



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
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Speech by the President of the Conference of INGOs at the meeting of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group on Democracy (GR-DEM), Strasbourg, 11 July 2017

Madam Chair, Ministers' Deputies,

I am pleased to be able to share with you the outcomes of the Conference of INGOs' summer session, which took place from 26 to 30 June. I would like to thank the Permanent Delegations of the member states who attended the meetings and organised events. In this report I do not wish to go into too much detail; however, I would like to discuss some highlights of the session and the progress made in the issues addressed.

This session celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Conference of INGOs. Over the last four decades, and particularly in recent years, our institution has undergone far-reaching changes and shown its capacity for renewal. This renewal process is a key factor in its continued long-term existence, which is guaranteed for the most part by you, Ministers' Deputies, and by the Secretariat.

The Conference of INGOs adopted the [Recommendation on business and human rights](#) in order to support the promotion of recommendation CM/Rec(2016)3 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The document makes several recommendations to member states, the business sector and civil society. I invite you to take note of them.

During this session, we discussed [the impact of women's mobilisation, which has spread to several European capitals](#). In partnership with the parliamentary Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, a side event was organised with the participation of civil society representatives and members of parliament from Turkey, Poland, Iceland and Ireland. Despite the progress made, attacks on women's rights are real, especially given the wave of populism which manipulatively sets the rights of one group of people against those of others, in order to gain power. We also held a debate on populism in light of the Secretary General's latest report; participants included the Ambassador of San Marino and Chair of the Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group on Human Rights, Bellatti Ceccoli, and Mr Matjaž Gruden, Policy Planning Director.

Ministers' Deputies, there is only one main solution to populism. We must take into consideration the expertise NGOs have in the political arena. This dialogue must be built on transparent, deliberative processes and on the consideration of NGO contributions in the decision-making processes normally reserved for public authorities. I know that during this meeting, Ministers' Deputies, you started to discuss the guidelines concerning civil participation in political decision-making that were drawn up on the Secretary General's initiative, endorsed by the CDDG and to which the Conference of INGOs has contributed fully since preparations began. I would like to highlight the importance of this document, which offers innovative and pioneering ideas that are to the credit of the Council of Europe and its member states. These guidelines are eagerly awaited, not only by the Conference of INGOs, but also by our international partners and the public authorities that we met during our visits to member states.

During the plenary session, I submitted for discussion the reports by the Conference of INGOs on the visits made to member states. I am grateful to the Irish Government for its welcome and for the constructive dialogue that was established on the basis of [our report](#). I would also like to thank the Hungarian Government for its [critical comments](#) which, as desired, were made public and remain accessible online. Our Expert Council on NGO Law seems to have been the first Council of Europe body to publish, just before the April session of the Parliamentary Assembly, its [legal opinion on "the transparency of organisations supported from abroad"](#). I deeply regret that the Ambassador was not able to attend and contribute to the dialogue with the INGOs and the Hungarian civil society representative invited for the event.

I also reported on the meetings held in Cyprus with civil society members in the north and south of the island. I would like to thank the Permanent Delegation of the Republic of Cyprus for its willingness to listen regarding all the projects mentioned by the Conference members, showing strong collaboration with the Cypriot NGOs. International collaboration between organisations representing civil society is an important factor in the latter's vitality and progress.

During the same session, I informed the INGOs about the second meeting held at the Council of Europe with the representatives of NGOs based in Turkey. I do not have enough time to fully report on the state of utter confusion, or the strong sense of hope and expectation felt by Turkish civil society with regard to the Council of Europe's ability to help solve the deep crisis currently affecting Turkey.

It is deeply troubling to hear about the detention of the [Chair](#) and the Director of Amnesty International, a member organisation of the Conference of INGOs, along with the detention, on 5 July, of human rights defenders and two trainers who were taking part in a training event in south Istanbul; some of our associates are among those detained. Taking into consideration all the commitments made by Turkey at the Council of Europe, I ask the Committee of Ministers to examine the conditions of detention of the Chair of Amnesty International and to demand the release of the human rights defenders and the two foreign trainers arrested on 5 July 2017. (The eight human rights defenders in detention since 5 July are: İdil Eser, Amnesty International, İlknur Üstün, Women's Coalition, Günal Kurşun, lawyer at Human Rights Agenda Association, Nalan Erkem, lawyer at Citizens' Assembly, Nejat Taştan, Equal Rights Watch

Association, Özlem Dalkıran, Citizens' Assembly, Şeyhmuz Özbekli, lawyer, and Veli Acu, Human Rights Agenda Association). Mass arrests of civil society members, teachers, academics and those from other professions have dramatic consequences.

I also believe that the current conditions with regard to the protection of human rights defenders and freedom of association in Turkey are not such as to allow the official visit of the Conference of INGOs to take place. For while our members and associates are detained, I cannot visit Turkey.

If NGOs decide, and a lot of them have, to remove human rights advocacy from their statutes, or to halt international collaboration because they are being persecuted or fear being so, human rights and democracy are undermined.

In 2008, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe stated that it wanted to enhance protection for human rights defenders in Council of Europe member states and to promote their activities. This is fully in line with the principle of all rights defenders, namely, to prioritise protecting the rights of others, sometimes even by endangering yourself.

We live in difficult times. We need to protect NGOs, which have been the guardians of the values and rights promoted and defended by the Council of Europe over the course of numerous democratic transitions in Europe. The Council of Europe is able to do this because it remains the primary guardian of the rights we are all committed to.

Thank you for your attention

Anna Rurka
President of the Conference of INGOs