

Intervention of Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, at the GR-DEM of 5 June 2025

Item 5 - Presentation of the outcome of the Spring session of CINGO

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to inform the GR-DEM about the outcome of the April session of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (CINGO), which was held in Strasbourg on 7-9 April.

According to decisions taken at the previous session of CINGO (in October last year), the format of our Spring 2025 session was changed and made more interactive. In the margins of the session, meetings of all our thematic committees and the Task-Force on civic space watch were held, and the Standing Committee held an exchange of views with representatives of those bodies regarding desirable improvements to interactions on crosscutting themes. We also held an exchange with those who represent CINGO in various bodies of the Council of Europe (intergovernmental steering committees, (enlarged) partial agreements, conventional monitoring bodies). We also organised a workshop to inform participants about the preparation of new “Guidelines for the Council of Europe Secretariat on Engaging with Civil Society” by the Organisation, and to collect input for the ongoing drafting process.

In the light of the ongoing crises, the Conference thrives to improve its cooperation with other European institutions, mainly the European Union, and therefore we had invited representatives of the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency and the European Economic and Social Committee (its Civil Society Organisations Group). They participated in the side meeting of our Task Force on civic space watch as well as in the General Assembly and gave valuable input to the proceedings, not least in the debate on our own [Recommendation on the shrinking Civic Space and actual political developments](#) – adopted on 9 April 2025.

The many crises affecting democracy and human rights in Europe (and beyond) have been a key issue of this session. The Recommendation, which was disseminated to the relevant bodies of the Organisation as well as to the Permanent Representations of the member states, lays out a series of concrete demands of CINGO to counter-act the tendency of an increasingly shrinking civic space, which in several member states leads to authoritarian structures and severely impacts civil society, civil rights and human rights defenders and all those who exercise their guaranteed rights for freedom of expression, assembly and association.

As we see a growing threat to our democratic societies from social tensions, which are often fed by cultural and religious differences, our Committee for Interreligious & interconvictional Dialogue has started a campaign to revive the PACE initiative for a permanent platform for interreligious dialogue. It has co-organised a side event during PACE’s January Session, with the participation of key speakers including the Human Rights Commissioner and the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Antisemitic, Anti-Muslim and other forms of religious intolerance and hate crimes. The Committee launched its own internet platform for

interreligious dialogue, which was created under the aegis of the CINGO and offers a wide range of best practice examples for a peaceful dialogue between the different communities.

Our thematic committees regularly organise webinars which reach out to civil society across Europe and beyond to inform, debate and find solutions for the many conflicts and challenges we face today. To give just one example: our Committee “NGOs as advocates for gender equality and women’s rights” organised a webinar on how to engage men and boys in education for gender equality, which was supported by the Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Commission (GEC) and attracted 190 participants not just from all over Europe but also from Canada, USA, Mexico, some South American and African countries, Australia, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines.

I could experience a similar interest recently, at a webinar organised by one of our INGOs, which we do regularly to better inform our civil society delegates about the Council of Europe, CINGO, the ways of collaborating with the Council in various respects (in public consultations, country evaluations by monitoring mechanisms, through observership, submissions to the European Court of Human Rights or the monitoring of the implementation of its judgements). It was fascinating to see the high interest of participants from countries outside Europe. This can be taken as an encouraging sign that the CoE is seen as a beacon of democracy, human rights and rule of law in our world of eroding democracies. This should encourage us all to reach out and find likeminded allies globally.

As we see social peace and resilience as a corner stone of a functioning democracy, we continue to support the process to strengthen the Council of Europe’s Revised Social Charter and advocate for all member states to become Parties to it and to sign the additional protocols, especially on the collective complaints system, and to abstain from reservations, such as on territorial applicability. In the light of our increased co-operation with other European institutions and acknowledging the importance of the EU in social matters, our Committee for the European Social Charter and its monitoring mechanisms, together with leading NGOs in the field of social justice, prepared a [Declaration on the announced EU anti- poverty strategy](#), which was also subsequently adopted on 9 April 2025 by the General Assembly.

Three years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, we recognise the situation of war as a key challenge for Europe; CINGO and the various participating INGOs stand united with the people of Ukraine in their fight for freedom and justice. We have thus discussed and approved a [Recommendation to the Council of Europe and its Member States on the ongoing war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine](#) which sets out clear and strong measures for the continuous support to Ukraine. We heard testimonies from two victims detained illegally in Russia and the occupied territories of Ukraine:

- Maksym Butkevych – human rights defender, co-founder of the NGO “ZMINA”, journalist, and Ukrainian Armed Forces serviceman. He was illegally captured by the Russian Federation while serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces and was recently released from captivity.
- Lyudmyla Husieinova – Head of the NGO “Numo, Sisters”, human rights defender, and former civilian detainee illegally held by the Russian Federation.

These first hand experiences were moving and striking, giving an insight that no report or news cover can ever provide. It can only strengthen our resolve to continue our support with all means at our disposal. We thus ask Member States to carefully read our recommendations and take them into consideration.

Unfortunately we do not just face war in Ukraine: in many member states we can see attacks on civil society, the key principles of democracy and a harsh and often brutal repression of

voices that diverge from government policies. In this light the CINGO adopted a [Statement calling for the immediate release of Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mayor of Istanbul](#) recalling the arrest of not just the mayor of Istanbul as a well known and prominent figure, but also of lawyers and students in the subsequent protests against this arrest.

CINGO held also an exchange with representatives of civil society in Georgia who gave first hand testimonies on actions affecting civil rights and human rights defenders as well as representatives of the free press in the country. The testimonies given and the pictures shown of victims of police brutality as well as anonymous gangs harassing those who speak out against the current political developments in Georgia were shocking and scaring. Actions against the property of NGOs and individual persons, as well as smear campaigns in social media and public statements, including by members of Parliament who brag about it on their social media accounts, paint a bleak picture of the situation in the country. We in CINGO were even forced to help some human rights defenders to relocate into EU countries as the pressure on them had become unbearable.

Our Committee on Migration Issues had prepared a [Communiqué on Internal security and border management in the context of migration: Respect for human rights is essential](#) which was endorsed by CINGO on 11 April. It reflects the findings of its fact-finding mission to Poland and the border to Belarus. Although we fully acknowledge the fact that migrants are misused as “weapons” by Russia and Belarus to destabilise our democracies, we also need to defend the key principles of the Human Rights Convention and respect the verdicts of the Court. In this sense, we also see a need to react to the open letter signed by nine Heads of State and Government on the judgements of the Court concerning migration and we welcome the reaction of the Secretary General and many NGOs to this letter. We are especially worried about certain formulations that challenge the position of the Court as THE interpreter of the Human Rights Convention and that talk about the Court seeking to limit the scope of political decision-making, in a way that mirrors similar statements by Donald Trump. As this is a highly emotional theme that can easily feed populism, this calls for a debate on fundamental human rights, which must be reaffirmed as non-negotiable.

At the April session, we also had a discussion and endorsement of a report on CINGO’s official visit to North Macedonia last year (4-6 November 2024), with the participation of Ms Uranija Pirovska, Executive Director of the North Macedonian Chapter of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. It was especially interesting to hear the reaction of the North Macedonia, which referred to several concrete actions taken or to be taken to remedy a number of concerns identified in our report. In future visits, as well as in relation to other key assessments issued by CINGO, we will invite Member States to react and we intend to follow up on the results to the best of our abilities. It would be good if in future we could have an exchange in the appropriate Rapporteur group on important texts issued by CINGO.

For this year we have already asked the Serbian authorities to receive an official country visit of CINGO, as we are of course concerned over recent developments there and want to get a firsthand experience of the situation of civil society in the country. We also plan a country visit to Greece, and the official request is in preparation.

Given the many crises and challenges, our Expert Council on NGO Law is quite busy at the moment. It has recently published an [Addendum to its Opinion on the Slovak Republic’s NGO framework regulation](#) introducing the concept of “organisations supported from abroad”. In the case of a similar bill brought to the National Assembly of Hungary on [Transparency of Public Life](#), our Expert Committee has also issued an extensive opinion. The bill has for now been postponed and we hope that it will be postponed for good and not come up again in the

Autumn. We therefore ask the Hungarian authorities to very carefully take our assessment into account and reiterate the importance of complying with CoE conventions and EU law.

In addition, I would like to draw attention to the study [Non-Governmental Organisations: Review of Developments in Standards, Mechanisms and Case Law 2020-2024](#) which was published on 31 January 2025 by the Expert Council.

During our General Assembly in April, we also held an exchange with Michael O'Flaherty, Commissioner for Human Rights, which was very lively, supportive and informative. We heard a presentation by Agnes Von Maravic, Head of the Children's rights Division, in light of our own youth strategy and the work of our Committee on the Rights of the Child in Europe - Protecting and promoting the well-being of children of all ages. Finally, we held an exchange of views with Ambassador Francesca Camilleri Vettiger, Permanent Representative of Malta on the upcoming presidency of Malta. In this context we already have linked up with Malta on our Youth strategy and plan a common social media action to mark the International Youth Day in August.

Finally, it is my pleasure – as a matter of reciprocity and in my capacity of President of CINGO - to herewith Madam Ambassador Caitriona Doyle, to attend our next General Assembly for an exchange of views to update our civil society delegates about the work of the Rapporteur Group on Democracy.

I thank you for your attention.