

Speech of Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe at the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers

Turin, Italy - 20 May 2022

Europe today is no longer what it was just three months ago. The brutal aggression of the Russian Federation against the Ukraine has ripped away the veil of illusion – the illusion that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe would inevitably move towards a golden era of everlasting prosperity, that history was taking its natural course towards human rights, rule of law and a liberal democracy for everyone. Although it was founded to guarantee a peaceful and democratic Europe after the atrocities of the Second World War, it found a new mission after the Iron Curtain came down. In those days, the Council of Europe was the beacon of democracy in Europe, when a Soviet leader talked about “our common European home” in Strasbourg, and when one state after another in Europe joined the Council of Europe with the ambition to improve democratic structures, uphold human rights and implement the rule of law.

The shock of this war forces us to look very closely of what has happened in the last generation. In too many instances the principles of this Organisation have been ignored, too many judgments of the European Court of Human Rights are left un-executed. The commitments which sovereign States freely took towards this Organisation, and towards each other, are eroded and undermined in full view of the other member States and of citizens. The result has been a frustrating continuing trend, called out repeatedly by the Secretary General in her annual reports, of democratic decline and loss of trust in our national institutions and in our European architecture. The very institutions and values which brought us the unprecedented post-war period of peace and prosperity are in distress!

We need to learn from this. And we need to act. A renewed democratic project for Europe and a re-invigorated Council of Europe are needed to sustain the ambitions of our people and our continent in this new century. The Council of Europe once again could take a leading role. It has acted decisively and with dignity according to its own rules and statutes after 24 February 2022. It needs to keep this momentum. Civil society in Europe expects this Organisation to live up to its reputation as the conscience of Europe and put democratic security on the top of its agenda.

On behalf of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe and of the civil society in Europe, we now ask four things of the Committee of Ministers. First, to hold a 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe to strengthen the Council of Europe to face today’s challenges and tomorrow’s opportunities. It is well suited to do so, but in order to effectively protect human rights, democracy and rule of law it has to be sufficiently willing, courageous and resourced with an organisational structure that is more transparent, less hierarchical, more modern and more open.

Second, that the way to this summit shall be through an open dialogue with civil society, a genuinely meaningful participation throughout the process. The Conference of INGOs has undergone fundamental reforms and renewal, even during the pandemic crisis, and more recently, the CURE Campaign has been founded as a civil society initiative to demand a more reactive Council of Europe. Let us dare more democracy in the Council of Europe.

Third, the Council of Europe has provided instruments to deal with the challenges facing our increasingly divided, even polarised, societies, including but not limited to the European Convention on Human Rights and the Court, the European Social Charter and many other treaties, monitoring bodies, recommendations or guidelines designed to strengthen democracy, civil society and a free and liberal society built on social justice. We need to strengthen these instruments, not to give in to demands to water them down. We take the commitments of Council of Europe membership seriously and expect the member States and the Organisation to follow up the implementation of these commitments vigorously and with determination. We need to stand up for our values.

Fourth, and lastly, I ask all of you to remember that, even though the Council of Europe is an international intergovernmental Organisation, founded and governed by states, its core mission is not to serve states or governments, but to serve the people of Europe.”