



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



# Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe

## Activity Report 2019

**DRAFT**

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## Introduction

2019 was marked by many celebrations and debates on the occasion of the Council of Europe's 70th anniversary. It was also a great opportunity to renew the commitment of member States to the Council of Europe, as did also civil society towards the Council of Europe, its values and the rights it defends. In this spirit, the Conference of INGOs adopted in April 2019 an important Resolution entitled "[The future of the Council of Europe: the civil society's commitment](#)".

This resolution was in part a collective and political response to the Secretary General's Annual Report which presented the reform of the Council of Europe, approved by the ministers at the Helsinki Session. This report was followed by a draft contingency plan which directly and indisputably threatened the existence of the Conference of INGOs if the Russian Federation did not pay its contribution to the budget of the Council of Europe.

The high-level dialogue between the States, between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly, but above all the vote of the latter to renounce the suspension of the right to vote of the Russian delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly has ended a long period of pressure and uncertainty over the future of the Council of Europe and the future of the Conference of INGOs.

In 2019, the Conference of INGOs worked under serious pressure. There were, however, events and meetings full of optimism and mutual trust. One of them was an exchange of views with the candidates for the post of Secretary General of the Council of Europe. It was the first time that the candidates accepted such a meeting with the INGOs enjoying participatory status.

The Conference of INGOs welcomed the election by the Parliamentary Assembly of Marija Pejcinovic Buric as Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the second woman to occupy this post after Catherine Lalumière.

## **Civil society participation at the heart of the attention of the Committee of Ministers for three successive years**

In 2017, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Guidelines on civil participation in political decision making. In 2018, the work carried out by the drafting group on civil society and independent human rights institutions, under the responsibility of the CDDH, led to the adoption by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe of the [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe](#)

On the occasion of World NGO Day in February 2019, the Conference of INGOs organized, for the first time at the Council of Europe, a specific event to celebrate the contribution of civil society to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The event titled "[Why do we need NGOs?](#)" -[Contribution of NGOs to the work and mandate of the Council of Europe](#)" brought together different stakeholders: civil society, Permanent Representations of Council of Europe member States, eminent human rights defenders, students and representatives of the Secretariat general. The Conference of INGOs was particularly pleased to welcome Marcis Liors Skadmanis, philanthropist, founder of the International Day of Non-Governmental

Organizations. Following this event, the first recommendations on strengthening civic space within the Council of Europe itself were addressed to the Committee of Ministers by the President of the Conference of INGOs.

In this perspective, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed to organize a high-level conference devoted to co-operation between the Council of Europe and NGOs on the occasion of the Council of Europe's 70th anniversary. Finland, the General Secretariat and the Conference of INGOs were associated to this excellent initiative. [The High-Level Conference on the role and position of NGOs in the Council of Europe took place on 22 March 2019 at the University of Warsaw](#). It was made up of several round tables, with several objectives. First of all, it was a question of situating the participation mechanism within the Council of Europe from a historical and comparative perspective, compared to the working methods used by other intergovernmental and / or international organizations vis-à-vis and with NGOs. Secondly, it was about taking stock, identifying strengths, achievements and challenges, in order to draw up recommendations and decisions for the future.

In order to prepare this conference, the President of the Conference of INGOs in close collaboration with the Democratic Innovation Division, consulted the INGOs members of the Conference of INGOs on how they perceive their own participation in the Council of Europe, what are the bodies with which they interact most. The questionnaire took into account all the levels of participation announced in the Guidelines on civil participation, adopted by the Committee of Ministers.

The results of this survey show that out of 130 responses received, the 48% declare that the participative status has improved over the last 5 years. But a big part of INGOs see the need to deepen cooperation: 71% of them are satisfied with the availability, accessibility and clarity of the information provided by the Conference of INGOs, but only 37% affirm the same regarding to the Committee of Ministers. 47% state that in the past 5 years they have not had the opportunity to participate in the consultation procedure established by the Committee of Ministers, the 39% stress the lack of such opportunities within PACE, the 40% within the Congress and the 35% with the commissioner. Regarding Conference of INGOs, only 11% did not participate in the consultation. For all organizations, these numbers increase when the issue involves long-standing, results-oriented dialogue or co-authoring projects as recommendations or policies. 61% of respondents state that their INGO has never had the opportunity to participate in such co-drafting processes with the Committee of Ministers, unlike the 20% with the Conference of INGOs. These results show the need to fully implement the guidelines on civil participation in the political decision-making process within the Council of Europe.

At the end of the High-Level Conference, the initiating States in liaison with the General Secretariat formulated the almost exhaustive list of the proposals that have been made. They were presented by the Ambassador of Poland at the plenary meeting in April 2019.

Finland, which at the time chaired the Committee of Ministers, conducted the process of adoption of the decision (called Helsinki decision) at ministerial level, during the 129th Session of the Committee of Ministers. This decision includes three following priority actions:

“1. To examine further options for strengthening the role and meaningful participation of civil society organisations, and national human rights institutions in the Organisation, with the view to increasing its openness and transparency towards civil society, including access to information, activities and events;

2. further strengthen the Organisation’s mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders, including the Secretary General’s Private Office procedure on human rights defenders;

3. to invite the Secretary General to explore the possibilities of inviting the relevant human rights NGOs to a regular exchange with a view to further enhancing co-operation between civil society and the Council of Europe and enriching the discussions of the Committee of Ministers and other Council of Europe bodies.

At present, this decision is the highest regarding the line to follow in order to increase the co-operation between NGOs and the Council of Europe. Its implementation clutters all the organs and bodies of the Council of Europe.

In December 2019, during her annual exchange of views with the Ministers' Deputies, the President of the Conference of INGOs presented concrete proposals for the implementation of some of the aspects of this decision, in particular to include all INGOs with participatory status in informal debates organised by the Committee of Ministers, to open a written consultation on subjects of interest to the Committee of Ministers, to establish a fund to facilitate the participation of national members of INGOs in debates with the Committee of Ministers and support through voluntary contributions the project of DG 2 and the Conference of INGOs aimed at strengthening freedom of association in Council of Europe member states.

It is up to the Committee of Ministers to give concrete implementation to the Helsinki decision through progressive and inclusive actions. It is up to the Conference of INGOs to respond to it and support the Committee of Ministers in the implementation.

## **Human rights**

### ***Protection of human rights defenders***

The Human Rights Committee continued its support for Mehman Huseynov, a prominent Azerbaijani blogger who was in critical condition in an Azerbaijani prison, following the hunger strike he started. Mehman Huseynov, has been imprisoned since March 2017 for defamation against the authorities. The Committee organized an urgent side event on 21 January calling for immediate action on the part of the Secretary General of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, the Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Dunja Mijatović, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to intervene in this case. Mobilization and international pressure around the situation of Mehman Huseynov have prompted the dismissal of charges by the Azerbaijan authorities. However, when invited to the Committee's meeting in April, Huseynov was unable to attend, being stopped at the border with Azerbaijan. A few weeks later, Mr. Huseynov was reinstated his right to freedom of movement.

In September 2019, at the initiative of the working group on freedom of expression and the media, the Human Rights Committee contributed to a side event organized by International Media Support on the subject of the safety of women journalists and human rights defenders. Threats of rape, physical violence and graphic images appear in their inboxes and on their social media platforms during their working day. Women journalists and human rights defenders face a double burden: because of their gender and because they express themselves.

The Human Rights Committee adopted a declaration following the invasion of Turkey (Operation Peace Spring) in north-eastern Syria, with the aim "of preventing the creation of a terrorist corridor across the southern border". The INGOs present called on the parties involved in this conflict to bring peace to the region.

### ***Protecting access by vulnerable groups to social, cultural and economic rights***

The Transversal Working Group on Poverty continued to pursue the objectives for which it had been set up.

During the first session of the Conference, the members of the group proposed a [Recommendation on the right to decent housing](#) which was approved by the Conference of INGOs and was transmitted to the Committee of Ministers. This document followed the debate and recommendations proposed during the event of October 17, 2018, which focused on the theme "Decent housing for all". With this recommendation, the Conference showed its precision in identifying a relevant problem felt by European citizens, as it was also a subject discussed later on in the year by the [Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

In this area a [Recommendation on poverty and precarity amongst students in Europe](#), initiated by FEDE (Federation for Education in Europe) and presented by FEDE and ESAN (European Social Action Network) was adopted by the Conference of INGOs in April. It follows the work of the Education and Culture Committee on education and the right to dignity. This recommendation was presented to the CDPPE in July 2019 and encouraged action to be taken by various countries as early as the autumn.

During the year, the group continued to work on its transversality, but it remains mainly focused on the annual event marking of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 October). Under the leadership of H  l  ne Rozet (ATD 4 World) Maritchu Rall and L  on Dujardin (ESAN), the Working Group organised an event on 17 October 2019. The theme chosen was "[The right to decent housing - the voice of children](#)", establishing a link with the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The group also launched a call for children's contributions on this subject. As a result, [a booklet](#) was created from their production.

The Conference of INGOs was also invited by one of its members - the International Federation of Social Work – and organized a workshop at its international conference in Vienna. The revised European Social Charter, as well as the Additional Protocol on collective complaints, was the subject of a substantial presentation and a discussion with social workers around the world. The workshop was funded by the INGO Service Association and the Social Charter Department sent documentation for all participants.

The Standing Committee agreed to become a partner in an academic research project, proposed by a consortium of universities (Aalborg (Denmark), Lisbon (Portugal), Lincoln (United Kingdom), Paris Nanterre (France), Warsaw ( Poland) and Thrace (Greece)), within the framework of the Horizon 2020 European Commission programme. The INGO Service Association agreed to be the formal bearer of this partnership. The coordinator of the transversal group on Poverty, was involved in the preparatory work. The project called ACTIONS aimed to study the links between access to social rights and the decline of democracy. The grant was not obtained, but we would like to emphasize again this important attempt by the Conference to contribute to collaboration between civil society and the academic world, as well as its efforts to find new resources for activities that correspond to its thematic priorities.

### ***The exercise of the right to freedom of religion and belief by LGBT groups***

The European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups organized, in partnership with the Human Rights Committee, a side event entitled "[Which practical roads to follow to counter the oppositional debate between the freedom of religion & belief and LGBTI Rights?](#)"

Over the past decade, tension has increased over alleged freedom of religion and the rights of LGBT people. An important example is the confrontation in Romania between the Romanian Orthodox Church and local LGBTI+ activist organizations over the right to a family or just the concept of family, which resulted in a failed referendum, because it did not reach the threshold necessary to be legitimate. Although none of the parties involved won a victory, a deep divide was created in society and injuries were inflicted which will take a long time to heal.

The debate "LGBTI in Europe - let's think together", organized on 25 January 2018 by the Conference of INGOs, has started to address the above-mentioned tension in an inclusive manner, stressing that freedom of religion should not be discounted in favour of the rights of LGBTI people, nor vice versa.

One of the important bases of this exercise is to work according to "shared values and approaches". The organized event offered a space for reflection on these values and practices respectful of human rights.

The Education and Culture Committee has set up a working group on intercultural cities. A study and a report have been drawn up throughout 2019 on combating anxiety and the place of women in cities.

### ***Freedom of expression, disinformation and hate speech***

Misinformation is omnipresent in our media landscape. The 2000s saw a greater capacity of the media and citizens to produce, share and access content - news, but also more and more disinformation. The theme of the World Forum for Democracy focused on disinformation as a threat to democracy. The contribution of the Conference of INGOs to the World Forum has been prepared by the Human Rights Committee which, through its working group on freedom of expression and the media, in partnership with NGO International Media Support has prepared [a forum talk on "disinformation and fake news »](#). The question about regulating social media has been asked, knowing that politicians and governments around the world often invoke "fake



news" to delegitimise critical reporting and justify activities aimed at restricting media freedoms. Participants in the debate stressed the need to mobilize journalists themselves as spokespersons for best practices to verify the information.

Freedom of expression is often used as an argument by those who practice discrimination and hate speech. At the meeting of the Human Rights Committee, the International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism guided the committee on this subject, highlighting the rise of anti-Semitism in the public arena. This concern was transformed into a round table during the October session on the theme "Hate speech on the Internet and migrants".

### ***Contributions to the Steering Committee for Human Rights and to the Bioethics Committee***

The Conference of INGOs continued contributing to the Steering Committee for Human Rights and its drafting groups (CDDH-MIG - on alternatives to the detention of migrants, CDDH-INST devoted to independent human rights institutions the man CDDH-SYNC-relating to the system of the convention, CDDH-SOC – on the European Social Charter).

A new development has taken place within the Bioethics Committee. The Conference of INGOs was represented at the high-level seminar on public debate as a tool for the governance of new technologies in the field and a bioethical perspective. The event encouraged the active participation of NGOs.

The inclusion of marginalized people in public debate is a fairly complex and difficult process. In addition to this, many doubts remain about the best way to establish a long-term dialogue between the public and decision-makers in bioethics, especially at international level. There is a need to promote genuine exchanges of ideas, good definitions of terms used, to ensure sufficient confidence on both sides of the process and to ensure that public debate takes place at different levels of decision-making. The Conference intervened twice emphasizing the need to situate this debate in the context of shrinking civic space. The Code of good practice on civil participation in the decision-making process was also highlighted.

In the Bioethics Committee, the last few years have been marked by the discussion on the need or not to establish a Draft Additional Protocol to the Oviedo Convention, with the special aim to protect the human rights and dignity of persons with mental disorder with regard to involuntary placement and involuntary treatment. The Committee of Ministers decided that the Bioethics Committee has to go on working on this Draft Additional Protocol.

In 2019, the Committee called for contributions for a study that will examine good practices in mental health care. A first meeting took place at the end of November at which the Conference of INGOs' representative made a written contribution and participated in the debate. The objective of the meeting was to reach consensus on the way forward, but this has not yet been achieved. There is additional complexity added by the fact that the World Health Organisation is also working on this mental health issue in relationship with other civil society organisations. As such, it was a little more difficult to better understand how to maximize the added value of this project. The representative of the Conference of INGOs finally raised certain points of clarification of the purpose of the meeting and the usefulness of the study as well as certain technical aspects on what a study aligned with the objective presented would imply. The

contributions seem to have been well received, Miguel Cabral, Vice-Chair of the Human Rights Committee and representative of the Conference was invited to collaborate in more detail. In the future, it is important to secure our position, especially with a potential role in mind in this process, as one of the bodies of the Council of Europe that can help achieve better communication between all parties involved.

## **Democracy**

### ***Major event: Code of good practice for civil participation, revised, in the spotlight within the Conference of INGOs and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities***

Ten years ago, the Conference of INGOs adopted the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process and the Strategy for its Implementation and Promotion. The Code has become a Council of Europe reference document, supported by the Committee of Ministers which adopted a specific Declaration on this subject. The Political Affairs Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe expressed in its contribution the merits of the Code and welcomed its elaboration. Finally, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has expressed its willingness to contribute to its promotion.

Following the recommendation of the Secretary General, Thorbjørn Jagland, in his 2015 report, the European Committee on Democracy and Governance worked with the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe to develop new Guidelines for civil participation in political decisions. Their adoption by the Committee of Ministers in September 2017 has advanced international standards, guiding the practices of public authorities at all levels of governance.

In the light of this new developments and of Recommendation 385 adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in 2015 entitled "Developing active participation of citizens through a partnership with civil society", the Conference of INGOs decided to revise the Code of good practice. To do this, the President of the Conference asked the Congress to set up a joint drafting group with a view to updating this code. This joint group was led in 2018 under the coordination of Gerhard Ermischer, Vice-Chair of the Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee of the Conference of INGOs.

The Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs adopted the revised version of the Code at its meeting on June 24, 2019. On June 28, 2019, the Congress's Current Affairs Committee, met in Stuttgart at the Landtag (State Parliament) Baden-Württemberg and approved the revised version of the Code of Good Practice and recommended its adoption by the plenary of the Congress in October. On this occasion, Gerhard Ermischer was invited to hold an exchange of views with the Congress Committee.

During the Autumn Session of the Conference, which was parallel to that of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the two bodies of the Council of Europe adopted the revised Code. The President of the Congress and the Congress Rapporteur in charge of the Code of Good Practice both addressed the members of the Conference of INGOs. The President of the latter also addressed members of Congress during its plenary meeting. These two pillars of the Council of Europe are firmly resolved to jointly launch the revised Code. This marked the start

of a new fruitful cooperation aimed at creating a practical toolbox for improving participatory processes, intended for NGOs, as well as local and regional authorities.

The adoption of the revised Code was celebrated by the two bodies over a shared cocktail after the meeting.

### Call for good practices

A call for case studies of good and less-good practices was launched in order to create a new toolbox facilitating the implementation of the Code. The Youth Department of the Council of Europe has declared its interest and took part in it, with particular emphasis on the participation of young people. This cannot be done without external expertise, which has already been provided by the Expert Council on NGO Law. A questionnaire was drawn up with the experts and was published in November 2019. First examples have been collected. The process will continue in close co-operation with the Congress and the Youth Department and it is hoped that other Council of Europe bodies will follow.

### The future of youth political participation

In September 2019, the Conference of INGOs organized a workshop during the symposium entitled "[The future of political participation of young people](#): questions, challenges and opportunities" organized within the framework of the joint program of the European Union and the Council of Europe at the European Youth Centre. The symposium brought together around 200 young participants to explore the tensions and create a space for learning and inspiration among the actors involved in this subject.

The workshop brought the Code of good practice for civil participation to the centre and led to a discussion with relevant examples offered by the participants.

### ***European cultural identity - a controversial and contested issue***

In April 2019, the Education and Culture Committee invited Mr. Alain Lamassoure to speak on the subject of the project for the foundation of an Observatory of history teaching. Following the exchanges of views with the INGOs, the HOPE project mentioned the role and place of civil society in the text presenting the programme.

Since June 2017, the Education and Culture Committee has started a three-years mandate, structuring its work around the controversial issue of European cultural identity. The need to deal with this topic in depth is based on a double observation raising questions for the European continent: the return of populism and the migratory flows. While Europe has been built on waves of migration, some European territories claim that they are no longer ready to welcome new populations.

To direct its work in the best possible way, the Committee opted for a transversal approach by developing four working groups allowing to tackle all the related themes identified as contemporary issues: lifelong education, digital citizenship, intercultural cities, and a Europe of heritage and creation which are directly steering the European conscience. Based on the reflections of these working groups, a White Paper on European cultural identity will be published by June 2020.

This document is intended to be a practical didactic guide containing plural definitions and approaches to words and concepts for learners, teachers and trainers in the context of education for democratic European citizenship.

In order to involve all interested parties and enrich the content of the future White Paper, the Committee has set up a dialogue between INGOs and high-level political figures (ambassadors, ministers, experts, European, national and local elected representatives) on the construction of the modern foundations of this identity, within the framework of three consultations taking place between 2017 and 2019 which aims to approach this subject from three distinct angles. The main objective of this dialogue is to bring about a modern and evolving approach to European cultural identity from civil society.

The first consultation on 27 June 2018 brought together Council of Europe ambassadors and European personalities and dealt with European cultural identity from a philosophical, historical and cultural perspective.

The second consultation on 9 April 2019 aimed to address European cultural identity from the perspective of citizenship education, with experts, senior representatives of UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the Permanent Representative of the North-South Centre.

The third consultation on 29 October 2019 provided an opportunity to hear the opinion of local and regional political actors and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on a European identity "shared" in the territories by the sedentary and migrant

### ***Roma civil society***

In 2019, the President of the Conference of INGOs took part in the jury evaluating candidates for the Dosta Price, awarded every two years by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities to three municipalities in Council of Europe member States which have implemented innovative and creative initiatives to effectively ensure the long-term integration of Roma communities and Travelers in their territory, while respecting their diversity and ensuring their active participation in democratic life.

The Standing Committee also appointed the Chair of the Education and Culture Committee as the Conference representative to the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers Issues (CAHROM). Access to quality education remains a top priority among measures for Roma and Travellers, as it is a determining factor in their life prospects. However, school should not be a place of acculturation and denial of cultural diversity. Knowledge of Roma culture can change the way in which the largest minority in Europe is viewed. CARHOM ended its mandate in December 2019 but work on Roma issues continues within the CDADI and the Chair of the Education and Culture Committee continues to actively represent the Conference.

Peter Verhaeghe (Caritas), contributed to the 7th meeting of the Council of Europe Council Dialogue with Roma and Travelers civil society held in April 2019, leading the discussion on strengthening the right of the Roma and Travelers community to decent housing. Claude Vivier Le Got represented the INGO Conference at the 8th Dialogue meeting, moderating a round table on collective complaints. Civil society organizations can be key actors in desegregating schools and promoting more inclusive education. Their participation in public litigation, notably before the European Committee of Social Rights and the European Court of Human

Rights, is essential. It not only helps to ensure respect for human rights in Council of Europe member states, but also to raise public awareness of the discrimination suffered daily by Roma and Travellers.

In December 2019, the President of the Conference of INGOs presented the Conference of INGOs, and its activities, to Roma women's NGOs as part of their study visit at the Council of Europe entitled "Understanding and interpreting Council of Europe mechanisms for establishing priorities and develop strategies and action plans".

The work within the Conference of INGOs on the specific issues facing the Roma and Travelers community constitutes a new development. This was possible thanks to the partnership established by the Conference of INGOs with the Council of Europe team in charge of this programme.

Today it is not enough to work on generic issues, without looking at the context and the specific needs of audiences. This work must continue within the entities of the Conference of INGOs which must also take care to welcome more Roma and Travelers INGOs in order to facilitate their access to political decisions concerning them, to create a synergy with the Conference of INGOs to strengthen the monitoring of national legislation, political decisions, strategies and action plans for the inclusion of Roma and Travelers People.

### ***Climate change, migration and human rights***

The Transversal Group on Social and Territorial Cohesion drafted and proposed for adoption by the Standing Committee a [Recommendation on climate change, migration and human rights](#) with a view to the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP25) which was to be held in Santiago de Chile from 2 to 13 December 2019. The Conference of INGOs called for the establishment of return assistance in the case of circular migrations, accompanied by work with the diasporas to return to the original land, taking global and positive account of migration, whether temporary, circular or permanent, so that it is perceived as a strategic opportunity, intended to reduce pressure on the environment and stimulate investment in countries of origin and no longer in terms of loss and damage for the host country. It invited, among others, to take into account social and territorial cohesion, based on the concept of public good and to anticipate environmental threats, in particular on the habitats, water and food resources posed by extreme climatic events and slow degradation of soils and subsoils.

### ***Democracy and fundamental rights in the era of new technologies***

The Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee, at its meeting in June, conducted a substantial debate on the opportunities and risks of new technologies and their impact on representative democracy and human rights. The members of the Conference of INGOs were informed of the work of the working group on digital democracy set up within the framework of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG). Emphasis has been placed on the possible impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on democracy according to the proposals made by experts during [the round table organized by DG 2 Democracy](#).

The specific regulations related to the use of AI to guarantee human rights and the principles of democratic governance are being studied by the [Ad-hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence](#)

set up by the Committee of Ministers. This committee, in a transversal and structural way, brings together all the components of the Council of Europe. In this context, the Conference of INGOs made its first contribution emphasizing the need for impact assessment in legislative processes involving AI, the need for supervision of facial recognition and predictive analytics based on predefined algorithms in order to preserve the exercise of freedom of assembly, association and expression.

### Digital Citizen

Digital developments have been a highly disruptive innovation for people and organisations. Recent developments are changing the way our lives are being lived. Digital disruption brings some threats, but also consequences including in the realm of policy making where digital developments allow citizens to engage with policy makers and can a framework for active participation in evidence-based decision making.

In 2019, the Digital Citizen Transversal Working Group met on two occasions to identify key digital challenges in order that a pro-active approach can be taken to address policy needs for a digital future.

The first meeting explored the digital changes taking place in the NGO landscape. Members shared their experiences and challenges that they faced. Few had any experience of digital impacts on the ways politics is being carried out. This led to a [presentation of the group activities](#) by the Chair to the Conference's Education and Culture Committee. The presentation introduced the tasks of the Working Group and the challenges being faced by NGOs. The group reported on a meeting that was held with one member of the Council of Europe's Ad Hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAHAI). It also initiated a survey of digital impacts on INGO members of the Conference.

The second meeting in 2019 developed a list of recommendations to be presented to the Conference, proposing the need for a clear and transparent digital strategy, developing a connected INGO community and to establish ways to share the challenges being faced by INGOs in their work in Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. This second meeting led to an invitation for the Working Group to present its activities to the Plenary meeting of the Conference for discussion. The breadth of digital issues, from bioethics to democratic governance, was introduced. In many situations, specific expertise was needed and the need to re-think education and learning was discussed. Above all members had confirmed the need to fight for an 'open Internet for all' that operates for the benefit of all and to encourage the application of existing norms, regulations and laws that are not being implemented. The focus must be on benefiting from the potential offered by digital developments while monitoring its impact on users.

### ***Preventing Corruption by Engaging Civil Society***

The Working Group "Preventing corruption by Engaging Civil Society" was created in January 2018 with the goal to educate citizens about different methods to prevent corruption NGOs developed in different countries around Europe.

In 2019, the Group members continued to show interest in increasing the impact of civil society organizations to raise citizens' awareness in fighting corruption in order to develop a civic culture of transparency and morality from an early stage, starting eventually with programs in

schools and universities to educate young generations which will not accept corruption. To meet their needs of sharing good practices from different countries - expressed in previous meetings - Laura Stefan, Anti-Corruption Programme Coordinator of the Expert Forum (EFOR), a Romanian NGO and Manuel Dalia, blogger and independent political journalist from Malta, were invited to one of the Working Group sessions.

Laura Stefan presented two programmes developed in Romania "The Political Clientele Map" and "The School of Democracy". The first one shows all Government allocations and transfers provided to municipalities and county councils from reserve and intervention funds, as well as funds managed by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration (MDRAP), pointing out that it is difficult to obtain funding if the mayor and local government are from opposition parties.

"The School of Democracy" is a youth dedicated programme which involves citizens in the decision-making process and in the monitoring of decision-makers. The goal of the program is to create an innovative learning environment for teachers who want to discover alternative and effective tools for active education and which involves the active participation of young people.

The "School for Democracy" includes a training seminar and the implementation of civic projects in schools and communities in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Topics discussed include: non-formal learning methods, leadership, democracy and the rule of law, good governance, populism, clientelism, public participation, active citizenship, public and advocacy mechanisms, project writing and implementation, dissemination of results and best practices.

Manuel Dalia spoke about the high-level corruption that exists in Malta and the cause of death of investigative journalist Daphne Caurana Galizia who discovered and informed the public about corruption at the governmental level since the election of the current Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat in 2013. Daphne Caurana Galizia died in a car bomb attack on 16 October 2017. After her death, people protested but nothing happened, because Maltese television channels belong to political parties and media coverage is controlled.

Another aspect of corruption in Malta is very weak banks' supervision: only one accountant is responsible for the existing 27 international banks and investigations occur only if other countries discover criminal events or frauds. Manuel Delia explained that is very difficult for journalists to publish and educate citizens about corruption because authorities accuse them of betrayal.

The "Preventing Corruption by Engaging Civil Society" Working Group activity in 2019 focused on sharing good practices from different countries during the sessions and also online. Hugo Castelli Eyre, representative of the European Network of Churches and Freedoms, who is a member of the Working Group, published the Group reports and experts' interventions translated into Spanish on the website of his organization. To conclude, civil society, and especially NGOs, might organize information campaigns for citizens and give hope that corruption can be avoided, and positive change can happen.

## **Contributions to steering committees and drafting groups**

It should be noted that the activity of our representatives in steering committees in the field of Democracy was very sustained this year. This can be explained in particular by the thematic plurality, but also by the fact that the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG) has finalized several studies and set up new working groups. We also note that our representatives on these working groups are themselves in charge of the collective work carried out within the Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committees and the Education and Culture Committee.

The collaboration with the CoE Youth Department was increased, thanks to the fact that there are now two representatives of the Conference of INGOs to the two Council of Europe bodies responsible for youth policies: the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ ) and the Youth Advisory Council (AC / CCJ), which meet within the Joint Youth Council (CMJ) twice a year.

### ***European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG)***

This year, in its report to the Ministers' Deputies, the CDDG underlined the contribution of the Conference of INGOs in its work.

In 2019, this contribution was mainly in the drafting groups on public ethics and digital democracy. Two new groups were created in 2020: democracy and new technologies and democracy & public responsibility. As for the first theme, coordination was established with the representatives of the Conference of INGOs at the CAHAI. The second group is a follow-up of the group specializing in the supervision of local and regional authorities.

For several years, the Conference of INGOs has been represented on the Council of Europe's Platform of Actors on the Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance at local level. The representative of the Conference, Gerhard Ermisher, was recently elected Vice-President of this platform. In the revised platform regulations, the Conference of INGOs is now explicitly designated as a statutory body of the stakeholder platform with all the rights of a full member within the enlarged Bureau of the CDDG.

### ***Steering Committee for Educational Policies and Practices (CDPPE)***

The Chairperson of the Education Commission, Claude VIVIER LE GOT, represents the Conference of INGOs on this Committee and its Bureau as an observer representing NGOs. She intervenes at all meetings of the CDPPE and the Bureau to recall the place of civil society in education. At the meeting in Prague on 29 November 2019 on Ethined, she led a half-day session devoted to the fight against corruption in education.

The Chairperson of the Education and Culture Committee was invited to speak at the meeting of Ministers of Education held in Paris on 26 November 2019 under the chairmanship of France and focused her intervention on the history of the "forgotten", i.e. the historical point of view of the most vulnerable population groups (LGBTI, Roma, women, children, refugees, minorities, INGOs, etc.), who often have little presence in the official historical canals.



## ***The Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP)***

The Conference of INGOs continued to be represented at CDCPP, the secretariat of which also contributed to the work of the Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee. The Chair of this Committee, Thierry Mathieu made an introductory remark during the 10th conference on the European Landscape Convention held on 6 and 7 May in Strasbourg. He is also a member of the jury for the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe. He also participated in the Workshops for the implementation of the Convention entitled "Water, landscape and citizenship in the face of global change" in Spain.

The Chair of the Education and Culture Committee represents the Conference on the CDCPP. At the request of a member country, she built, wrote and delivered a 30-minute online teaching module on "the importance of associative networking in the vitality of European heritage".

## **Freedom of association and the rule of law**

### ***Legal advice and studies***

In 2019, the Council of Experts carried out a major study, on ["The use of criminal law to restrict the work of NGOs supporting refugees and other migrants in Council of Europe member States"](#). A call for contributions was launched toward the member States (16 responses received), independent human rights institutions, INGOs and civil society. A meeting with national NGOs was organized at the Council of Europe to integrate their concerns and recommendations into the study. The latter examined the situation of non-governmental organisations providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and other migrants in Council of Europe member states and the extent to which criminal law and its application have an impact on NGO activities.

The study found that laws criminalizing NGO activity and the enforcement of these laws have a significant impact on the legitimate activity of NGOs, negatively affecting freedom of association and related human rights. The laws themselves are vague and lack legal certainty in the manner in which they are applied, and limitations on the lawful activities of NGOs are often neither necessary nor proportionate.

The President of the Expert Council was invited for an exchange of views with the Parliamentary Committee for Migration and Displaced Persons of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He presented and discussed this study with MPs.

Based on the study results, the Expert Council on NGO Law will prepare guidelines to help Council of Europe member States to ensure that their legislation and practices in the fight against illicit trafficking, smuggling and border control comply with applicable European standards governing freedom of association and the fundamental rights of NGOs.

The Council also published a [Compendium of its Opinions adopted on various questions of conformity with European and international standards of laws, relating to non-governmental organizations](#) proposed and / or adopted by member States of the Council of Europe. The extracts are systematised by reference to the different themes addressed in the opinions so as to

give an overall picture of the problems identified and the requirements applicable to them. The extracts selected aim to identify issues of more general application but, as each opinion referred to concerns the legislation of a particular member State of the Council of Europe, the specific context of that member State always needs to be kept in mind.

The President of the Expert Council together with the President of the Conference mobilized to defend the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), following the legal de-registration proceedings, launched against them by the Macedonian Revolutionary Internal Organization (VRMO). In this perspective and taking into account the positive obligations of the member states under Article 11 of the ECHR, a dialogue with the Ambassador of Bulgaria was established. Following this, the Prime Minister issued a press release defending the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee against harassment and threats.

The Council of Experts was also involved in the drafting group responsible for the Code of Conduct of the Conference of INGOs and in the drafting group on the revision of the Rules of Procedure for the Conference of INGOs.

The experts were also part of the delegation which carried out several fact-finding visits to member States. The President and the Honorary President represent the Conference of INGOs on the European Committee on Legal Co-operation of the Council of Europe.

### ***Fact finding visits to the member States***

The right to participate in public policy decision-making is a right associated with freedom of association. As stipulated in Recommendation CM / Rec (2007) 14 in its chapter VIII paragraph 76 "Governmental and quasi-governmental mechanisms at all levels should guarantee the effective participation of NGOs without any discrimination in dialogue and consultation on objectives and decisions of public policy. Such participation should allow free expression of the diversity of opinions on the functioning of society. This participation and cooperation should be facilitated by appropriate disclosure or access to official information. " This is what is attached to the mandate that the Conference of INGOs has given itself by establishing fact-finding visits to member countries.

In May, the delegation headed by the President of the Conference of INGOs visited [Italy](#). The visit was organized in partnership with the Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (Coalizione Italiana per le Libertà e i Diritti civili) with the help of the Permanent Representation of Italy to the Council of Europe.

The delegation met with NGOs focused on the protection of human rights in the context of migration and prisons, NGOs providing assistance to victims of domestic violence and protecting the rights of women, NGOs focused on access to the rights of the Roma population, freedom of conscience and religion and the fight against corruption. On the same day, another meeting was organized with NGOs providing social services to the vulnerable population, refugees and asylum seekers.

The second day was devoted to meetings with the many senior public officials and institutions. The report of the visit was discussed at the October plenary meeting, during which the Deputy Permanent Representative presented government comments on the Conference of INGO report.

In November 2019, the delegation of the Conference of INGOs visited [Armenia](#). The partner organization, the Federation of Armenian Youth Clubs (FYCA), organized two meetings with more than 50 NGOs: human and civil rights organizations, lawyers' and women's organizations, LGBTQI groups, youth organisations, anti-corruption NGOs, voluntary organizations. The Permanent Representation of Armenia to the Council of Europe organized the agenda with the high public authorities.

Our thanks go to the Permanent Representation of Italy and Armenia to the Council of Europe, the partner NGOs and all the institutions and organizations met.

We also thank the Permanent Representation of the United-Kingdom and Romania and our partners for the discussion which took place in October 2019 on the situation of NGOs in the countries concerned.

## **Integrated approaches**

### ***Equality***

The Equality integrated approach is coordinated by the Vice-President of the Conference of INGOs in charge of equality, with the contribution of the working group "Gender perspectives in the political and democratic process" and the task force.

Following the discussion organized by DG 2 and moderated by the President of the Conference of INGOs, involving the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in person, representatives of the Committee of Ministers and the national NGOs of the countries where the Istanbul Convention is struggling to get established, the Vice-President of the Conference of INGOs, in collaboration with the task force, organised a [round table to highlight the obstacles to the implementation of this Convention](#). The guests highlighted conservative forces that block progress and manipulate public opinion. Several concerns have been expressed about the future of the human rights of women and girls in the member States where the convention is not implemented.

The NGOs have an important role to play in both monitoring and advocating for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Their contribution to monitoring processes is also important. The Conference of INGOs is represented by its Vice-President on the [Committee of the Parties to this convention \(GREVIO\)](#), which meets twice a year.

It was decided that the group on "Gender perspective in political and democratic processes" will support the different Conference of INGO working groups in order to strengthen the gender dimension of their activities. Specific training was organized on the norms and standards of the Council of Europe, in collaboration with the executive secretariat of the Gender Equality Commission.

In October 2019, the Conference of INGOs adopted the [Recommendation on Equality between women and men](#), asking member States to respect and defend this essential achievement of human rights. On this occasion, the Conference expressed its concerns about the increasingly restricted funding for civic movements for the defence of women's rights. She recalled the

crucial role of women and civic movements for democracy, in the past, in the present and in the future.

Within the Gender Equality Committee of the Council of Europe, the Vice-President responsible for equality, Anne Nègre, contributed to the drafting of the [Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism](#) (CM / Rec (2019) 1), adopted by the Committee of Ministers in March 2019. This recommendation constitutes an important advance in the definition of sexism and measures to prevent it.

The Conference of INGOs is also represented at meetings of the Equality and Non-Discrimination Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly. In 2019, following the change of regulations within PACE, our representative was faced with some access difficulties which were clarified at the beginning of 2020.

## **Youth**

As foreseen by the [Roadmap for the participation of young people within the Conference of INGOs](#), several concrete measures have been taken with a view to the participation of young people to improve the youth perspective in the work of the Conference of INGOs.

Following the observation that many young people, members of INGOs with participatory status in the Council of Europe, do not actively participate in the sessions of the Conference, mainly due to the lack of financial resources, the Conference of INGOs launched a “ Young Delegates Program ”with the support of the association OING Service. The call and the selection of candidates were made jointly with the contribution of the Advisory Council on Youth.

Six young delegates from 2019 were selected and contributed to the work of the Conference. They proposed to introduce a “Youth check” tool which, through a few questions, will make it possible to check whether the texts voted and the publications of the Conference of INGOs take the youth dimension into account.

The 2020 youth delegate program is underway - the call was launched in early 2020 and participants have yet to be confirmed.

The work meetings were held, mainly in Brussels, with youth organizations with participatory status, in order to raise awareness of the importance of the participation of young people in the Conference of INGOs work.

More INGOs give their youngest members the opportunity to participate in the Conference sessions. By raising awareness of the importance of youth participation and through the “Youth Delegate Program”, encouraging progress could be made.

This strong sign was greatly appreciated by the Youth Department as well as by the two Council of Europe bodies. Efforts are being made to establish concrete bridges between the thematic work of the Conference and the work carried out by the priority groups of the Advisory Council on Youth, which are: "Access to rights", "Participation of young people and youth work", as well as “Inclusive and Peaceful Societies.

- The Conference of INGOs was invited to a symposium organized by the Youth Partnership of the Council of Europe and the European Union, in co-operation with the Youth Department: "The future of political participation of young people: questions, challenges and opportunities" and proposed a workshop on participation in decision-making processes.
- The Conference of INGOs contributed through its two representatives to the drafting of the "Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on the protection of civil society organizations of young people and the support of their participation in democratic processes", which made it possible to recall already the existing work of the Conference of INGOs.
- A week-long study session on "Shrinking civic space in Europe" was in preparation by the European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC, member of COING) in collaboration with Rural Youth Europe and the Council of Europe.

The study session, considered as an opportunity for young members (18-30 years old) of INGOs to be empowered to broaden the space for civil society through youth work and youth-led actions will take place in March 2020.

This type of cooperation between the INGOs of young members of the Conference and the Youth Department could inspire other youth NGOs holding participatory status for the future, and could be the start of a series of study sessions. collaborative in the future.

## ***Migration***

The Migration Task Force, coordinates this integrated approach which is a recurring phenomenon, having a strong impact on the realities of Europe from north to south and from east to west.

In accordance with the functions assigned to it, it met regularly, in particular during the sessions of the Conference of INGOs. The Task Force was keen to establish contact with the various actors of the Conference and in particular with the thematic committees, ensuring that the issue of migration and human rights was taken into account

Furthermore, insofar as the Task Force is directly linked to the Bureau and the Standing Committee by one or more of its members, it was able to challenge the governance structures of the Conference, so that the whole civil society represented can valorise the concrete actions in the Council of Europe, such as the various advocacy that accredited NGOs carry out on a daily basis.

In this perspective, the Committee on Education and Culture organised an exchange of views with senior representatives of ALTE in the framework of language teaching for migrants on 16 October 2019.

Before organizing one or the other event, proposing such or such advocacy action or even establishing contact with another pillar of the Council of Europe, the members of the Task Force have always taken the time to analyse the situation both statistically and politically, seeking to gather as many elements as possible, so that its analysis is as objective and efficient as possible.

In this spirit, the task force organized in April 2019 a side event entitled "[Duty or offense of solidarity, the action of NGOs in the assistance system and support to migrants and refugees](#)". The event was organized with the sponsorship of the Committee on Migration and Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Parliamentary Assembly, with the contribution of Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ, General Rapporteur, for the PACE campaign on the end of detention of migrant children. President of Doctors of the World, Damien Carème, winner of the 2018 North-South Prize of the Council of Europe underlined that the reception of migrants could reveal less tension among the local population, if a worthy solution had been found quickly by state institutions. This remains a concern expressed by many INGOs. The Conference of INGOs welcomed Giorgia Linardi, advocate and Italian representative of Sea-Watch whose actions were directly threatened by the Italian government at the time. Together with Carla Ferstman, representative of the Expert Council on NGO Law, they demonstrated how regulations put in place, with the participation of the EU, have made it difficult, even delegitimizing, the action of humanitarian NGOs on the Mediterranean Sea.

In October, the INGOs benefited from a side event during the Conference session, to which the Permanent Representations of the member States, the delegations of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, were invited. This event consisted of the [screening of the film "Grand H"](#) followed by a debate. It was organized with the support of the Permanent Representation of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the city of Strasbourg and the Association INGO Service. Thanks also to Maritchu Rall, former President of INGO-Service who was in contact with the municipality throughout this project.

During the same session, with the collaboration of Action for Women and the Quaker Council for European Affairs, the Conference of INGOs hosted the exhibition "[SEEN: Portraits of women on the run, by themselves](#)". The main objective of the SEEN exhibition was to change the narrative of the way runaway women are portrayed by mainstream media. The exhibition was organized with the support of the Permanent Representation of Switzerland to the Council of Europe and the association INGO Service.

The Migration task force has established a very reliable working relationship with the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Migration and Displaced Persons. The cell representative contributes to the drafting group on the alternative to the detention of migrants, which works under the responsibility of the Steering Committee for Human Rights. The cell also remains vigilant and monitors the work of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture with regard to places of detention and the camps where migrants are gathered.

Among the next steps, the Migration task force wishes, in addition to the continuation of current actions:

- Intensify the collection of good practices of INGOs in the field of migration and the reception of refugees to further feed the bodies of the Conference of INGOs and thereby the Council of Europe as a whole.
- Contact the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Migration and Refugees.

## Internal governance

In April 2019, the Conference of INGOs adopted [its Code of Conduct](#) and has been congratulated by many Council of Europe bodies.

In parallel with this work, in April 2018, the Standing Committee adopted the terms of reference for the "Drafting group in charge of proposals relating to the Regulations, or other statutory provisions of the Conference of INGOs". At the same time, it wished to "strengthen effective and ethical governance, the efficiency and effectiveness of the Conference of INGOs, of its governing bodies.

In 2019, the drafting group continued work on the draft rules of procedure. In February 2019, he presented its [interim report](#), including the feedback from the consultation conducted in 2018. On the basis of the contributions received, the drafting group stressed the need for in-depth reflection, even a reorganization, in order to align with the dynamics of the reform of the Council of Europe.

The guidance note for the work on the rules was presented and validated by the Standing Committee in January 2019. This opened the cycle of meetings aimed at drafting the content of the new draft rules. The main points of it were presented and discussed with the members in October 2019. Subsequently, [an open consultation was launched](#) to collect new ideas from the members. From the beginning of December 2019 to January 2020 a new draft was drawn up. It is currently under discussion in the Standing Committee and among our members. The Honorary Presidents of the Conference are also consulted by the President and the Vice-President of the Conference in charge of the drafting group. The final vote is scheduled for October 2020.

The year 2019 was also the year in which we had to thank Julianne Lagadec for her resignation as Vice-President of the Education and Culture Commission. She has not been replaced in this position, from which she wished to resign.

## Interactions with other Council of Europe institutions

In 2019, an important step was taken in collaboration with the European Center for Global Interdependence and Solidarity of the Council of Europe, known as the "North-South Centre" which this year celebrated its 30th anniversary. A specific [celebration was held](#) and the Lisbon Forum brought together all the representatives of the quadrilogue for a substantial and in-depth debate around the links between the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the pan-European perspective of human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law. Our representatives contributed to the development of this concept and led a workshop with colleagues from France, Portugal and Morocco.

As planned, interactions with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities have been boosted. For the first time, this was done on the basis of the concrete activities proposed by the Conference to the various parliamentary committees. The parallel session with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities was also a success thanks to the joint work on the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation. The Conference of

INGOs, through its organs, constantly and always seeks a positive response from the Permanent Representations, offering the space for substantial interaction and debate.

With regard to the Committee of Ministers, the regular exchanges of views between the President of the Conference and the Rapporteur Group on Democracy (twice a year), as well as the Deputies of the Committee of Ministers (once in the 'year) were intensified, as detailed on pages 4-6 of this Report.

The Conference of INGOs welcomed with great appreciation the first voluntary contribution from Georgia which wished to contribute to the joint project of the Conference of INGOs and DG2 "Freedom of association in the member States". The Conference of INGOs also welcome Georgian initiative to choose civil participation as one of the priorities of its chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

## **Interactions with other intergovernmental organizations**

Since 2017, the President of the Conference of INGOs participate as an observer in the Panel of Civil Society Experts of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

As part of the INGOs' preparation of the White Paper on European cultural identity, the Education and Culture Commission maintains relations with UNESCO. These exchanges led to the debate led by the Commission at its meeting in 2019 on the subject of European cultural identity. The Education and Culture Committee has been working closely with UNESCO throughout this year on Education for European and World Citizenship.

## **Conclusion**

The reform of the Conference of INGOs engaged during several years will continue to meet the expectations of our members and institutional partners. The word "reform" remains very present in the Council of Europe itself, as an ongoing process. The Committee of Ministers at its meeting in Helsinki in May 2019 made it clear that Council of Europe bodies must adopt more flexibility, be more focused and increase efficiency at all levels. The current Secretary General, elected in the context of reforms, will very soon present concrete reform plans to the Committee of Ministers. Because even if the Committee of Ministers adopted a biennial budget with zero nominal growth, savings still have to be realized.

The challenge is to achieve more flexibility, while maintaining stability in its operation, to make relevant contributions to the priorities of the Organization. One very important issue to consider at the civilizational level is the use of artificial intelligence. The Conference must be able to debate on it, but above all to propose tools and recommendations, to alert and act to propose alternatives where human rights, democracy and the rule of law are weakened.

The Conference of INGOs thanks everyone who has actively engaged in the activities of the Conference of INGOs, who have represented it with dignity and relevant expertise and have brought the voice of European civil society to the Council of Europe and beyond.



Our thanks go to the Division of Democratic Innovation of the Council of Europe and to the Association INGO Service which voluntarily supported the activities of the Conference of INGOs during this year

Thank you