



**Address by Mr Gerhard Ermischer,
President of the Conference of INGOs**

GR-DEM, 1 June 2021

At first, I would like to say what a great pleasure it is for me to be able to address the GR-DEM just one month after I have been elected as the new President of the Conference of INGOs. But I should say not just as the new President, but also of the President of a new Conference. Because the Conference has undergone a fundamental reform process during the past three years. Started by my esteemed predecessor Anna Rurka this process led to the adaptation of our new Rules of Procedure in December 2020 which give the Conference a completely new structure. This structure came into life with the GA in April this year, when a new Standing Committee was elected, and the new structure was established.

The Conference has now a very lean structure. It is governed by the Standing Committee which consists of the President, two Vice-Presidents and eight members – all directly elected by the members of the Conference. For its working capacity the Conference can now create targeted Committees which are set up for a period of time, have a clear mandate and programme, timeline and expected outcome, shall work closely with the other bodies of the CoE in the framework of the key-priorities formulated by the Secretary General and the Framework set up by the Committee of Ministers.

The first committees were prepared already after the adaptation of the new Rules of Procedures in dedicated task forces and adopted by the General Assembly in April. They cover a wide range of themes, environment and climate change, social rights, children rights, migration, interconvictional dialogue as well as artificial intelligent. A committee on gender equality is in preparation to be adopted at the autumn session of the Conference. For all committees the appropriate bodies of the CoE were identified, conventions, partial agreements, programmes or committees of the PACE and were already approached to co-ordinate efforts and outcomes.

The new Standing Committee is also re-structuring our liaisons to the intergovernmental steering committees, partial agreements and committees of the PACE to guarantee a very close co-operation between our representatives and the Standing Committee and to better integrate this work in the proceedings of the Conference. We also have started to build up new communication structures to improve and strengthen the communication with our members, to better understand their needs and demands and to better empower them to participate in the work of the Conference inside the CoE as well as to make use of their potential for the Conference – especially when it comes to outreach and dialogue with grass roots organisations.

To link up with local, regional and national civil society organisations was always important to the Conference. It was done either to its own members, where they are big membership organisations or consist themselves of local and regional associations. An important tool were the country visits, which of course had to be stopped during the Corona Crisis, but hopefully

we will be able to commence them soon. It was also done by inviting grass root organisations to events of the Conference, but this was very limited due to budgetary reasons: the budget of the Conference itself is very small and most grass root organisations can hardly afford to send representatives to Strasbourg for a specific event.

The Corona Crisis has been a game changer in this field. It has forced us all to go online for meetings and conferences, working meetings and events. This has allowed many members of the Conference itself to participate who normally find it difficult to travel to Strasbourg. It has also allowed us to invite and integrate a great number of grass roots organisations for our own events, consultations and working meetings. This has strengthened the Conference, helped to better ground it and has also activated members who had been less participative in the past. The reform process has also brought organisations back to the Conference which had drifted away and has brought new big players to the Conference, like e.g. Greenpeace.

We will therefore continue to use these tools and add online communications to the existing physical formats (which will always stay important and allow additional personal contacts which are very much needed) and also to create hybrid formats which will allow the existing structures to become more inclusive and effective.

The key priorities of the Conference in the first month of the new mandate were key priorities of the CoE: the Istanbul Convention and the situation in Belarus. The Conference is adamant in defending the Istanbul Convention, urging member States of the CoE who have not signed or ratified it to do so and sees it as one of the most important instruments to protect women from violence. The Conference is also especially dedicated to the Social Charter of the CoE, active in the process of modernising it and again advocating for member States to sign and ratify it, if not done so already, and especially to sign all the additional protocols, especially on the common complaints mechanism, which is so important for civil society to hold countries accountability on the obligations they have undertaken.

The greatest challenge for the Conference, its members and civil society at large is the shrinking civil space, as stated in the recent report of the SG on democracy under duress. A recent evaluation by CIVICUS lists only 14 member States of the CoE as absolutely free and gives them the top marks on civil society empowerment. But unfortunately, the ranking goes down to the lowest marks even for member States of the CoE. We will always seek the dialogue with countries, governments and country representations in the CoE on these matters, offer our expertise and experience, our help wherever needed and accepted. But we will also be unbending on the fact that all member States of the CoE have signed up to the principles of an open and liberal democracy, human rights and rule of the law and have to adhere to these principles and respect the core values of the CoE enshrined in its conventions, chartas, recommendations and guidelines, adopted by the Committee of Ministers and signed and ratified by the member States.

On the Helsinki process we are very happy with the first dialogue with Civil Society organised in the GR-DEM just very recently and see this as a very important step forward. The Conference is committed to play an important role in this process and has the skills and potentials to offer to the Committee of Ministers. As the voice of civil society inside the CoE it should be seen as the born partner in this process and with its own reform and new structures is even better suited to provide a strong and constructive input. The Conference of course does not want to monopolise the process, we see the need for an open dialogue with parts of civil society which are not represented in the Conference, due to its specific structure consisting of international NGOs granted participative status by the CoE, like think tanks, professional associations, trade unions or representatives of the economy.

The Conference strongly support suggestions made by member States, as to make the process more open and transparent, allow live streaming of broadcasting, allow questions to

be asked and comments to be made from outside through online media. It is also committed to an open and free dialogue with civil society, without limitations, a dialogue which can be controversial and vivid to lead to good results. It seems prudent to have a series of these dialogues dedicated to clearly defined themes, mostly one at a time, to be targeted and result oriented. The Conference can give advice and help ensure that representatives of civil society are truly independent and representative.

I would like to thank the President of the GR-DEM for his kind invitation, the good co-operation we already had on the first dialogue with civil society in the GR-DEM and hope to continue this meaningful work with the GR-DEM and the member States in a spirit of an open and true partnership of the Committee of Ministers with civil society in Europe.