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Presentation of the outcome of the [January 2018 session](#) and information on the forthcoming activities of the Rapporteur Group on Democracy (GR-DEM)

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen the Ministers' Deputies,

I am pleased to be able to share with you the outcome of the winter session of the Conference of INGOs, which took place from 22 to 26 January 2018. The [new Bureau](#), comprising 4 vice-chairs, one of which is responsible for equality, and 3 rapporteurs, was elected on 24 January. I am also pleased to inform you that I was elected for a second term of office as President of the Conference of INGOs. My ambition remains the same – to see this organisation grow, to be able to respond in a constructive manner to the challenges facing international NGOs and NGOs in member states, and to strengthen the Council of Europe's norms and standards.

Over the past three years we have all observed the gradual change in the social and political context. The decreasing space for civil society in Council of Europe member states is a real problem. The Conference of INGOs and the Council of Europe as a whole need to take more account of the right to freedom of association, the right to express opinions, and the right to participate. In this context, I have set myself the objective of increasing the impact of our work by strengthening and supporting civil society in our member states. Civil society must stand up again, even if in certain contexts the rule of law has been altered and the fact of exercising one's rights and freedoms is punished by prison sentences or other penalties that undermine fundamental rights and freedoms.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at a time when the rise in populism is placing liberal democracies in a critical situation, it is necessary to underline the importance of the Council of Europe's links with the population of member states. That is the role of the Conference of INGOs, which is fully aware of the realities of citizens' everyday lives in our member states. My wish is to continue our exchanges of views and that the permanent delegations continue to contribute to the debate on the situation of NGOs in member states. Identifying our points of agreement and disagreement is the only way to make progress in finding appropriate and lasting solutions. This dialogue will also continue with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress, for we acknowledge the importance of national parliaments and local elected representatives with regard to legislative initiatives and civil participation in the decision-making process.

In this respect, the hearing on the decreasing space given to civil society, held by the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights at the last session and in which I took part along with the Commissioner for Human Rights, shows the importance of such hearings as it helps to co-ordinate the efforts of the different institutions and bodies of the Council of Europe

The plan to set up a platform focusing on freedom of association, which I mentioned during my exchange of views with the Ministers' Deputies in November 2017 and which aroused the interest of several permanent delegations, is in the course of preparation. We are currently

working with the experts to establish clear criteria for analysing warnings from NGOs so that the platform can gauge the extent of the problem and establish dialogue with the public authorities on the basis of legally sound arguments. I therefore hope to be able to present this project to the permanent delegations which showed interest in the platform very soon.

I would also like to inform you that the Conference of INGOs has adopted the expression “droits humains” to replace “droits de l’homme” in the French documents and publications of the Conference in the hope that it will encourage other Council of Europe institutions to adopt a linguistic approach which does not discriminate against women in all of the languages used but in particular in one of the two official languages. We also adopted a Recommendation on the proclamation of the European Social Rights Pillar by the European Union, asking the European Union and its member states to accede to the revised European Social Charter as the “social constitution of Europe”¹ and as a roadmap for promoting the effective guarantee of social rights for all.

On the basis of the GRECO’s recommendations, the Conference is continuing its work on the code of conduct which we hope to present for adoption in June.

The Conference of INGOs discussed the situation of NGOs in [Estonia](#) and [Serbia](#). I thank the Ambassadors of these two countries for their comments on the Conference’s reports following the visits it made to these countries. At the plenary meeting we also presented two opinions of the Expert Council on NGO Law: one on freedom of association in Turkey [\[en\]](#) [\[tr\]](#) and one on the legislative changes currently under discussion in Romania [\[en\]](#). I would like to thank the Romanian Ambassador for the dialogue and for the clarifications he provided. We will continue to monitor the situation.

I would like to inform you that the Conference of INGOs wishes to make its next visits to “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, the United Kingdom and Armenia. Contacts have been established with the permanent delegations of these countries and I will have great pleasure in meeting the Ambassadors to discuss the aim of these visits and the programme in greater detail.

At its plenary meeting, the Conference of INGOs held an exchange of views with the newly elected Commissioner for Human Rights and we also welcome the representative of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, who presented the report on the current challenges facing NGOs working in the human rights field.

Two short events were held, a [side-event on 'Human Rights Defenders in the sphere of the Council of Europe: current challenges and new responses'](#) and a [debate on the situation with regard to respect for the rights of LGBTI persons](#), with the participation of INGOs and, in the case of both events, rapporteurs from the Parliamentary Assembly.

In June, the Conference of INGOs will adopt its action plan 2018-2021. It will be based, among other things, on the roadmaps of the thematic committees of the Conference of INGOs. I thank the Irish Ambassador for his contribution to the first meeting of the “Human rights” committee of the Conference of INGOs. It was a successful start. The themes which will be studied by the committees reflect the diversity of our member INGOs: freedom of association and expression, the protection of human right defenders and the democratic oversight carried out by NGOs, access to rights (Human Rights Committee), citizen participation in political decisions, preventing and fighting corruption and strengthening social cohesion (Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee), the contribution to the intercultural cities programme and the cultural routes programme, the right to lifelong

¹ Opinion of the European Pillar of Social Rights. <https://go.coe.int/5Te2N>

education and the exercise of digital citizenship (Education and Culture Committee). Equality, youth and migration are part and parcel of all the activities of the Conference of INGOs.

We also invited some forty national NGOs to provide input for the Conference's work on the digital environment - some very ground-breaking digital initiatives and tools were presented.

At its plenary meeting, the Conference of INGOs was informed of the budgetary crisis facing the Council of Europe. The Conference of INGOs is aware of the efforts that the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General are making to find a diplomatic solution to this crisis. The Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs has adopted a statement, which will be forwarded to you very shortly in the form of a letter calling on member states to show greater solidarity with the Council of Europe so as to make up for this shortfall and cover the costs of needs that have not been met.

Finally, I would like to thank the Committee of Ministers for its commitment to the INGOs and the Conference of INGOs as one of the pillars and one of the main bodies of the Council of Europe, but above all as an indispensable democratic agent whose aim is to implement the rights and standards promoted and upheld by the Council of Europe.

Thank you for your attention