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Speech by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs
at the GR-DEM on 30 April 2019

Chair, Ministers' Deputies, Excellencies,

I would like to start my presentation by thanking the Permanent Delegations which accepted our invitation to contribute to the programme of the April session of the Conference of INGOs and, thereby, to its success.

Yesterday, the Secretariat forwarded you the documents adopted by the Conference of INGOs, which include a Recommendation on the right to decent housing for all, a Recommendation on poverty and precarity amongst students in Europe and a Resolution on the future of the Council of Europe. Regarding the latter, the Conference of INGOs expressed its support to the Secretary General and the Committee of Ministers in their endeavour to find a political solution to the budgetary crisis at the Council of Europe to enable it to carry out its activities in a sustainable manner. In the document, the Conference of INGOs also stressed that reinforced interaction with civil society through a space for substantial, formal, honest and open debates on the strategic orientations of the organisation represents a real opportunity and strength for the Council of Europe. I should therefore like to thank Poland and Finland, and the Secretary General, for having held the Warsaw Conference which focused on the position and role of NGOs in the Council of Europe. We should now work together to implement the recommendations made. To avoid eroding civil society's trust in our organisation, it is crucial that we show that the Council of Europe is working to introduce new practices. We will undoubtedly be able to implement some of the proposed initiatives quickly, while others will need time. My commitment to the task is not enough. If the Committee of Ministers does not support the process initiated by the Warsaw Conference, we will not be able to move forward and the proposals made will come to nothing.

I should like to thank the Permanent Delegations of Belgium and Croatia for supporting my proposal to hold an exchange of views between the candidates for the post of Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the Conference of INGOs. During this exchange, held at the session, the INGOs asked many questions about how to deal with the political and budgetary crises at the Council of Europe and about preventing corruption, promoting equality, fighting discrimination against LGBTI persons and strengthening the implementation of Council of Europe standards and of human rights.

This session also saw a significant step forward, with the adoption of the Code of Conduct aimed at preventing conflicts of interest and the risks of corruption. It took two years to draft after GRECO's recommendations were received. It is the first achievement in the reform of the Conference of INGOs which is still taking place. The code will enter into force as soon as the Rules of Procedure of the Conference are amended, as it introduces some new practices, such as the setting up of an Appellate Committee, which would be within the ambit of the general functioning of the Conference of INGOs. I wish to express my gratitude to GRECO and, above all, to its Secretariat for its assistance in this process which is new for the Conference of INGOs.

At the April session, we welcomed for the first time five INGO youth delegates, chosen from among many applicants. They will contribute to the activities of the Conference of INGOs throughout the year and share with us their opinion on the improvements desired in the organisation of our activities.

Lastly, please allow me, Ministers' Deputies, to announce a few upcoming activities. Firstly, the day before the Committee of Ministers session, a meeting will be held with Finnish associations in co-operation with Amnesty International Finland to gather their ideas on strengthening human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and by the same token, the role of the Council of Europe on a pan-European level.

At the end of May, a delegation from the Conference of INGOs will make a fact-finding visit to Rome. I should like to thank the Permanent Delegation of Italy for its support in organising the visit.

The next session of the Conference of INGOs will be held in October in parallel with the session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. It will be the first time that the events are scheduled together, with the objective of strengthening interactions with the national delegations of the Congress. A joint drafting group of our representatives and those of the Congress is currently updating the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, ten years after its adoption. The aim is to have the updated code adopted in October by the Conference of INGOs and the Congress at their respective sessions.

We hope that the choice of dates for the autumn session will also make it easier for you, Permanent Representatives, to participate in the debates held during the Conference session.

In conclusion, I would like to announce that the project aimed at strengthening freedom of association in Council of Europe member states is open for voluntary contributions. The brochures presenting the project can be found at the entrance to the room. Any support you can give would be much appreciated.

Thank you for your attention.

Anna Rurka