



**Statement of the President of the Conference of INGOs
at the launch of the Campaign
“Democracy Here – Democracy Now” - Reaching out to young people**

**organised by the Youth Sector of the Council of Europe
Strasbourg, 21 March 2022**

The Conference of INGOs includes a number of youth organisations and with its own youth delegates feels very close to the youth sector. We have a long-standing co-operation and heartily welcome the campaign to reach out young people in Europe to re-vitalise democracy. This project was already direly needed when planned. Now, amidst the catastrophe of the brutal war in Ukraine, it has become even more vital.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is a cruelly logical consequence of a 20-year long slide away from democratic reforms to a more and more authoritarian approach, an outright dictatorship and finally an unveiled tyranny. In all this time the Russian Federation has been a member of the Council of Europe. We could see the development, but even after the occupation of Crimea reactions were stalled, we allowed the Council of Europe to be blackmailed by Russia and finally we gave in. While all this was happening, Russia was not alone on this slide. Many countries have entered this dangerous course, not just outside Europe, but inside Europe and even inside the EU.

In the Council of Europe, we have tried to compromise, to apiece, to stick to consensus. We failed to draw the red lines and we failed to draw the consequences. We have thought, as so many did, that after the fall of the Iron Curtain the world would take a natural course towards democracy, freedom and human rights. Now we have to rebuild our resilience, we need to re-vitalise our democracies and finally stand by the values we treasure, not only verbally, but in our deeds. We can no longer look the other way and allow the decay of democratic values continue without consequences.

More than 30 years ago, when I was still a student, writing my doctor theses, I was in Bonn, when the Iron Curtain came crushing down. I remember how I thought: I was to become a historian and now I experience history happening before my own eyes. A short time later some very renowned colleagues announced “the end of history”. As history was now reaching its natural destination, democracy had prevailed and we were looking into a peaceful period of prosperity. Even then I thought this to be very wrong. History never comes to end, there is no natural course, and an everlasting period of prosperity is an illusion, as an American President had to learn the hard way announcing it in 1929.

We saw the slide down of some countries without taking the appropriate actions. We now have to look much more careful. Because we are all on this slide. Some still very much on the top and others further down. We have governments in Europe that have renounced the principles of liberal democracy. We have parties in “old” democracies that show open scorn for the democratic principles and the universality of human rights. And, as much as it pains me to say that as a representative of civil society, we have parts of our civil society who do no longer

believe that democracy has the answer to their problems, their needs, their demands and their anger.

They prefer to believe in conspiracy theories and admire autocrats. They are a symptom of a diversion in our society, a rift that is drifting ever further apart. We need to find ways of reconciliation, of ways to bridge this gap, to strengthen social cohesion and resilience again.

We must learn the lessons from recent events. Democracy is not something you win and then just keep for ever. It needs to be cared for, we need to fight for it, it must be re-discovered and renewed again and again. It is a permanent process. And as history is moving on and changing, every generation has to re-invent democracy anew. I do not have the slightest doubt that the young people of today will do that – simply because they already are. They have found new ways of co-operation, new lines of communication, new structures, fit for purpose and fit for the 21st century to organise themselves and voice their concerns.

Fridays for Future are just one very well-known example. Young people use social media in a way someone of my age never will be able to – and not just for fun but to exercise their democratic rights. But for their generation to be able to re-invent democracy and not to be forced to re-build it from smoking ruins, it is the duty and responsibility of my generation to ensure that we preserve this precious and fragile concept. We have to change, this institution has to change, our approach has to change. We have to understand that we are defending our values – against an aggressor who has dropped all pretence and shown his true colours as well as against all those who are still following on this path regardless of where it leads.

In all the tragedy of this moment a window of opportunity has opened. We must use it. We have not done so very well with quite a lot of windows of opportunity which have opened in the last 20 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain. This one we cannot miss. For this window of opportunity people die today in Ukraine, a whole country is reduced into smoking ashes and rubble. To miss this window of opportunity would not just be a mistake, it would be a crime. And the young generation would have to pay the price for it.