

President

To all Members of the Conference of INGOs

Strasbourg, 9 June 2021

**FIRST INTERIM REPORT OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE AND
THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs**

Dear friends,

The Standing Committee (SC) and the President of the Conference of INGOs would like to inform you about their recent activities since the elections at the end of April. We hope this newsletter will help us to stay informed and in touch.

INNER WORKING OF THE CONFERENCE

The SC held its online constitutional meeting immediately after the elections on 29th April. Since then, it met online on 4th and 13th May, and on 3rd June. It decided to regularly meet on every first Thursday of the month, making use of the online facilities we all have become used to during the Covid-Crisis.

The SC has decided on the new representatives for the intergovernmental steering committees¹, partial agreements and committees of the PACE, where the Conference of INGOs is represented. The list was finalised at the end of May. Several meetings of the committees have already taken place in that time and the representation of the Conference of INGOs was ensured by ad-hoc measures.

The SC is working on a strategy to improve the contact between the SC and all the representatives of the Conference, vis-à-vis the bodies of the CoE, to ensure a strong impact of the Conference on the work of these bodies, and that all activities are well aligned with the strategy of the Conference and the proceedings of the SC.

We are now in the process of redesigning our website to make it a tool for you to understand the Conference with a 'who-is-who' chapter. Suggestions and help in this are very welcome.

¹ A **Steering Committee** is set up by the **Committee of Ministers** and conducts the intergovernmental work of the **Council of Europe** in a special field of work, under the rules of the **Council of Europe** relevant standards. Steering Committees consist of the representatives of Member States and sometimes third parties are admitted as observers (sometimes with the right to speak and in exceptional cases with the right to vote). The Conference of INGOs is represented in most Steering Committees as a "participant", which is not a full member but with more participatory rights than a mere observer.

The SC has also decided on a communication tool to be provided for its own work, as well as the work of all our own committees. Priority is to offer a safe environment to work in, without uninvited third parties eavesdropping on our communications, best under European privacy rules. The decision-making-process will take place in the beginning of June and the solution will then be forwarded to all our Committees to have a safe and secure solution to work on their documents, exchange information and distribute results. The Secretariat of the Conference of INGOs has obtained two BlueJeans Licences for video-conferencing and the INGO Service has purchased one BlueJeans Licence. These E-Conference tools can be provided for all our committees or for other groups inside the Conference who need to communicate online. The Secretariat will also acquire a licence for the BlueJeans Events App, a very convenient tool for holding bigger online events with many participants, which has already been used, for example, for the Conferences' webinar on Post-conflict Areas in Europe at the World NGO Day.

We have started developing a three years strategy for the Conference, which should be adopted at the next General Assembly (27 September - 1 October). This strategy needs to be closely aligned with the priorities of the Secretary General and the Framework Plan adopted by the Committee of Ministers at their Ministerial Session on 21st May. But it also needs to reflect the needs and demands of you, our members. Therefore, the SC has prepared a very simple and quick survey, based on the priorities of the CoE, asking you as members to evaluate these priorities and how important they are to you. The survey can be accessed by this link: <https://www.surveio.com/survey/d/E8Q8A6G7D9U6R1Q6G> . **Kindly reply to this until Friday 25th June.**

The SC is following up on the ideas raised during the election campaign. To this effect, the SC has decided to appoint SC-members as liaisons to you all, our member organisations. All member organisations will receive a letter from their liaison, explaining the system and establishing a first contact. We hope that this will allow the SC to get closer to you and strengthen communication between the SC and all members of the Conference.

In addition, the SC will set up the promised informal platforms, using our online tools, to encourage member organisations to get in contact with us and to exchange information, give input to our work and find out about the needs and demands of our members, as well as options to work together on concrete matters and projects. **The first dialogue will be organised on 30th June, in two consecutive sessions held in English and French.** All members will receive an invitation and a link to participate in these informal meetings. We hope that we will be able to establish a continuous communication with our members in-between the formal sessions that we have twice a year, (hopefully in Strasbourg again soon). But we also intend to keep hybrid formats to be as inclusive as possible and to stimulate members who cannot travel to Strasbourg to participate in all deliberations of the Conference.

A number of your organisations have invited the new President to give an address at their General Assemblies, meetings or a contribution at events they have organised. So far, the President was able to address Caritas Europa at their GA, participate in Social Platform's Conversation with Matthew Caruana Galizia, the son of murdered Journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia from Malta, a webinar for Social Workers in Europe. More of such opportunities are coming up and are proving to be a positive side effect of the Covid-Crisis, which has shifted these events into the Internet and makes it easier to participate in them without travelling.

The SC has also appointed liaisons to all the newly formed Committees of the Conference, who will be in contact with them and ensure a strong and positive link between the Committees, the SC and the workings of the Conference. A number of Committee meetings have already taken place, in which members of the SC participated to give input, co-ordinate efforts and ensure that all the work done is duly recognised.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER BODIES OF THE CoE

For the newly elected President it has been the time to meet all relevant representatives inside the CoE, to make himself known and advocate for the Conference and its importance. These meetings took and continue to take place in a hybrid format, some in person in Strasbourg, some online. The President was able to be in Strasbourg twice in May and will return mid-June. He could establish his office, start working very closely and intensively with the Secretariat and already had a number of in-house meetings, with:

The CoE Administration:

- Snežana SAMARDŽIĆ-MARKOVIC, Director General of Democracy, DG-II
- Claudia LUCIANI, Director of Human Dignity, Equality and Governance, Directorate General of Democracy, DG-II
- Daniel POPESCU, Head of Department of Democracy and Governance
- Markus ADELSBACH, Head of Elections and Civil Society Division

Representatives of other CoE bodies:

- Rik DAEMS, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- Leendert VERBEEK, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
- Dunja MIJATOVIĆ, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe
- Robert SPANO, President of the European Court of Human Rights, Council of Europe

A meeting with the Secretary General is planned for 15th June in Strasbourg. A number of meetings with Ambassadors, Permanent Representatives of CoE Member States, as well as with other bodies of the CoE are planned during that week in order to explore possibilities for co-operation.

The Committee of Ministers:

The Committee of Ministers (CM) held its Ministerial Session (with all the Ministers of Foreign Affairs representing their countries) on 21st May. It marked the end of the German presidency to the CM and the start of the Hungarian presidency. Officially, it took place in Hamburg, but most representatives joined the conference online. The President of the Conference could give a first statement to the ministers at this event, which is published on the website of the Conference of INGOs: [Address of Mr Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of INGOs at the 131st Session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe - Newsroom](#).

The Rapporteur Group on Democracy of the CM (the GR-DEM) held an online meeting on 1st June. The President of the Conference was invited to present himself and the Conference at this meeting as per agenda point 1. He described the reform process, the layout of the “new” Conference and our key priorities at this moment, such as the Istanbul Convention, the situation in Belarus and the shrinking space for civil society in Europe, as well as the Social Charter, environment and climate change, Artificial Intelligence, as reflected in our new committees. This layout and the strategy of the new committees raised great interest with the representatives of member states in the GR-DEM. They took more than 40 minutes to discuss this new structure of the Conference and our future co-operation.

The President was then invited to participate in the second point on the agenda, dedicated to the Helsinki Process. This is the strategy of the CM to improve its communication with civil

society and is of the utmost importance for the Conference. We already could play a relevant role in the first dialogue with Civil Society organised by the GR-DEM, which was co-moderated by our now-President-then-representative of the Conference to the CDDG (the Intergovernmental Steering Committee on Democracy and Good Governance). There was strong support for the request of the President of the Conference to make this process more transparent, open it up to the public through live-streaming or broadcasting, allow more NGOs to formulate questions or remarks, and to give the Conference a strong role in this process.

RESPONSES TO REQUESTS FOR HELP AND ANSWERS RECEIVED

We have already received a number of letters from NGOs in distress and on behalf of Civil Rights Defenders or Journalists in distress. We have also received responses from governments on activities of the Conference, such as the Round Table on the Istanbul Convention on 21st May. These requests and responses need to be answered and the SC is setting up a mechanism to better deal with these and other challenges. A first letter has been drafted in response to systematic harassment of journalists in Serbia, a fact-finding process has been started on the situation of women in Turkey, in response to several letters received by female MPs of the AKP, and the situation in Belarus is high on our agenda. You can read the statement of the President on Belarus on our webpage: [Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of INGOs condemns the recent Human Rights violations in Belarus - Newsroom](#).

You will find official responses on our website and we will be in touch with you with requests for support. Plus, you can follow the Conference and the President on Twitter: @ngo_coe and @GERmischer.

Yours sincerely,
Gerhard ERMISCHER