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High-level videoconference of the Greek Chairmanship of the Council of Europe on “Human Rights during the pandemic”, with Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr M. Varvitsiotis and the heads of Council of Europe institutions (Wednesday, 03 June 2020)

Intervention by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs

Mr Chairman, Dear Secretary General, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers for organising this exchange of views and ensuring the video transmission, making this discussion accessible to the general public. We welcome Greece's willingness to bring the Council of Europe even closer to the citizens and, in particular, to young and vulnerable people who are often far from intergovernmental institutions.

In times of emergency, the protection of human life and public health is a priority for all segments of society. We have observed different approaches by the States regarding the lockdown and steps undertaken to fight the pandemic. However, one thing seems to be common, and that is the shared responsibility of institutions, civil society and citizens to achieve a common goal.

We must underline the courage and dedication of the different categories of professionals who found themselves in the first and second line in the fight against the pandemic: the medical staff, the local professionals who ensured the hygiene of public places, the social workers, the teachers and the millions of volunteers across Europe who provided food aid and visited isolated people. These professionals and volunteers faced a high risk of infection due to lack of protection, insufficient equipment, long working hours and occupational burnout.

The pandemic has amplified existing inequalities. Vulnerable people and elderly people have become even more vulnerable due to a lack of access to services and rights, despite the extraordinary efforts of some governments to, for example, temporarily regularize all migrants so that they have access to care. Victims of domestic violence, children at risk, victims of gender-based or racial or ethnic discrimination, persons with disabilities, undocumented migrants, persons living in poverty, youth and adults, homeless people, persons deprived of liberty are, according to our members, the most vulnerable groups, affected by the phenomena that have increased during the pandemic. The risks faced during the pandemic have provoked a trauma which will have long-lasting consequences, particularly with regard to mental health and social and economic concerns.

Health issues were quickly joined by economic concerns and questions remain on what changes this pandemic will bring to our societies. Will we come back to “business as usual” as soon as possible? Or could this crisis bring changes in laws, public policies and practices to

implement fully human rights, democracy and rule of law and protect the most vulnerable and to feel stronger together?

A healthy democracy, based on human rights and rule of law, is also good for our health!

The pandemic brought a new dynamic to the exercise of representative and participatory democracy. The government assumed an exceptional power in several States during the pandemic.

Civil society organisations and INGOs under lockdown have had to limit their physical presence in the field but have quickly adapted to the conditions by using the digital space for their monitoring or assistance work. They reinforced their effort to alert to threats and to take the solidarity action. If we take an overall picture of the situation, we see that civil society is a key partner in helping States to frame inclusive policies and provide social support to vulnerable communities. They should be recognized, not only as charities, but also as democratic actors and partners.

We observed some good practices respecting standards on civil participation in the decision-making. However, these are fairly isolated cases, initiated by local governments or MPs. In a more general way, civil society organizations and the public at large have rarely been consulted in the process of designing, implementing or reviewing appropriate measures. Public participation, especially for CSOs, cannot be restricted at a time when they are a partner in responding to emergencies.

As EUR-OPA, the Council of Europe Major Hazards Agreement underlined, there is a strong need to create platforms allowing for a two-way communication among individuals, governmental authorities, non-governmental organizations and private sector actors in order to inform about the initiative and to identify the conditions of social vulnerability.

In times of a health emergency, evidence-based decision-making and transparency are crucial. The decision-makers should provide local government, the relevant private sector actors and NGOs and civil society organizations with access to open data on the social vulnerability of and the risks faced by citizens. Such solutions can empower citizens by giving visibility to their concerns, better enabling them to join or influence the governance process and facilitating their access to the information needed and to create grass-root solutions.

Covid-19 should not be used as an excuse to violate the fundamental rights. We recommend reinforcing the ratification and implementation of the European Social Charter and its collective complaints procedure in order that people living on the margins of society, including migrants, can benefit from these rights.

There is a need to provide good working conditions and access to appropriate equipment for all professionals, who remain on the front line.

Our expectations are that our governments together with local authorities helped by the general public take more targeted action to protect all vulnerable groups within society.

Regarding elderly people, there is a need to change our approach and behaviour, we need to fight against ageism.

The emergency measures should be proportionate and limited in time. These measures should not have a discriminatory impact.

Access to the internet should be declared by all member States as a fundamental right.

Finally, European leaders should be ambitious and build Europe on social and climate justice, putting human rights, rule of law and democracy in the centre.

Thank you for your attention.