

RTDE attending the Council of Europe Conference of INGOs, Strasbourg, June 2014

INTRODUCTION

RTDE representatives Aycke Smook (President) & Hugh Wynne (Treasurer) visited Strasbourg to attend the latest meetings at the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe (CoE) on 24 & 26 June 2014.

This was their third such visit, & two of the four days (in all 23 to 26 June 2014) had business planned that seemed sufficiently relevant to justify the time, effort, & expense of attending.

For the four-day Agenda, please see: http://www.coe.int/T/NGO/Articles/OING_Calendarier_2014_2.asp

Although much noted below was of limited relevance to RTDE, there were some useful pointers & lessons learned, & contacts were made & re-established.

DAY 1 (STRASBOURG, TUESDAY, 24 JUNE 2014)

The Agenda item was: 14.30–16.15, Room 2, Palais de Congress, Working Group “for the abolition of torture”.



Aycke Smook (President of RTDE) & Sylvie Bukhari-de Pontual (Chairperson of FIACAT) in discussion after the Working Group meeting “for the abolition of torture” at Strasbourg on Tuesday, 24 June 2014

The language of this meeting was French, apart from a brief contribution by a Russian delegation that preferred English. Aycke Smook’s summary, based on Hugh Wynne’s notes, is as follows:

Presenters:

Sylvie Bukhari-de Pontual, Chairperson of FIACAT, &

Nicolas Huet, Administrator & Logistic Project Officer & FIACAT Representative to the Council of Europe

FIACAT (International Federation of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture) <http://www.fiacat.org> is a federation of some 30 ACAT (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture) groups worldwide.

Nicolas pointed out that, in Europe, many countries were not particularly fastidious in their control of torture. In some such countries, even those that are members of the Council of Europe, official use of torture was widespread against government opponents.

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The Conference of INGOs was expected to accept the final Texts adopted & proposed by its Committees & Working Groups. The Conference of INGOs would then present these Texts as suggestions to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for them to discuss & adopt the Texts, & to take them forward as Resolutions.

After the meeting, Aycke & Hugh spoke to Nicolas & Sylvie about RTDE's interest in finding entry points to discuss end-of-life issues at the Conference of INGOs.

Although far from the concepts of torture normally addressed by the Working Group, RTDE explained that: *"Failure to provide adequate pain relief was often likened to torture..."*, & asked if FIACAT & the Working Group could agree that *"to prevent a person ending her/his own life at her/his own wish could sometimes be classified as torture"*?

Sylvie conceded that, if a doctor did not agree to relieve severe & needless suffering of a patient, it could be called torture, even if euthanasia, if requested by the patient, were postponed.

Sylvie had been quick to point out the connection to issues such as euthanasia. However, when asked by RTDE, she said her Committee would be very willing to receive a short paper proposition by RTDE for consideration & possible discussion at a future Working Group meeting.

RTDE expect FIACAT to send a report of the meeting, in English, to all who attended.

DAY 2 (STRASBOURG, THURSDAY, 26 JUNE 2014)

The Agenda item was: 08.30–09.15 Registration, 09.30–13.00 & 14.30–16.30 Meeting, Room G.03, Agora.

On arrival, INGO representatives were able to register for the "General Meeting" or Conference of INGOs, & collect some of many necessary (& optional) papers from tables outside the meeting room (Agora G.03). This process was rather unorganised. Some INGOs had provided pamphlets, which may be a hint for RTDE.

For the Agenda for the "General Meeting" or Conference of INGOs, please see:
http://www.coe.int/T/NGO/Articles/CONF_PLE_2014_OJ2_en.asp

1. The President, Jean-Marie Heydt, in the Chair, opened the meeting & welcomed INGOs to their Conference.
2. The meeting appointed two Rapporteurs, one for English & one for French.
3. After some discussion & a ruling from the President, the Agenda was revised to include (in Any Other Business) an item on Russian journalists in Ukraine & obstacles to the exercise of their profession.
4. There was discussion & criticism that the Report of the previous Conference (on 30 January 2014) had only just been made available, & then in French only. An English Report was to be made available the next week. One delegate stated that the Report should have been available in English & French no more than one week after the Conference. The Report was adopted, but with several abstentions & one vote against.
5. The President noted the work done by Committees & Working Groups between INGO Conference Meetings. A number Chairs & Vice-Chairs of Committees' had come to the ends of their Terms of Office, & procedures called for elections to these posts. The meeting appointed four Tellers, who were not candidates for election. By secret (paper) ballots, the Meeting elected Chairs & Vice-Chairs of the Democracy, Social Cohesion & Global Challenges Committee, the Education & Culture Committee, & the Human Rights Committee.
6. Alain Mouchoux made a presentation on Participatory Status. He had two themes:
 - a. How to interest INGOs & make them aware of the many possibilities that exist to engage with the Council of Europe in general & with the Conference of INGOs in particular?
 - b. How to help them familiarise themselves with the Council of Europe & its working methods?

He noted that, of 320 INGOs, about 120 (or 37.5%) were represented at the present Conference. INGOs played an important role in Democracy by contributions from Civil Society, ensuring Diversity in all areas. He questioned how INGOs might best use Participatory Status, & what it had given to INGOs.

He noted that the Conference of INGOs was represented in the Council of Europe & in the *quadrilogue* (a working methodology between (1) Governments, (2) Parliaments, (3) Local & Regional Authorities, & (4) Civil Society). There was a mutual responsibility to keep each other informed. The Participatory Status of INGOs was unique in the World.

The tools of Participation were common Working Groups & Meetings, including those with the Council of Ministers.

He suggested that INGOs do not get adequate recognition or mention by the Council of Europe, & that links with the EU need to be enhanced.

He said many worthy organisations fail to get INGO Participatory Status, & fear they will never achieve it.

INGOs & their Conferences are different things. INGO activity continues in the months between, & reports of this activity might be given at future Conferences of INGOs.

He noted complaints that a list of INGOs is not on the CoE website, which led to a proposal for sessions to guide new INGOs to this website, the CoE buildings, lists of hotels, etc. He said there was ignorance among INGOs, & a bias to those based near Strasbourg, which had led to suggestion of a pooled fares policy, to spread differing travel costs more equitably.

He suggested that INGOs could use Skype, email, & e-bulletins, but the CoE website was far too difficult to navigate. He thought modern software might make these things easier, & suggested a person should be nominated to receive & coordinate suggestions.

However, he warned that money was the key to implementing suggestions & to all that INGOs do & aim to do. He called for the Committee of Ministers to support its endorsement of INGOs with more money. He accepted the overall budget was limited, & would not increase, but it was appropriate to point out particular difficulties.

He suggested holding exit interviews with those INGOs who choose to leave, & said that INGOs that never attend should endure the consequences. He stressed that INGOs have diversity & energy, & their synergies should be identified & exploited.

7. The Meeting voted to adopt texts, previously adopted by its committees, on (a) Exploiting the Rights of Children, (b) Gender Based Violence, (c) Protecting those defending Human Rights, & (d) a Position Text on including Human Rights in the Paris Treaty (in addition to climate change, etc.).

8.1. Instruments of the Conference of INGOs. There had been a meeting in Chisinau to promote democratic decision-making, & to move from theory to practical action. Training programmes were to be established, even outside Europe, e.g. Australia, Brazil, & Canada. These would develop advocacy skills, & develop existing networks within Educational & Civil Society. Support would be provided at local level.

The next meeting would be in Tbilisi, with a side event on a topic such as "citizen participation in decision making". A dialogue toolkit "From Polarisation to Participation" is adjunct to a Code of Good Practice. There were about 50 INGOs in the Eastern partnership programme, but there were difficulties in organising meetings. General difficulties in Azerbaijan & Ukraine were mentioned in areas such as anti-corruption, tax, elections, justice, & administration. War in Eastern Ukraine had hampered reforms there. Deaths in Odessa & the Maidan were to be investigated. Europe must help Ukraine, or other countries may suffer similarly. Ukraine needed to be part of Europe, & the CoE should lead reforms there.

The Code of Good Practice applies also to the Southern Neighbourhood countries, such as Morocco & Tunisia. The UN Human Rights Declaration should be the basis for all progress. International Law should supersede National Law. Women should be included by quota or parity: parity is preferred, but quota is currently more achievable. It was noted that one women's party had a quota of 30% men.

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8.2. Expert Council on NGO Law. In Azerbaijan, there had been an Expert Opinion in 2011, & the Expert Council had been mandated to examine legislation & its application. A report was delivered in Baku in 2012, & amendments were made in 2013. The Expert Council was reviewing these amendments.

The Conference of INGOs was an important pillar of the *quadrilogue*. INGOs were studying the legal position of whistle-blowers, on which there was a global crackdown. Work continued & was expected to be reported at the next meeting in January 2015.

9. Appointment of five members of the Verification & Disputes Committee for a 3-year term. These were chosen for their competence & availability. Only five names had been submitted, & all were approved & validated

10. Open Questions. There was none.

11. Any Other Business. With consent of the Chairman, RTDE made a short announcement introducing its delegates. RTDE explained that, in the context of developments across Europe & wide discussion of end-of-life issues, RTDE represented some 25 Societies & groups in Europe pressing for recognition of the Right to Choose at the end-of-life, namely to exercise all voluntary options. RTDE represented a great many people in Europe, & on their behalf, sought the possibility for all peoples' end-of-life wishes to be recognised & respected by the Council of Europe.

Journalists (particularly Russian) in Ukraine had problems working, with risk of imprisonment without reason. Safeguards were needed to protect all journalists, their free movement, & their carrying of information. Journalists in war zones were subject to some rules, but they may stray beyond these, thus increasing their peril. The Education & Culture Committee had finalised a resolution, & would present it to the Council of Ministers shortly. The Council of Ministers had taken a clear position on this issue.

A Mission in South Ossetia (with members from Russia, USA, Germany, France, India, South Africa, Lithuania, Greece, & Italy) had made a declaration on future elections, to be submitted to the UN Secretary General for signature. To avoid violation of election procedures, ballot boxes would be signed by representatives of all parties, a unique arrangement. There was wide discussion that the CoE may observe elections there.

In answer to why the INGO Service Extraordinary Meeting had been cancelled, it was explained that work in progress had not been completed, so the Meeting had been postponed until January 2015.

Regarding reports of violence against women, it was said that each of the 47 CoE Nations had a representative, & INGOs should encourage these representatives to visit a women's shelter & report.

A delegate asked how people were chosen to represent the Conference of INGOs, & answer was given that, usually, they were chosen for competence & availability, depending on urgency. Some were volunteers.

Another had sent nominations for the North-South Prize, but received no reply. The Secretariat would check.

12. The President, Jean-Marie Heydt, announced that INGOs would hold their next Conference on Thursday, 29 January 2015, & he then closed the present Meeting.

POSTSCRIPT

As before, it was not easy to find our way in CoE, a labyrinthine organisation of many people & buildings. Happily, however, some of the people we met in June 2013 & January 2014 recognized us, which made things simpler. RTDE has now established a presence, & made further contacts, which should be of help in the future.

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