



## WORLD NGO DAY 2021 WEBINAR

# CHALLENGES FACING NGOS IN CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT SITUATIONS

FRIDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 2021  
10.00 - 13.00 CET  
ONLINE LIVE STREAMING

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On occasion of the World NGO Day 2021, we wish to pay tribute to the civil society work, focused on human rights, reconciliation and the rule of law, in the conflict and post-conflict contexts. The Council of Europe has seen within its member States multiple armed conflicts over the last couple of decades. Recently the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has shaken the diplomatic relations between Council of Europe states, but also international INGOs have seen their members opposing each other. Unresolved conflicts continue to affect certain parts of the European continent, putting at risk the safety, unity and democratic governance of societies and threatening the populations concerned, including NGOs. The Council of Europe has to contend with such situations. In these territories the NGOs contribute significantly by documenting all kinds of human rights violations, bringing them to light, caring for victims and assisting them in seeking justice. While certain information about the human rights situation in these regions is publicly available, little is known about the situation about civil society and non-governmental organisations, the environments they operate in and the challenges they are confronted with.

## **SECURITY SAFETY**

This is, probably, the major concern. The last two decades have seen NGO staff, individual activists, lawyers, journalists being harassed, threatened, abused, tortured and outright assassinated. In areas of armed conflict, persons collaborating with foreign organisations, including the most recognised humanitarian NGOs, are exposed to the risk of prosecution for espionage. The lives and safety of people involved in the work of peace-building NGOs are also frequently at risk, the authorities either targeting them directly or allowing very vehement discourse against them, thus favouring violent actions.

## **LEGISLATION**

Legislation governing NGO activities in post-conflict situations may be deficient in many respects and be amplified by the restrictive global trends (challenges on foreign funding, on registration, on excessive reporting requirements, restrictions on the dissemination of information, mandatory dissolution based on the overregulation of CSO in regard to counterterrorism or money laundering measures, etc.). Furthermore, as a result of the de facto situation on the ground the de facto applicable rules may be those lacking any democratic check and balances and meaningful judicial review by independent judges.

## **ACCESS TO THE FIELD AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS**

Both safety issues and legislation may prevent NGO from accessing the victims, providing social welfare and documenting human rights violations. The very fact of a visit to the conflict territory may result in sanctions upon return. The question of access to the field also arises for organisations whose mission is to prevent torture. NGO staff, activists, lawyers or journalists from the conflict or post-conflict areas may be prevented or restricted in their international travel to European or international fora to present their findings and assessment. The authorities of the Council of Europe Member States and the de facto authorities of the territories affected by the conflict may also impose sanctions or engage in retaliatory acts against those activists who appeared at the international fora disseminating their findings on the conflict or otherwise engaging in international advocacy. Transnational exchange of experience among civil society actors on how to avoid and overcome the pressure exerted on them is non-existent. The isolation of civil societies in these regions is a fact and the umbrella organisations play an important role of to support and protect grassroots civil society organisations acting in the de facto territories.

## TOP-DOWN POLARISATION

Growing polarisation within societies in Council of Europe member States is endangering democracy and the rule of law in Europe. Furthermore, as history shows us, the division within societies accompanied by hate speech can promote behaviors like desensitization, and dehumanization eventually leading to violence and conflict. In the 1970s, B. Moore showed that without a powerful, independent middle-class democracy does not endure. While his theory puts forward the socio-economic roots of democratic sustainability, today we face not only economic polarisation but also on an ideological one. Radical ideologies and extreme approaches tend to fracture the mainstream of a democratic society, which was its point of balance. The extreme positions approach each other and divide society at all levels of public and private life. In political debates the extreme groups amplify the tensions within communities that operate in a hostile climate marked by hate speech, negative stereotypes and prejudices addressed towards the 'other side'. The junction between the politics and radical ideologies, or even political and religious fundamentalisms restrict access to human and fundamental rights of the LGBT+ persons, women, migrants and vulnerable groups and minorities. In this context, violence remains a part of public life for a large number of people.

## PEACE-BUILDING AND RECONCILIATION

Since a number of years, civil society groups, NGOs and INGOs play an important role in the peace-building, transitional justice and reconciliation efforts on the territories affected by diverse conflicts. What can we learn from the past and current initiatives as those implemented in Northern Ireland and Western Balkans, specifically when the government attempts fail? The long-term implemented initiatives aiming to change attitudes through education initiatives, for example Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) in Northern Ireland, or the documentation of atrocities, prosecuting war crimes and public information (Humanitarian Law Center – Serbia) contribute to restoring the memory of war victims and their families, thus contributing to reconciliation.

## DRAFT PROGRAM

### 10.00-10.30 INTRODUCTION

Welcome: Anna RURKA, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe.

Keynote: Clément NYALETSOSSI VOULE, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association.

### 10.30-11.30 - PANEL 1: CIVIL SOCIETY in the context of armed conflict and post conflict situations.

Moderator: Gerhard ERMISCHER, Vice-Chair of the Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee of the Conferences of INGOs. Panelists (in alphabetical order): Kety ABASHIDZE (Human Rights House Foundation), Arzu ABDULLAYEVA (Helsinki Citizens Assembly), Laila AIT BAALI (Wo=Men), Krenare GASHI KRASNIQI (Regional Youth Cooperation Office - RYCO), Isuf HALIMI (European Center for Human Rights), Ion MANOLE (Promo Lex), Sasha ROMANTSOVA (Center for Civil Liberties), Arman SAHAKYAN (New Generation NGO), Anna SEVORTIAN (EU-Russia Civil Society Forum), Rory TRUELL (International Federation of Social Workers).

### 11.30-12.30 - PANEL 2: When violence is a part of public life – Civil Society and top-down polarization.

Moderator: Rares CRAIUT, Rapporteur of the Conference of INGOs. Panelists (in alphabetical order): Wielie ELHORST (European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups - EFLGBTCTG), Tezcan ERALP ABAY (Association of Civil Society Development Centre - STGM), Ana KOTUR-ERKIC (European Network on Independent Living - ENIL), Goran MILETIC (Civil Rights Defenders), Mirela RAJKOVIC - SEEYN), Piotr SADOWSKI (Volonteuropa), Nick VAN DER STEENHOVEN (Choose Love), Alfonso ZARDI (Pax Christi International), Beata ZWIERZYNSKA (Education in Action).

### 12.30-13.00 - DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Moderator: Anna RURKA, President of the Conference of INGOs. Panelists: Marcis LIORS SKADMANIS, Philanthropist, Founder of the World NGO Day; Christoph SPRENG – Vice President of the Conference of INGOs.