



Provisional edition

Wednesday 23 January 2019, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 5

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The sitting is open.

Our first item of business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in Document “Commissions (2019) 01 Addendum 2”. Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Assembly’s committees agreed to?

They are agreed to.

Joint debate: Media freedom as a condition for democratic elections / Public service media in the context of disinformation and propaganda

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): We now come to the joint debate on two reports, both from the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media. The first is entitled “Media freedom as a condition for democratic elections”, Document 14669. It will be presented by Lord George FOULKES on behalf of the rapporteur, Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN, who is now no longer a member of the Assembly, and with an opinion from the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy presented by Ms Olena SOTNYK, Document 14809. The second is entitled “Public service media in the context of disinformation and propaganda”, Document 14780, presented by Mr Petri HONKONEN.

I remind you that I shall interrupt the list of speakers at 12 noon to accommodate the address by the President of Finland. The debate shall resume this afternoon at 3:30 p.m. after that address and, of course, after the lunch break. I remind colleagues that speaking time in this debate is limited to three minutes.

I call Lord George FOULKES, on behalf of the rapporteur, to present the first report. You have 13 minutes in total, which you may divide between the presentation of the report and the reply to the debate.

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC): I start by paying a warm tribute to the rapporteur on the topic, Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN, who is sadly no longer a member of the Assembly. During her years in the Assembly, she did a tremendous job promoting the core values of the Organisation. The report on “Media freedom as a condition for democratic elections” is further proof of her excellent work and of her commitment

In this report:

- speeches in English are reported in full;
- speeches in other languages are reported using the interpretation and are marked with an asterisk (*);
- speeches in German and Italian are reproduced in full in a separate document.

to upholding the principles and standards of the Council of Europe. It is a great honour for me to be asked to present the report that she has worked on and that was unanimously adopted by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media yesterday.

The report deals with two deeply interconnected issues of crucial importance to our societies: the freedom of the media and the right to vote. Voters have no genuine freedom of choice if that choice is not well informed, so the media must be free to inform the public without being subject to political, economic or other pressures, and with due regard to professional ethics. Clearly, media freedom is an essential condition for democratic elections.

For the first time, the report examines in depth the role of the media during election campaigns. It also pays attention to the growing politicisation of the media, to undue pressures on media professionals, and to the mounting prevalence of disinformation during elections. The draft resolution addresses the ways in which various types of media reflect the platforms of political parties and candidates. It calls on member States to promote a free, independent, and pluralist media environment and to ensure total transparency when media are owned by political parties or politicians.

Broadcast media – radio and television – play a crucial role during election campaigns, so we call on member States to include, in their regulatory frameworks, the obligation for the broadcast media to cover campaigns fairly and impartially. That obligation must ensure that opposition parties also get balanced coverage.

Public service media are a particularly sensitive subject in the context of elections. Their editorial independence must be guaranteed. We must put an end to any attempts to influence them or to transform them into government-controlled media. The State should not be the boss of public service media. They must not be subject to any political or financial pressures for the information that they disseminate.

Beyond traditional media – the mainstream media, such as radio, television, and newspapers – our report also examines the growing role of social media, which we have spoken about in many contexts in the Assembly. That technological and social shift has changed the impact of the media on the whole democratic decision-making process, notably during election periods. New media actors enable political parties and candidates to pass their message directly to the people – the electorate – and are a means for their supporters to disseminate those messages widely.

At the same time, the nature of online communication makes it difficult to apply to social media the principles that the professional media are required to comply with. You all know well that most attempts at regulation have failed to produce convincing results of compliance. Some attempts have been heavy-handed and have amounted to censorship. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of self-regulation by social media, which often disregard the conventions that have been widely accepted by the professional media.

Given the existing legal gaps, the various forms of malevolent online communication endanger the smooth and fair conduct of the electoral process and, ultimately, democracy itself. There is sufficient proof that autocratic regimes, anonymous stakeholders, and interest groups use social media to manipulate public opinion with false news, co-ordinated disinformation campaigns, trolls, and bots to attack not only candidates of the opposing camp but human rights defenders, civil society groups, and journalists.

What should the response to those threats be? The draft resolution calls on member States to, “implement effective strategies to protect the electoral process and democracy from the threat of information manipulation...through social media” and to “develop specific regulatory frameworks for Internet content at election times and include...provisions on transparency in relation to sponsored content published on social media”. The public have a right to know the sources that fund electoral advertising, or indeed any other information or opinion. A clear legal liability should also be established for the social media companies that publish illegal content that is harmful to candidates.

We must be vigilant and ensure that sanctions provided for in relation to unlawful content are not used to force the self-censorship of opponents’ opinions and critical views instead. The application of extreme measures, such as blocking entire websites, should be rigorously limited by law. In this connection, Internet intermediaries must co-operate with civil society and organisations specialised in the verification of content. Moreover, they should develop initiatives offering users fact-checking services – very important – and tools to ensure that all information is confirmed by an authoritative third-party source.

Finally, let us not forget that media regulators are a key player in the electoral process. They must be totally independent of political and economic powers. Also, they have to be able to address the challenges posed by the use of social media as a vehicle of political communication. They have to get up to date and counter information disorder. Therefore, member States need to enhance the operational capacities of their media regulators.

In conclusion, I hope that colleagues will support the draft resolution that our committee has submitted to you and agreed unanimously. Even more importantly, I urge you to pursue our resolution within your parliaments and promote its effective implementation by our governments. Thank you very much.

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. You have nearly six minutes remaining.

I call Ms Olena SOTNYK, Rapporteur for the opinion of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. You have three minutes.

Ms Olena SOTNYK (Ukraine, ALDE, Rapporteur for opinion): First, I pay tribute to the rapporteur and thank the vice-chairman of the committee, who presented the report. This co-operation was extremely important because I think it was the first time that two committees have approved all amendments unanimously, so I thank you for the great co-operation.

The report addresses the problem of the technological shift that has created the new tools of social media and online media. Of course, that has had a tremendous impact on democratic institutions, the results of elections and the decision making of our electorate. Logically, the report raises specific challenges that current regulation does not fully address. We are all politicians in this Chamber, and, to tell you the truth, many politicians and political actors misuse these new tools, using them to spread propaganda, undermine ideas of democracy, and put democratic institutions at risk. It is therefore our personal responsibility, as politicians who support democratic institutions, the rule of law, and the idea of democracy, to provide guarantees in our parliaments and societies, and to be an example of best practice in using social media and new institutions in the interest of our electorate and our citizens.

It is our responsibility and our main interest to find a way for pluralism and freedom of the media in order to provide the most information for our citizens and the role of this Assembly in that regard is tremendous. I am not going to remind you of all our resolutions on this issue because a lot of reports are currently being prepared. However, the Venice Commission has a code of best practice for electoral campaigns and this should be implemented in our countries.

In the long term, there is a risk of destroying critical minds and democratic choice, and this can lead to the destruction of democratic institutions, as we see in some States today. We can lose our future and the future of democracy, which is why I am calling on all members to be responsible and to use their authority as much as possible to provide particular standards.

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. I now call Mr Petri HONKONEN, Rapporteur for the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, to present the second report. You have 13 minutes in total, which you may divide between the presentation of the report and your reply to the debate. The floor is yours.

Mr Petri HONKONEN (Finland, ALDE, Rapporteur): It is my privilege and honour to present this report in our Assembly.

As has been stated by previous speakers, media freedom is a precondition for free democratic societies and free and fair elections, as well as an enabler of freedom of speech and thought. This topic is particularly relevant for me personally. Finland will have general elections in April this year and, as a politician – as we all are – I will be depending on media for coverage but at the same time will be much scrutinised by the very same media for my previous and current actions. This kind of co-dependence is a positive and necessary element of democracy.

We are all surrounded by fake news, disinformation, and information disorder – whatever we want to call it – and we must not forget the underlying reasons for it, which are to erode our democratic societies from within, and to create divisions, tensions and polarisation. Fake news, disinformation, and propaganda are here to

stay. We cannot make them go away by writing new legislation or by trying to catch the trolls and propagandists. They will always be one step ahead. So what can we do? One important element is education. We must ensure that we and our people are equipped with the necessary skills to spot fake news from the constant flow of information and news. Another important element is accurate and high-quality journalism delivered by independent media, free from government pressure.

In this report, I focus on the role of public service media in dismantling and tackling disinformation. This of course comes with responsibility as it requires editorial and institutional independence. In return, public service media must be expected to deliver high-quality journalism on matters of public concern, based on reliable information and a diversity of unbiased opinions. Public service media should not be, nor become, the mouthpiece of any government. However, public service media faces many challenges. Independence is threatened by attempts to increase government control over content, and funding has been cut in recent years. Public service media also faces criticism for allegedly distorting the digital news marketplace, as it offers news stories online free of charge. At the same time, it has to compete with new forms of media and social media over content and relevance, which has led to a demand for quick and entertainment-oriented news. This all weakens public service media's capacity to counter disinformation and propaganda.

During my preparations for this report, I have been thrilled to discover that the challenges I have mentioned are being tackled, and my report is full of examples of good practice. I was particularly impressed by the examples presented to me when I visited the BBC in London. I am aware that the scale and resources of the BBC are quite different from many other public service media outlets in Europe, but what it does to educate its audience, to spot fake news, and to expose wrongdoing is still worth mentioning. One service that I found very relevant not only for the United Kingdom but for all of us was BBC Monitoring, which consists of a large international team with local knowledge and language skills who look at local information, analyse it, and scan it for relevance in areas where reliable news is hard to find.

I was also impressed by the various initiatives in public service media in member States to engage with younger audiences through relevant and interactive programmes. The TV series "Skam" produced by Norwegian NRK has received wide audiences all over Europe, but there are many more examples of programmes aimed at involving young people in discussions on topical affairs in controlled forums. Attracting young audiences is not an easy task for public service media. However, fostering critical thinking and media literacy is a crucial element in equipping young people with the skills to spot false news and propaganda.

In the draft resolution, I propose several measures aimed at member States, public service media organisations, Internet intermediaries, and the European Broadcasting Union. One important aspect of countering disinformation is fact-checking. I was especially impressed by the resources put into fact-checking when visiting the BBC, but I know that many news outlets, whether public or private, put many resources into ensuring the truthfulness of their news stories. I am sure my dear colleague Ms GÜLSÜN BİLGEHAN, who is sadly not with us here today, will agree with me when I say that this is particularly important in times of elections. In order to make an informed decision, the people must be able to trust that the statements presented in the media are based on facts. As accurate, critical, and high-quality journalism benefits society as a whole, I want to underline the call for member States to secure adequate funding for public service media and to support research into information disorder to better understand its impact. I also think it is important to discuss public service media in a modern context and to look at new tools for user-generated content and artificial intelligence-driven fact-checking.

The resolution also calls on public service media to consider making it their priority mission to counter disinformation and propaganda and to engage with, for example, social media against information disorder. I would encourage the development of educational programmes to inform people about the importance of source criticism and fact-checking.

I hope that we can all agree that this issue requires our immediate attention. Already we have seen evidence of disinformation that has had an impact on election results. As open and uncorrupted information is the basis for the functioning of democracy, we are indeed facing a very serious challenge. The media are not the enemy and should not be perceived as such. In these times when it is possible to find any kind of information to support our own narrow or wide views, it is important to know that the free press is there to present us with the truth. Therefore, the Assembly should take a strong position on this.

Let me finish by saying a heartfelt thank you to the secretariat and the Committee members for their support during the preparation of this report. A special thank you also goes to my British colleagues for hosting an excellent fact-finding visit. I look forward to questions and comments on this report.

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Petri HONKONEN. You have five minutes remaining.

In the debate I call first Ms Dubravka FILIPOVSKI.

Ms Dubravka FILIPOVSKI (Serbia, FDG, Spokesperson for the group): Freedom of media, rule of law, and independence of judiciary are three basic principles of democratisation and progress of every European society. Serbia adopted a new law on media, in line with the Venice Commission, according to which privatisation of media was implemented, as well as byelaws which are already being implemented. Also, a new media strategy, up to 2024, is in progress, which in the spirit of the best examples of international experiences should contribute to further improvement of the media climate in Serbia. It is important to emphasise that in Serbia false news is not criminalised because this could be interpreted as suppression of freedom of expression. However, regarding true coverage, the violation of standards of journalism as a profession originates in economic reasons, namely media competing to stay in the market.

Increasing violence against journalists in European countries, such as Slovakia and Malta, usually ends in death. Unfortunately, in Serbia, one journalist experienced an unpleasant case of arson, and the culprit was quickly seized, but the person who commissioned the crime is still at large. I expect and believe that the authorities will soon resolve this case positively. However, the situation regarding some opposition politicians is difficult, because they pester journalists whose reporting they do not like, and that is not good.

In conclusion, a significant part of media is taken up by social media, which is very influential, and citizens can express themselves freely, unlike in some countries in the world, and that is good for freedom of speech.

Mr Andrzej HALICKI (Poland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): I congratulate the rapporteurs. This is an important issue and these are important reports, especially at a time of growing dissemination of disinformation. Of course, democracy does not exist without a pluralistic independent media market, and we have to support the pluralism and independence of media, which should be free of political or economic pressure.

I wish to emphasise two connected points. Voters have the right to have full information to make a free choice. The first is the special role and responsibility of public media. Even state-owned public media does not belong to the government or the ruling party: it is for citizens. It belongs to the citizens. We have to say that loudly because we have seen several cases in which public media have aggressively disseminated propaganda and even disinformation. We have to say loudly that that should be punished and eliminated by our attempts to fight it. Public media belongs to the citizens, and it has to be able to criticise the government. The role of public media is important, especially in election campaigns and for the electoral process.

The second issue is the dissemination of hate speech and disinformation. This is now a well organised process used by enemies of democracy. We have to support the private sector in fighting this – there is a good example of co-operation between private companies such as YouTube, Facebook, Google, and Twitter, and a code of practice was signed three months ago. We also have to support journalist organisations and broadcasters to fight hate speech and the dissemination of disinformation. We have to do that actively because hate speech activity, disinformation, and information disorder are growing.

In the name of the Group of the European People's Party, I confirm that we strongly support all the recommendations in the reports.

Ms Angela SMITH (United Kingdom, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): These are very welcome reports. One reasserts the importance of free media to democracy and makes useful recommendations for practical progress in improving the status of the media in member States. The other argues, rightly, for a major role for independent public service broadcasters in combating what it refers to as “information disorder” and its growth online, especially on social media.

There are problems across all member States. The worst attacks on free media are the murder of journalists. Seven journalists have been killed in Europe since the beginning of 2017. Below that, there are a range of actions, from arrest through to harassment, designed to intimidate journalists and the media. Again, there is a worrying trend in this regard and the United Kingdom is not immune. There has been a particularly worrying increase in intimidation in the past two or three years. A senior BBC journalist, Laura Kuenssberg, the political editor, needed police security protection at the Labour Party conference in 2017, as well as in the general election that year. However, it is not just Labour extremists who have intimidated this particularly fine

journalist; it has also come from other political parties – all because they do not like what she reports about the party they support. She receives considerable online abuse. It is a clear case of the victim being blamed by those who condone the actions of extremists.

We have also seen misinformation in the United Kingdom. There is a particularly awful and abusive online account called Skwawkbox, which earlier last year ran a constant campaign of deliberate misinformation designed to undermine evidence that the Russian Federation was the prime suspect in the Skripal poisoning. We have to tackle this problem. Misinformation is a serious threat to our democracy. I have used my own country as an example to demonstrate that, but it is a problem across all our member States.

I support the recommendations. The Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group supports the recommendations. We have to get this right. The Council of Europe needs to campaign vigorously on this issue. We need to see leadership. Let us run a good, vigorous campaign to tackle this problem. Let us get behind this morally and politically to make sure we see progress very quickly, so we can look forward to a future in which we have a free media, and a reduction in and the elimination of abuse and misinformation online, in the press, and on broadcast.

Ms Naira ZHRABYAN (Armenia, EC, Spokesperson for the group)*: Speaking as a journalist, an MP, and an ordinary citizen, I consider that the issue we are debating this morning requires an urgent solution. It is quite clear that a free media is a precondition for the holding of democratic elections. However, in the world today, the industry of fake news is openly challenging professional media. This phenomenon is spreading even more quickly than the Ebola virus.

The factories of falsehood are particularly active during elections, manipulating public opinion. The fake news industry creates a distorted reality, blurring the lines between truth and falsehood. I am convinced that it is high time for national Parliaments that are members of the Council of Europe to seriously grapple with the problem of fake news and try to come up with legislative solutions against the industry of falsehood to ensure that ordinary citizens can get hold of objective and genuine information. Germany enacted stringent laws against fake news and hate speech on social media a long time ago.

I myself have witnessed the terrible extent of hate speech on social media. In this new media environment, where misinformation and false news can be spread speedily and act as tools of manipulation, we have seen a distorted reality emerge, leading to anarchy in the area of information. All member States of the Council of Europe should shoulder their responsibility for the media. This is a serious problem for the whole of society and it requires the involvement of non-governmental organisations.

I fully agree with our distinguished rapporteurs that fake news distorts public opinion and has an impact on the electoral process. We well understand why social media platforms are currently racking up their efforts and spending tremendous amounts of money to spread falsehood. I have a simple solution. Let us set up a working party within the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media to try to come up with legislative and legal solutions to combat fake news. Speaking as a Member of the Armenian National Assembly and as a former reporter, I will be initiating a debate against fake news with genuine media and non-governmental organisations dealing with this issue to protect free expression of ordinary opinions and the free press to ensure that all citizens can have access to genuine and impartial information.

Mr Raphaël COMTE (Switzerland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group)*: A number of very intelligent things have already been said. I do not want to lower the tone, but I would like to comment on the financial side of things, something that was picked up in the report adopted by our colleague Mr Petri HONKONEN.

The media is undergoing a real revolution, as far as business models are concerned, as a result of the drop in advertising revenue. For private media, things have become very complicated. Good journalists need the financial resources to be able to do their job. The public service media are fortunate to be entitled to set resources, but we need stable independent resources as well. The public service media, as has already been said, are not there to act out the will of the government. They are not subject to the same economic pressures and they should be entitled to resources placed at their disposal to carry out a number of tasks that may not be cost-effective from an economic point of view. Therefore, their resources need to be maintained and secured. We also need to ensure that their budgets, as far as is possible, are not contingent on decisions made by governments and parliaments.

In a number of member States, there are licence fees for public service media. That is one way to secure those resources. Licence fees are quite well perceived in some countries. For example, in Switzerland we had a referendum last year on the licence fee for radio and television. The question put to the Swiss population was, "Do you want to abolish the licence fee? Do you want to make savings of €350 a year?" More than 70% of the population said no. They wanted to continue with the levying of the licence fee. If you explain to the population just how important the licence fee is, I think they understand that. If they want high-quality media, they need to be willing to provide the requisite resources.

Let me provide another concrete example of what public service media can do. France and Germany signed a friendship co-operation treaty in Aix-la-Chapelle. A whole series of fake news was spread across social networks suggesting that the treaty had been signed in Germany, not France, and that Alsace was going to be given up to Germany. Well, I do not think that that is quite the case! The policemen in the Strasbourg streets today looked French rather than German to me. French television carried out a very clear analysis of exactly what the treaty entails. It made a clear distinction between facts and opinions. You can, of course, form your own opinion on what the treaty means, but there are a number of facts that are very clearly established that you can agree on. That is one of the roles of public service media. They need to take the necessary time to establish the facts and perhaps some private media do not have the time to do so. That is why it is of vital importance to maintain public service media and to give them the resources they need to get on with their task. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group support the reports that have been submitted.

Mr Hişyar ÖZSOY (Turkey, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Rather than speak about the issue in terms of some abstract and general categories, let me engage the two reports by focusing on my own country of Turkey, where, unfortunately, we have experienced almost every single problem outlined in the two reports regarding media freedom.

After the abortive coup in July 2016, about 200 media outlets were not only banned under emergency rule, but their properties were unlawfully confiscated. Many were Kurdish or opposition media. Over 3 000 journalists lost their jobs. Turkey is currently the world's biggest prison for journalists. In April 2018, the Stockholm Centre for Freedom denounced the situation: 200 journalists have been arrested, 59 have been convicted and 140 are wanted and are forced to live abroad. In December 2018, the International Press Institute stated that 161 journalists are in prison, and 95% of the media is controlled directly by the government, which vilifies journalists and critical intellectuals as terrorists, traitors or enemies of the state. There is extreme censorship of websites and social media. Thousands have been detained for social media posts, and hundreds have been arrested. Even Wikipedia is banned in Turkey under the pretext of national security. Self-censorship has become the main mechanism for surviving the ongoing witch hunt against the media and society.

Pro-government businessmen have a virtual monopoly over the mainstream media. Public media, funded by citizens' taxes, has turned into an official propaganda machine for the government. During the elections the overwhelming majority of the media denied the opposition fair coverage time. For example, in the run-up to the June 2018 elections, the state broadcaster devoted 181 hours to President Erdoğan and his allies and only 16 hours to his main rival despite the legal requirement to give them equal air time.

The media were never free in Turkey, but in parallel with the establishment of an authoritarian presidential system over the past three years, media freedom in Turkey has deteriorated dramatically. Authoritarian regimes never like free media and intellectuals who produce and disseminate critical knowledge. If we are to win the struggle for democracy in Turkey and elsewhere, we must ensure at least a degree of media freedom, so that citizens have access to reliable information and a diverse range of viewpoints. That is necessary if they are to make informed decisions about their political future.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC)*: I want to start where the previous speaker left off. He was reporting on the disastrous state of the media in Turkey. In that context, I remind you that this report is the last report of Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN – a very able colleague, who was a journalist and had first-hand experience of the situation in the country.

This is one of the most important issues that we have to address. When we go out to observe elections, we must also look at the media landscape and assess whether there is a free media, which is able to report the situation free from any financial pressure, and whether governments engage in confrontation with other candidates. That is often not the case.

When I was in Turkey, I saw the situation that Mr Hişyar ÖZSOY was talking about. I was absolutely astonished by what was going on. I watched a football match, and at the beginning and end of the match, and in between, there were TV programmes showing superstar Erdoğan. It was quite astonishing.

In the reports we face two separate phenomena. The President of the United States is disseminating fake news and portraying it as “alternative” news. Once fake news is out there, we have seen how difficult it is to correct it. We have also seen the hate campaigns that have been run in recent elections. In Georgia the female candidate was subjected to a barrage of hate on social media.

There are also the legal issues raised by Mr Andrzej HALICKI. When right-wing populist movements take power, their primary political goal is to weaken public service broadcasters. That is an important concern for the Council of Europe. We should try to beef up our public service broadcasters because public service broadcasting is an ethical issue and support independent media.

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): May I gently remind colleagues that three minutes means three minutes, and not three and a half or four minutes?

Mr Volodymyr ARIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): I echo what colleagues have said about the importance of free, independent media protected from the influence of interested actors during election campaigns. I want to focus on the current reality: the media has become an instrument of influence and is frequently used to spread fake news and material and to enable external meddling in election campaigns.

The international experience in recent years shows that technology is being used to spread messages about events that never happened to trigger anger, hatred, and irritation in society and to influence citizens’ decisions on voting day. Rule No. 1 for producers of fake news is to make it believable. Rule No. 2 is for it to be timely. Rule No. 3 is to spread it among many different sources, which have been prepared in advance. Owing to the time limit, I will mention only those main points.

The consequences of fake information are very serious for the composition of governments in all states in the world. Several states that used to have real democracy, elections, and direct representation in the government have voted to change that following meddling. That has already been done in many democratic states.

Cases such as the so-called Lisa case in Germany in 2016 – a false story of a Russian-German girl who was reportedly raped by Arab migrants – and the story of the crucified boy in Donbass, which never happened, were created and spread by Russian media. Such stories can not only cause people to vote under the influence of feelings that prevent rational thinking but can start wars, as happened in Ukraine in 2014. It is important that we resist fake news, not only to save countries from making the wrong choice in elections.

The main responsibility for fact-checking and blocking false information lies with media outlets and democratic society. This matter relates to the self-regulatory competence of media organs. I refer again to my report on media ethics and responsibility.

Times are changing fast, and we have new challenges to respond to. The current challenges increase the responsibility not only of media outlets but of States and communities, to help journalists and editors search for fake news in the daily wave of information. Before the elections in Ukraine, we created Ukrainian election taskforces, led by prominent world experts with experience in the fight against fake news, to serve the media environment and detect fake news on a special web resource. The task of that rapid response team is to monitor, evaluate, and disclose the full range of foreign subversive activities in Ukraine and to make proposals for a suitable response. If that experience is a success, it might be a model for preventing meddling in elections through the use of media outlets. It may help the media to stay clear of fake news and may ensure that society has access to information that can be trusted.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE (Romania, EPP/CD): This thoughtful and well-rounded report could not have come at a better time. In their latest global report, experts from Freedom House concluded that 71 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties. Unfortunately, some of those countries are member States of the Council of Europe.

One third of the world population now lives in backsliding democracies. In our age, democracies are no longer eliminated in sudden coups but are slowly eroded from within when those who came to power democratically wish to preserve their power by non-democratic means. This includes constant attacks on the freedom of the

press, so the report is of the utmost importance. If we fight for a free press today, we stand a good chance of improving the state of democracy worldwide and stemming the advance of leaders with authoritarian inclinations.

Attacks on the free press take many forms. The most dramatic involve acts of violence against journalists, including assassinations, harassment and incarceration. More insidious attacks involve governments putting economic pressure on media outlets, forcing them to choose between abandoning their editorial independence or bankruptcy. In its mildest form, government interference is manifested in the purchasing of advertising from, or offering media coverage to, friendly journalists rather than independent journalists. In a harshly competitive environment, this subsidy can represent a huge economic advantage. I suggest that we must include that aspect in the report and recommendations to our member States that we will formulate today.

If left unchecked, the situation will get much more serious. In places such as Hungary and Turkey, media ownership is so concentrated that there remains only an illusion of editorial independence. In the current context, social media can be both a threat and a great hope. Over the past few years we have seen social media used by both civil society, to spread the message of democracy and to call for greater government transparency, and by malicious actors, who did their best to subvert the democratic process. The answer here is not a heavy-handed approach or censorship but a more thorough education of the population in the essential skills of critical thinking and media literacy.

Sir Roger GALE (United Kingdom, EC, President of the Assembly): I happen to know that the next speaker has been appointed as a member of Her Majesty the Queen's Privy Council. I am sure that this is entirely out of order, and I will only do it once, but it is a pleasure to call the Right Honourable Sir Edward LEIGH.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, EC): The same congratulations to you, Sir Roger. I am afraid that this report attempts to respond to the developing challenge of disinformation while totally failing to understand the situation at hand. The reality about fake news is that the old giants – public service media is perhaps the greatest old giant of all – are running scared. They no longer set the parameters or control the frames of the debate. What is more, it is now easier to catch them out when they go astray themselves.

The draft resolution claims that public service media are "an independent source of accurate information and unbiased commentary". Is that true in any European country? It is not true in mine. The quality of such institutions will of course vary, but let us take just one example. What would members say about a public service media institution if one of its own producers said of a supposed documentary that it broadcast that it was "a wholly one-sided, inaccurate, and unfair piece of journalism" that "made no attempt to be even-handed"? What would members say about a public service media institution that got important facts wrong, misrepresented arguments, distorted evidence, used questionable statistics, allowed one side to make damaging accusations about the other without a right of reply, and left reputable interviewees feeling like they had been tricked and mistreated when they saw the programme broadcast? That is not Facebook or Twitter or Russian trolls – it is the BBC.

I have to admit that many Britons, particularly ones of a conservative disposition, like me, have a love-hate relationship with the BBC. We admire the high ideals of its founding father, Lord Reith. We admire the quality of so much of its output, whether television drama, science television or the World Service, which is reliable in its output. However, that does not mean that we are willing to sit back and be subjected to bias and misrepresentation. We respect the BBC, but – the World Service arguably excepted – it is not impartial. Most Britons can tell you what the BBC's general opinion or view on any subject is. It is a consensus of the metropolitan, liberal, pro-European Union elite. It is simply objective reality to state that its rigorous impartiality has gone the way of the dodo.

This report seeks to find a solution to fake news but, citing a supposed consensus, it refuses even to accept that "fake news" is a term worth using. It is trying to stick its fingers in a dam that has long since burst. We are dealing with a market reality here. The old public service media has lost influence not only because there are challengers but because its own behaviour has fostered distrust in its output. If the BBC is willing to broadcast biased programmes about my own community in Britain, I will begin to question the accuracy of the rest of its programmes. I can only speak for the United Kingdom, but I suggest that the situation may be similar in other countries.

There is a danger that, in the rush to condemn fake news, we are facilitating an attempt by the old giants of public service media to shut down or delegitimise their challengers. People are not idiots. We trust them when voting to weigh and balance the proposals of various candidates and parties. We should trust them to watch, read and click, and to weigh up what information is reliable and what is unreliable.

Mr Ahmet Ünal ÇEVİKÖZ (Turkey, SOC): First and foremost, I express my appreciation of the rapporteurs of both reports, which are very relevant to the current circumstances that most member countries of the Council face. I also express my gratitude to my former colleague, Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN, who is absent, for her excellent work as a member of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media. She has been able to produce a balanced and exemplary report despite coming from a country that unfortunately fails to be a positive role model for media freedom. Many reports suggest that in Turkey today, 233 journalists and media representatives are charged with various allegations, with sentences totalling 552 years and 10 months of imprisonment and 3 928 000 Turkish lira in material and moral indemnities.

We have to admit that there is a legal gap and that various forms of malevolent online communication endanger the smooth and fair conduct of electoral processes in many countries. Systematic trolling has become common practice in today's social media world. If today we discuss Russian cyber interference in the elections in the United States, or in the elections in Germany or Turkey for that matter, we should consider a more in-depth analysis of the role of online communication, especially during election processes. We need to focus on how disinformation and misinformation are used to manipulate society and the electorate. The public domain should be legally protected for a better working, pluralistic society.

In November 2018, dictionary.com chose "misinformation" as its word of the year, defining it as "false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead". "Disinformation", on the other hand, is "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda". These two words complement one another. If the public or private media sectors deliberately spread misleading information, it becomes disinformation, and if they use social media as a tool for the dissemination of disinformation, it turns into misinformation. Both are serious threats to our democracies.

According to the June 2018 report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Turkey is top of the list of countries facing fake news. One online verification site in Turkey, teyit.org, reported that, in 2017-2018, 11 518 suspicious news items were reported to it, 56% of which were exclusively in the field of politics. The symbols of today prepare the background for the reality of tomorrow. To deal with fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, there will be a need for co-operation between civil society and regulatory bodies. Additionally, fact-checking and media monitoring projects can create awareness of undue propaganda. The existence of echo chambers and filter bubbles are also obstacles to overcoming the polarisation of society. Such a situation unfortunately enables extremism and radical populism to make progress. We should prevent that from happening.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV (Azerbaijan, ALDE): Pollution of the information environment is one of the ecological hazards of the new era that generates the most concern. Unlike other ecological disasters, however, it is a trend that covers the entire world without exception. The main reason is that we are all in the web of the same spider.

Time changes everything, and over the years the essential notion of the mass media has evolved. Hundreds of years ago "the mass media" simply meant the print media, but they were soon joined by information agencies, and radio and television. That was the dominant model of the mass media until the Internet era. The social network that emerged from the Internet nightmare disrupted the classic media model and upset its balance. Although it failed to replace it, it did considerable damage to its power and influence. The social network has emerged not as an alternative to official media or its opponent but as its inexpensive duplicate.

However, as the speed, intrigue, and adventurous charm of that duplicate were so great, it occupied a place in community life and thought in the short term. The non-professionalism of the social network has unfortunately started to spread to traditional media, damaging it from the inside and bringing it down to its own level. Disinformation, propaganda, and controversy have to a certain extent always been present in the press, but they have never been as widespread, massive, blatant or devastating as they appear to be today. Today, the social network would appear to be magazines, journals, and radio and television, as well as public transport and the street, where one can hear good and bad, false and true information. Not everything appears to be bad in the social network. Nonetheless, the social network is increasingly opening the way to information chaos and hate speech, giving rise to national, racial, and religious discrimination.

How should we treat the mass media, the social network, and what steps should we take to direct this energy in the right way? In my opinion, the media are increasingly in need of greater professionalism. A high level of professionalism can prevent the massive flow of non-professionals and low-level persons into the sector and also build a protective barrier against the free movement of undesirable information and confrontation in the media. Let us confess: today the social network, which is appropriating more and more powers of the professional media, is managing us and even keeping us in bondage. This is a world inside a world. Let us all work together to make this universe more moral – to elevate it and make it more democratic.

Mr Barna Pál ZSIGMOND (Hungary, EPP/CD): I congratulate the rapporteurs on their work.

We consider the right to freedom of information and media freedom to be essential preconditions of the right to free elections. In Hungary, editorial independence is guaranteed, along with sufficient and stable funding, to ensure quality journalism that is deserving of the public's trust. Public service media, as an independent source of accurate information and unbiased commentary, is by definition well-placed to counteract the phenomenon of information disorder. In the present media environment, there is a need for a strong public service media that can counter information disorder. Hungary is deeply committed to promoting and protecting the freedom and pluralism of media, as well as granting everyone equal access to media content. The Fundamental Law of Hungary stipulates that everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression and that Hungary recognises and protects the freedom and diversity of the press.

The radical changes in information technology arising from digitalisation called for a revision of Hungary's media regulations, dating back to 1995, and the adoption of effective, transparent, and up-to-date regulations became inevitable by 2010. After the new framework entered into force, we engaged in constructive dialogue with international actors – among others, the OSCE. These negotiations resulted in concrete amendments to media legislation. The so-called Media Constitution defines and protects editorial and journalistic freedom – namely, that any person employed by media content providers shall have the right to professional sovereignty and independence from the owners or sponsors of the provider. Hungary further advocates a balanced and diverse media market, thus enforcing plurality in the media landscape. This requirement is also anchored at the constitutional level. The Press and Media Act of 2010 contains provisions aimed at preventing market concentration and regulates media service providers with significant powers of influence.

When it comes to elections, it is even more difficult to protect the electoral process and democracy from the threat of information manipulation and propaganda through social media. In line with OSCE regulations, systematic media monitoring was established during the 2018 election campaign in Hungary, and there were no decisions from the election authorities or court rulings on public service media impartiality. However, the greatest challenge we face in the context of disinformation in democratic elections is in regulating the Internet. This includes the fact that it is difficult to regulate it owing to its international nature. We should therefore focus on this in future because the greatest threat to elections is from these uncontrolled media sources.

Finally, I must reject what my good Romanian friend Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE said about the concentration of the Hungarian media. I would draw his and the Assembly's attention to the regular cases of hate speech in the Romanian media against various minority groups.

Mr Yunus EMRE (Turkey, SOC): I thank both rapporteurs, Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN and Mr Petri HONKONEN, for preparing these comprehensive reports, which clearly demonstrate the central role played by conventional and non-conventional media when it comes to the quality of elections – the very core institution of democracy. The propositions outlined in both reports are very accurate. If we are to counter the growing danger of information manipulation in the new media environment, we should determinedly implement these propositions. As my dear friend Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN stresses in her report, one can talk about freedom of choice in elections only if voters are genuinely informed about the different options. On the other hand, Mr Petri HONKONEN's point about the role of public service media is highly accurate, especially in an environment where the dissemination of disinformation is rising exponentially.

I want briefly to emphasise two additional important points. First, Ms Gülsün BİLGEHAN mentions media literacy in her report. I believe that the top priority in enhancing the quality of information in the new media environment should be education. In this respect, I strongly agree with the proposition in the report concerning the introduction of media literacy courses in school curriculums. The younger the age of initial contact with these courses, the better results we would have.

My second point is about Mr Petri HONKONEN's well-prepared report on public service media. Theoretically, I agree with all the points in the report, yet certain ones fell short in reflecting the situation in hybrid regimes that combine democratic and autocratic features. The report presupposes a democratic environment in which the government is willing to struggle against propaganda. However, the absence of equal opportunities for different candidates in elections is very common in the public broadcasting institutions of hybrid regimes. That is why we need more specific solutions for democracies that are not fully functioning. Once again, I thank the rapporteurs for their excellent work.

Mr Bernard FOURNIER (France, EPP/CD)*: One of the reports before us deals with the role of public service media in the context of disinformation and propaganda. The report recommends that we rely on public media to combat information disorder. This recommendation inspires me to make three observations.

First, the desire to entrust a special role to public service media in combating information disorder presupposes that these media are completely independent of political and economic power. Alas, that is not always the case. The funding of public media through advertising in particular can result in conflicts of interest. After all, it is difficult to disseminate a report criticising a given company that buys a large amount of advertising. Even though journalists often defend themselves quite well against these pressures, the pressures do exist and are the result of the declining resources available to public media, against the backdrop of a general desire to reduce public expenditure.

However, there is also political pressure on public media. In many countries, decision makers in the media are appointed by political powers, who are often tempted to put pressure on the editors. Therefore, to support public service media as the main way of combating misinformation presupposes, first, that they are independent of both political and economic power. Unfortunately, that is not the case in all the member States of our Organisation.

Secondly, let us note that public service media do not have the same means available as the Internet giants to combat fake news. Indeed, companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter are often the platforms for the dissemination of fake news and are therefore better placed to intervene. It is therefore also necessary for public service media to be present on social networks to guarantee plurality of information.

Furthermore, the large Internet companies have greater financial resources, making it possible for them to identify fake news more easily. For instance, in France, public audio-visual media have an overall budget of €4.5 billion, whereas the turnover of Google alone is €33 billion.

As a last observation on the report, I stress the advantage offered by co-operation among media, whether public or not, in combating information disorder. Such co-operation also implies that there should be non-profit journalism organisations and social media platforms that make it possible to identify fake news more easily. Thank you for your attention.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Ms Miren GORROTXATEGI.

Ms Miren GORROTXATEGI (Spain, UEL)*: Media freedom as a precondition for democratic elections is fundamental and a sign of the democratic health of any political system. We need public opinion to be free; this is therefore a precondition of any genuine participation in the democratic process. Public opinion cannot be free, however, unless it is informed. This concerns the preparation of elections, consulting citizens in referendums, and any involvement in political affairs. This is a fundamental requirement, and I consider the report particularly important.

I also draw the Assembly's attention to one of the basic functions that should be involved – namely, the responsibility of members of the Assembly for observing elections. After years of experience, and with thanks for the great support of the Venice Commission, I think we have achieved a very efficient general framework for assessing the regularity and fairness of electoral processes. These electoral observation missions, however, are often biased or distorted because of fraudulent interference.

One of the most important sources of this fraud involves media manipulation. This is an issue the Assembly should face up to as an important challenge. We need to establish a framework for the supervision of elections. As part of that framework, we would have to assess whether these elections are generally democratic on the basis of criteria concerning the use of media in informing ordinary citizens.

Mr Ali ŞAHİN (Turkey, EC): I thank both rapporteurs for their valuable efforts; both have made valuable contributions to the debate on the manipulation of electoral behaviour. Needless to say, the freedom of the media is one of the essential instruments of democracy. In other words, freedom of media also means freedom of speech.

The Internet has changed the definition of the media. Social media, with its various platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, have gained more importance than professional media instruments such as newspapers, magazines, and television channels.

We should bear in mind that media freedom cannot be questioned if we are talking about democracy, freedom of speech, and the rule of law. However, the issue of media freedom has been hijacked by criminal and terrorist organisations in recent years. Media freedom has been exploited by different criminal and terrorist organisations as a protective shield. It cannot be a safe haven from which to threaten the integrity and existence of any country. The freedom of the media should never allow journalists to support terrorism. In the name of media freedom, journalists cannot kill, disclose state secrets, praise terrorism or be involved in attempted coups. If a journalist is committing such crimes, we cannot consider him or her a journalist. Not a single journalist in Turkey has been jailed because of the freedom of the media.

It is a terrifying fact that, with the introduction of the Internet and social media tools to our lives, from time to time written and visual social media tools become a propaganda ground for terrorism by praising it and discrediting elected governments. One of the most worrying threats we face today is meddling in elections via digital and social media, which seeks to create an environment of doubt, mistrust and confusion.

It is the responsibility of all of us to protect and strengthen media freedom; to prevent foreign powers meddling with the media; and to ensure that it is not hijacked by terrorist organisations, separatists, extremists, and destructive hate speech. Thank you for your attention.

Mr Ľuboš BLAHA (Slovak Republic, SOC): It should be stressed much more in our debate that in capitalist societies the main threat to media freedom comes from private corporations. One of the most famous living intellectuals, Noam Chomsky, warns us that the media are owned by the big corporations and financial groups, which, logically, tend to spread pro-business values.

In my country, Slovakia, the mainstream media are mostly owned by dirty financial groups, transnational corporations or mafia-connected oligarchs. The information output is logical: almost every newspaper in Slovakia fosters the typical business values of liberalism, market Darwinism, privatisation, and deregulation. All mainstream media offer practically the same content, with daily attacks on the state, social redistribution, trade unions, and left-wing ideologies.

Guaranteeing the freedom of such media does not mean guaranteeing freedom of speech; it just guarantees the freedom of speech of the rich media owners and deprives working-class people of any freedom. In countries such as Slovakia it also means giving this privilege to the mafia and the oligarchs, who are the biggest threats to freedom and even to the security of journalists.

I remind the Assembly that a young journalist, Ján Kuciak, was murdered in my country last year, together with his fiancée. According to investigators, it is highly probable that a mafia-linked businessman, with political connections to the Slovakian neoliberal opposition party, paid for his murder. We should speak more about the owners of media and the structural injustice in the media system caused by the extremely rich corporations and their dirty money. There is no counterbalance because there is not enough money for it. This is the main threat to people's freedom, not social media.

My second point is about the selectivism in media protection. According to some liberals, only the liberal media deserve freedom, with alternative media being labelled as "conspiratorial", "dangerous" and "extremist". Now they are even labelled as tools in the Russian hybrid war, and this is a dangerous path. Where is the pluralism, freedom, and democracy in this selectivism? It can be easily misused by the liberals to label every criticism of capitalism as "extremist" and "dangerous". All the alternatives will be eliminated, as happens in totalitarian regimes.

In democracies, there are always alternatives, including the anti-capitalist ones. We need to protect them because without the alternatives the world has its name and it is not "democracy" but "fascism".

Ms Esther MUÑOZ (Spain, EPP/CD)*: At some point in time, all of us will have received a WhatsApp or other message containing fake news. We see all kinds of videos on social media that go viral even though they are seeking to incite hatred among citizens and to pit ordinary people against the institutions or the government. Some even contain messages directed against particular nations or countries. More information is available than ever before, but it is also easier than ever before to spread disinformation. That is a huge problem, but it is no coincidence because fake news is directed disproportionately against our democracies, serving to undermine our principles and values. It is attempting to force us to call into question the liberal values underpinning our democracies. That is why we have to be resilient in defending our values. The public service broadcasters have to be there to report the facts, not propaganda. That is why we believe that governments have to control public service broadcasting – as well as the intelligence services – because we face an extremely frightening situation. We have to do everything in our power to fight false news, and we cannot have public service broadcasters being used as propaganda mouthpieces for the reigning government. We have to fight hatred and confrontation, which all serve to undermine our democracies.

Mr Martin WHITFIELD (United Kingdom, SOC): I welcome both of these reports and their contents, and the submissions that have been received this morning. In the short time available, I shall concentrate on the issue of media freedom as a condition for democratic elections. In particular, I wish to emphasise, as the opening of the media freedom report does, that “free elections are a pillar of every democratic society”, whether we are talking about elections of politicians or referendums. The greatest protection we have comes from the education of those participating in the vote. The freedom of the press and the protection of facts over false news is of fundamental importance to a proper democratic exercise. I welcome many of the recommendations in this report.

We need to remember that there are two elements to all this. The first is the election time itself, which is relatively short-lived and in which there is an intensity of media speculation and media spending by political parties and those who support them. Much needs to be done to protect the electorate from fake news during this short period because, unless a false message is rectified quickly, the damage is done and the election is upon us. The use of fact-checking organisations and the use of restraint and self-respect to ensure that calls are not made for the abuse of politicians or those who are standing on a particular point is important for all of those who take part. The second is the free press and the role of professional journalists who can exercise an inquiry and bring their opinions to the public’s view. Those things are also enormously important, and that right needs to be protected. The role of the journalist – and identifying who is a journalist – is fundamental to this subject. On many occasions the people who seek to put down a journalist’s opinion start by undermining their professionalism. We expect a lot of our journalists, and so we need to protect our journalists even if we disagree with their conclusions.

Finally, I wish to draw attention to two elements of the report. The first is paragraph 9.3, which says that we need to “establish clear legal liability for the social media companies”. The second is paragraph 11, which states that “The Assembly calls on Internet intermediaries to: develop initiatives offering users fact-checking services...co-operate with civil society and organisations...support the research and development of appropriate technological solutions”. That is important because we are close to the time when almost immediate checking can take place and we should move to that.

Mr Krzysztof TRUSKOLASKI (Poland, EPP/CD): I wish to talk about the current state of affairs in the public service media in Poland, which is ruled by the Law and Justice party. Since that party came to power, it has seized control of our prosecution authorities, the constitutional tribunal and, most significantly, in terms of this debate, public service media. This seizure of our public service media was gradual. Until the rule of the Law and Justice party, the authority in charge was the National Broadcasting Council. It was dealing with radio and television, being a constitutional body that defended freedom of speech, the right to information, and the public interest in radio and television. Law and Justice charged its own National Media Council with appointing the management and supervisory boards of public service media companies, while also marginalising the competences and role of the NBC. Is it not a violation of the constitution when a body authorised under the basic law is deprived of its competences?

The symbol of state-controlled public media is Jacek Kurski, the current chairman of Polish television, who not so long ago, as a Law and Justice party representative, was a Member of the Polish Parliament and a Member of the European Parliament. Since the Law and Justice party took control of our public service media, more than 130 journalists have been dismissed or have left in protest, with most of them having been in charge of creating informative and journalistic programmes. They were replaced by people who overtly

supported or were affiliated to the Law and Justice party. The ruling party has transformed public media services into a party propaganda megaphone that has become a tool for political battle. We have seen extreme and base commentaries in information service programmes, and footage based on fake news, playing on phobias and repeating lies about the opposition.

As the statistics show, the Law and Justice party has dominated public television broadcasting, but the biggest controversies have arisen as a result of the content of public service television. All opponents of Law and Justice are discredited and libelled by pro-government propagandists. A scandalous act of public television involved broadcasting footage of the murder of the Mayor of Gdańsk, Pawel Adamowicz. The footage included an attack on the political opponents of Law and Justice, putting the blame for his tragic death on them. This television promotes controversial people who constantly attack the opposition, call for Poles and allow anti-Semitic rhetoric. Given all this, I conclude that Poland under the rule of the Law and Justice party provides us with a textbook example of a seizure of control of the public service media, transforming it into a party propaganda megaphone.

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC): There is a sense of déjà vu about the debate. Many issues that we discussed yesterday in the context of the debate on referendums are coming up again. In my role in that debate, I was struck by how speaker after speaker made the same point that their referendum had been the subject of fake news. I appreciate that one of the reports wants to abolish the term “fake news”, but it is part of our language, and it would be difficult to abolish.

When so many speakers bitterly complain about fake news, what has happened to our media? I speak as a former presenter for BBC World Service Television in London, where we had to provide independence, because that independence was so valued that it allowed us to broadcast and be trusted around the world. That editorial independence is still part of the BBC, but it would be foolish to look at any broadcaster outside the context of the society in which it operates. There is no doubt that the BBC is now an urban broadcaster with many young people and minorities. In other words, it is part of the liberal – with a small l – establishment.

In his contribution, Sir Edward LEIGH pointed out the love-hate relationship that exists between politicians and official broadcasters, but that is nothing new. What has changed is the prevalence of online and social media; my local paper follows social media as much as any other activity that it covers. Social media may be vitriolic and unpleasant, but the false media – wide of the mark, wholly inaccurate, little more than individual views and conspiracy theories – that are put about are more worrying. How we regulate them, if we regulate them, is a major problem.

The pressures on television presenters are tremendous. When I did the job, there were particular parties that wanted to make their views known, of course, but I recall few attempts to try to push a view on us. I suspect that that has changed as a result of social media and how they pick up and use those stories.

Mr Manuel TORNARE (Switzerland, SOC)*: Jefferson said that, “Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press”. As several colleagues have said, it is true that the situation of the press is an indicator of whether a democratic society is in good health, but press plurality is something that few member States in the Council of Europe are offering.

Every year, Reporters Without Borders identifies and ranks countries that respect press plurality; in 2018, Norway was No.1 and Switzerland was No. 5. It denounced many States represented here, however, because journalists in those countries are in real danger and have even been killed. I will mention the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Hungary, Turkey, and Poland. I congratulate those who come here from those countries and denounce the situation because it puts them in danger. There is also Malta, Slovakia, Bulgaria and even Italy. In those countries, journalists are imprisoned, intimidated, and threatened, which is like killing the messenger of good news.

In so far as content is concerned, there are predators of freedom, for which social networks are largely responsible. They disseminate fake news and, unfortunately, they have contaminated the press. When speaking on behalf of his group, our excellent colleague Mr Raphaël COMTE, from Les Libéraux-Radicaux in Switzerland, referred to the fake news about the migration pact of the United Nations. Even in Switzerland, some media have claimed that that pact was binding. That is fake news – it is not true – but it was disseminated by Fox News and by media in Poland, Austria, and Hungary. Several colleagues have referred to Germany’s legislation to condemn fake news. Every country must do the same, otherwise it will become an international scourge.

I also denounce the rich people who control the media, as is true in France and Switzerland. All they care about is profit, so they continuously put out fake news – you can watch television 24 hours a day. When I took my bath this morning, I was informed that there was 10 cm of snow in Strasbourg, which is very interesting. Citizen Kane is killing the press. They do not spread interesting news.

What about financial means? Mr Raphaël COMTE talked about the Swiss referendum. As a Swiss, I am proud that people voted in favour of paying €400 each – even those who do not have a radio or a television – to finance independent and high-quality public media. That is an objective that we need to move towards.

Press plurality is in danger in Europe. We need to ask ourselves whether our public authorities should provide money, where required, to protect press plurality. I am in favour of that and we will debate it shortly in my parliament.

Mr Jokin BILDARRATZ (Spain, ALDE)*: First, I would like to speak on behalf of all journalists who are contending with great difficulties. A great many journalists are in prisons in member States of the Council of Europe – journalists who are being held in prison because of their journalism – so this is a timely discussion. We know full well that many political parties have become electioneering machines and that all equilibrium has gone out of the window. Therefore, it is important that all our States be alerted to those abhorrent situations with regard to the establishment of proper balance in the media.

I very much subscribe to what the authors of the report advocate. They talk about success stories, but how can we define a success story? Should the BBC be a model of credible public service broadcasting? Two key concepts underpin the excellence of the BBC: first, the way it is funded, and secondly, the fact that it is totally independent in the way it is organised. Most TV or radio channels in member States are led by people close to the political establishment; the BBC is a good counter-example.

On the proper funding of public service broadcasting, in Spain public service broadcasters are entitled to obtain revenue from advertising. They could do that, but it leads to a drop in the quality of information broadcast on television. In Spain, public television represents 25% of the audience ratings. So public media find it difficult to compete with private media, which attract 75% of the audience and do not necessarily champion the same values. Underfunding leads to a loss of credibility.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you. I remind all speakers to respect the three-minute time limit. The next speaker on the list is Mr Giorgi KANDELAKI from Georgia, but he is not in his seat. Is he somewhere else in the Hemicycle? Apparently not. I therefore call the next speaker, Ms Gabriela HEINRICH.

Ms Gabriela HEINRICH (Germany, SOC)*: I thank both rapporteurs for the clear and important reports that have been submitted to us today.

The tone of our media has become much coarser, partly as a result of social media. Facts and opinions are widely thrown about, leaving a trail of disinformation in their wake, and comments are full of hate. Such important elements of dealing with complex subjects – in other words, carrying out clear research and making a key distinction between facts and opinions – are falling by the wayside as a result of fast news and media competition. When an opinion is posted that is not properly researched, even if it is countered with proper fact-checking, people still remember the sensationalist headlines.

There is a transfer of the obsession with clicks on online media to other media. We can no longer assume that the headlines that we see are necessarily related to the content. Opinions and news are therefore being sold. Readers, viewers and listeners are taken in by headlines. In Germany we are talking about the justification of public service media, especially the costs. This matter is often raised by people who are quite happy to spread misinformation and who feel threatened by the public service media. A responsible media should not let itself be exploited; its task, first and foremost, is to say things as they are. Of course, media providers can comment on things, provided they make it clear that they are doing so.

As has been accurately described, it is important for us to deal with the media powers. Now that it has become fashionable for readers or viewers to comment on issues, it is all the more important for them to make a clear distinction between opinion and fact. It is also important to distinguish whether the plethora of information with which we are deluged in real time can be taken at face value. We need to learn from this. We need to ask questions such as “How can we ensure that information is checked for accuracy?” and “Can we trust this medium?”

Democracy requires fact-based, well-researched, quality journalism. But let us be very clear about one thing: quality does not mean the number of clicks. Both reports underline the importance of the issue, and it is true that we need to address it. We have to combat very similar phenomena in our countries. In this context, I hope very much that the Assembly will support these reports.

Ms Ganira PASHAYEVA (Azerbaijan, FDG): We all should be very concerned that fake news is becoming a serious threat to the states and societies of the modern world. Fake news is seriously damaging people, social groups, organisations, and countries, and threatens their activities. The globalisation and commercialisation of fake news are very dangerous. In most cases, fake news is used as a tool for political campaigns. People are exposed to disinformation attacks. A clear strategy should be developed and implemented to avoid dangerous disinformation tendencies. Each of us should take an active part in this fight. Traditional mass media and information agencies have important tasks in preventing and fighting the spread of fake news. At this time, when social networks and social media are so widespread, it becomes more and more difficult for us to fight disinformation. There is therefore a serious need to combine our efforts in this direction.

Unfortunately, the number of mass media and journalists spreading disinformation using the freedom of the press and of speech is increasing. This is very dangerous. My country, Azerbaijan, attaches great importance to these issues and has been fighting against disinformation, as well as constantly supporting international initiatives in this field, because Azerbaijan is one of the countries most affected by disinformation. For example, a lot of disinformation against Azerbaijan is allowed on the basis of inaccurate facts and false information given through the mass media of Europe. Unfortunately, as a result of this disinformation, many people living abroad with no broad knowledge about our country may have the wrong impression of Azerbaijan. We are seriously concerned about this.

If we are willing to actively fight against disinformation, we should first start to do it with this Organisation in which we are represented. Unfortunately, not only mass media, journalists, and social networks but some politicians play an active role in disseminating disinformation. We should also be concerned about the increased activity on social media and networks of terror organisations, groups that support terrorism and groups that enhance radicalism, hatred, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism.

An important event has been held at the Baku International Humanitarian Forum in Azerbaijan, entitled “Disinformation Policy – a Threat to Stability in the Modern World”. We think that there is a serious need to hold a lot of events and roundtable discussions on this topic with the participation of journalists, politicians, and the youth of all member States, as well as to increase the number of events promoting societies on those topics.

Ms Nicole DURANTON (France, EPP/CD)*: The issues addressed by the rapporteurs are fascinating. What can democracies do to deal with information disorder while respecting fundamental freedoms? Disinformation and fake news are flourishing in a post-truth world. That said, the phenomenon is not that new. In the past, we used to talk more about rumours. In the 18th century, repeated rumours of a plot to cause famine contributed to the creation of sympathy for the revolution. The great French historian Marc Bloch said that, through rumours, people “unconsciously express all their prejudices, hatreds, fears, all their strong emotions.” Fake news is really just a modern-day version of an ancient phenomenon, although its persistence may be surprising.

Progress in education, and access to information and fact-checking do not seem to be effective. Traditionally, censorship fuelled the rumour mill, but today we are seeing that the reverse is true – possibly linked to the mistrust of traditional media. In France we have been trying to join the fight against fake news. The term “fake news” could be seen as vague and polemical, so it might be preferable to talk about information manipulation, which is understood as being the massive and artificial dissemination of false news for hostile political ends. A counter-propaganda offensive is doomed to failure. We need a participatory and democratic approach, which is why collaboration between the Council of Europe and the European Union must be strongly encouraged.

The European Council adopted a number of conclusions last year, calling for an action plan to be drawn up to offer a co-ordinated European response to the challenge posed by disinformation, and to fight against the threat to democratic systems against the backdrop of the upcoming European elections. What is more, last December the European Commission set out a plan of action against disinformation based on four pillars: developing detection analysis and response capacities; providing a co-ordinated response by setting up, by March this year, a rapid response mechanism; stepping up communication on the values and policies of the European Union; and ensuring that the platforms take responsibility for taking down false accounts and for

fact-checking, as well as further raising public awareness. On top of all that, in France a common working party was set up with Facebook on an experimental basis to fight online hate speech, and to give representatives of the French authorities an insight into the ways in which Facebook takes illicit content offline.

Ms Nicole TRISSE (France, NR)*: Often identified as the fourth power after the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, the press plays a decisive role in any democratic society. It has been shaped recently by technological progress, starting with the printing press and running all the way through to the Internet, social networks, and the emergence of a political consciousness among people, thanks to universal education and the spread of knowledge. At a time when the press is being denigrated, it is essential that we confirm the importance of the independence of the media as set out in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as something that is essential for the electoral process.

A critical viewing by journalists of actions by political authorities and the views of candidates is essential for citizens to be able to forge their own opinions before voting. There are authoritarian regimes that muzzle the press for propaganda purposes, and that is, unfortunately, a reality around the world although perhaps less so in Europe. Nevertheless, the media faces new challenges today, especially the issue of their financial independence, which is a sine qua non condition for them to be able to provide serious information and to be credible.

There is also a temptation towards more and more concentration, with some economic powers controlling the media, and a reduction in the independence of public service media with it being controlled by the executive. Having a network such as ARTE, for example, a publicly funded Franco-German network based in Strasbourg, provides for independence, but the problem remains of disinformation with a view to causing harm, as well as false information or fake news to generate prejudice. Misinformation can also be based on real facts but interpreted in such a way as to misinform.

In fact, it is astounding to note that, according to the Eurobarometer for March last year, 40% of European people confront fake news on a daily basis. In that context, having a public mediator is essential, and we should support that in the name of our democracies, to protect them. I am delighted that the French Government announced in June last year that a special platform to identify fake news would be made available. It is called "Vrai ou fake?", and it will be accompanied by a campaign to raise the awareness of young people and make it easier for them to identify fake news.

Thank you for this important debate. I fully support the reports.

Ms Haya MUFLIH (Jordan): I thank the rapporteurs for their good report on media freedom as a condition for democratic elections. The report contains a lot of facts and realistic information about the role of media during elections. Media should be neutral and not force its ideas or support for any party or candidate.

During elections, a lot of misinformation and propaganda occur. The media should correct any false information that may affect a party or a candidate who become the victim of false information. Media should be part of a truly democratic electoral process. In my home country, we have parties and independent candidates, and the media should be neutral and check information that is published about parties and candidates.

I would like to talk about my experience during the elections. I focused mainly on the Internet and social media because many people search for information about candidates and their electoral statements through the Internet. Many journalists take material from the Internet and use it as a key source of information, so they should check whether it is true or not so that they do not harm individuals' reputations and privacy.

I am grateful to the rapporteur for the report and I fully support it.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The next speaker will be the last before I have to interrupt the list of speakers this morning. I remind members that this debate will resume at 3.30 p.m. followed by votes on the reports and amendments.

Ms Sevinj FATALIYEVA (Azerbaijan, EC): When discussing the role of the media in elections, we should consider several aspects, including the functions of the media in the electoral process; the media's role as producers of mass information services; and providing air time or print space to election candidates. The media also act on their own initiative, informing citizens about the most important events and problems.

The rights that the election legislation of countries provides to the media as participants in the electoral process include the opportunity to provide accurate information to voters; comprehensive, objective and balanced coverage of the electoral process and candidates' activities during the election campaign; and coverage of the election results. The media also create conditions for the conduct of election campaigning through mass media by providing registered candidates and electoral associations with free and paid-for airtime on television or radio. It is necessary to create a legal opportunity for the mass media to exercise the function of public control over the timeliness and legality of the decisions and actions by election commissions.

Today the mass media have a large role in information about attitudes, interests, and political preferences. In past decades, Internet technologies have burst into all spheres of human activity. Political processes were also subject to this influence. The Internet allows all involved participants not only to consume information but to generate it. If traditional media are more oriented on the political activities of people, social media tend to present people's personalities, which tends to create a certain image, be it positive or negative.

A great advantage for political organisations is the use of social networks, through which information comes to readers through the first person and is conveyed in the right tone. Millions of people are free to express their opinion without censorship on any issue. Social media have created a new reality that is faster than the traditional one. The creation of fake news costs nothing and can spread immediately and become very popular. No one is interested in investigating what is fact and what is fake. Who will win this information war? Probably Facebook and Twitter because investors are more interested in investing in new platforms rather than traditional media. That is why it is very important for any media resource benefiting from media freedom not to forget about its responsibility for the news it spreads. There is an urgent necessity to work out laws on inaccurate information disseminated under the guise of reliable messages in the media and Internet resources, and the publication of material expressing disrespect for society and the state, and other disorderly conduct.

Address by Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ, President of Finland

Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: We will now hear an address by Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ, President of Finland. After his address Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ will take questions from the floor.

Mr President, welcome to Strasbourg, the home of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Your visit is highly symbolic, as Finland currently chairs the Committee of Ministers of our Organisation. We are delighted to welcome you here to the Assembly Chamber. Let me restate what I told you a few moments ago in my office. Our Assembly shares and fully supports the priorities of your chairmanship when it comes to strengthening the European system of human rights and the rule of law and the promotion of equality, as well as the emphasis you have placed on inclusiveness and preventing radicalisation.

Mr President, in your new year address you issued a warning about the rise in worrying signs coming from extremist movements, which remind us, alarmingly, of the early manifestations of the cruelty and atrocities of the last century. You also referred to the increasing temptation to embark on a non-democratic pathway. These are worrying challenges that are a threat to many of our countries. To respond to those threats, you stressed the importance of defending our values and the need to preserve our multilateral and rules-based system. I am sure all members are keen to hear more about your opinion on these matters, as well as on other contemporary international political issues and the important role the Council of Europe plays in that context. I give you the floor, Mr President.

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Secretary General, Madam President, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, ladies and gentlemen.

(The speaker continued in French)

Madam President, allow me to congratulate you on your re-election.

(The speaker continued in English)

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you today. This year, 2019, is an important year for the Council of Europe, not only because of its history but for what is at stake for the future. Looking back, we celebrate the first 70 years of this Organisation, a cornerstone of the rules-based international order on our

continent. The founding idea of that order, established after the horrors of the Second World War, was clear: never again. Never again must Europe fall into a state of war. War always comes with a cost of terrible human suffering. It often leads to serious violations of human rights and, at its worst, even to crimes against humanity. Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, the values the Council of Europe stands for, can only thrive in a state of peace. Maintaining the absence of war must be our highest priority. At the end of the day, peace is the most important contribution we can make to human rights. Everything else comes after that. In 1949, this principle was put at the very beginning of the Statute of the Council of Europe: “the pursuit of peace based upon justice and international co-operation is vital for the preservation of human society and civilisation”.

Ladies and gentlemen, throughout the past seven decades, peace and the rules-based order have been remarkably enduring in Europe. The picture has never been perfect, but for a very long time the overall trend continued to be for the better. The Council of Europe and its convention system has played a key role in that development. It has successfully upheld the core values that define us as Europeans. What worries me, however, is that today we increasingly talk about the success of those values only in the past tense. When looking at the present, let alone the future, we tend to speak with a lot less certainty. In fact, many of the current divisions in Europe seem to be exactly about our own core values. Instead of exporting them as we used to do, we now have to concentrate on defending them at home. On top of our internal difficulties, we are also living in a rapidly changing global environment. We can all see that the direction of change is not only positive. The entire rules-based international order is under growing pressure. We are witnessing a negative turn in the level of commitment to international law. Jointly agreed standards and norms are being challenged.

Secretary General, Madam President, the fate of the rules-based order is not an abstract question, nor is it only an issue of power politics and relations between States. The standards and provisions that order consists of, and the multilateral institution to guard them, have profound implications for our daily lives. If they are weakened, ordinary people – individuals, all of us – will suffer. At its essence, the Council of Europe is a forum for peaceful and constructive dialogue. It is the opposite of the rule of the most powerful. On the contrary, the focus of the Council of Europe is on the rights of individuals. Its convention on human rights and the European Court of Human Rights allows people to seek justice when they feel they have not received it nationally. People really do use that opportunity. There are currently over 57 000 applications pending before the Court. To put those figures in perspective, we should not forget how large a population enjoys this protection today. When Finland joined the Council of Europe 30 years ago, we became its 23rd member. Since then, the number of member States has doubled. We are now 47 member States and 840 million people. The Council, the convention system, and the Court are there for every one of them. That is a major achievement but also a big responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, I know that the Council of Europe is currently going through a process of reform and acute budgetary issues. Administrative reforms need to be addressed of course, but even more important is to use this opportunity to discuss the future vision and focus of the Organisation. My hope is that the Council of Europe remains the backbone for all its members. The reform process should be built on the unique strengths of the Organisation. They are, in particular: the European Court of Human Rights, the Commissioner for Human Rights and the monitoring mechanisms. The commitment to legally binding treaties by member States must not weaken.

If we are to succeed in safeguarding those invaluable fundamentals of the Council of Europe, we cannot close our eyes to the changes in the world in which we live. The signatories to the Statute in 1949 could not have imagined many of the phenomena that surround us, which we take for granted. Additional surprises will surely follow. To remain relevant, the Council of Europe, like any organisation, must be agile and able to address new issues that arise. Living in the present sounds like a commonplace objective, but it is not an easy task.

The need for dynamism in the Council of Europe's work may come from completely new sources. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and climate change, with all its repercussions, can have unforeseen consequences affecting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Surprises can also come from issues that are new not in themselves but simply in their volume or nature. In the past few years, migration has been one of the most divisive issues in Europe, within countries as well as between them. I believe that the main responsibility for responding to that challenge lies with the European Union. Unless it can agree common rules for migration, we run the risk of a race to the bottom, with member States competing with each other to be the least attractive destination. That would be bad news for the core values of the Council of Europe.

In the coming years, we may have many difficult discussions ahead of us. The Council of Europe can bring added value to those debates on the political, legal, and ethical levels alike – values in plural, to be precise. It has the responsibility to ensure that its principles continue to shape the future of Europe, as they have for the past 70 years.

Yesterday, the Foreign Minister of Finland discussed the priorities of the Finnish presidency of the Committee of Ministers. Let me say a few words about one of the key themes: gender equality and women's rights. Gender equality has been a central element in Finland's success story. Our rise from poverty to prosperity would not have been possible without equal opportunities for all. What has worked out well in Finland applies to the world at large. We simply cannot afford to undermine the rights of half the population. Gender equality, in addition to being the right thing to pursue, has an important economic impact and contributes to more sustainable development.

A crucial element of gender equality is the prevention of violence against women. In that respect, the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention is a ground-breaking document in its ambition and scope. It sets clear targets for us all to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. In Finland we have taken several concrete steps since ratifying the document, but much still needs to be done. Decreasing violence against women in Finland is one of my commitments, as a HeForShe champion for United Nations Women. The persistent high level of violence against women and girls, not only in Finland but globally, is a source of deep concern for me. If we are to build more equal and sustainable societies, that violence must stop.

The Council of Europe is currently in worrisome political difficulties and faces the acute risk of losing one member. Let me be clear that there are no doubts about the origin of the situation. Finland was among the first countries to condemn the annexation of Crimea publicly. Nonetheless, the Russian Federation's departure from the Council of Europe would be a loss for all sides and would ultimately be yet another blow for the entire rules-based international order. I trust that the Council of Europe will solve its current crisis as it has solved all previous ones. Finland will actively support efforts with other member States and stakeholders to find a way forward. The problem can be solved with the Parliamentary Assembly. I therefore call for close co-operation between the institutions – the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly – to work for a common, sustainable solution.

Distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, you are the best experts on your forum. In the dialogue that follows my speech, I would be particularly interested to hear your concrete ideas about a possible way forward.

Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: Thank you very much, President, for your speech, which was of great interest to the members of our Assembly. A large number of colleagues have expressed their desire to put questions to you. I remind members that questions must last only 30 seconds, not more, and that they must ask a question, not make a speech.

The first question is by Mr Egidijus VAREIKIS on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Questions to Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ, President of Finland

Mr Egidijus VAREIKIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Mr President, people of my generation remember that, during the Cold War, Finland was the place where West met East. The Helsinki process was very important in ensuring world peace. We are now talking about a new Cold War. Perhaps it is time for Finland again to start global diplomatic efforts for world peace.

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Many people now say that we face similar circumstances to those that we saw during the decades of the Cold War. Someone has even said that we face an ice-cold war. Finland appreciates and respects dialogue, and we are trying to enhance that all the time. Last week I had the opportunity to meet President Xi of China, and I have also met President Trump and President Putin recently. The world order has changed. I mention those three gentlemen, but we others – 7 billion of us – depend on what they think and how they handle their policies. However, those others can also have an influence through dialogue – by telling them what we think and hoping we return fully to a rules-based order, which has been beneficial for every human being, including in this Parliamentary Assembly, every time you meet.

Mr Ahmet Ünal ÇEVİKÖZ (Turkey, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Finland is a direct neighbour of the Russian Federation, and the two have good neighbourly relations. Do you think you have an opportunity to contribute to the resolution of the current crisis in relations between the Council of Europe and the Russian Federation? Soon after Finland leaves the Chair of the Committee of Ministers in the Council of Europe, it will take the presidency of the European Union. In view of this double role, what are your plans to develop co-ordination between the two organisations?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Yes, we have a big neighbour, and I have already said that we want to have dialogue. Finland also has a dialogue, as I do personally, with the Ukrainian President Poroshenko. There is only one aim for Finland: trying to have a dialogue and thus enhancing the peace, which is most important for all of us.

We also chair the Arctic Council at the moment, so this is a year of three presidencies for Finland. The visit of our Foreign Minister yesterday and my visit today has opened our eyes to the fact that the Council of Europe and the European Union have a lot in common. Like you said, we are a player now, with our presidency of the European Union starting midyear. This is a good lesson for us, too. Your idea about trying to enhance co-operation between the institutions is a good one that I gladly support.

Lord Richard BALFE (United Kingdom, EC, Spokesperson for the group): Mr President, you referred to the three presidencies. I notice that Japan, China, India, and Korea have had observer status at the Arctic Council since 2013. However, the application of the European Union has been deferred since then, and it appears that the Council of Europe has never applied. Do you see a more tied-in role for the Council of Europe and the European Union at the Arctic Council in future?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): I have said many times that, if we lose the Arctic, we lose the globe. How we protect the Arctic is vital. There are historical and geographical reasons why the Arctic Council has only eight permanent members. We have observers, as you said, and we have noticed a lot of increasing interest in becoming an observer, from the very South to the very North. On the European Union's observer status, that was tabled a long time ago and has been discussed year after year. We might try it again someday. However, we are all aware that the Russian Federation has vetoed it. As long as that is the situation, it is difficult to go further. Let us put it this way: I fully agree with you.

Mr Jokin BILDARRATZ (Spain, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group)*: Thank you, Mr President. This morning, you addressed two very important concepts.

(The speaker continued in English)

First, preventing radicalisation, and secondly, developing inclusion. What is the role of education in Finland in preventing radicalisation, and what role does universal basic income play in developing inclusion in Finland?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): In Finland we face a problem – specifically with young boys – where they somehow fall out of society. What we have been thinking and doing about that and about the radicalisation of youngsters fits together. The key is that everyone, especially young people, should feel that they are part of society. When people feel a part of society, they behave in a decent way. How do we make youngsters feel that? Education is surely one way, and so are financial solutions to help them.

I have also pointed out the responsibility of each individual. I suddenly remember words from here or there from when I was a youngster, such as somebody saying to me “Don't do that again” or “Now you've made it fine”. Such reactions from people near to us either bring us in or take us out of society. I think everybody will have similar experiences from their youth. It is very odd, actually, how one sentence from a total stranger can still come into our minds after decades. Why? Because it had an impact. We all have an impact on each other.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Mr President, I fully support your call to recognise it as the shared responsibility of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers to overcome our internal problems, which have persisted for too long and have cost this Organisation and especially our citizens too much. We are happy that the Finnish presidency is now leading this process, but

what role could you play as head of state of Finland, an honest broker country? More concretely, will you meet President Putin, or have you already met, to make it clear that there is also a shared responsibility on the Russian side to overcome this problem and that it is also in the interests of the Russian side to be part and parcel of this Organisation and to live up to their obligations, in the interests of the citizens of our biggest member State?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): As I said, I have been in discussions with both President Poroshenko and President Putin, including about the Council of Europe and the current situation. I hope to be able to try to enhance that dialogue so as to enable us at the end to find a common solution. Surely, it is not in my hands; it is more in your hands. However, I have said today to Madam President and the Secretary General that if it is needed, or if they think it would be useful, I am always there, trying to help.

Ms Ganira PASHAYEVA (Azerbaijan, FDG, Spokesperson for the group): Threats to the future of Europe such as populism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism are obviously serious concerns. Are combating these negative tendencies and strengthening dialogue between cultures and civilisations among your priorities as the President of Finland heading the Committee of Ministers? My second question relates to refugees. Do you consider the activities of European countries and institutions to be adequate to the increasing refugee problem in Europe, which is the result of conflicts and wars, and what further steps should be taken?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): If we find populism or new kinds of opposition arising in different countries, we cannot just say, "Well, they are wrong." We also have to look in the mirror. Have we done something wrong that has raised these kinds of feelings? Trying to find the answers is a very difficult task.

I think the situation in many countries is similar to that in Finland. If I compare the situation now with 30 years ago, I see that almost everything is better for ordinary people, but I am not sure that people are more satisfied than they were at the beginning of this era. We should also bear in mind that we human beings are such that we get used to good things, and we also get used to demanding more good things. That makes politics more and more difficult, and maybe it makes populism easier and easier.

One of the new elements we face is social media, but somehow I am optimistic. As we can all see, sometimes it is very aggressive and not necessarily truthful, but I am optimistic. I somehow feel that this trend will pass. People get bored when they keep seeing things that make them think, "Well, that really wasn't quite true" or "That was throwing the ball too far." I am a strong believer in democracy. To refer to the Finnish experience again, we have had two periods, the first in the '70s and the second just 10 years ago, when a new party made big gains, and we called them populists. Both of them, in the '70s and now, ended up with governmental responsibility and they changed – they vanished also. We have to think carefully about these kinds of elements. If we say to some of these movements, "You're totally wrong. Get out. Shut your mouth," that does not work and often only generates more criticism.

On the question of refugees, I would repeat what I said. The migration problem is specific to the European Union area, and the European Union has to take a leading role in how people get into Europe, how we interpret asylum legislation and, if at the end there are people who are not entitled to stay, how we return them together. If different European Union members create their own systems, I am afraid that we will end up with chaos.

Mr Bernard FOURNIER (France, EPP/CD)*: On 10 December last year, we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the signature in Paris of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This text is today identified as a common achievement of humanity, but it is not at all certain that it would be accepted today. That is something that was recently said by the German Chancellor, and I very much fear that she was right. I would like to hear your view on this issue and, in particular, on the calling into question of the universal character of human rights that we are, alas, witnessing today.

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): I have not seen the comments of the German Chancellor. Surely times have changed, and it is indeed possible that if there were a new round or a totally new situation, we should make an agreement like the one that we did. The context might be a bit different, because we are

facing different times and different phenomena, but basically, as I have said, I am a strong believer in a rules-based order and, in the end, I think it would very much be possible to end up with an almost similar convention.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV (Azerbaijan, ALDE): Azerbaijani-Finnish trade turnover is steadily growing, and today 13 Finnish companies are registered in the fields of industry, trade, services, and construction in Azerbaijan. How do you see the prospects for economic relations between our countries? Secondly, when the OSCE Minsk Group was established in 1992, Finland was chosen as a co-chair in finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. You retain your place in the Minsk Group today. What new efforts can we expect from you towards finding a solution to what is a critical problem for Azerbaijan?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): I think Finnish industry will be very happy that you have given me the chance to tell you about everything it can offer. We all face the phenomenon of urbanisation, which is a huge challenge. In Finland, many companies are co-operating on how to solve the problems of urbanisation, such as wastewater, access to clean water, and traffic. We need a lot more of this kind of thinking. We know that people tend to move to cities, but it is a huge environmental challenge, which we must try to clear up.

Turning to Minsk, Finland fully supports the ongoing process. I understand that there is a bit more optimism at the moment. We hope that there will be a solution; surely Azerbaijan and Armenia are the key players in what will happen.

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC): Mr President, I understand exactly what you said about migration, but the press also reports that Finland is looking to revise its immigration treaties. Could you tell us where immigration policy in Finland is going?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): I am not aware that Finland is changing its treaties. I am aware, however, that Finland is going through the existing treaties and how they are interpreted. One example is the Dublin Agreement, of which we still hear two different interpretations. We should be clear about what the international agreements and conventions demand and what they do not expect from signatories. This is the work we are doing. I do not believe that there will be any huge change in Finnish migration policy. The problem, however, is that we received quite a lot of young men who were not entitled to refugee status but are not leaving the country. That is a dangerous situation for them and for others. Feeling yourself to be, in a way, empty is not good for a young boy.

Mr Attila TILKI (Hungary, EPP/CD): Mr President, I would like to ask another question about migration. It is a very serious problem and there are a lot of asylum seekers in Finland who pose a security risk, burden the social security system, and create pull factors for further migrants. What kind of solution does Finland apply?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): As I said, it is quite a difficult situation. If you have people staying in your country illegally, which is their situation if they do not have refugee status, it is difficult to give any good answer to that question. You cannot treat people, even if they are staying illegally, in a way that does not follow human demands. That is why all the countries in the European Union face the same problem. Thus, it is most important that the European Union should take a leading role so that we do not see country-by-country solutions, which are not always the best ones possible.

Mr Betian KITEV ("The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", SOC): Given that I come from a Western Balkan region that has been at the centre of the international community's attention for the past decade in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration, I would like to ask: what is Finland's position on the enlargement of the European Union? It is a topic that remains high on the agenda of the European institutions. Does Finland support these processes, which are very important, particularly for my country and the wider region?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Finland has been supportive of enlargement. The last major enlargement wave was decided in 1999 in Helsinki during the Finnish presidency. However, we must also recognise that the European Union has quite a lot of problems at the moment. There is European monetary

union and financial problems. The global importance of the European Union has been declining. Why? My explanation is that it is because we have difficulty in agreeing and making compromises to find a clear path. That also damages the possibility of our having a place at the global table, which we should have.

I think the European Union needs to improve a lot. During its presidency I want Finland to take this question back to the table: where is the European spirit? I felt it in the 1990s when Finland joined the European Union, but I am not sure that I feel it in totally the same way today. We should find it again. That would also give rise to the possibility of enlargement. But enlarging something that needs fixing is a kind of paradox.

Alexander [The Earl of] DUNDEE (United Kingdom, EC): Mr President, considering the correct priority given to education for the future of democracy and human rights, and taking into account the excellent standards already set by Finland's education system – now recognised by the OECD's PISA measure as the best in Europe – what plans do you have to help improve education systems elsewhere, not least this year in connection with your country's current chairmanship of the Council of Europe and your imminent chairmanship of the European Union?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Let me start with a couple of words about our success story. Some say that you have to use a lot of resources for this, but our educational budget is average among those of OECD countries, so this is not achieved by money. Our teachers do have a university education, unlike the position in many other countries, but the basic element here is totally different – it is respect. I am talking about respect for education and respect for teachers. If you have pupils who clearly respect education and the teacher, who has given them knowledge and information, that makes for the best result. You ask how we can export that. We have created a clear combination as to how we can export “the Finnish education” to different countries, and it is being exported quite a lot. However, my answer still is that this lies in attitudes. You have to respect what you do, as then you do it well.

Mr Espen Barth EIDE (Norway, SOC): Mr President, I flew in yesterday from the deep Arctic, from Tromsø and the Arctic Frontiers conference, so I was happy that you mentioned the Arctic. One topic we discussed there was the fact that an institution that was built in better times, the Arctic Council, is working well, to a large degree unaffected by the difficult East-West relations we are seeing elsewhere; credit should also go to the chairmanship. I wonder whether one reason for that is that the Arctic Council has been able to focus on its core purpose and its core issues. Do you think the Council of Europe has a lesson to learn from that experience?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Yes. We planned to have an Arctic Summit, the first ever where the heads of state could meet, This was going well until something happened, and it now seems that we are not able to arrange it. As for the Arctic area, one explanation for what is happening is surely that the surroundings are cool enough not to have hot talks. This is being tested now because of the environmental element; the melting of the ice is dangerous for the whole globe. However, huge economic interests are involved, and how these eight Arctic countries can handle and combine them is a test now. So far, as you said, we have not seen any major problems, and it seems that the big members – the United States and the Russian Federation – are both trying not to bring to that table issues that raise only problems. That is a good attitude to have. As I said, the two elements of the environment and the economic interests may create a new and testing situation.

Ms Zita GURMAI (Hungary, SOC): The priorities of the Finnish presidency include the protection of human rights and gender equality. You also want to pay particular attention to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention – the convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. I am the rapporteur on this, so I would love to know what to do. What can you suggest to those national parliaments that refuse even to negotiate in respect of the convention. Onnea! Good luck!

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): Kiitos. Thank you. That was wonderful Finnish spoken. As I said in my speech, in Finland we have a lot to give thanks for on equality. Finland was the first country in the world to give full political rights to women. This is key to our success story, and I hope that all nations find out the same truth. I also mentioned the HeForShe movement, which is led by United Nations women; and we talk specifically about Africa. We Europeans – this is more for the European Union – must do concrete things

together. All the European Union countries must do things together, with a clear plan of how to enhance the position of women and girls in Africa. That would help us a lot in the future. My answer has to be that eyes have to be opened to understanding that it is to our benefit if women are strong – we all benefit from that. Sometimes you have to be “selfish” and give possibilities to others in order to help yourself.

Mr Momodou Malcolm JALLOW (Sweden, UEL): We have seen, and continue to witness, the rise of fascism and nationalism in Europe. These people have not only occupied our public space, marching through our streets and intimidating others, but occupied our corridors of power and institutions of policy making. This is highly relevant in Finland, as in December 2017 a court in Finland banned a neo-Nazi group called the Nordic Resistance Movement. My question is: what do you intend to do now that you have the presidency of this great institution, to defend our core democratic values from these racist and fascist terrorists who are taking over Europe?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): We can have but just one opinion: racism is totally wrong. That has been written down in our conventions and it is a guideline for every covenant. On Nazism, you mentioned the Finnish experience of having flags. I want to tell you that the police took them off these people quite quickly and they will continue taking them off them. The problem with those movements is how to respond legally to them. In a modern society it is difficult to ban certain groups, especially if they are not legally organised; you do not know who they are. But the position must be very clear: you have to react to everything that is not in accordance with legislation. I am sure that that is the Finnish answer against both racism and Nazism.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC)*: I will be brief. You were right to emphasise that the Council of Europe is faced with the serious political problem of the Russian Federation’s membership. It is a sensitive and vexed issue. We are all aware that, if the Russian Federation were to leave the Council of Europe, it would change the very nature and identity of the Organisation. Finland has had complex relations with the Russian Federation. How does the Finnish chairmanship see the issue and how can it help?

Mr Sauli NIINISTÖ (President of Finland): We are helping in every possible way, especially where you see that we can or should do something. In the end, I underline that it is in the hands of the Council of Europe; the Committee of Ministers and the Assembly have to work together to try to find an answer. By all means, however, we will be as helpful as we can be. We will try to help with whatever is needed.

You rightly mention that even the nature of the institution might change. I am worried not only about the Russian Federation’s membership of the Council of Europe, which is surely important, but that it is the only institutional link between Europe and the Russian Federation. If even that is cut away, how can we continue the dialogue?

Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: That brings to an end the questions that members wish to put to you, Mr President. I thank you very much for your address and for replying to questions.

Next public business

Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: The sitting will resume this afternoon at 3.30 p.m., when we will continue our joint debate on the two media reports. I invite you to join us for the ceremony to commemorate the Holocaust.

The sitting is closed.