



CONF/PRES/SPEECH(2020)2

Address of the President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe to the Participants of the International Conference on Civil Participation in Decision-Making

6 and 7 May 2020

Dear Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen the Ministers' Deputies, Excellencies,

Dear Madame Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Dear Mayors, experts

Dear NGOs colleagues,

Dear Participants

I would like to express my gratitude to the Georgian Chairmanship of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers for including civil participation in the priorities of its programme. It is an important issue for the future of democracy in Europe.

The Conference of INGOs, as the Council of Europe body that brings together more than 300 International Non-Governmental Organisations, helps the Council of Europe, on a continuous and substantiable way, to carry out its mandate. For more than 40 years, our representatives and members contribute to the work of the Council of Europe organs, steering and intergovernmental committees, the committees of the parties to the Council of Europe treaties, and thus bringing a civil society perspective to standard setting, its implementation and monitoring. In this regard, the Conference of INGOs is very attached to hard law and case law, as well as to soft law, established by the Committee of Ministers.

If we are here, it means that together we believe in the strength of standards set by deliberate decision, we believe in learning from good examples as part of public policy, offering a model to follow in the hope of leading by example. The good reputation of a State that implements a progressive practice reinforces the pride of its people and their trust in democratic institutions. The same principles and process also apply to the Council of Europe Guidelines on Civil Participation in the political decision-making, for the preparation of which the Conference of INGOs has contributed.

When we speak about civil participation, we are talking about democracy IN action, about the various forms of activism used by citizens and civil society organisations. Such activism can sometimes take an institutional form but can also be more subversive and creative. Its aim is always the same but diverse: to propose, to create, to support, to challenge, to criticize, to

influence the processes and finally to co-decide alongside those who have decision-making authority at different levels of the governance.

Politically speaking, liberal democracy and democratic transitions in many countries has led to the democratisation of our public and institutional life. Such democratisation implies a democratic way of making decisions which requires power sharing and deliberative decision-making. Today, decision making on issues that have social consequences and collective implications, carried out without the input of the persons concerned is seen simply as a bad and undemocratic practice. Deliberation should allow to compare alternative solutions, to confront contradictory visions, to reframe and transform sometimes personal aspirations or sectorial private interests into the general interest.

Shrinking civic space has a direct negative impact on civil participation. It constitutes a real obstacle to free and legitimate expression and to civil society's contribution to democracy. Sometimes specific legal provisions or political decisions restrict civic space. Sometimes these restrictions are unintentional. More specifically, the democratic space is closing for many NGOs and civil society organisations, journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders, for a number of reasons:

- growing polarisation within society reinforced by the political discourse of some civil servants, leaders or personalities,
- no access to public media,
- difficulties in accessing funding,
- online personal attacks
- digital threats,
- banking restrictions as part of anti-terrorism measures,
- restrictions on freedom of movement,
- smear campaigns targeting advocacy groups,
- the deterrent effects on civil society organisations which are victims of discrimination, hate speech and hate crime

In the face of these threats, the extraordinary success of civil society organizations consists in their growing internationalization, global, regional and international platforms created by civil society organizations themselves that serve to connect isolated organizations, to protect them and their members and leaders, and to mutualize actions and amplify impacts. Online activism and the digital environment are contributing to this evolution.

A strong and resilient civil society in Europe can only emerge if we have a healthy public discourse on the democratic role played by NGOs and civil society organisations and if the enabling political environment is translated into law, policy and practice.

Lessons learned from populism show that we should not limit civil participation to an elitist and competitive conception of democracy. On the contrary, it is only through an inclusive approach that leaves no one out that we will succeed in defeating populist demagoguery and build a fairer society.

Civil society organisations and NGOs are not only experts giving advice to decision makers or to citizens so that they can make an informed decision. You just have to look around the streets of our capitals and you will see that democracy works when citizen' forces, I dare say political forces, can express themselves, showing the human potential for self-determination.

As policy makers, you may see this expression as a power struggle, or, on the contrary you may see it as an important condition for the emergence of political leadership that must be engaged in constructive democratic dialogue and democratic deliberation at all levels and

stages of the decision-making process. Today the traditional channels and forms of public consultation, hearings, voting or abstention are no longer sufficient to allow the diversity of civil society to express itself and to participate in democracy. In fact, our decision-making processes are becoming less and less democratic.

I am clearly opposed to the trends we see today which aim at replacing institutional sustainable participatory mechanisms and institutional structures supporting civil participation by an ad-hoc participatory approach. The latter gives the definite power to those who already have it. The power to design participatory processes and to choose who and when to consult.

We must be more ambitious and not set these two approaches against each other but articulate them and make them complementary. This leads us to think about civil participation in a joint, cross-cutting, connected and complex way, where apparently disjointed or opposed entities can work together, yes in an intelligent way, but not in a totally algorithmic and predictable way. We need to critically look at the way we practice democratic decision-making in our ordinary institutional life, whether we, as democratically elected persons, are sufficiently connected to the people that we are supposed to represent.

The Conference of INGOs is also looking to renew its way of working and deciding in order to strengthen the connection between international, national and local NGOs, to bring them together and make their voices heard; here in Strasbourg, to be inclusive and provide support where it is needed.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that no state can act alone in the face of a health crisis of such a scale. It is the thousands of associations that have ensured the presence and facilitated the lives of millions of citizens. Will these actions be recognized by decision-makers in the post-pandemic period? When it comes to cutting budgets, will associations and the non-profit sector be a priority for governments, or will they be put in competition with the market sector?

We need to think about civil society participation in a sustainable way. The Council of Europe sets an example.

In the pandemic and post pandemic time, we all, the Council of Europe as a whole, must more than ever stand in solidarity with civil society

Thank you very much for your attention

Anna Rurka

