

## **ICoE Conference for NGO's January 27 – 30, 2014**

RTDE representatives Aycke Smook (President) & Hugh Wynne (Treasurer) visited Strasbourg on 29 & 30 January 2014 to attend the latest INGO meetings of the Council of Europe (CoE).

This was the second such visit, & only two of the four days (in all 27 to 30 January 2014) seemed sufficiently relevant to justify the time, effort, & expense of attending.

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

### **DAY 1**

On arrival, a meeting of the Human Rights Committee was in progress, & the agenda item under discussion was a draft decision on "combating hate speech". The Humanists gave support to those pressing for freedom of speech, even religious evangelism, although this was being suppressed in some places. A French contributor said: "hate speech was not being opposed in French schools, as it should be, & a call was made for more help & other resources to be provided to Social Workers & Teachers. The draft decision was adopted with one abstention.

The next topic was the long-term future of the European Convention on Human Rights. Reforms were needed to improve efficiency, but these must not undermine the protection of individual citizens. All present must be involved in alerting the INGO Conference of threats & problems as they may be seen to arise. In March 2014, a working group will look at submissions received. Later, in Oslo, the future of the European Court of Human Rights will be examined, particularly the aspects of Human Rights & dignity, economic impacts on Human Rights, & Human Rights in a multi-cultural society.

This was followed by discussion of the European Social Charter, & monitoring of adherence to this in European States. States were not obliged to ratify all sections, but at least 6 sections from the total of 9 must be ratified for a state to accede to the Charter. Collective complaints may be made by several bodies & parties, including some INGOs. Certain reported violations were mentioned, & the steps taken to achieve compliance. Training in making Collective Complaints was requested by some. Such training is provided 3-yearly as routine.

A document on Human Rights & Religion was discussed with great emphasis on a desired amendment to include "gender identity" in one sub heading. A long plea was made for this, & detailed discussion followed. A vote was taken from each INGO present. This process was confused & unclear, with some representatives voting all ways: for, against, & to abstain! The amendment was ruled duly defeated, but I was not at all sure that this was the true sense of the INGO representatives.

Following this was a brief presentation on true gender equality, insisting that topics, such as emancipation, tended to consider women but not men. This continued to consider gender equality in political & democratic processes. All violence was to be opposed. It was suggested that some survivors of violence, especially sexual violence, should be invited to present, briefly, on how they had managed their violent confrontations & had managed to cope & survive.

The matter of sectarian excesses & violations of human rights was very briefly discussed. This was followed by programming arrangements for a future meeting at Turin on 17 October 2014, to coincide with a meeting at the Duma, Moscow concerning social workers & social aid & further discussion at the French Embassy at Moscow.

Finally, there was discussion about the equal participation by those with mental disabilities in cultural, sports, & leisure activities.

There was no other business, & the meeting closed.

## **DAY 2**

On arrival, INGO representatives were able to sign-in for the "General Meeting" or the Conference of INGOs, & collect some of the necessary (& optional) papers from tables outside the meeting room (Agora G.03). Some organisations had provided pamphlets.

The President, Jean-Marie Heydt, opened & welcomed INGOs to their Conference. Four INGOs had joined recently, & were greeted en-bloc. He noted that it was a political meeting, with its main role being to influence the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), & he stressed that the diversity of INGOs was a great strength. The Conference would hear from representatives from Ukraine: it must hear from all stakeholders, & it may mediate with governments. Written documents produced must be followed up by action.

On considering the Agenda, there was vociferous objection to omission of an item on "Gender Based Violence", which was proposed by the Standing Committee to be deferred to a side event at the June 2014 Conference. Appeal was made that a Standing Committee proposes, but the Conference decides. Clarification was also sought on how Conference of INGOs' money is spent on attendances. In addition, there was a need for a procedure for the Conference to deal with urgent matters arising in the World. There was some support for all these points, & the President agreed to move the omitted item to AOB.

The Synopsis of the 27 June 2013 meeting (not attended by RTDE) was considered, & there was criticism of its late production. Nevertheless, it was Adopted.

The CoE Director of Democracy spoke of Ukraine, of developments in democracy,

& more generally. There was a concurrent debate in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), & there were new developments daily. CoE's concerns were solely: Human Rights, Democracy, & the Rule of Law. Some 11 Ukraine "anti-demonstration" laws, now set for repeal, did not comply with CoE Standards.

The CoE future Budget had been approved on a "zero nominal growth" basis, equivalent to a 2% per year reduction, but it was said this would not affect INGO Conferences directly, & there would even be some increases.

Questions were raised about: Democracy & Islamic Fundamentalism, Democracy in Unrecognised States, who were the Winners & Losers in the new Budget, & Solidarity among Civil Society in Europe. The Director said that Abuses in Freedom of Expression should always be reported, there was an on-going problem with the management of Migration (which would not stop), & a world forum on this might reverse gains made by INGOs. Shortcomings in Monitoring should always be identified, so they could be acted upon.

The 2013 INGO Activity Report was like a rear view mirror. Some 27 Working Groups serve the INGO Conference Committees. Eight indicators are shown on the website. In 2013, Tunisia had been a priority. Support was given to countries where Human Rights were not respected, e.g. Belarus. INGO Participatory Status was now ten years old. Some 140 INGOs [of over 400] now pay their annual subscriptions. The 2013 INGO Activity Report was approved, despite its text being unavailable.

There were 5 candidates for election as Rapporteur. Each was allowed 2 minutes to speak or be spoken for. Of 110 INGOs registered, 107 voted 14, 14, 9, 61, & 9 votes, respectively. Anna Rurka was elected as a Rapporteur. One INGO Bureau member had resigned owing to a career move & a resulting conflict of interest.

An item on INGO Service funding examples, on the website agenda, was omitted from the business.

INGO initiatives. The Expert Council on NGO Law was renewed & expanded order to create & expand the enabling environment in member countries, which requires a study of national legislation. In 2013, the Russian law creating a category of "Foreign Agents" was considered, & an Expert Opinion was prepared & presented to the Russian Government in October 2013 at a Round Table meeting, which had allowed Russian INGOs to express opinions. There has been no follow-up yet with the Russian Government, but their disposition seemed favourable. For 2014, Russia will be followed-up, & Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Turkey, & Hungary will be considered. In 2014, Azerbaijan will hold the Chair of the Committee of Ministers. A website ([www.dialoguetoolkit.net](http://www.dialoguetoolkit.net)) was developed for exchanging information efficiently, seemingly in a chat format, almost as a blog.

Representatives of Ukraine (population 45 million) explained that it was divided,

geographically, between "East & South" areas & "West & Central" areas &, politically, between Liberal, National Democrat, & Nationalist groups. There was strong argument about the present disturbed situation there. Diverse demonstrators were united by a wish to live under the rule of law. Illegal violence continues. There are numerous abuses. There is escalation. There is a catalogue of woes. A Declaration was adopted, with some amendments.

Transversal questions were discussed regarding Child victims & Child perpetrators of abuse. There had been, & would continue to be, Gender Equality activity in 2013 & 2014. Topics would include: the Media Image of Women, & the Istanbul Convention on Gender Equality, to be followed by Monitoring.

A number of Texts, previously prepared by INGO Committees, were all Adopted.

A representative had asked how time management & efficient operation might be improved. It was suggested this should preferably be referred to the INGO Bureau or Secretariat, or that a Working Group should be set up.

Outside the meeting, a number of representatives had concurrently attended, outside the CoE Palais, a Memorial meeting to the memory of the Holocaust on this, the Holocaust Day.

Texts (mentioned above) on "Gender Based Violence" & Gender Equality in Syria had been submitted too late, & stood as Opinions only. On a procedural vote 25-16, with 2 abstentions, the Conference decided it could not vote on these texts, but it endorsed the general sense of these Opinions. The President ruled that they should be deferred to a side event at the June 2014 Conference.

There was a report on a social workers' meeting at Moscow's Duma, at which social workers undertook to examine the Russian law on social disbursements. There had been a cognate debate, at the French Embassy in Moscow, which supported this proposed action.

An opening statement of enthusiasm & support was made by a representative of the International Association of Judges & Prosecutors, which was represented for the first time since becoming an INGO. (This was a lesson & example for RTDE.)

It was announced that the next Conference of INGOs would be on Thursday 26 June 2014, & the present meeting was then closed.

#### Postscript

It was not easy to find our way in this labyrinthine organisation (CoE) but, happily, we were recognized by some of the people we had met in June 2013, which made it much easier for us.

After the session, we spoke with the President of the Human Rights Committee (HRC), Annelise Oeschger, who told us that choice in dying at the end of life is a very controversial topic indeed. She advised that working from the "bottom up"

might be preferable to working from the “top down”, especially at first. Religion plays a big role, especially, but not only, with the new Member Countries in Eastern Europe. She advised us to join an HRC working group, & said she would tell us how to get into such a group, & which of these working groups could be the best for our aims.

Anja Wiersinga, International Alliance of Women, representative at the Council of Europe & the United Nations, told us that it took her a few years to get in the position she has now.

Jane Crozier-Vincent, of the CoE Civil Society Division, told us that it can cost much time &/or a lot of money to pay people to lobby for causes.

The representative of the “Association Européenne des Enseignants”, Heleen Jansen recounted the same story. She said that, if we believed in our mission, eventually we would reach the goals for which we were working!

I thank Hugh for his secretarial activities.

Your President  
Aycke Smook