

## **Dialogue of the President of the Conference of INGOs with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe**

**Strasbourg, 1 July 2024**

### **Report on the General Assembly:**

The General Assembly of the Conference of INGOs (CINGO) was held from 8 to 10 April in a hybrid format in Strasbourg and online. We have decided to keep the hybrid format to allow all members to participate, as it is often difficult for some to come to Strasbourg for financial reasons as well as time and resources. This is especially important when we have elections and need to take important decisions.

The General Assembly was held in two parts: the first was dedicated to the end of the previous mandate and stock taking on Monday ([link](#) to the speech of the President). Tuesday and Wednesday were dedicated to elections and the creation of new committees as well as starting the process to formulate a new three-years strategy for the Conference.

As a highlight we could greet the new Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty at our General Assembly, who presented his mandate and vision and held a vivid and vibrant dialogue with the members of the Conference ([link](#) to the speech). This was especially interesting to our members, as the dialogue took place just one week after the new Commissioner had taken up his office – and after the Conference had organised with CURE-Campaign an online dialogue of the three candidates for Human Rights Commissioner with Civil Society before the elections.

In the second part we held the elections. Our Standing Committee became even younger and more diverse, a short report can be found with this [link](#) and the new Presidency ([link](#)), Standing Committee ([link](#)) and committees ([link](#)) are all available on our website.

We also started the process of drafting our new three-year strategy, which will be accompanied by special strategies for equality and for youth. The Conference with its different committees and commitments reflects the diversity of its membership, which in turn reflects the diversity of the tasks of the Council of Europe. The participatory process of drafting the strategy (starting with an online survey on priorities based on the Reykjavik principles but also giving members the possibility to state their own priorities) reflects the successful process developed three years ago. This allowed to come to a focused strategy which can be accepted by a great majority. Very specific interests can be covered by representing the Conference with highly specialised expertise in different bodies of the Council of Europe. The Strategy shall help us to re-enforce our cooperation with the various bodies of the Council of Europe including the Committee of Ministers and to ensure that this impact will be meaningful and helpful for the Council of Europe as well as to Civil Society – not the least in strengthening our links with Civil Society Organisations which do not enjoy participatory status, local and regional associations and those parts of Civil Society which are underprivileged and vulnerable and normally do not have access to European Institutions.

### **Major recent Activities:**

The President of the CINGO participated in the Ministerial Conference held on May 17 in Strasbourg to mark the hand-over of the presidency of the Committee of Ministers from Liechtenstein to Lithuania ([link](#) to the speech).

### ***Organisation of an online dialogue of Civil Society with the three Candidates for Secretary General***

Following the model of the dialogue of the candidates for Human Rights Commissioner the Conference and CURE organised an online dialogue of the three candidates for Secretary General of the Council of Europe, which after substantial preparations took place on 27 May and attracted great interest in Civil Society also beyond the membership of the Conference itself. The dialogue was recorded, and the written answers sent by the candidates in advance of the online event was published on our webpage. You can find the documentation [here](#).

### ***Participation in the drafting process of:***

The Conference found many new experts and delegates to represent us in CoE bodies like intergovernmental steering committees, (enlarged) partial agreements, Conventions and Monitoring Mechanisms as well as drafting groups for new instruments. The activation of members after the reform process has prompted major INGOs to supply us with high-level experts and to give support to our participation, making use of their extensive networks and expertise and giving us access to new resources. To mention just a few:

- Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights (CAI)
- Feasibility Study on new legally binding or non-binding instruments on Environment and Human Rights (CDH-Env)
- Convention on Protection of Lawyers
- Recommendation on the Rights and Best Interests of the Child in Care Proceedings

Of course, we were not always satisfied with the outcome of these processes, especially the drafting process for the new Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights was heavily criticised not just by us but by all the Civil Society actors in the process and we find the outcome disappointingly weak. Nevertheless, we will continue to work in all the follow up projects on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights as we see these as essential for the future of democracy, human rights, and the freedom of expression. The Committees of the Conference also organised events of their own on the theme, as for example the webinar on “Digital Revolution. With or without Her?” ([link](#)).

We were proud to have the founder of the **World NGO Day** Marcis Skadmanis with us in a hybrid event in Strasbourg, together with high-level representatives of Civil Society as well as the Council of Europe. The documentation and live recording can be found [here](#).

### ***Ongoing work on Social Charter System:***

The Conference is deeply dedicated to the Social Charter System. The Committee for Social Rights has finalised and published its Social Rights Tracker, an online tool which allows members of Civil Society to give information and launch complaints at an early stage. It is intended as an information tool, early warning system and aid to Civil Society to make the best use of the Social Charter.

Although we were not happy with the outcome of the recent reform process of the Social Charter System, we hope that with the Reykjavik Declaration and the upcoming High-Level Conference on Social Charter in Vilnius we will see a true restart of the system. We held many dialogues with the

Social Rights Committee of the Council of Europe and will be present at the event in Vilnius and are ready to make our contribution.

In addition, the Actions for Social Rights Committee of the Conference of INGOs, in partnership with the International Movement All Together in Dignity - ATD Fourth World, organised a webinar to mark the **World Day for Social Justice** on the theme of "[Social justice in action: Breaking the perpetuation of poverty across generations](#)". It was also the forum for presenting the new book "The Escape from Poverty - Breaking the Vicious Cycles Perpetuating Disadvantage".

### ***Ongoing work with hate crime and hate speech:***

While we contributed to the work of the CoE on hate speech and hate crime we also participated in campaigns of our member organisations in this important issue. For example, recently in a seminar organised by the European Center for Human Rights on combatting hate speech and hate crime against LBTQI+ Youth communities here in Strasbourg.

### ***Representations in bodies of the Council of Europe:***

As there are so many bodies where we are participating here only two examples of intergovernmental steering committees:

- The new CD-Dem replacing the former CDDG. We participated in the constitutive session and will participate in the upcoming first (online) meeting of its Working Group on Civil Society Participation GT-CS. With our member organisation, the European Partnership for Democracy, we found a very experienced and strong organisation to represent us in this body. The CD-Dem will have to sort out its very ambitious working programme and find its priorities. We are there from the start to give our input and we hope that when the CD-Dem is finally constituted with all its organs working it will find a strong participation of Civil Society through members of the CINGO and above as observers to strengthen the voice of Civil Society and help find practical solutions. We will definitely advocate for this goal.
- The CDDH is traditionally a body we work very closely with – and we participated in practically all its drafting groups and sub committees. While we are in the process to restructure our representation in the CDDH and form a new network of experts in the Conference to aid our work with this committee we already participated in the recent Civil Society Conference in Helsinki and the jubilee meeting of the CDDH in Helsinki to celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> session. As mentioned before, we will make a great effort with all the ongoing and upcoming groups dealing with Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights as well as with Environment and Human Rights.
- Next to the intergovernmental steering committees and (enlarged) partial agreements we are also represented in several conventions and monitoring mechanisms. Beyond the direct representation of the CINGO these play an important role for our member organisations and civil society beyond the limits of the Conference, as the conventions are the window of the CoE to Civil Society and are widely used by NGOs and advocates of the many rights and values defended by the Conventions, from fundamental human rights to democratic participation, culture, cultural heritage, education, environment, health, sports, protection from hate crime and cyber-crime, combating hate speech, equality, non-discrimination etc. The Conventions are also a link to the world of local and regional associations, grass-roots organisations which either already work with them or which we can introduce to these instruments so close to their everyday work and needs, e.g. through field visits to meet with representatives of this type of NGOs.

### **Expert Council on NGL Law:**

Our Expert Council on NGO Law was very active in supporting the work of our committees and contributing to various events, while in the same time publishing very recently a number of reports and opinions.

- Report on Civil society support to refugees and other migrants in Europe: the need to end the backlash on civil society space ([link](#))
- Report on Stigmatisation of Non-Governmental Organisations in Europe ([link](#))
- Georgia – Opinion on the draft law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence ([link](#))

### **Special Focus in implementing the Reykjavik decisions:**

#### ***Equality:***

- Our Committee for Equality prepared a first draft for a new strategy for the Conference to streamline equality in all aspects of the work of the Conference which is in line with the new Strategy for Equality of the Council of Europe. The draft was the result of a common round table of all committees of the Conference in the October session and will serve as a guideline to formulate the new strategy which shall be adopted at the autumn session of the CINGO this year.
- Participation in the Gender Equality Conference of the Council of Europe
- Participation in the work of the Istanbul Convention / GREVIO
- As intended when we first founded our new committees, they have started to work more and more together on cross area challenges, as in the case of equality on migration issues, religion and social issues.

#### ***Youth and Children's Rights:***

- The CINGO is preparing a New Youth Strategy in close co-operation with the Youth sector of the CoE, especially the Youth Advisory Board and had already several meetings to this regard. It also builds bridges to other sectors, as Social Rights, Equality, Non-Discrimination etc.
- We are also reaching out to youth organisations beyond CINGO and CoE structures to become more inclusive and better grounded on a grass-roots level.
- A special focus shall be on finding space for underprivileged youth who normally have no access to European institutions or the CoE and do not participate in events like the World Forum of Democracy or come to work in the Youth Centres of the CoE.
- We will launch a first online round table with Civil Society actors across the youth sector in August to mark the World Day for Youth and hold a series of such events until the autumn session of the CINGO to prepare the strategy. It shall be launched with a special hybrid event in Strasbourg on the day after the GA on October 17.
- CINGO Children's Rights Committee has widened its focus and received a totally new mandate at the April Session. In addition, it participated in the CD-ENF and the Lanzarote Committee care proceedings, online harm, mental health support, and child poverty.

#### ***Migration:***

The Committee on Migration is one of the most active of the CINGO. Its most recent work in a nutshell:

- Cooperation with the Special Rapporteur of the Secretary General on Migration
- Cooperation with the PACE
- Participation in the Coordination Group on Migration

- Webinar on Migration and Health ([link](#))
- Communication from the Conference of INGOs on “Migration and electoral context” ([link](#))
- Special Event on Migration and Law / criminalisation of NGOs and migrants with the Expert Council of NGO Law of the CINGO on Refugee Day ([link](#))
- Education and Migration Webinar (upcoming)

#### ***Environment / Reykjavik Process:***

Environment is an issue most important to the CINGO. Unfortunately, we were not happy with the weak outcome of the drafting group evaluating the possibilities for new legally binding or non-binding instruments on Environment and Human Rights. We continue to clearly support an additional protocol to the Human Rights Convention as well as other measures to strengthen the human rights aspect of the right to a clean and healthy environment and to combat the challenges of climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution. We stressed these also at the recent meeting of the CDDH in Helsinki. To better co-ordinate our own work with the appropriate bodies of the CoE in the light of changes and reforms in the Reykjavik Process I had recently communications with:

- Representatives of the Bern Convention
- the Landscape Convention
- the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement
- and the Department on the Reykjavík process and the Environment, while Tanja Kleinsorge also participated in our General Assembly to communicate the new strategy and all the changes to our members.

#### ***Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue:***

- Out of the preparations done in the last mandate the work on a permanent platform for Interreligious and interconvictional dialogue has started in earnest, with communications with the PACE which once had took the lead on such a development.
- It has been agreed to organise a side event at the October Session of PACE to launch a more intensive co-operation with CINGO on this issue.
- In addition, the committee has recently organised a Webinar on “Women in religions - Addressing structural discrimination & violence against women” ([link](#))

#### ***Sport and Human Rights:***

This is a new committee already well connected with the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sports and appropriate bodies of the CoE as well as high level experts from outside the Conference. It actually started to work already in the process of formation before the General Assembly, not the least in the light of major sport events this year, in clouding the Olympic Games in Paris.

#### ***Ad Hoc Group on NGOs in Distress:***

Unfortunately, this is a most distressing theme, with so many new legislations making the work of NGOs and Civil Society so much more difficult, including the criminalisation of the work. While the Expert Council is doing sterling work in addressing these issues, as does of course the Venice Commission, there are aspects beyond the mere legal context which need to be addressed, including a better reactivity of the Conference in case of smear campaigns against its own members. Therefore an ad hoc group has formed out of the membership of the Conference which organised together with the Standing Committee of the Conference

- A meeting at the General Assembly with the Expert Council on NGO Law

- A Network Event during the General Assembly

And decided to work on a mechanism for CINGO to react on smear campaigns against members and beyond and improve our reactivity.

**Cooperation with external Institutions and non-member states:**

- Restart of cooperation with Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) with several meetings with representatives of FRA and creation of a strategy of improved cooperation
- Side-events with UN in New York and Geneva (with the department on Environment and Reykjavik Process)
- Davos Forum on Baukultur (a new representative of the Conference upcoming)

***Cooperation on CS in Belarus***

A recent meeting with Margo Vorykhava (Youth Advisory Council, Advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on Youth) on the planned new contact point and Civil Society hub for Belarus in Vilnius (chairmanship of Lithuania) and cooperation with CINGO, our Expert Council, for training programmes and our new youth strategy.

**Official Country Visits:**

- Georgia (initiated)
- North Macedonia

**Field trips for dialogue with Civil Society:**

This relatively new type of field trips is not as formal as the official country visits, which are always initiated through the permanent representation of the country visited, with a tendering process for finding the partner organisation on the ground, official visits to representatives of the country's government and authorities etc. The field trips are directed to local and regional NGOs to raise awareness of the CoE, explain the role of the Conference, show ways to cooperate with a European Institution for more local and regional organisations, as well as collect information from these organisations about specific problems and challenges and bring back first-hand experience from grass-roots organisations to the work in Strasbourg. These trips shall also help us to find access to specific vulnerable and under-privileged groups making use of the expertise and networks of those of our member organisations who work hands on in the field. For this year we have planned

- Croatia (done in April)
- Slovak Republic
- Türkiye