



## **Exchange of views with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe**

### Notes for speech

Mr Gerhard ERMISCHER, President of the Conference of INGOs

Strasbourg, 9 February 2022

As you all know the Conference of INGOs was undergoing a fundamental reform process which culminated in the elections end of April 2021 where we did not only get a new Standing Committee and President but also a new leaner structure.

Parallel to the debate of the reform of the Conference we had an evaluation of the Conference of INGOs initiated by the Council of Europe and which was finalised in about the time we had adopted our new rules of procedure. Although we could not profit directly from this evaluation during the debate, the process helped to shape the reform which fits nicely with the results of the evaluation – which we took as a guideline for implementing our new structures after the elections in April last year.

We had to manage the final stage of the debate on the new rules of procedure already during the first year of the pandemic crisis – and implement the reform now in the second year. This had not only disadvantages. The improved use of online media has made us more inclusive, has allowed our new dedicated committees to meet regularly and work efficiently and the Standing Committee has settled in its routine of monthly meetings and additional ad hoc meetings in smaller groups to deal with actual challenges.

But it also means that there are members of the Standing Committee with whom I have worked so closely in the last 10 months – and who I have not met physically even once. The same is true for our committees, representatives to intergovernmental steering committees, partial agreements, bodies of the CoE or conventions of the CoE. As much as we profit from a more intensive online communication we also suffer from the lack of physical meetings – and we now are in a situation where face to face meetings are desperately needed. There simply are limits to online communication.

So, I am very happy to be with you here today, I am happy that I could meet quite a number of ambassadors here in Strasbourg in person and I will continue my round to ambassadors. As much as Corona restrictions allowed, I also arranged meetings with representatives of member organisations and potential new INGOs.

In bringing the reform of the Conference to life we have achieved a lot, but there is also still a lot to do. And that is not all just on us because we also need the support of the Council of Europe which was clearly outlined in the evaluation report: the lack of funds and resources for the Conference on one hand but also the creation of a mission statement that clearly outlines the role of the Conference in the Council of Europe. In creating and adopting our 3-Years Strategy we already have made a step into this direction, and we continue to do so with the

work on our communication strategy or action plan. We want to be part of this process, which is being led by the Secretary General and her Private Office, as this clearly will be of the utmost importance for our future.

This also brings me to the Helsinki Process. We are contributing to the process. We were party to the exchanges held in the GR-Dem, GR-H and GR-J. But I must repeat here what I already said in the rapporteur groups: this dialogue needs to become more open and more transparent. Even for the members of the INGO Conference the Council of Europe and especially the Committee of Ministers appears as a black box. We have started to pull the lid a bit, by inviting chairs of rapporteur groups to our last General Assembly, to explain the Helsinki Process to our members, but it all happens behind closed doors. And for NGOs and citizens who are not part of the Conference it appears even more closed and secret.

We have already shared suggestions on how to open up the process, like livestreaming, allowing at least a moderated debate through written questions e.g. in a chat function. Of course, we also would like to see the Conference in a more pro-active role in the preparation of the events. We understand that we are not in a position to take decisions, but we could be made more use of in an advisory function. And this goes of course not just for the up-coming meetings of Rapporteur Groups with Civil Society, but as well for the planned annual exchange of the Secretary General with Civil Society.

At this point I might also mention our own contribution to promote the Council of Europe and its instruments. The publication of our Expert Council on the recommendation 2007(14) of the Committee of Ministers gives in an insight in the situation in all of Europe, covering all 47 member states plus Belarus and Kosovo<sup>1</sup>. Albeit not a scientific study but based on responses gathered by NGOs it gives valuable insights and helps Civil Society Organisations to work with the recommendation.

In a follow up to the revision of the Code of Good Practice for Civils Participation in the Decision-Making Process we have set up the BePart Platform together with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Department of Democracy and Governance. Just now we are collecting good practice examples from all over Europe, looking at them from both sides, Civil Society and Government and preparing the launch of this platform as a living tool to help both sides to create good participatory processes.

We help creating the Handbook for Civil Society of the Secretary General to better interact with the Council of Europe. And we have been party of the launch of the CURE Campaign, a Civil Society Initiative to strengthen the values of the Council of Europe and to attract Civil Society Organisations to co-operate with the Council of Europe.

The pandemic crisis put a stop to our country visits over the last two years, but this year we will take up the visits again and the first one is fast approaching to Finland. This visit is basically planned as an advertisement tour for the Council of Europe and the Conference of INGOs as we see that there are many very active NGOs in Finland (and in all of Scandinavia) who virtually do not know anything about the Council of Europe and even less about the Conference. We also see that there exist very well acknowledged forms of participation for Civil Society with the Finnish Parliament when it comes to the EU or UN, but less so to the Council of Europe. We, therefore, have decided to try out a new format in this visit to bring together NGOs, citizens, parliamentarians and representatives of the Conference of INGOs to

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<sup>1</sup> \*All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

discuss the potential of the Council of Europe and how to strengthen the co-operation with the Conference of INGOs.

We also have planned visits to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Portugal. The first one will focus on strengthening Civil Society's contribution to building resilient democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Portugal was already planned before the pandemic crisis, but it seems an ideal place to look at the consequences of the pandemic crisis, the emergency measures that had to be taken and the long-term consequences we will face – Long Covid for Civil Society and more general for Democracy.

That democracy is under stress even in Europe is a fact we have been bemoaning for quite some time now. We have spoken about shrinking civil space in the Council of Europe for years. And in all that time this space has continued to shrink. And this is not just a consequence of crisis, may they be security crisis or the pandemic crisis. There is a systematic weakening of democratic structures and civil society from inside and outside Europe. We therefore have decided to dedicate our upcoming event for the World NGO Day to this theme.

We have decided to follow our lead from last year and organise a webinar to a burning theme of our time. We have communicated closely with Marcis Skadmanis, founder of the World NGO Day, who will be present at our event – the only one he will participate this year, as more than 500 events around the whole world would simply be too much to cover. I am also very grateful that Ambassador Mårten Ehnberg will give an opening address.

We will have a small but select group of speakers from Memorial, from the Helsinki Committee, on the Kavala case as the spotlight cases of Civil Society in distress. These show case examples are well known and the Council of Europe as well as the European Court of Human Rights deals with them. They are show cases that serve as examples, but we want to have a vivid and open debate with participants not only from our own institutions but from the Civil Society at large and we are also looking for answers and solutions not just for questions and problems.

It also gives me the opportunity to transfer our own position on this distressing situation. We understand that the Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation and that the Committee of Ministers as it sits here with the Ambassadors Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary is acting in the high art of diplomacy. But as the voice of Civil Society in the Council of Europe it is our duty, and mine here today, to remind you that the Council of Europe is a value based organisation which has become pan-European by 47 countries joining it as this value based organisation, pledging themselves to the values of democracy and human rights, to continuously improving democracy and human rights in their countries and to adhere to the proceedings of the Court of Human Rights as the ultimate defender of these rights and values.

This organisation must stand up for its values, this is what the citizens of Europe expect from it. In all my communications with representatives of NGOs, members of the Conference or not, this was the main point made: if the Council of Europe is known it is known as the fundamental human rights organisation in which people put their trust to defend the values it stands for and for which so many people fight in their countries against all odds. This is the ultimate duty of the Committee of Ministers, the ruling body of the Council of Europe and the guardian of the findings of its Court for Human Rights. It is that message we spread through the Conference and on our country visits, when we advertise the Council of Europe and advocate for its values.