

EXCLUSIVE interview with Anna Rurka, the President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe

Academics and INGOs' participation within the Council of Europe amidst the creeping closure of civic space

What is the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs)? What are its main goals?

The Conference of INGOs represents civil society in the Council of Europe (CoE). It was established in a historical process as a result of the evolving relations between the Committee of Ministers (Council of Europe's decision-making body) and civil society since 1952¹. In 2003, the Committee of Ministers recognized the Conference of INGOs by awarding it participatory status² in the CoE. According to the Resolution 2016(3) of the Committee of Ministers, the Secretary General accepted the INGOs request to join the Conference of INGOs.

'Participatory' status in the Council of Europe, as opposed to a 'consultative' one is a unique accomplishment. To give just one example, different international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the European Commission or the United Nations do not have a similar body composed entirely of civil society organisations. Such a status helps to fulfil the Conference's main goals: to represent civil society organisations, to strengthen the position and interests of each INGO member and to allow civil society organisations to interact with the representatives of the governments, parliaments, local government and other NGOs. In practice, it also creates a space for multi-stakeholders to initiate dialogue on timely issues, which are believed to be a priority for the CoE.

What is the role of academics in the Conference and the CoE?

The CoE interacts with academics through different intergovernmental committees or CoE departments and divisions. The officials representing governments often have an academic background or they are academics appointed by governments. In the Conference of INGOs, academics may be representatives for NGOs and must be independent from governments.

To be more effective, NGOs' advocative actions must be based on scientific evidence and analysis. Thus, the effort of individual researchers and their associations is invaluable: they can help civil society and NGOs to adopt an evidence-based approach. Therefore, the

¹ More info about historical background here

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806ecbd2>

² More info <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/participatory-status>

Conference of INGOs created an Expert Council on NGO Law³ in 2008 with experts, including academics with a strong legal background. The experts are appointed for a three-year mandate by the Bureau of the Conference of INGOs. Furthermore, academics from other fields are also welcome within the Conference of INGOs in the fields that they commit to within their own NGOs. Universities, however, cannot be contributors due to the CoE definition of NGOs⁴.

Scientists and researchers also have an important role to play in political decision-making, science advocacy and campaigning for academic freedom, especially amidst the 'post-truth era' and resurgence of authoritarianism. Despite the division of the scientific community regarding the issue on association or disassociation between academia and activism, scientists need to speak up, at the very least, for science itself. The global movement for climate change is a great example of the activism initiated by the academics. Their concern is both the climate and the will to build political decision making on science. Nowadays, some politicians and anti-science movements want to deny scientific evidence, and have witnessed recent confrontation and polarisation regarding gender issues. The Conference has also recently focused attention on denouncing assumptions created to support a boycott of the CoE Istanbul Convention. Such denial is usually based on beliefs and ideologies and for this reason it is clear to me that today, academics cannot stay silent as either scientists, activists or simply as citizens..

Finally, in countries like Turkey or Hungary (amongst others) we observe increasing restrictions on academic autonomy. Preserving such autonomy within academic institutions is essential to educate younger generations on democracy and human rights and is only possible if the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of thought, and independence of the private and public universities are preserved and kept independent from government doxa. The University must be kept a 'republic' within the State, which itself has a definitive obligation to preserve this space as such. Therefore, NGOs like Eurodoc, have a special role to advocate for academic autonomy whenever it is endangered, and the Conference of INGOs is a perfect arena for this.

How can ECRs voice their concerns about the growing threat to academic freedom in Europe?

Each INGO member of the Conference of INGOs can propose a topic to or write a concern directly to the Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs, or to its Bureau if they wish to take a position on a specific topic. However, at the beginning of the 2018 mandate, we created a global action plan for the duration of the Standing Committee and Bureau mandates. INGO members were consulted and asked to propose a specific topic for the working groups within the thematic committees. In this way, a proposal of specific issues or

³ More info <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/ngo-legislation>

⁴ Our definition of NGOs comes from the Recommendation 2007/14 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the **legal status** of NGOs in Europe, the universities are not part of that, contrary to European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) which includes universities to the category of civil society organisations.

objectives could be included in the three-year action plan. Consequently, such a practice can be continued at the beginning of the new 2021 mandate.

Next, the Conference has two ways to act. First, if the Conference of INGOs wants to have a common position, it can draft and adopt a common recommendation, resolution or both. The recommendations which are adopted are sent to the Secretary General's cabinet and to other CoE bodies. It is important that the recommendations and resolutions are useful for the NGOs, the CoE, and civil society in the Member States. For me, however, the action is not finished when we only adopt the recommendations. Organizations need to understand what they want to do with it afterwards. For example, NGOs should also advocate and implement changes locally, nationally or in collaboration with CoE bodies or parliamentarians based on the recommendation or resolution. Sometimes, one such document is the first step in drawing the attention of Parliamentarians. In other cases, the recommendation or resolution of the Conference can also contribute to a parliamentary report under preparation.

Moreover, if the issue is 'politically hot', it is also easier to raise awareness about it during a one-hour side event when the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) or the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities sessions are held. During this direct contact with parliamentarians, we have the opportunity to discuss migration, modern slavery, political prisoners or academic freedom - all of which are of particular importance to the CoE and/or civil society in the Member States.

Secondly, while being represented in around twenty steering committees within the CoE (often intergovernmental ones), we can work on the aforementioned core issues by focusing on the essence for the documents content. This is only possible because the Conference of INGOs, PACE and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities have the status of a participant - individual NGOs can only request accreditation as observers there. For example, Eurodoc has an observer status in the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice. Nonetheless, none of these bodies have the right to vote in such a committee - only the members (i.e. governments) can do so. Therefore, I believe that academic freedom should persist as a vital topic for discussion within the internal committees of the Conference of INGOs, such as in the 'Human Rights' or 'Education and Culture' Committees. Members of those committees can start such a debate.

You often talk about the threat presented by the gradual closure of civic space. Are you concerned about the effect of this trend on early career researchers (ECRs)?

Surprisingly, such a closure comes from academics who restrict themselves. As an academic, I see that some individuals, depending on the country where they work, have a problem with speaking publicly about their civic engagement as academics. They argue that academia should be neutral and not engaged in social or civil activism. For me, this is a false debate. Every academic is also a free person and has the same rights to speak freely as any other citizen. However, the decision of whether an academic chooses to contribute to civic engagement is something that I personally respect.

What is more, facilitating a supportive environment for NGOs and preserving civic space is also in academia's best interest. If researchers cannot engage in civic activities when their rights and freedoms are threatened, academics will not be able to fulfil their careers. Academics need to understand that shrinking civic space threatens the right to freedom of association, which is one of the fundamental human rights. What is at stake is not only the right to register an association, but also the freedom to participate in public affairs. Public debates should be properly informed so that citizens can take decisions based on evidence delivered by experts in specific topics. Therefore, it is the duty of experts, including academics, to make information accessible even if it conflicts with the political mainstream or dominating ideology. For this reason, experts and academics must enjoy their freedom of expression, including publishing such information in places accessible to everyone (open access).

There are a few good practices which impress me as opposing forces to the shrinking of civil spaces nowadays. The Citizens' Assemblies found in Ireland, Estonia, and the UK represent tools for deliberative democracy. Estonia and Ireland offer the most compelling examples, where the Parliament accommodates recommendations made by citizens. The Citizens' Assembly emphasises the role of different stakeholders, as well as the interdependence of components in the process of decision-making: informed decision, deliberation, freedom of expression, and the right to participation. These are great examples to follow, especially by early career researchers like those represented by Eurodoc.

In conclusion, early career researchers who want to pursue an academic career should ask themselves what their vision of academia is. They need to make a choice how, as scientists, to use their academic freedom, be valuable for society and to connect with the rest of the world. In my opinion, universities can no longer remain neutral when faced with increasing pressure on core democratic values. A university is, after all, a part of society and must empower new generations to face the challenges of the future and drive social development. Academia shouldn't close civic space and suppress its own voice if it wants to change society. Ultimately, this task cannot be done solely from an office.

Eurodoc has held a participatory status at the Conference of INGOs since 2014. Eurodoc is also active on other levels of the Council of Europe, including the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice (CDPPE). Farouk Allouche (representative), Auréa Cophignon and Beata Zwierzyńska participate in the sessions on behalf of Eurodoc.

The interview was conducted by Beata Zwierzyńska, Eurodoc General Board Member.