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Speech of Anna Rurka at the Session of the Committee of Ministers in Helsinki on 17 May 2019

Mr Chairman, Ministers, Secretary General, Deputy Secretary General, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Here today in Helsinki we are shaping what the Europe of democracy, human rights and the rule of law will look like for the foreseeable future.

In an ever more complex world no single actor can generate democratic security. The third Summit of Heads of State and Government in Warsaw recognised this when the member States committed themselves to preserving effective democracy and good governance at all levels stating that “this can only be achieved through the active involvement of citizens and civil society.”

To fulfil its role as best as possible, to bring the voice of civil society to the Council of Europe, the Conference of INGOs should not be put in danger each time a crisis or a reform happens.

In March this year, a conference was devoted to the role and position of NGOs in the Council of Europe, for which I would like to thank the host, Poland, as well as the Finnish Chairmanship and the Council of Europe Secretariat. Having in mind a multi-stakeholder participation in the Council of Europe, I congratulate you for the decision adopted today to examine further options for strengthening the role and participation of NGOs in the Organisation. Participatory status for INGOs, established by the Committee of Ministers in 2003 was, in fact, a democratic milestone and remains an example for other international organisations.

However, genuine participation requires an enabling environment, access to information and, last but not least, the financial and human resources to support meaningful participation, as stipulated in the Guidelines on civil participation in political decision making, which you adopted in late 2017.

At this crucial moment, which will design the future of the Council of Europe, we should remember the founders of Europe. They had a conviction: the pursuit of peace. And they had a vision of the closer unity between all like-minded countries of Europe. Civil society supported that conviction and that vision, playing a major role in the call for European unity launched at the Congress of Europe in The Hague in 1948. The Conference of INGOs and INGO participation in the Council of Europe today is the continuation of this ambition for a peoples' Europe.

Limiting NGO channels of participation in our Organisation, further distancing or isolating it from citizens, which will be a consequence of continuing the budgetary crisis, may let it seem that participatory democracy is a system for affluent times only, and can be dispensed with in times of difficulties. On the contrary, by increasing the openness and engagement of our Organisation with civil society stakeholders, with young people and human rights defenders,

we can demonstrate the “unity in diversity” which defines democracy, as well as it defines the Council of Europe.

I think that we can face the modern world’s new challenges while not losing sight of the old ones, still present. I also believe that the Council of Europe remains a unique Organisation, which contributes substantially to citizens’ confidence in the European future. Finally, I am convinced that our member States remain committed to the values in our Statute, including to the realisation of genuine democracy, and that you will therefore find a solution both to the current crisis and to the wider crisis of faith in the sustainability of the vision of our founders.

To close, I would like thank Finland for an excellent Chairmanship. We wish a lot of success to France. The Conference of INGOs is ready to contribute to the priorities and the agenda of the French Chairmanship.

Thank you for your attention.