGO-Law: this has really developed to a crown jewel of the Conference of INGOs. It was very active, submitting statements to the Committee of Ministers on pending cases like Kavala in Turkey, Beka-Ousta Western Thracian Turkish Minority in Greece and others, but also working on Russia and Belarus and the legal situation of civil society there. You can find several of their most important products further down in this report.

### ***Work with other bodies of the Council of Europe***

- Continuous work with the North-South Centre (NSC): next to the regular work including participation in meetings in Lisbon and Strasbourg, we could strengthen our engagement in the NSC. In addition we could welcome a mixed Jordanian delegation of Civil Society and the Ministry of Social Development in Strasbourg, debating better civil participation. Our Vice-President and representative to the NSC Christoph Spreng presented the revised Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in Decision Making, the BePart-Platform, our Dialogue Toolkit and other tools developed by the Conference of INGOs and in the Council of Europe and we got very positive feedback from both sides, Civil Society delegates as well as governmental participants. The co-operation will continue.
- Participation in the preparation of the World Forum of Democracy (WFD): we advocated for a strong democracy centred theme for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WFD and we will again be sponsoring our own lab, in addition presenting the BePart Platform together with the Congress and the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity and once again send a delegation of representatives, especially from the youth sector, to the WFD.
- Strengthening co-operation with the Youth Sector of the Council of Europe: as demanded by members in the General Assembly we are intensifying our co-operation with the Youth Sector, have appointed our new youth delegates and are giving responsibilities to young participants and former youth delegates to increase youth participation in the work of the Conference.
- Event on the day of the eradication of poverty: the annual event on October 17 this year could boast a special guest, the UN special rapporteur for extreme poverty and human rights, who was not only present at the ceremony in front of the Palais but also participated in our webinar and presented his new study, exploring how people in extreme poverty often do not make use of rights they have, why this is

the case and how it can be remedied. Special Thanks to our Committee on Action for Social Rights for the preparation of the event and the webinar. In addition, we had this year a close co-operation with the International Committee for October 17 for the online commemoration of the World Day for Overcoming Poverty and with All Together in Dignity. We have received the support of the Irish Presidency of the Council of Europe and the Irish Permanent Representation to the Council of Europe and together will unveil an additional plaque with a translation into English of the pledge to eradicate poverty on the memorial stone in front of the Palais during our General Assembly on 24-26 April 2023.

- Webinar on the day of fighting human trafficking: This annual event was centred around the situation of displaced people, especially on the actual situation of Ukraine refugees. We were happy to receive a representative from GRETA, the very successful monitoring mechanism of the Council of Europe on the Convention to Combat Human Trafficking. This year the event was organised by our member Religious in Europe Networking against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE) in close co-operation with our Committee on Rights of the persons who are migrants, but as a cross cutting issue with the representation of many other committees on children rights, equality, social rights etc.
- Participation in Intergovernmental Steering Committees, Partial Agreements, drafting groups and other bodies of the Council of Europe through our representatives and our committees: this is a continuous work and the place where we can make strong contributions. It is something we have to highlight even more in the future and started to do so by dedicating one part of our General Assembly to present some best practice examples. This work is not so visible to the outside world as our contributions become part of the documents, which after being adopted by the Committee of Ministers become binding or non-binding legal instruments, but our watch-dog function becomes especially important where we stand for strong documents to defend human rights and democratic freedoms (as for example in the case of the drafting group for the intended Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, the former CAHA now CAI).

### ***Country visits***

- Country Visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina: this was the second traditional country visit of the Conference of INGOs in 2022 – after a long break due to Corona restrictions. The official report will be given in the 2023 April session of the Conference of INGOs with the presence of representatives of civil society organisations and the Government / Permanent Representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- First visit to Andorra – a new kind of cooperation with a country to strengthen civil society engagement. On the invitation of Andorra, we undertook a first visit in July to discuss with representatives of the government, parliament and regional governments the potentials for a project to strengthen civil society engagement in Andorra through means of deliberate democracy. A second visit shall follow in November 2022 to discuss these possibilities with representatives of Civil Society and citizens of Andorra.
- Upcoming fact-finding mission of our Committee Rights of persons who are migrants to Greece: This is a new instrument of the Conference. The Committee on Rights of the persons who are migrants will undertake a field trip to Greece to

liaise with NGOs in the field and to learn from first-hand experience about the situation of migrants as well as NGOs giving aid to them. This done in close cooperation with other bodies of the Council of Europe and links have been established with UN organisations and the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU.

## **Products**

**The Legal Space for Non-Governmental Organisations in Europe**, a study by the Expert Council on NGO Law on Council of Europe Recommendation (2007)14 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe. The study has already been presented earlier, but we have created a video to learn about the recommendation encourage civil society to make better use of the Recommendation. This video has been presented at our General Assembly in October 2022 and it is available on our webpage. You can find it here: [Video](#) and download the study here: [Study](#)

- **Opinion on the Compatibility with International and Regional Standards of Recent Amendments to the Belarusian Legislation Affecting NGOs**, a study by the Expert Council on NGO Law just finished. You can find it here: [Opinion](#)
- **Working with the Council of Europe**: A practical Guide for Civil Society. This handbook and Portal will help all civil society actors to be better informed about the many possibilities to work with the Council of Europe and to find their way round the complex structures of the institution. The online version is supplied with live links to all the relevant bodies and shall be continuously updated. You can find them here: [Handbook - Portal](#)
- **BePart Platform** is online, working, promotion material has been produced and is distributed, e.g. at the upcoming WFD. Our co-operation with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and with Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity in the house to promote our Code of Good Practice and collect best practice examples is up and running. You can participate here: <https://bepartforum.org/> Most of these products you can for now also access directly from start page of our home page and our newsroom. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/home>

## **Work with partners outside the Council of Europe**

- Re-vamping our co-operation with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA): We have participated in their studies, directly through the Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs but also through many of our member organisations. We have received a request by FRA to re-create our partnership, after FRA had dissolved its Advisory Board for Civil Society, where we had been a born member. After an online meeting with staff of FRA, the President of the Conference of INGOs had a personal meeting with the Director of FRA in Strasbourg, defining new ways of co-operating in country visits, projects, and the FRA Platform, where the Conference shall be given a prominent role. We also agreed to establish a regular dialogue and find a way to formalise our co-operation. A link up with the Committee on Rights of persons who are migrants was made to contribute to their fact-finding mission in Greece.
- Co-operation with the CURE Campaign on making the Council of Europe more visible to civil society and bringing a stronger civil society contribution to the Council

of Europe. This co-operation continues especially in the light of a potential Summit in April in 2023 in Iceland, but also to help in our dialogue with civil society in Russia and Belarus.

- Preparation of our dialogue with Russian and Belarussian civil society: this is an undertaking in the framework of the priorities of the Council of Europe defined immediately after the expulsion of Russia and made possible with a voluntary contribution by Finland. We are preparing the upcoming event in Strasbourg on 22-23 November 2022 to better understand the needs of civil society in distress in the countries and in exile outside the countries, how to strengthen links, how to support their fight, how to safeguard their security. As this dialogue is so delicate it will be in a closed and safe environment, but results shall be shared not just with our members but also with the Committee of Ministers, member States and other bodies in the Council of Europe.

### ***Our position on a potential new Summit***

At the 132<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Committee of Ministers in Turin in May 2022, the decision was taken, to establish a high-level reflection group to give advice on a potential new Summit of the Council of Europe, which could take place in Iceland in April 2023. Although it was very much a black box, we could advocate successfully that our voice needs to be heard and finally were asked to submit our own statements and ideas on the major questions posed to the high-level group.

For this we undertook a survey with our members and other civil society actors to find out what civil society actors expect from a reform of the Council of Europe / a new summit. We have drafted a recommendation to the High-Level Reflection Group transmitting our desires and ideas.

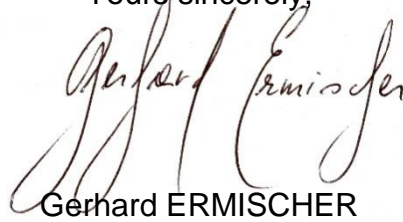
Independent from this we want to see a real next step leading from the Warsaw Summit and the Helsinki Process to a true strengthening of civil society in the Council of Europe and an inclusive dialogue with civil society. We also hope for a strengthening of the status of the Conference of INGOs, to make it more save in the house and give it a stronger voice – and support.

**A personal remark** from me as the President of the Conference of INGOs: As we do not have a Secretary General and only half a Secretariat, which is also responsible for the WFD, I have to be my own Secretary General and often enough my own secretary. So, I depend very much on a direct dialogue with you, the representatives of the member states and with the CM. It would be very helpful if I could get more access to the Committee of Ministers, not just be invited once a year to the plenary meeting and twice to the GR-DEM. Of course, I could participate in most of the dialogues of the Rapporteur Groups of the Committee of Ministers with civil society, but that it is a different cup of tea.

So, it would be good if I could have a more regular exchange of views, not just with all relevant Rapporteur Groups as well as the plenary meetings, especially to be invited to participate on themes relevant to civil society. I have moved to Strasbourg, and although I still have other obligations and cannot be here 365 days a year, I have made Strasbourg my regular home now and am available, even at short notice. I deliberately make this commitment and I ask you take advantage of it.

In addition, I have to thank all the members of our Standing Committee, the chairs and participants of our thematic Committees and all our representatives appointed to the different Intergovernmental Steering Committees, Partial Agreements and drafting groups in the Council of Europe. Without the incredible volunteer work that has been done by all these people it would not have been possible to make such an impact and to undertake so many projects and contribute to so many products of the Council of Europe. In addition, I would like to thank all the member states and permanent representations who have supported our work, invited us to co-operate with them. The voluntary contributions and the secondment offered by Finland have been and are of great help to us, and we would like to invite other countries to follow that example to support our work.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gerhard Ermischer'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G' and 'E'.

Gerhard ERMISCHER