

SPRING SESSION

CONF/PLE(2019)SYN2

MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF INGOS DRAFT SYNOPSIS Friday 12 April 2019

1. Opening of the meeting by Anna RURKA, President of the Conference of INGOs

Anna Rurka opened the meeting and welcomed the guests including Waltraud Heller from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency who was participating via video-conference from Vienna.

2. Designation of the rapporteur of the meeting Richard PIROLT and Katarzyna Sokolowska

3. Agenda: for adoption

One change: a draft Resolution on “the Future of the Council of Europe: civil society’s commitment” in response to the Secretary General’s report “Ready for future challenges - Reinforcing the Council of Europe” would be presented for adoption.

The Agenda was adopted with this amendment.

4. Exchange of views with Snezana SAMARDŽIC-MARKOVIC, Director General of Democracy of the Council of Europe

Ms Samaradzic-Markovic maintained the importance of cooperation of the Council of Europe with the INGOs and the Conference of INGOs both in the development of standards and monitoring processes. She mentioned the Secretary General’s Annual Report, stressing emerging challenges and civil society’s role. A pro-active approach to the Council of Europe’s standards and values was needed to promote effective participation for genuine democracy.

She stressed the necessity of the administrative reform and the simplification of the Organisation’s methods and structures. In her view the adoption of the Code of Conduct was a strong signal of the responsibility of the Conference of INGOs. As the Council of Europe faced the biggest crisis in its history, there would be programme and budget cuts and a reform of the whole organization. The contingency plan was to maintain policy making but to reduce activities in the ordinary budget. Most reductions would be implemented in 2020 and 2021 and this might imply reductions of 48% of the current budget.

There were calls for intensified dialogue to ensure that Russia would stay a member. Ms Samaradzic-Markovic thanked the Conference of INGOs and Anna Rurka, President, for their dedication to Council of Europe values and their active participation.

5. Presentation of the conclusions and follow-up of the Warsaw Conference on the role and position of NGOs in the Council of Europe (22 March 2019), Janusz STANCZYK, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Poland to the Council of Europe

Anna Rurka thanked the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Poland for organising the Warsaw Conference and Finland for including this event in its CM Chairmanship programme.

Ambassador Stanczyk maintained that an active civil society was the backbone of any modern society and of the Council of Europe. From his point of view there were different aspects of INGO participation, not only at the Council of Europe, but also at FRA or OSCE.

The Conclusions of the Warsaw Conference covered aspects such as:

- Enhancing interaction with the Committee of Ministers (CM) on specific subjects
- Making use of the regular exchanges with the Human Rights Commissioner and invite also NGOs on specific themes
- Increasing transparency of CM work by considering improved accessibility of CM documents
- Enhancing participation of the Permanent Representatives in the INGO Conference's work
- Developing guidelines for effective INGO participation in processes of the Council of Europe
- Creating a platform for NGO alerts regarding freedom of association in the member States as proposed by DG2 and the Conference of INGOs in its project on Strengthening of Freedom of Association in the Member States

6. Presentation of the priorities of the French Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe followed by an exchange of views with Jean-Baptiste MATTEI, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of France to the Council of Europe

Ambassador Mattei underlined the important role of civil society in defending human rights, even more so in the face of the current situation of shrinking space for civil society in some member States. He emphasized the value of the Warsaw Conference which had demonstrated that there was room for more civil society involvement in the Council of Europe, including at the Committee of Ministers' level. The French Chairmanship would be following up on the implementation of the Warsaw Conference conclusions.

He outlined the main priorities of the French Chairmanship:

- To continue to reinforce the European system of the protection of Human Rights
- To strengthen dialogue with judges (Protocol 16)
- Social Rights
- Rights of Children, following the 30th UN Convention in 2019
- The promotion of equality, combatting violence against women
- 25th Anniversary of ECRI
- A common vision on history in Europe

Concluding remarks: Ms Samaradzic-Markovic supported the initiative of inviting youth delegates to the INGO sessions and saw this as a positive signal of diversity. She also thanked the Conference for involving the Youth Department in the initiative. Ambassador Stanczyk maintained the importance of achieving something at the Committee of Minister level – such as a meaningful text on NGO participation in the Council of Europe.

7. NGO participation at the Council of Europe – Presentation of the results of the consultation by Anna Rurka followed by a discussion with participants

A questionnaire had been sent out, based on the guidelines on civil participation. 104 replies had been received. Most of those who responded had been working at the Council of Europe for quite a

long time (11-30 years). The most used body was the Conference of INGOs. A lot of NGOs underlined that they put a lot of effort into that cooperation. The co-development of projects was not well developed in the CoE, only in the Steering Committees, and not every INGO could be included there. The report would be disseminated through the Secretariat.

Anna Rurka informed the INGOs that the Standing Committee would organize a training on cooperation between NGOs and CoE bodies. The training would take place at the October session and she asked INGOs who worked with different CoE bodies to get in touch with the members of the Standing Committee to help prepare the training.

8. NGO participation in decision-making processes in the member States of the Council of Europe

Report of the fact finding visit of the Conference of INGOs to North Macedonia

The President of the Conference presented the report of the visit underlining the NGOs expertise and technical competences. The government comments were presented by Ms Olgica VASILEVSKA, *Chargé d'Affaires a.i.*, Deputy Permanent Representative of North Macedonia to the Council of Europe. Ms Vasilievska underlined that the report of visit would serve as a guideline for improving the dialogue with civil society. Ms Simonida KACARSKA, Director of the European Policy Institute from Skopje, gave an update on the situation of NGOs in North Macedonia and underlined the importance of the report which allowed NGOs not only to engage with the Council of Europe but to be more informed about the work of the CoE and not only the EU.

In conclusion it was said that: The Conference of INGOs welcomed the changes in North Macedonia. There was a lot of hope that North Macedonia would serve as a role model for the region. It was important not to lose the momentum and to constantly improve the state of human rights, democracy and rule of law through the results of monitoring made by some Human Rights organisations.

9. Accountability of the NGO sector as a new challenge in the context of the restrictions on civil society space – Dr Carla FERSTMAN, Senior Lecturer, School of Law, University of Essex, member of the Expert Council on NGO Law of the Conference of INGOs ('25)

The text of Dr Ferstman's presentation is available on request in English.

10. [Civil society space – view of organisations](#) - Presentation of the key findings followed by a discussion with Waltraud HELLER, Programme Manager Civil Society Cooperation, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (video conference)

Ms Heller stressed the importance of civil society when talking about civic space. The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) served as a platform/framework for civil society/NGOs. A decrease in co-drafting had been observed which was an indicator of shrinking civic space, research showed 50 major topics clustered to 4 areas:

- Regulatory environment
- access to resources
- access to decision-making (on national level)
- safe environment (physical but also digital and psycho-social wellbeing)

The FRA platform had about 700 members and was a rather consultative but not standard setting body.

A survey to understand what problems activists were facing showed:

- Little improvements in civil society's situation
- Threats and attacks persist: written, online, negative campaigns, psycho-social wellbeing

- Legal challenges (tax, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly - mainly with regard to counter-terrorism)
- Barriers to funding: availability of funds, access to information about funding: FRA served as mail distributor when new information appeared
- Challenges in consultations: no feedback to inputs, lack of adequate processes, lack of impact

11. Item added to the agenda: Adoption of the [Resolution on the future of the Council of Europe in response to the Secretary General's report "Ready for future challenges - Reinforcing the Council of Europe"](#)

Vote: 0 against, 0, abstention, the Resolution was unanimously adopted

12. Digital civic space

Karl Donert thanked Patrick Penninckx (Head of the CoE Information Department) for his contribution to the working meeting on digital civic space. The digital space was an essential part of INGOs work, however only a small number of NGOs had a digital strategy.

13. Date of the next session – 28-31 October 2019