

Speech of Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe at the 131st Session of the Committee of Ministers

Hamburg, 21 May 2021

First of all, let me say how privileged I feel to be able to address the Committee of Ministers just three weeks after I have been elected as the new President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. Let me assure you that I fully intend to continue the work of my esteemed predecessor Anna Rurka, and with the same spirit and commitment she has shown.

That spirit and commitment is the spirit and commitment of the Conference of INGOs, which has been undergoing a massive reform process under her leadership. A reform process to which I could contribute as a member of the former Steering Committee of the Conference and which has been formalized in December last year when the General Assembly of the Conference adopted the new Rules of Procedure with an overwhelming majority.

The elections end of April this year have put the seal on the reform process, when a new and highly motivated team was elected for a leaner and more pro-active Standing Committee. The new structure of the Conference is much less hierarchical, has lost weight and administrative layers – just in line with the priorities of the Secretary General and the new four years strategy of the Council of Europe.

We already have established a number of new committees – targeted, with a clear mandate to work closely with the other bodies of the Council of Europe, to bring added value and the voice of civil society to programmes and projects of the Council of Europe and to make an impact in line with the key priorities of the Secretary General and the Council of Europe at large.

The reform process shall make the Conference of INGOs more re-active and more pro-active. We are just now setting up a new strategy for quick response to NGOs and civil rights defenders under duress and we are committed to make our voice heard when it comes to the fundamental values of the Council of Europe, values that unfortunately are under attack have to be defended right now with all our collective strength.

The Secretary General's annual report rightly points out that "Democracy is in Distress", we in the Conference are also extremely concerned about: Shrinking civil space, the attacks on the Istanbul Convention, a Social Charter that needs to be fully implemented in the member states, debates about equality and LBTQI-persons endangering traditional cultural values and infringements on the freedoms of association, of expression, or opinion.

The Conference will always be outspoken and unbending on these issues and I want to thank all the Member States, governments and representations at the Council of Europe which have shown support to us and my predecessor in this mission we all should share – and I would like to ask them to continue this valuable support, which is so dearly needed in these times of change- let it make an opportunity.