

## **CONF/PRES/SPEECH(2021)2**

### **End of mandate speech by Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs, at the meeting of the General Assembly of the Conference of INGOs on 28 April 2021**

In 2015, when I was elected for my first term, I had a vision of a Conference of INGOs which knew how to analyse, conceive the future and act. A Conference with the courage to express opposing arguments and see the complexity where others saw complications, a Conference armed with proposals, intelligent in its diversity and respectful towards, what all public policies in the world have as a target: human beings.

These two terms have been more than I could have imagined and projected in 2015.

Human life, this is clearly what stands out after 6 years of my mandate : as an absolute value, as a guideline, a horizon, but also as the very concrete reality principle, which connects the Conference of INGOs and the Council of Europe to the field. It is through commitment to an individual's life or by helping save them from oppressed situations that I understand that my function and action have meaning and can produce a real change in the life of the persons. For this to happen, I had a strong conviction, I believed deeply and strongly, even if no one believed anymore, because the failures and bad news are piling up. My meetings and connections with rights defenders who are not afraid to risk their lives for the freedom of all, marked my life forever. Thank you so much for that.

Yes, the function shapes the life, the function and the challenges make us see how small we are, allow us to surpass ourselves and seek solutions in collective action. This requires modesty, courage, independence, determination and critical thinking.

During my first mandate, thanks to willingness on both sides, we have engaged in genuine dialogue and regular exchanges of views with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, at the level of the Ministers' Deputies and the Rapporteur Group on Democracy. The political debate on the situation of NGOs in member States held at each plenary meeting of the Conference of INGOs has brought together the INGOs and the Ambassadors to address a shared concern.

To ensure that action led by the Conference of INGOs answers the challenges and needs of civil society at the national and local levels, I initiated the fact finding visits to the member States, focused on the involvement of NGOs in the public authorities' decision-making processes. These visits are not a part of any statutory document. These visits are the concrete product of trust placed in the President of the Conference of INGOs by the Committee of Ministers and by the member States. Among all the States visited and solicited for cooperation in this framework, only one - Turkey - refused a visit of the President and her delegation.

The Conference of INGOs contributed to the revision of Resolution (2003)8 on participatory status. The new Resolution (2016)3 adopted by the Committee of Ministers now explicitly mentions the role of the Conference of INGOs, as a body of the Council of Europe, representing the INGOs with participatory status.

During the last three years, relations with PACE were impacted by the crisis that the PACE itself has gone through. The corruption affair which made PACE close the door to many INGOs,

prompted us to work on the Code of Conduct in order to arm the Conference of INGOs with a reliable instrument, certifying our accountability. To reinforce the dialogue in this very difficult time, the President of the Conference was invited for an exchange of views with the PACE Standing Committee. I was also invited separately to meet the political groups in order to inform them about the Conference of INGOs activities and to inform them about challenges facing civil society. The Conference is referenced in at least two recent PACE Recommendations and Resolutions: those concerned the new restrictions on NGOs in the member States and those concerning NGOs working with migrants. This reference is made because the Conference body has produced substantial high-level work on the issues addressed, work that cannot go unnoticed.

In this regard, the Conference of INGO and its Expert Council clearly showed their contribution to the design and implementation of the CoE standards.

Regarding the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities much has already been said about this today. I would like to thank the colleagues who were part of the joint group with the Congress. The adoption by the Congress and the Conference of the revised Code of good practice for civil participation, the reciprocal invitations for an exchange of views between the Presidents are strong signs of recognition that should be continued at both a political and at an operational level.

I wish to express my appreciation for the receptiveness and support that the former and current Secretary General of the Council of Europe have shown during my two terms. After a long period of absence, the Conference of INGOs has regained its place in the Council of Europe's activity report, to which it again contributes on a par with the other bodies of the Organisation.

For the first time, the Conference of INGOs welcomed the candidates for the post of Secretary General of the Council of Europe for an exchange of views. The two candidates, at that time in the rank of ministers, presented their vision of the Organisation to our members. It was a highlight in the life of the Conference, organised thanks to the good cooperation with the Permanent Representations of the States presenting the candidates.

The period of political and financial crisis that the Council of Europe went through, the contingency plan that threatened the existence of the Conference of INGOs, these were the dark moments of my mandate and I will pass on the details. But we have taken the lead with foresight in initiating, leading and voting on the structural reform of the Conference of INGOs. It was the only, and the right, thing to do and I would like thank all those of you who supported this initiative right from the beginning.

I was very proud to announce the adoption of the new Rules of Procedure to the Ministers' Deputies at my annual exchange of views, who all congratulated the Conference of INGOs for these results.

During my first mandate, we had an interesting and dynamic cooperation with the EU External Action Service and during the last 3 years, we also established a very strong institutional cooperation with the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of the European Union. The President of the Conference was invited on regular basis, as an observer, to the meeting of the advisory FRA civil society panel. This collaboration enabled the Conference of INGOs to make its actions known and to better coordinate its strategic initiatives regarding civic society space in Europe.

The exchanges with the UN Special Rapporteurs took place on an ad-hoc basis. This global vision contributed to our work on the issues on Freedom of Association and Peaceful Assembly and the protection of human rights defenders, with exchanges with the former Rapporteur Maina Kai and the one current Clément Voulé, as well with Michel Forst, when he exercised his function as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HR Defenders.

Also at the intergovernmental level, the President of the Conference of INGOs was invited by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to open the plenary of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting and recently the Conference of INGOs co-organised a panel discussion on Citizen Assemblies with the Community of Democracies.

Last but not least, I need to mention a valuable collaboration with the Open Government Partnership which started from the drafting process of the CoE Guidelines on civil participation and which continued through a publication, reciprocal communications at events and the joint organisation of a workshop during the Fundamental Rights Forum organised by FRA.

I think that the above elements complete very well the picture that colleagues drew up this morning when they presented the evaluation of the 2018-2021 Action Plan. There was a lot of “first time” initiatives during the last three years. The challenges for civil society will not stop, on the contrary, they will certainly increase: lack of funding, more restrictions, systematic violations of freedom of assembly and of association, as part of the “global crackdown” on human rights and NGOs. We need to be creative to answer that.

I am really very happy that the Conference took up the challenge of working remotely, which has significantly increased the participation of our members. It is not just the quantity that has increased. During the last years the quality and forms of participation has also greatly improved, being more focused and result oriented.

Openness of the Conference to its members, to national and local NGOs, our ability to build responses adapted to the real needs of civil society on the ground has always been my primary concern. Very often success stories have happened when we have acted together with national civil society, on the one hand at the Council of Europe and on the other at national level. This requires that the representatives of the INGOs and of the Conference are well connected with and recognised by the national and local NGOs, in all member States of the Council of Europe.

The Conference through its members must be a real vector of connection between the Council of Europe and the citizens. The civic movements that are rising in the member States, and I am thinking in particular now of the Belarusian civil society and the women's organisations and movements in Turkey, need the Conference in action, to help them **in their struggle** for human rights, democracy and human dignity.

To conclude, I would like to thank my team for its constant support and availability. Thank you for all the moments when we were afraid together, when we laughed together, when we shared our convictions and when we built a common vision of the Conference of INGOs and this right up until the end of this mandate.

We've been pushing the walls during the past few years, for more space, more oxygen, more diversity, more young energy but also, we have used the windows that were open to us to make Conference of INGOs stronger and to reinforce the civil society role in democracy.

This could never have happened without DG 2 and the Democratic Innovation Division, without Mary Ann, Jutta, Jane, Lusiné, Ellsworth Fabienne and Anu – thank you!

Thank you for the trust you have placed in me over the past 6 years.

Thanks to the reform adopted in December 2020, the Conference is now experiencing a great momentum.

Let's not waste this "one moment in time" which allows the Conference to be more than we expected!

Let's use this momentum for a better future of civil society in Europe!