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Speech by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs, at the 128th session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs congratulates the Kingdom of Denmark on the results of its Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. We particularly welcome the negotiations that led to the adoption of the Copenhagen Declaration; this was a process that took into account the substantial and sometimes critical contributions from NGOs and the Conference of INGOs itself. As the *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights* of Denmark stated in its declaration of 15 May, it is essential that all member states continue to express explicitly their support for the Convention system and for the Court in its current form.

The Conference of INGOs, a body of the Council of Europe comprising some 300 international non-governmental organisations, is an indispensable voice of civil society within the Council of Europe. Civil society action at European level is a tremendous factor of cohesion and trust in our multilateral European institutions, which deserves to be recognised and respected as such.

The erosion of liberal and constitutional democracy that we are witnessing today is above all a consequence of a disconnect between the liberal values that define us (such as universal suffrage, individual rights and freedoms, the protection of minorities, equality before the law) and the daily practices we see around us. A sharp fall in the trust placed by individuals in the political systems of representative democracy shows above all that the social contract between those who are governed and those in power must be strengthened, protected or even, in some cases, renegotiated. This contract is implemented by accessible and transparent democratic institutions that listen and respond to the needs expressed by society, with due regard for the rule of law and international standards. In this respect and at another level, the Council of Europe was created to be a place for the development of liberal and democratic standards and values, but also to act as a guarantor that they are applied. This has been made possible by the judicious combination of collective governance by its member states and its independent Secretariat responsible for implementation.

The Council of Europe itself must be able and have the means to show its responsiveness when it comes to addressing crises of confidence and the turning away from those values which can at times be seen in certain member states. For this reason, the Conference of INGOs congratulates the Parliamentary Assembly, and in 2017 followed suit by launching its own process of reform, in order to ensure an appropriate ethical framework and approach to governance. Similarly, drawing on the important work of the Committee of

Ministers on the “Guidelines for civil participation in political decision-making”, we have created more participatory structures open to institutional partners within the Council of Europe.

Freedom of association, as guaranteed by the European Court of Human Rights and in its broad definition as proposed by the Venice Commission and the OSCE in the guidelines, is always at the heart of our action. The political injunctions imposed on NGOs, the large-scale and arbitrary dissolution of many such organisations, the arrest of our members in Turkey, the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan, restrictive laws or draft laws that do not allow NGOs to enjoy their full rights in Hungary, all show the need to restore the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Convention system. Faced with the increase in these situations, to varying degrees, the overall picture is that civil society no longer feels protected by national institutions. It must therefore be reassured that the Council of Europe speaks on its behalf and that it is doing what it can to protect fundamental rights and freedoms. In response to the proposal for action put forward by the Secretary General in his report, aimed at helping member states strengthen the guarantees relating to the freedoms of assembly and association, we are working to propose a constructive response to the shrinking civic space in member states which will combine NGO experience, Council of Europe legal standards and political dialogue. We very much hope that this subject will be considered as a priority on the political and budgetary agenda of member states.

A high level of trust in public institutions in society is a key indicator of a healthy democracy. This trust is built in daily relationships between authorities and individuals. There is a long list of problems that public authorities could not deal with without the help of NGOs; the migration crisis is just one example. The Conference of INGOs, through its efforts to implement your guidelines on ensuring civil participation in political decision-making which we fully embrace, and to defend freedom of association, wishes to put the spotlight on the good practices in our member states, which will help consolidate liberal, participatory and lasting democracy.