



## **CONFERENCE OF INGOs CONF/PLE(2020)SYN2**

### **MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs Friday 16 October 2020 9.30-12.00 Online meeting Report**

1. Opening of the meeting by Anna RURKA, President of the Conference of INGOs  
Anna Rurka began the second part of the plenary meeting of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe with welcoming words. She underlined the importance of the Belarus situation and its influence on the functioning of civil society. She also briefly presented two documents – one resolution and one recommendation which were put to vote at the end of the meeting.
2. Nomination of the Rapporteur of the meeting: Katarzyna Sokolowska and Rares Craiut
3. Draft agenda – adopted
4. Political situation in Belarus and the changing role of civil society, introduced by Anna Rurka

Anna Rurka briefly presented the relation between the Council of Europe and Belarus. Last year the Committee of Ministers adopted a plan for cooperation between the institution and the country. There are different CoE internal bodies in which Belarus is present and provide contribution. Belarus appears in every document of the Council of Europe. The Conference of INGOs has been actively involved since the last election in Belarus, thanks to the proposal of the Committee of Human Rights. After the discussion, members of the Conference of INGOs are welcome to propose ways in which to support civil society in Belarus. Thanks to the actions undertaken by civil society in this country and the evolution of its long-term mobilisation, there is a clear space and will for cooperation from the Conference of INGOs. So far protest has not ceased. The president of the Conference of INGOs highlighted that civil society mobilisation in Belarus will shape the future country. In her opinion, the electoral crisis will develop trust in the third sector.

- a. Democratic role of civil society in Belarus, before, now and after the presidential election, by Andrei Yahorau - Chairman of Eastern Partnership NGO Platform

In his speech, Andrei Yahorau underlined that there is no financial or political support for NGOs. In the last years, there were some changes, like the development of a crowdfunding platform or involvement of the private sector. The Government's reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic was not appropriate but the reaction from Civil society was very strong and positive. On the first level, social mobilisation continued during the elections. Civil society has controlled transparency of elections and many people were mobilised to be observers. He said that it is a difficult time for Belarus and that international support is very important for civil society and for its citizens. More and more people are becoming involved and this must continue. Social solidarity has increased and different structures and movements have developed; local grassroots movements, social movements, there are three groups providing social and physical support for people, hubs connecting different people for networking. The number of people involved in thousands of different organisations has increased. Changes in public organisations are key ways to change the civil society world. There are ongoing changes in public spaces. This week there are organised marches of disabled people or ex-prisoners. People are trying to reestablish the normal meaning of public institutions, for instance the aim of schools is to teach, not to be a government tool. All groups need support in skills development, better organisation and funding. We need to support self-organised organisations from the bottom up.

b. Women's role in the democratic movement in Belarus by Stanislava Guskova- Assembly of NGOs of Belarus ('10)

Stanislava Guskova highlighted that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is a great example of women political leaders. There are three strong women who became leaders in Belarus – Sviatlana's supporters. They have become symbols of resistance. Belarusian authorities constantly abolish peaceful protests. 200 brave women stood on the streets holding flowers. In the past the authorities did not use violence on women, but this has changed. Women protesting on the streets are very afraid of losing their lives, their families or being arrested and they are being harassed or imprisoned. Women's marches started to be organised with different groups of women taking to the streets such as mothers or LGBTQI+ women. Their message was to stop the violence. The authorities then started going to the homes of these active women. They are now beginning to be recognised as political movements. There is a discrimination and violation of treaties concerning women, so far 300 official warnings have been issued to families to take away their children and there was a case when a pregnant woman was imprisoned. Women have a very strong presence in this protest, we must not forget this. The speaker underlined that we cannot exclude women from the political protest now and in the future. The women currently in prison were standing for women's rights.

c. Youth and student's role in the democratic movement in Belarus; by Dzmitry Herylovich, Chairperson Belarusian National Youth Council 'RADA.

Dzmitry Herylovich referred to the youth who play an important role in the process towards peace in the country. Young people are present on campuses and in students

areas, and demand new, free elections. They want to work to ensure youth rights. Currently, 400 students have been prosecuted and so far, over 100 were arrested. One student was brutally captured by police at university. Rectors and deans, who support the President, are taking part telling students that they cannot protest. The authorities' brutal student arrests in the universities was a warning, but it didn't work – the youth did not give up. The Dean told the students that if they continued to protest they would be dismissed from university. These actions are taking place in different cities and universities, not only in Minsk. Student movement is strong and we – the National Youth Council - will be supporting them. Student action continues on a daily basis. It draws a lot of attention to student unions and to the National Youth Council. The State Youth Union is monopolised and funded by the government, they are a dependent body. It is not possible for them to express their own opinion and they have to remain in line with the government. RADA couldn't participate in the process of the creation of a youth strategy, they could only propose amendments. They don't know what to do to persuade the government to express willingness to finally hear them. We wish to express our solidarity with students and youth movements, persuade the government to meet with human rights movements and financially support civil society. We would like to share info from democratic sources, not those that are government-controlled.

d. State of emergence and transformation of civic solidarity by Alexey Leonchik, coordinator of solidarity fund

Alexey Leonchik presented the funds which are collected to cover medical costs and support for people who were in prison. So far, since 2017 we have 70 000 people who donated funds but we are still continuing the collection. The record was 30 000 donations in one day in August for those who were tortured or injured. 50 per cent of the donations come from Belarus and the rest from the diaspora. Due to the internet problems in the country, the donations from the diaspora were interrupted. Many people applied for volunteer work in our movement. It's the first time in Belarus that so many people want to donate to the organisation and help others. This movement on behalf of the people is historical. It will not stop here, it will continue to develop.

e. Successes of mobilising the international community in response to the crisis in Belarus and the upcoming challenges in this respect by Ilya Nuzov, FIDH Head of the Eastern Europe-Central Asia Desk

FIDH is an international non-governmental organisation which stands for political prisoners. Since May the situation of political prisoners has changed in Belarus. 30 political figures had been arrested, now there are over 90 political prisoners. Very little information is available, so we are not sure what the exact number is. As an example, Wasna Rabkova was arrested for helping people for legal intent. Other people have been arrested for tax evasion, legal interpretation, only because they called for a fair trial. None of them will have a free hearing. Lawyers and people who want to support citizens for a fair hearing are harassed and threatened. We need to mobilise the international community and call on political leaders for deliberation. There is a strong mobilisation on behalf of international organisations. The UN Commissioner for

Human Rights has already reacted, action on behalf of OSCE has been initiated, EU sanctions have been adopted. Certain actions have also been taken by NGOs. One of the challenges currently faced is that authorities are not reacting, or appear not to. Thanks to international actions the situation has improved a little, without them it would have been worse. The speaker underlined that they are running out of instruments and ideas in the advocacy field. It is not clear how different actions from different institutions will be coordinated and what will happen next is uncertain. Ilya Nuzov thanks everyone for their support and hopes that there will be a continuity. It is important to involve other actors and there is an urgent need to become involved in humanitarian actions.

f. Civil participation in the current constitutional reform by Hanna Asipovich  
– policy expert and consultant

Hanna Asipovich in her speech focused on constitutional reforms. She started by saying that there is no timeline for constitution changes. The proposals submitted were never made public. Constitutional reform has been launched but it's not clear who can participate in the process and the civil society has not been invited. There is a need to establish a safe environment, freedom is currently abolished. She presented the conditions a democratic country needs in order to involve society. At this moment, minimum conditions must be guaranteed. The society does not trust the ongoing constitutional reform. An online platform for voting has already been initiated and functions but there is still the question if the authorities should continue with the constitutional reform which should not be an exclusive reform. It has to be highlighted that public organisations should take active part in the reforms. The number of registered NGOs in Belarus is very low. Organisations that refuse to be registered but are nevertheless active should not be excluded. Grassroots actions are looking for possibilities in how they can be involved. Most crowdfunding platforms in Belarus have been shut down which makes it more difficult for NGOs to receive funds. The speaker underlined that the constitutional reform should be structured, inclusive, evaluated and monitored.

g. Oleg Kozlovsky – Amnesty International

Oleg Kozlovsky mentions police brutality and the lack of independent judicial processes. The international community should support the vibrant and diverse civil society who is submitted to these violations. There are NGOs and international organisations in the field collecting data on tortures, obtaining medical records and documenting abuses. In the past month, OSCE and the Human Rights Council began investigating Human rights violations. The Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights has also initiated similar investigations. The Conference of INGOs is also an important body that can support this process and call for independent investigation. It is not clear when the Belarusian state will thoroughly investigate and prosecute these violations.

The president invites the registered representatives of states, which are Portugal, Slovenia, Belarus, Norway, Turkey and Russia to prepare any questions or reactions they might have for the Q and A session.

- h. Discussion initiated by Cyril Ritchie, Honorary President of the Expert Council on NGO Law and Gerhard Ermisher, Vice Chair of the DSCGC Committee of the Conference of INGOs ('15)

#### Q/ A Session ('15)

Gerhard Ermisher mentions that it is very difficult to match the small means that we have at our disposal with the great sacrifices the Belarusian people and civil society are making, sometimes even paying for with their lives. It is clear that the previous speakers have mentioned common points of support needed such as: technical specialists, the need to enhance the quality of the movement through civil education, to enable people to be more strongly involved in civil participation. Also noted is the request of funding for the civil society. This request not only applies to the civil society groups but is also addressed to the governments which need to engage in support of the democratic transition in Belarus. Lastly, the request or support for the collection and safe keeping of data – with the support from NGOs abroad who can keep the data safe until the right moment. People need to see that such atrocities do not go unpunished. We as a civil society can pressure our governments to act. The request to the Belarusian civil society: please state as clearly as possible how the Conference of INGOs can help.

Returning to the comments and declarations made by the previous speakers, Cyril Ritchie inquires how the Conference of INGOs can be helpful on transforming schools into institutions of civil education and not a means of ideological control? How can we be helpful on the long-term project? Cyril Ritchie also asks if there is any way of knowing how many students are involved in the protests and how to better involve more students. Also, can any of the previous speakers say anything about the possibility of external observers? Has anyone any ideas on targeting journalists to obtain their cooperation? How is it possible to reach the citizens of Belarus who are not on the streets? Could we learn more about the general strike that was mentioned? We, as the Conference, are looking forward to the renewed support of Belarus civil society and how the December session can play a role.

5. Draft Recommendation in support of the Council of Europe Convention on combating and preventing violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), introduced by Anne Negre (Vice President in charge of equality)

The Istanbul Convention was drafted to deal with violence against women and domestic violence. Thousands of women are dying every year because they are abused by their husbands. Children are witnesses and also victims. This violence has increased during the COVID-19 lockdown. The draft Recommendation aims to support the Istanbul Convention. There are countries that are unsure of the Convention. In the draft recommendation, the paragraph starting with “deploring” has now been modified and is online. Thank you to all the NGOs who worked on this!

The Standing committee has voted to endorse this Recommendation.

Result of vote (by chat) by the Conference of INGOs: No votes against. There is one abstention. Recommendation is adopted.

6. Resolution on access to digital technology in Europe and the responsibility of member States ('10), introduced by Claude Vivier Le Got, Chairwomen of the Education and Culture Committee.

Claude Vivier Le Got explained that this resolution was initiated by a digital citizenship group run by Karl. We are reminding states on the need to access digital technology and digital literacy. This resolution has been discussed and amended by 30 INGOs. We believe that access is crucial for citizens and if governments do not take this seriously the digital and social divide will only increase, possibly to a point of no return. We would like the Council of Europe to take a more energetic position on this, especially concerning marginalised groups.

Result of vote (by chat) of the Conference of INGOs: There are no abstentions nor oppositions. Resolution is adopted.

7. Dates of the second part of the autumn session – 15-16 December 2020