



Provisional edition

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Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No. 9

Debate: Democracy hacked? How to respond?

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

Good morning for everybody. My first commentary for you all this Friday morning with a very, very, heavy week behind us. You who are here I must really call you “heroes of labour”. We are still working. We have two documents, two reports to consider this morning and some other decisions to be made. So welcome to the meeting.

The sitting is now open.

The first issue is the changes in the membership of the committees. There has been a change to the proposed in the membership of the committees. These are set out in document Commissions (2020) 01 Addendum 5.

Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Assembly’s committees agreed to? Are any remarks or commentaries on that regard?

If not, then they are agreed.

Now we can start the more serious matter, that was also serious matter but in terms of debate, a more serious matter. The first item this morning is: “Democracy hacked? How to respond?”

We have a Report 15028 presented by Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy with an opinion (Doc. 15056) presented by Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

We will aim to finish this item by about 11:30 a.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I call Mr SCHMIDT, rapporteur, to present the report. You have 13 minutes in total, which you may divide between presentation of the report and reply to the debate. So you know the rules.

Please, the floor is yours.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you Chair.

Built as an open and democratic space, the internet is a global village. It allows information to spread easily at low cost. Therefore it is difficult to identify trustworthy information or find those responsible for illegal behaviour online.

Disinformation, fake news and non-transparent interference are growing problems in democratic decision-making.

Foreign interference in the election is happening all over the world and digital media increases and accelerates the possibilities of influence. That is why we need common answers to make our democracies more resilient.

As democracies we all need to think about how to regulate information distribution and political campaigns on social platforms to ensure voters' independent decision-making.

During my work I was faced with the complex relationship between democracy and a new technological environment. In some democracies the use of technology tools has facilitated democratic participation and political activism. On the other hand, internet and social media can endanger the voter's free will or the principle of equal opportunities for all candidates, as well as voters' right to privacy.

Private companies like platform operators gain huge influence in political decision-making.

A powerful monopoly controls citizens' access to information and data. The problems they can cause for democracy are at worst collateral damage. This is something we have to be very aware of.

Also cyber attacks are becoming increasingly significant in what is now called hybrid warfare, a new type of warfare combining conventional and non-conventional methods. This also involves a redefinition of conventional military strategy concepts of attack and defence. In this context there is a great risk of civil society being targeted directly and its rights being jeopardised. The importance of this issue is without doubt, however it falls outside the scope of my report.

I'm lucky to refer to the highly valuable work done by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on the legal challenges of hybrid warfare. My intention however is to focus on issues related to disinformation, internet infrastructure and transparency, and their impact on the democratic processes and on elections.

I shall focus on how European countries respond to these issues, especially in the context of elections. European countries so far react in different ways to the problem. For example, France and Germany have chosen the way of regulation. Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK have published reports or launched media literacy campaigns or handbooks aimed at countering disinformation or foreign interference.

On the related subject of hate speech, the Network Enforcement Act was passed in Germany in June 2017 to combat hate and extremist content online. It requires social media companies to block or remove content that violates restrictions on hate speech in the German criminal code. Particularly problematic is a requirement to delete false information within 24 hours, a requirement similar to the new bill in France. This represents a major challenge not only to platform operators but also to the legal system. Without a reform of judicial structures this regulation is hard to implement and may pose a threat to the freedom of expression. Correct information may falsely be deleted due to time pressure or fake information may be legitimised by being overlooked.

In the end of last year the German government published a set of measures against hate speech. Among other things, it contains a demand for better and more resources for the judicial system. In my report I support this claim. We need to initiate judicial reforms and set up specialised divisions for judges and prosecutors focusing on disinformation and hate speech. However, it is equally important to follow the Swedish path of media literacy and training.

During my fact mission to Stockholm I learned a lot about how to make a democratic society more resilient. We need to promote education and to strengthen the legal and democratic culture of citizens, and political candidates need to be trained in dealing with disinformation and fake news.

I'm thankful for the valuable contributions of our experts during the hearing in Berlin. I included in my report their call for systematic access to data for researchers. We can only approach the problem if we know enough about the influence of disinformation. However these approaches only work with international cooperation. Online distribution of information does not stop at borders.

The work of the Council of Europe on personal data protection and electoral rights has been remarkable. Also the European Union has been actively tackling disinformation since 2015 with the East Stratcom Task Force, with several resolutions and codes of practices. This is a useful structure to be supplemented by the member states of the Council of Europe.

Only through international cooperation are we able to ensure our citizens' rights for independent information and decision making.

Part of the international cooperation should also be the regulation of social media companies. While controlling citizens' access to data they bear a great responsibility to ensure the reliability of information. They need clear rules on how to deal with fake news, hate campaigns and targeted disinformation. Transparency needs to be high especially during election campaigns about who is posting and financing what kind of political ads.

I'm convinced that with a better legal structure, broader media literacy and international cooperation and regulation, we are well prepared for attacks against our democracies.

I suggest you vote for this report in order to strengthen our democratic societies, to ensure our voters' independent decision-making and to preserve a free and fair public sphere.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Frithjof SCHMIDT, you have 5 minutes remaining.

Now I call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, rapporteur of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights to present the committee's opinion.

You have, as you know, 3 minutes for this. Please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Thank you, Mr Chairman,

Dear colleagues, especially my colleague Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT thank you for your scrupulous report. I remember my idea came about two years ago, in the Copenhagen Bureau, I suggested to have this hack democracy. We switched from paperwork, Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT, to proper news magazines to the Internet world, absolutely not prepared, and you mentioned very dangerous trends inside of our democratic societies, and the report is extremely scrupulous about that.

So we are in favour of every point in your report related to internal battling against radical trends in society, against hatred. But we have new phenomena when we have interfering in democracy elections - for example, one of the points - from outside of the democratic world and that is extremely worrying. While the not democratic world is organised, and try to use this new modern loop inside of our society and we have law you mentioned, we have a new law, a new reaction on Bundestag, Assemblée Nationale and other parliaments. How to react? How to react to this foreign threats and not let them interfere into our elections trying to use one or second opinion? In practice, Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT, it's about it's about other issues. It's about using even radical platforms from outside. Radical platforms, radical parties inside of our societies trying to strengthen radical trends from outside. It's new phenomena, absolutely. For that reason we have mostly unanimously adopted a few remarks to amendments and we would like to ask you to support that.

I would like to stress one more point. The European Union, just started to spend money trying to defend their democratic space with very few, not big budget implications for European Union, and we are here not in European Union, we are here in Council of Europe, but to encourage people to spend more money for defence of our democratic space and not interfering to the elections will be extremely important.

So these information weapons should be not used against our democracies. Our Committee considers that large-scale information manipulation in connection to this electoral process might raise issues under Article 10 of the Convention and Article 3 of the Protocol number 1. Article 10 protects freedom of expression, information and article 3 is the right of free elections.

So Assembly, we hope you'll recall that the principles of no intervention is well established international law. So for that reason I would like only to refer to Mr Boriss CILEVIČS report about, you just mentioned hybrid war, our current Chairman of Legal Affairs Committee and his report was based on how to prepare for hybrid war and how to defend our democratic society.

So, thank you so much. This is extremely important so we are supporting, in general, and we're telling you thank you so much to Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT's report and we are only adding a few remarks related to not interfering to our democratic processes.

Thank you so much. Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mister Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

And now we have the practice that, when starting the debate, the first speakers are speaking on behalf of the political groups.

And first I call Mr Sos AVETISYAN from SOC group to speak.

Please, the floor is yours.

Mr Sos AVETISYAN (Armenia, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Ladies and gentlemen.

It's an honor to speak on behalf of Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group in this hemicycle.

I want to thank the rapporteur Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT for a very valuable and timely report. This report is not only valuable for aptly diagnosing the overall situation but also the challenges. It singled out the challenges that we are facing today in terms of defending our public sphere.

As Mr Jürgen Habermas has warned us earlier, the public sphere is challenged. And it will be very idealistic to assume that we can elaborate quick solutions to this problem. It's not that surprising that during this one year that I was in the PACE I've seen dozens of reports discussions about this topic. Because since the term post-truth was coined all of our attention was diverted to this ideas and we wanted to understand how we can defend our public space.

At the same time I want to underline that more and more fact checking initiatives are being developed. Reputable media outlets and civil society are calling for ethical debates on the media platform. Media literacy courses are being introduced at formal and informal educational curriculum. So what can we do? Can we really cope with the tools that we have today at our hands with algorithms, targeted ads, data-gathering algorithms, fake accounts, etc.? Not really.

At the same time, over-regulation and over protection can be dangerous because that can close our societies. It is a central dilemma and is highlighted in this report. The convention for protection of individuals with regard to automatic processing of personal data is a milestone achievement. And we should work on this. At the same time our tools should be sharpened to defend the public sphere.

Dear parliamentarians,

When the media is under the influence of big money it succumbs to the will of those who pay, it stops being a reputable one. The media which has the mission to inform the society cannot afford being distrusted by the public. I am saying this because media and the public trust are synonymous in a stable democracy. Today when the information technologies are developing with an unimaginable pace, when there is freedom to express any idea and the tools to spread it all across the internet, we should be more and more cautious.

To put this another way, media has been also infected itself. It could be one of the cures, one of the doctors, but it is not. What we witness today is sometimes called hybrid warfare, disinformation, propaganda. All of this remains a threat to our democracies. While freedom of speech is of paramount value, a necessary air that we breathe every day, it is equally true that the fake news should not shadow this freedom, should not belittle its role.

I strongly recommend you to vote for this report because it's an extremely valuable one. It helps to protect our citizens, our democracies and withstand attacks from inside and outside wherever they come from. Because through education and long-term improvement of our citizenry we can achieve this solution.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much indeed.

The next one is Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO.

She's speaking on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Please.

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. Rapporteur,

The Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe thanks you and congratulates you on your work, which is fully in line with the democratic spirit defended by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The report under discussion today deals mainly, and rightly so, with the risks to our electoral systems caused by the malicious use of this new tool, the Internet.

I would like to begin my speech by mentioning the advantages of using social networks. We cannot deny that the development of this means of communication has greatly favoured the disclosure of information that the electorate needs to form an opinion. It allows a multitude of personal searches and access to data almost instantaneously. It is also THE good tool, easily usable and made affordable, for political parties or unlabelled candidates with limited financial means. I would even say an opportunity.

As you emphasise, Mr Rapporteur, this means of communication must not be countered to the detriment of freedom of expression, which is so dear to the principles defended by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The draft resolution is along those lines.

Unfortunately, the positive aspects are often accompanied by negative aspects, and they are, on reading the report, rather numerous. You have listed them: misinformation with this tendency to fake news, data theft, the intensification of hate speech on the net, the shaping of opinion gradually diminishing the electorate's interest in a confrontation of political ideas. I can only worry about it.

You also point out in your report - and this is an extremely alarming point - the repeated interference by a foreign country in national elections. Geopolitical harassment for geostrategic purposes will inevitably put the political stability of our countries in jeopardy. Malevolent and hostile influences challenge all the democratic principles we defend while creating or accentuating national divisions. This mechanism is, of course, reprehensible behaviour and must be unanimously condemned.

I would like to conclude my remarks by calling on you, all parliamentarians, to first of all support this resolution, which proposes, *inter alia*, to promote media education, to encourage mechanisms for verifying information but also to support the code of good conduct established by the Venice Commission. This code sets out good principles in terms of respect for democracy and the proper use of digital technologies.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): *Merci beaucoup.*

Next one is Ms Branka STAMENKOVIĆ speaking on behalf of the European Conservatives Group, please.

Ms Branka STAMENKOVIĆ (Serbia, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Yet again we are discussing social networks. It seems to me that this topic keeps coming back to the agenda over and over again. And it always comes in the context of dangers of social networks and the need to control social networks. Please allow me to remind you that the widespread term fake news did not originate in regard to anything on social networks. It actually originated in regard to the content on the mainstream media. How come we never debate the fact that there is less and less pluralism in the mainstream media? That there are certain newsworthy events that mainstream media never report about? That they are less and less doing the job of informing the public and are more and more doing the job of preaching to the public and promoting just one way of looking at things? Your average Joe on the street is not dumb. He sees that the reality is surrounded with does not match what he sees on the TV news. He sees that certain topics that he deems very important are never discussed in the mainstream media or at least not in a way in which his voice and his opinion can be heard. So he turns to social media.

So many new political movements have sprung up and gained popular support thanks to social media. This is because they are not in a business of preaching to people but listening to people and representing them. Now you say this is populism, right? And you say it in a very, very disparaging way. Well, I tell you that this is the core principle of democracy. That the majority opinion should rule. Having in mind that mainstream media is dominated by the traditional political elites while social media are the domain of the new political movements

that enjoy popular support, I must tell you that this obsessive need to control social media actually comes across as a fear of the traditional political elites losing ground to the new political movements. And these new political movements have no access to the mainstream media.

I thought this was the malady that only Serbia suffers from, but no, this is a widespread phenomenon as I learned from many colleagues here in the Council of Europe. It's present in Belgium, in Austria, in Germany, many other well-established democracies. And I think that's the real problem and real threat to democracy that we should be discussing here: the sooner the better, maybe even in April at the next session I hope.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

The next one is Mr Tiny KOX.

He's speaking on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

Please.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mr President.

Thank you very much, rapporteur Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT.

There are, as he says, in this first paragraph of the resolution serious worries about the scale of information pollution in a digitally connected and increasingly polarised world. On the basis of these worries, the rapporteur has developed a report and a resolution that is based on the report to address these worries and to find some answers on how to tackle them.

I think first and foremost we should underline that whatever threats there may be that come from the outside, the main threat in our member states with regard to our democracy is the deterioration of the democratic standards in our member states. In far too many member states we see that electoral laws are changed in order to influence results of elections. We see that freedom of press is limited due to concentration of the ownership in few hands and due to limitations to the alternative press. We see harassment of political opponents. We see arrests of journalists and politicians. In many of our member states these things happen. Whatever the good reason to look to foreign meddling via new media in the internal affairs of a member state it should never be used as an excuse that the main threat comes from the inside. There we are national parliamentarians. There we should act. We should not hide behind some idea that our democracy is under threat because of foreign interference. If it's under threat, we are first and foremost responsible.

The report that our rapporteur has drafted is in the opinion of my group a balanced one and we will support it. It is needed that we address the issue and that we talked about it. What is not seen as positive by our group is the fact that there is some foreign intervention from another Committee, the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights who comes up with the enormous amount of amendments which may be right, may be wrong, but they do alter the very nature of the resolution and report of our rapporteur. I do not think that that is the idea when we ask a Committee to give an opinion on a report. We should look for some changes but not to rewrite the report. I know Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS is very much involved in this issue. He wanted to have this debate, but it was the rapporteur Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT, who drafted the report on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. I do not think that we should need so many interference from another Committee to rewrite the report. That is not how we should behave.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

We have now the spokespersons of the political groups and their presentations. Mister rapporteur, you have obviously right to reply at the end of the debate, but do you want to now? Oh sorry, sorry I am too quick. There's still one group. Yes, actually. Obviously there is an Group of the European People's Party group.

Mister Aleksander POCIEJ from Poland, please. The floor is yours.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President, thank you very much for noticing the existence of our group.

Yes, I know it was the replacement and you are absolutely excused.

First of all I would like to thank Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT. This is a very, very important topic. This is something which is really, really undermining our political life. Sure, a country may undermine democracy by their own actions. We can see many examples of this among European continent but here we have something even worse.

This is the destabilization of the country coming from abroad. We have the Brexit problem. That is quite obvious, we detected the interference from abroad. US presidential elections, elections in Poland. Even we have here, we are in France, but also... the French authorities and French press spoke about the influence made from abroad on the French presidential elections. What's also obvious is that footprints always lead us to one country.

Of course, there is much more. Also the other countries that are trying to interfere. But we have to take under consideration what I said in many all those examples that I gave, this is one country that is the soil given to these hackers.

We also have the legal aspect. It's very easy and we know how to deal with defamation if deformation comes from the traditional media. But here it's something completely else.

So, I welcome mostly point 8 of this draft resolution. Really, we should work with the Venice Commission about how to deal with this legally because it's also a legal problem of a very important nature.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mr Aleksander POCIEJ. Also for your understanding. I have not forgotten Group of the European People's Party. It's as influential as ever, as your presentation also indicated.

Now the speaker's list is spokespersons for the political groups. Those presentations have ended and I ask the rapporteur would you like to react now or shall we move to the speaker's list? Rapporteur? Do you want to react now? You have actually opportunity to react now concerning the...

Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): I would like to do that at the end.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): You can. You have the right for that.

Thanks.

Now we go to the speaker's list and the rule for three minutes is applied here too.

We start with Mr Nikola POPOVSKI from North Macedonia.

Is Mr Nikola POPOVSKI here? The seat seems to be empty?

How about Mr José CEPEDA from Spain? Please.

Mr José CEPEDA (Spain, SOC): Thank you very much, Mr President.

First of all I would like to thank Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT for his work because the report is incredibly interesting. It is an important one. It deals with something that affects us directly, especially democratic societies, the most advanced of those societies.

I was listening to the colleagues who have already spoke in the debate. They were looking at the differences between traditional means of communication and digital media. I don't think that is the problem. I think that the problem stems from the fact that citizens in order to be able to express themselves democratically enough in our societies need to have quality information at their disposal, objective information. This is why we need to protect this objective information but also protect those who provide the information.

If you look at digital systems and the way in which they have been developing, we need to come up with recommendations, and that is the case in the report, addressed to countries. But as one of our colleagues has already said, we need to educate our children on how to use social networks and social media.

We also need to look at the way in which these tech companies, for example in California, operate. When we talk about the concentration of traditional media, we tend to forget how digital media are also concentrated. When we talk about Facebook or WhatsApp, the same company in that case. When we look at how images are disseminated on Instagram. Facebook, curiously enough, has been singled out for, as I'd say, tragic work, for the part of a scandalous company, Cambridge Analytica in its attempt to design psychographic profiles on every single one of its users. Facebook via its companies has managed to compile over 5 000 data on each of us and can design very specific profiles. This is true also for Twitter. There are other social media used by young people such as short videos with the Chinese social media called TikTok.

These are really echo chambers that tend to amplify certain narratives that are often xenophobic and racist. This has a negative impact on the opinion of people who don't necessarily have a well-formed opinion to contrast with. This is something we can work on.

Once again I'd like to congratulate the rapporteur and the two Committees for their work. In the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media I'd like to remind you that a lot of work has been done in this area.

I think this is a problem that we need to address effectively here at the Council of Europe.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): *Muchas gracias.*

The next one is Mr Yunus EMRE from Turkey, please.

Mr Yunus EMRE (Turkey, SOC): Thank you, Chair.

I thank Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT for this report dealing with one of the most crucial questions of today's digital age. The impact of disinformation on democratic procedures and on democracy itself. Many works and reports cited in this report revealed a wide range of dangers owing to abusive practices of digital platforms and social media, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, foreign electoral intervention, fake news, disinformation, political ads, and so on. This is a huge threat to democracy that we all face today, and in this sense, I completely agree with the general ideas and suggestions of the report.

As mentioned by Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT, this threat can only be eliminated by an intensive international collaboration towards three main goals: the improvement of Internet content and architecture, investment in quality journalism and providing media pluralism and transparency. As shown by the board of the 2019 Helsinki Conference organised by the Council of Europe and the Joint Report of the Venice Commission, it's an urgent need to establish an internationally-binding legal mechanism.

I agree with Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT that our Assembly should encourage and follow these works. In many countries the legal frameworks regulating media coverage of elections are not designed for social media. Therefore, we must create supervisory mechanism and democratic oversight structures and these mechanisms and structures should cooperate with Internet intermediaries and service providers in order to better regulate the social media.

And yes, social media comes with its benefits as well as with certain threats. Its benefits are quite obvious: it's increasing social capital, promoting political participation, creating an additional public sphere, where minorities too will take part in discussions. Especially in illiberal democracies it has become a vital component for access to reliable information. For instance, in countries where many media outlets are under the government's control.

Besides its function of the dissemination of ordinary political news, social media and citizens' journalism contribution to the surveillance of electoral processes is obvious. Yet if necessary steps are not taken by the international community and the social media companies, abusive practices would vitiate these positive contributions.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

The next one is Mr Ulrich OEHME, from Germany.

Mr Ulrich OEHME (Germany, EC/DA): Madam President, Honourable Members,

We live in an age in which information is available and retrievable everywhere and constantly. This development drives our companies forward. Information and data are the new raw material of our time. It is, therefore, more important than ever to critically question and examine information and, if necessary, to delete incorrect and distorted information.

However, we should be very careful about who, when, and how we can judge information as incorrect and even delete it.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Continue, please. Minus the few seconds you spent.

Mr Ulrich OEHME (Germany, EC/DA): However, we should be very careful about who, when and how we can judge information as incorrect and even delete it. Misinformation is not always the same as disinformation; and what some call a "lie" later turns out to be truth.

The latest example is the handling of the eight Chinese whistle-blowers during the outbreak of the corona virus in Wuhan, who were first arrested as liars and disrupters of order, now celebrated as heroes.

The introduction of judicial reforms and the establishment of specialised departments for judges and prosecutors, as proposed in the report, may sound pleasant to many. However, there is a risk that the opposition and civil liberties will be restricted.

What does reality look like today? Aren't they rather self-appointed discourse judges, who mostly without legal assistance, already now decide what disinformation and hate speech is? Aren't they already heavily involved in bringing the democratic discourse to a standstill? These self-proclaimed defenders of the truth, namely their own, always describe such information as fake or hate speech that does not correspond to their own opinion. These are not misguided individuals but campaigns often enough financed with tax money. In the current situation, the measures proposed in the report would provide even more money for the public media and actors and thus enable them to take even more action against alleged disinformation, would, in a sense be asking for trouble in many member states of the Council of Europe.

But equally important is the protection of the integrity of each state. It is important to prevent powers, be they other states or globally operating corporations, from impairing the political stability of a country by spreading disinformation. It should be clear where the information comes from, who is responsible for it or who has paid for it.

It must be said quite clearly: even if the report contains some useful measures, for example, to improve transparency in online contributions. It threatens to make the hacking of our democracies even easier. What we need is more transparency, pluralism and, above all, a little trust in the ability of our citizens to form their own opinions and to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Democracy means active participation in discourse without massive state supervision. The state should provide its citizens with the tools to identify the correct and important information; but not simply prohibit everything that it or self-proclaimed truth finders consider to be right. I cannot support this motion. Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next one is Ms Lesia ZABURANNA from Ukraine.

Please.

Ms Lesia ZABURANNA (Ukraine, ALDE): Thank you,

First of all I would like to say that I highly appreciate Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT's report because now it's extraordinarily important topic and issue for all of us.

A Eurobarometer survey in February 2018 found that 83% of European citizens believe that fake news represent a danger for a democracy. Also propaganda and disinformation are new. What is different in the digital environment of today? Is the speed, reach and sophistication of the use of information and communication technologies to manipulate perception, affect cognition, and influence behavior.

This new tools and practices have negative consequences both for public trust in technology innovation and for the quality of public deliberation and decision-making. The global rise of such digital manipulation of public opinion is of great concern to civil society groups working to advance democracy and equality both on and offline.

Misinformation and fake news undermines a core tenet of democracy and informed electorate. Political actors around the world ranging inside from state agencies to individuals have found ways to exploit the economies of digital advertising and fast-paced nature of the modern information ecosystem for their political advantage.

I would like to emphasize that now one of the most biggest countries with the name which we connect with aggression and inaction is the most prominent problem of disinformation, but unfortunately not its sole source. The disinformation of this country provides and instructive case study at home and abroad. It grows on the principle that there is no such things as objective truth. This allows this country to deploy multiplied narratives and conspiracies when seeking to undermine public confidence in western institutions, including claims that European politicians support Nazism in Ukraine, for example.

If we talked about disinformation in electoral context, we have to remind that even a partial list of election where this country produced or supported disinformation would include the American, French, German, and other elections in different years.

The disinformation challenge is about more than authoritarian propaganda or PR techniques. Long-standing vulnerabilities in human conditions combined with new and emerging technologies impact on the information environment, allowing for bad actors around the world to pursue political gains at the expense of democratic political discourse.

To sum up: to create pillars of trust the Council of Europe should initiate and support resolutions for the transparency of journalism and for the improvement of fact-checking services. Also special attention should be paid to the ethical operation of public service media and cases of dissemination of disinformation and propaganda.

So this report is a great step in the protection of democracy as strengthens the principle of accountability of the path of social media themselves.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

The next one is Ms Inka HOPUSU from Finland.

Ms Inka HOPUSU (Finland, SOC): Dear Chairperson,

Dear colleagues,

I want to thank Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT for a timely and important report.

When the internet was commercialised in the early 90s, it offered huge advantages. Twenty years later different social media platforms and communication services gave us an opportunity for active interaction. Internet has made the world more accessible. Moreover, it has eased access to knowledge and information. However, not all of it represents the truth. This is a double-edged sword, which is well addressed in the report.

Although technology and internet were developed to strengthen our democracy by creating new forms of participation and influence, it is clear that there are threats and risks associated with the amount of false information online. Even more challenging is the lack of understanding among voters and consumers on how algorithms control what you see and hear online based on your online activity. Data is the new gold and has become extremely valuable for targeted marketing.

The Finnish Future Fund Sitra traced data in a study and revealed how easily and meticulously users are profiled. Marketers and politicians target their messages, creating narrow perceptions of reality. If political campaigns are led by unverified and very targeted and narrow information, how can we consider the parliamentary elections and referendums valid if the voters have been misled by falsehoods? We as politicians have a huge responsibility. One recent and sad example was the Brexit campaign.

Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT raises important aspects in his report. I think education is the key and I hope you all include media literacy in school curricula. Finland has decided to put emphasis on critical thinking and different types of reading skills, including media literacy. We also need more training for teachers, parents and all web users.

Even a critical person can't control what content ends up in their feed. We must be aware that it is impossible to be fully protected from marketing.

Therefore, we must develop technology to help expose false information.

In addition we all have a moral responsibility to do the same. I warmly welcome social media groups who engage in verifying sources. This is an extremely important job on a grass-root level.

I warmly support the draft resolution.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: Our next speaker is Mr Sergey KISLYAK from the Russian Federation.

Mr Sergey KISLYAK (Russian Federation, NR)*: Thank you.

Thank you very much President.

Above all, we are to say that this is a very very serious issue and it is with great concern we look at the issues. Certain countries are under constant attack because of hacking and electronic interference and what is taking place in the political background as far as elections are concerned and preparation of elections.

We know of numerous different programmes in Western countries that are represented here to use this particular influence in order to point a finger at the Russian Federation. This entire issue of electronic interference is being manipulated also for external political purposes.

I think it's quite clear that in this particular report, the issue of working together in order to resolve the problems that exist. There are different views, of course, expressed by different people, by different member states. But reading through this particular report I think there are a number of different issues with which we are not in agreement. Where there is essentially an undermining of the effort to work in a concerted fashion.

At a psychological level I think there are a number of different, if you like, undercurrents. We are speaking about a hybrid war, a hybrid war. This is the idea behind this particular report. This is not written for members of the Council of Europe. It's written for members of the European Union and NATO. This appears to be a mechanism. The mechanism that is proposed here is one that would be a mechanism of the European Union and NATO. We know, we are familiar with this mechanism. It is a mechanism which is close to us. It is a mechanism that is our adversary as well. It takes everything and spins it into a whirlwind against us.

We have to be clear that we must speak about universal norms that would include all, that would be a concerted effort.

We have called for a universal approach under the auspices of the United Nations to deal with this particular issue of hacking.

In this particular organisation we are to bring together our power, our strength; work together. Unfortunately this particular report doesn't operate in that direction. It creates a delineation, unfortunately separating some from others, pointing the finger at some but not at others.

Fact-checking. Fact-checking is something that has to take place together. We can't do proper fact-checking unless we work together. For that particular reason we feel that this issue is extremely important. The motive behind this report is very important as well. But unfortunately, the tool, the approach and the implementation that is foreseen here is not the one that we are to choose.

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next one is Mr Claude CARIGNAN from observer delegation Canada, please.

Mr Claude CARIGNAN (Canada): Thank you, President.

Fellow parliamentarians,

I wish today to support the report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

This report deals with the considerable challenges surrounding the fundamental rights of our populations: freedom of expression, right to information, freedom of the press, respect for privacy. With the role of social media and the power of the Google, Apple, Facebook and Twitter of this world, these rights are threatened in more than one respect.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating this technological evolution and I am certain that we are only at the very beginning of this revolution. It is therefore urgent that we deal with this phenomenon now, in order to build it up, define its boundaries, assess its impact and take action without delay so that it can be harmoniously integrated into the lives of our fellow citizens.

The internet is an incredibly powerful tool for pushing back the borders of ignorance, but it can also prove to be a formidable weapon for the benefit of certain individuals who have few scruples and shape reality to make it their own.

Fake news, disinformation, hyper-faked videos: we are at the dawn of new phenomena that are polluting our democracies.

A recent survey conducted by the Canadian Journalism Foundation shows that 52% of Canadians get their information through social media; among millennials, this percentage rises to 60%. These data demonstrate the importance and impact that fake news and other misinformation can have.

Do the web giants have an interest in identifying this news and taking it down, knowing that it is often spectacular and inevitably leads to more clicks? More clicks means more profit. With this obvious conflict of interest, self-regulation by the web giants is not enough.

Thus, I stress the excellent proposal by Reporters Without Borders to change the environment in which they interact. They have empowered people, for example by posting, alongside controversial stories, verified related articles and providing applications that fact check or allow users to fact check themselves. This proposal is very interesting but, again, insufficient.

The committee's report points out the key areas we need to explore in order to be able to assess the impact of social media on our democracies: regulations, framework, support for regional print media, independent news media, education of the population in general and more specifically of young people, encourage research, we need to include digital platform providers in our strategies, and make sure governments can cooperate to do all this.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mister Mr Roberto RAMPI from Italy.

Mr Roberto RAMPI (Italy, SOC): Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

The issue that is addressed in these reports is really crucial for democracy as we know it today because these spaces, these social networks are not just tools. They are not just new media. They are, for all intents and purposes, the new territories. They are a place where democracy is exercised and where, however, today we are exactly where we were before the birth of democracies, before the rule of law, before the Magna Carta. They are places owned by individuals who can dispose of them as they want, who decide what the rules by which you live and die in those places are. You can be erased, closed, open, blocked. Obviously, this is an objective threat of democracy because it means that if those become the places of democracy, those places are not only public places. They are not places governed by laws that protect everyone. Democracy, in fact, in those places is a "hackable" democracy, as our excellent relations say.

It is clear that there can also be arsonist interventions on this. As Senator of the Italian Republic, my first bill was to make a commission of inquiry into the role of Cambridge Analytica in the last Italian elections because we have several elements that say that there was also a role, an influence and a willingness to influence the

vote in those Italian elections. It is clear that there are more and more movements trying to enter the democratic life of each country, trying to undermine one of the strong points of this community, which is precisely that of cohesion, for example, between the different European countries. This has affected all the countries that are involved here.

On the other hand, I think it is really important, relationships do it very well, try to acquire different points of view on how to deal with this issue. We just heard from our colleague in Canada. This is a global, worldwide issue. If we want to try to intervene, we can only do so at this level because these types of structures escape the legislation of any state. If we want to, and this is also a positive aspect, they break boundaries. They force us to be transnational. They force us to look beyond our stories of individual states, yet they challenge us to do so with an intellectual novelty too.

And that's the last thing I want to say. All the instruments that we are going to identify of a regulatory nature, of a legislative nature, of a sanctioning nature are useful. But the real tool, the only tool that can defend people from this kind of actions is the diffusion of culture. These are the cultural tools that allow us to understand where the fiction lies, where the artifice lies, what the reasons why they want us to think one thing over another are.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I now call Mr Claude KERN from France.

Mr Claude KERN (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mr President.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to thank our colleague Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT for the quality of his report.

I share his concerns about the extent of information pollution in our digital and connected world, but also about the risks this poses to our democracies. I am, of course, mindful of some of the large-scale disinformation campaigns that may have been carried out in Europe, but also in the United States, for example.

Our Assembly has already carried out work on these issues, particularly on cyber attacks in 2018, and I want to emphasise the major contribution of the Council of Europe on these issues. I am thinking in particular of Convention 108 for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, which was modernised in 2018.

In the face of challenges that concern all States, the content and architecture of the Internet must be improved; investment in quality journalism must be made and attention must be paid to guarantee media freedom, pluralism and the safety of journalists. Disinformation must be combated, even if it is sometimes legally difficult. On this point, I refer you to the exchanges we had in the French Senate during the symposium organised by the French delegation to PACE on democracy in the digital age.

To this end, it is essential to promote media education and digital literacy skills. Last year we adopted a resolution to that effect, which is still relevant today. We should also encourage media professionals and organisations to develop self-regulatory frameworks containing professional and ethical standards for their coverage of election campaigns, as we requested in our Resolution 2254 adopted last year.

I also hope that the Venice Commission will succeed in drawing up a list of principles for the use of digital technologies in the context of elections, that will be both authoritative and effective.

The issue is crucial for our democratic systems, for the trust that our citizens have in politicians, in parliamentarians, in governments.

Europe has been able to build a civilisation where reason and deliberation within a framework of trust are essential components. Digital technologies enable the emancipation of the individual from traditional information structures. Let us be careful, however, that this does not lead to a "de-civilisation", to use a formula by Norbert Elias and Hamit Bozarslan, in a world where one's bearings are blurred and trust is undermined.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): *Merci, Monsieur.*

Next one is Mr Betian KITEV from North Macedonia. Is he around? His seat seems to be empty. No, then we follow the list. Next one is Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, Ukraine. Please.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Hello, dear colleagues,

Well regardless the highly important topic we don't witness today many colleagues in this house. However, every place here could have been a concrete example of the cyber attacks, which I personally experienced during the election campaigns. However, dear colleagues, in the 21st century, democracy has undergone significant changes and whoever can think of various things maybe in the future our places will be taken by robots. With the digitalisation of the society and industry, cyber security is an essential precondition in this new reality. Therefore, ensuring that there is a common ground and baseline principles in the spheres of cyber security is critical to secure democracy, safe of the progress and to allow the society and industry to grow.

You know about our great example of electoral revolution of 2019 in Ukraine, which was a positive case, and that's why I'm standing here in front of you, speaking here, about this topic. Therefore, today one of our government's initiative is the decision of creating a ministry of digital transformation which was taken from other positive experience of our friendly countries around. And the purpose of this ministry is to introduce e-governance for the convenience of the people and ensure that transparency and accessibility of public services and ultimately minimise the corruption during the processes.

But I also want to outline, dear colleagues, that while building a defence and resilience, we also should not forget about the freedom of speech and democracy. Therefore, the things which are outlined in the report like positive campaigns, raising awareness, which have to tackle also young people who are here today with us and listening to our speeches, this is our task to show them how we treat youth and how we give them the opportunity to know more about our politics. Therefore, when they vote in the future for the representatives, their choice has the grounds. Being critical, being positive and being adequately represented, also in this house, is our task.

Therefore, I support to implement the number of strategies proposed by our colleague, the rapporteur, which will increase the broader perspective and give more push for the data-driven electoral campaign. And I would like to outline that we are all moving towards the electoral positive codes and votes.

Thank you very much, dear colleagues.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thanks, Maria.

Next one is also from Ukraine, Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO. Please.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I'm going to talk about the biggest, the most powerful, and the richest hacker of democracy.

Let's face the truth, in the short run democracy is weaker than authoritarian regimes because democracy prefers to play by rules. Democracy truly honestly believes in the freedom of speech and tries to develop freedom of speech, whereas authoritarian regimes break the rules. They abuse freedom of speech, they try to use freedom of speech as a guise in order to undermine democracy.

On the other hand, to paraphrase one classic politician: democracy is worthy of something only when it is able to defend itself. I would add to defend itself against such threats as anti-democratic subversive propaganda fueled by money or authoritarian regimes. Democracy should defend itself against such powerful and rich hackers as Russia, which is waging a new kind of war, the so-called hybrid war against world democracy, using such means as internet and social media.

It has been proved many many times that Russia in special services actively uses social media to undermine democratic institutions all over the world to discredit democratic institutions in the eyes of the population of these countries, to meddle in the elections. The characteristic feature of Russian foreign policy of Russia itself in this regard is that it has made disinformation and fake news its major instrument in its struggle against worldwide democracy.

In fact, we have a global war between democracy, on the one hand, and Russia with its tools of disinformation on the other hand. Russia systematically abuses freedom of speech. It has made a mockery of democracy and freedom of speech. To win this war for global democracy, we should create effective mechanisms against disinformation spread by the enemies of democracy. One of the first steps should be banning Russian propaganda channels such as Russia Today. We need to win this war for democratic values. We need to win the war for the hearts and minds of the people all over the world.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I now call Mr André REICHARDT from France.

Mr André REICHARDT (France, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr. President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I, too, would like to thank our colleague Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT for the quality of his report on pirated democracy and the means to respond.

Last November, in the framework of the French Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the French delegation to PACE had itself already organised a colloquium on human rights and democracy in the digital age.

While misinformation or alternative facts are not new. The accelerated flow of information in the digital age, particularly as a result of social networks, gives misinformation and alternative facts a magnitude probably never seen before.

The convergence between traditional media, the internet and mobile telecommunications, as well as the emergence of new types of media such as online platforms have radically changed the landscape. The reader or viewer now actively contributes to the news channel, not only by selecting the information, but often by producing it on the platforms. This development is having an influence on the way traditional media are financed, which are being weakened.

Several national elections have been affected by the massive dissemination of false information. To stick to my own country, I am thinking of the last French presidential election, as was said earlier, with the use of this technique, just a few hours before the second round of the election, more than 70 000 e-mails had been sent in the last few moments. Actors, mainly foreign, seem to have the objective of influencing certain electoral processes and mobilize all the means at their disposal to do so, including the dissemination of false information on digital platforms.

The stakes are therefore high and invite us to address issues that are sometimes legally complex, which our colleague's report refers to.

First of all, how do you identify genuine information from falsified or even only misleadingly presented information?

Secondly, how can the professionalism and ethical standards of traditional media, under financial pressure, be further strengthened and how can readers or viewers better assess the integrity of these media?

How can press freedom be guaranteed and how can we avoid the temptation of certain powers to transform public service media into government relays or even propaganda tools?

Finally, how can ethical safeguards be established on social networks and how can we ensure that platforms contribute to the fight against information manipulation?

Beyond legal protection, I also believe it is essential to promote media literacy to combat misinformation and to train our fellow citizens in the challenges of the digital world. Not least of all, I repeat, promoting media literacy, so that a person can step back if necessary. Without a genuine digital literacy of citizens, the safeguards that will be tried to be put in place will be of limited scope. The Council of Europe has an important role to play in all these areas.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: Our next speaker is Mr Aleksandr BASHKIN, please.

Mr Aleksandr BASHKIN (Russian Federation, NR)*: Thank you very much.

Mr President, it might seem strange to you but I am indeed grateful for the word said by my colleagues from Ukraine because he spoke to us about the dissemination of fake news and I think indeed his particular presentation was a wonderful example of that dissemination. Now digital word and the penetration to every aspect of human life has been seen as a plus, an absolute blessing. Unfortunately, this was a kind of reckless and presumptuous idea in the first place because there are numerous different risks out there.

Although the simplification of communication and difficult tasks are executed more effectively, there are many many risks. Indeed, we have to look at those risks that exist, we have to look at the way the computer world, internet, in other words, can undermine democracy as well. I think it's very important to understand the Russian Federation has very a specific legislation against the dissemination of fake news. And there is responsibility in Russia as far as blocking the dissemination actively on that particular front. In other words, we have been working.

Indeed, what is behind this particular report is very, very correct. The work that has been done has been very good but there is a great but here. Now in the work that we have done in the report concerning the safeguarding and the guaranteeing of the work of lawyers, we have seen two particular reviews that have been adopted. One which has been the compromising of confidentiality in issues of terrorism and the other view has been never compromising confidentiality. We, indeed, feel that confidentiality ought never be compromised. You cannot fight evil with evil and you cannot eliminate fake news with fake news.

So, I do feel that here there is a specific problem. In the text and in the allegations or the claims made as concerns Russia and its interventions in elections in other countries. The citizens of a country may be involved in a sort of criminal or antisocial activity on the internet but the people who do that shouldn't necessarily be associated immediately with the government of that territory, of that particular land.

Russia has a very clear perspective and a very clear view with regard to how this issues are to be dealt with. We do feel that there must be the protection of states, society, and individuals and that there are to be free elections under all circumstances. We have called for the adoption of a universal rule for responsibility as far as behavior of states on the internet. And we have proposed this particular initiative to the United Nations. There is a fully-fledged body with regard to protection over the internet, which is under the auspices of the General Assembly, most member states of the United Nations participate, including representatives of the Council of Europe.

But, colleagues, we will not support this particular resolution because to counter fake news, you have to adhere to a particular principle and not counter fake news with fake news.

Thank you very much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Next one is Ms Minerva HERNÁNDEZ RAMOS.

She is representing the Mexico observer delegation.

Please.

Is she around?

Mexico.

If she is not, there is another Mexican.

Mr Eudoxio MORALES FLORES. Are you around?

Pity. Pity. It would have been nice to hear comments from Mexico. No.

Then we go to the list further.

We have here Mr Ziya ALTUNYALDIZ from Turkey. Please.

Mr Ziya ALTUNYALDIZ (Turkey, NR): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank the rapporteur for this valuable preparation and almost highly prepared report.

While we are benefiting from technology we remain vulnerable to it at the same time.

Disinformation campaigns, manipulation of information and hate speech have become more common in member states, especially in election periods. Most notably, the Cambridge Analytica scandal has revealed the degree of how our privacy and free will are under attack.

On the other hand, psychological profiling and micro-targeting protocol ads have shown us the capability of information technologies to affect voters' opinions and democratic processes. Besides, the Cambridge Analytica scandal has revealed another danger, which is the possibility of foreign interference into the election process to change or manipulate the results. It can be observed that the prevalence of malicious use of virtual tools in elections casts doubts in elections and causes mistrust and confusion among voters.

In light of the aforementioned issues dear colleagues, questions on how we should tackle these challenges have gained paramount importance in recent years. In this context, as stated in the report, voters need to be enabled with trustworthy information. Therefore, fact-checking initiatives and public media services should be supported.

Furthermore, media literacy programs should be provided to strengthen citizens' capabilities to identify manipulation and unreliable information. On the other hand, data-driven electoral campaigning on social media needs to be better regulated and transparency in political online advertising should be enhanced as suggested in the report.

However, the complexity of the problem and its transnational nature are undermining the effectiveness of unilateral actions of the states. Thus, I believe that international cooperation is necessary to tackle challenges derived from democracy hacking such as sharing practices and increasing security agency cooperation as recommended again in this report.

All in all we should bear in mind that we have to stay vigilant and responsive to new challenges.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

That concludes the list of speakers. Now I call Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT, the rapporteur to reply. You have five minutes, please.

Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr President, I would like to begin by thanking you for the many supportive statements you have made in support of my report and for your support for the political intention of this report.

It is true that it is really a difficult and complicated subject when we talk about the abuse of the internet. We are not criticising the use of the Internet for communication. When we talk about abuse, we have to discuss very carefully: where does abuse start? For on the other hand, it is clear, particularly to the members of the Council of Europe, that freedom of expression, freedom of the press, is a great good that we must defend.

If we demand more transparency in the control of large social media platforms than possible answers for their abuse, it is also clear that we, on the other hand, also represent data protection and the protection of the privacy of users as a high value. This means that we are in a contradictory situation where we have to find a way to bring different values together and develop instruments to deal with this problem.

But it is also quite clear that when we see that our democratic processes are massively influenced by automated disinformation campaigns, for example, by so-called social bots, that we cannot ignore this problem, that we must address it and that we must consider measures to prevent such abuse.

Mr KOX has pointed out that the question that this should always come from abroad would be the wrong question to ask, but I do not believe that this is what my report says either. There are of course such attempts in our countries, from within them; and there are cross-border attempts at manipulation. Both are corresponding problems. The Internet does not find borders at state borders. It is a transnational problem. That is why the report also proposes that we need international cooperation and convention, for example, on the question of how we can create transparency.

To Mr KISLYAK I would like to say that I quote criticism in my report, which also includes Russia, for example, that such interventions have taken place on the Internet by actors based in Russia. You are absolutely right. It is not yet proof that the Russian state must be behind it. The question is, though if we can reach agreements between states that all states are obliged, if actors on their territory take such actions, control them and do something against them. If such criticisms are in the air, if you read my report carefully, if the European Commission addresses Russia as someone where there is a problem, then it is my job as rapporteur to quote this. That does not mean that I am passing judgment and saying that everything the European Commission says is now true. Everything Russia says is wrong. I didn't do that anywhere in my report. If we want to talk about solutions to this problem, then these things must also be mentioned and addressed. This is not directed against Russia, but it is the debate on the international problem.

So, how do you get out of it? I think it is very important that the Council of Europe does indeed play a central role here. Nor do I recommend anywhere in my report that we should simply adopt all the measures of the European Union, but rather, quite the opposite, develop international cooperation and convention so that this problem can be resolved between states and resolved between our societies. Including also the phenomenon that we have large international media groups; partly monopolies, which are not at all covered by our previous considerations for an international antitrust law.

Here I hope that the Venice Commission can play a central role in the further discussion. That is to say that the Council of Europe has a special significance here, much more than the European Union or the individual states and that the Venice Commission is such a recognized international authority that we can hope that all states will be able to recognize it as a neutral body, while proposals should be fairly considered.

I think this is an opportunity for the Council of Europe. It is a great opportunity for the Venice Commission. I hope that we will be able to seize them in the coming months and years. Thanks a lot.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT and thanks for your report.

Now does the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Andreas NICK, want to speak? You have three minutes, please.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Mr President,

Colleagues,

On behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs, I would like to thank Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT as well for this wonderful report on a very important issue. I'd also like to thank him for the very disciplined and structured way that the issue has been dealt with. I believe he avoided the temptation to fall into certain traps because the topic of this particular report involves, of course, the issue of interventions or interference from abroad or by foreign governments. Nonetheless, he achieved a certain amount of balance here and it is very focused on the issue of the various technical possibilities that exist and how to impede when necessary and, also, how to control the dissemination of information to a certain extent.

From the Committee, of course, we've been working on a number of different issues that relate to this one as well, so it's very important for us to cooperate on this front. This week, we heard the report by Mrs BERGAMINI, which deals with the technological dimensions of this issue; in other words, the implementation of artificial intelligence and how this may offer even greater opportunities to influence and manipulate these processes.

We also looked at the report by Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ on the issue of ill democracies. There was a very constructive hearing with Professor Diamond from Stanford University and a representative of the Venice Commission. I just want to illustrate that the Committee on Political Affairs is paying close attention to the diversity of issues surrounding this report. And I believe that we can perhaps also create added value for the debate in this Assembly, particularly by making a very disciplined attempt to distinguish these issues from one another.

There were a number of interesting and important contributions in the course of the debate. I believe that our colleague Mr KERN also referred very explicitly to the media situation. I do indeed believe that this is one of the key questions, along with the issue of training, of education. Social media is taking over the role of traditional media and we must be prepared to deal with that in a regulated way, as we do elsewhere, without -- and this is the downside -- causing the strangulation or nationalisation of the Internet and the dangers there.

In conclusion, I would like to remind you once again of the scope of this issue. A historian with previous knowledge made the comparison a few months ago that 100 years after the first printed book made by my fellow countryman Johannes GUTENBERG, the religious wars devastated Europe. And he warned that the uninhibited dissemination of information, including misinformation, and opinions on the Internet has the potential to interrupt and erode peaceful coexistence in our societies. I believe that the issues we deal with in the Committee on Political Affairs, we've tried to cover the possibilities that are out there on the horizon with the introduction of the Internet.

And I thank Mr SCHMIDT once again and look forward to advising the amendments.

Thank you very much.

Vote: Democracy hacked? How to respond?

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mr Andreas NICK.

The whole debate is now closed and we move to the consideration of the amendments. The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented a draft resolution, Document 15028, to which 10 amendments and one sub-amendment have been tabled.

So we start to look now at the amendments but I understand that the Vice Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, Mr Andreas NICK, wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 1 and 5 to the draft resolution, which were unanimously approved by the Committee, should be declared as agreed by the Assembly. Is that so Mr Andreas NICK?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Yes.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): It's so. Does anyone object to that proposal? If not, those Amendments 1 and 5 have been agreed. Thanks.

Now Amendment 1 is already done and we move towards Amendment 2. I call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support Amendment 2, please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion)*: It is not a question of rewriting the report, which is very good, but of adding a number of complementary aspects. In fact, it is a matter of revising paragraph 2 by recalling Resolution 2217 of 2018 on hybrid warfare – see the report of Mr Boriss CILEVIČS, from two years ago.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Let's try to keep the 30-second rule in this regard.

Now anyone wants to speak against? Mr Tiny KOX, please.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): As I said I support the resolution as it's proposed. I would advise in certainty to stick to the original text of our rapporteur. It's a concrete and precise and not to add it with other elements. Therefore, I would advise not accepting this amendment.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Opinion of the Committee?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Committee was against in a tight vote.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): I shall now put the amendment to vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

The results: it's rejected.

We move to Amendment number 3. Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Sir, I will be short, and would like only to stress that all our members voted in favour from by all Committee of Legal Affairs. Paragraph 1 of the draft resolution mentioned trends in foreign electrical interference. This problem is not mentioned elsewhere in the text. So, we are not asking to have this amendment in every paragraph of the text but only in one text for interference in elections is a very worrying issue. We should be given much more emphasis in this report. That's natural after all the reports in all countries. Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Anyone against?

Mr Tiny KOX once again please.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): I would advise the Assembly to stick to the original text. There are no findings from our rapporteur that these developments have been on an unprecedented scale. Why should we add it if they are not in the findings of our rapporteur?

The original text is far better.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Committee opinion?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee was against by a large majority.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Result: it's rejected.

We move next Amendment No. 4. Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support. Please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Dear friends,

This amendment is intended to reaffirm the Assembly's attachment to the right of freedom of expression just mentioned in all your speeches here, included the freedom of expression on the Internet and to protect this freedom from state's undue interference. The right to receive impartial information and ideas without interference by public authorities and regardless of frontiers is enshrined in article number 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

That is the... about freedom of expression.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thanks, anyone to speak against?

The Committee's opinion?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee was against the amendment as previously sub-amended in the in the Committee. I'm not sure whether you have the right basis for the decision. There was a sub-amendment that was approved but....

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): You can maybe make an oral sub-amendment if you so wish, I understood. Is it so?

Please.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): So that the Committee was against the amendment as amended.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Yes. Do you want to propose an oral sub-amendment now?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): He should have the text for that.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Let's take...

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): I don't have the text for that.

I think, okay, there was an oral sub-amendment in the Committee to replace the word "non-democratic states" by "some states".

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Now, in my opinion.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The sub-amendment was approved by the Committee.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): There is an oral sub-amendment now we are dealing with. I am sorry, it's complicated for all of us, etc.

In my opinion, the oral sub-amendment is in order under our rules how, it's made.

However, do 10 or more members object to the oral sub-amendment,? The oral sub-amendment said instead of using word "non-democratic" use word "some".

Is anyone against that type of oral sub-amendment? If not, this is not the case, I call now Mr Andreas NICK. You already supported this amendment. Anyone want to speak against it?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): In favour of the sub-amendment.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): That's enough. You said it already.

Is anyone against?

What is the opinion about the move?

Mr Frithjof SCHMIDT (Germany, SOC): I'm for the amendment.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, what are you thinking?

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Yes, in favour.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Okay.

The Committee is obviously in favour. That's very clear.

Now it's in the vote, this oral sub-amendment please.

The vote is closed.

This oral sub-amendment is approved. Thanks.

Sorry complication.

Now we move to consider the main amendment as amended.

Does anyone want to speak against it?

Mr Tiny KOX please.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): Mister Prestident,

The adoption of the oral sub-amendment improved the text but, overall, after discussion in the committee, the idea is that it goes too far because it speaks about having no state control at all. We should take care not to interfere too much in the modern media but also not less than we do in other media. Overall, it would be better not to accept this amendment.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Okay.

What is the opinion of the Committee please?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy):

The Committee was against the amendment as previously amended.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Okay, okay.

It's even more complicated.

But let's put it to the vote now. You decide. Please. The vote is open.

The vote is closed. The result is the destiny for this Amendment No 4. It is rejected. In the end it's solved.

We have already approved Amendment No 5.

We will now move to Amendment No 6.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support, please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Dear friends, this amendment is aimed at stressing the need to amend national legislation, if necessary, in order to make it better adapted to the objective of countering disinformation campaigns.

Germany and France, like we know very well, have already adopted specific legislation to counter this phenomenon.

Thank you so much.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does Anyone want to speak against?

Committee opinion?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee was in favour.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

The amendment is agreed.

We move to Amendment number 7. Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support, please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Dear colleagues,

The new phenomenon of trolling and this word was discovered, not by me, but by all mass media in the democratic world is one of the symptoms of democracy hacking. That was one of my intentions proposed in all the report, not to dominate with this word but to have it only in one place. Therefore, the state should do more to combat the actions of troll factories in particular by providing relevant legislations and adequate sanctions against natural and legal persons involved in such activities like trolling.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thanks.

Anyone wants to speak against?

Mr Tiny KOX.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): Mister President,

This amendment does not improve the text and introduces new elements as having legal and national legislation for sanctions against natural and legal persons involved in troll factories disseminating disinformation.

I don't know what it means and that's why also the rapporteur did not include it in his original text. So, this is not an improvement. It's better not to accept it.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thanks.

The opinion of the Committee?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee was against by a large majority.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): I put the issue on the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

The result, rejected.

We move to Amendment number 8.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support, please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Yes sir,

Our Committee is proposing an Amendment No. 8 in carrying out its various activities against disinformation, mentioning the European Commission. The European External Action Service should cooperate with relevant NGOs. Just spoken about were cooperation and solidarity, who could assist in detecting fake news, assist in detecting fake news. The relevant internal bodies should also cooperate closely. We are recommending to cooperate on all levels to fake news. Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Anyone wants to pick against? Opinion of the committee?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Committee was in favour by a large majority.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Great.

I put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

Vote closed. The Amendment is approved.

Amendment No. 9 and sub-Amendment No 1.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): This is encouragement to start to finance, after this new phenomenon appears, to finance the actions in European Union, well European Union have money, the Council of Europe does not have money. But maybe the European Union could financially help us combating disinformation because we have been allocated too scarce resources, too small resources.

In 2018, the budget for strategic communication was expected to more than double, by about €2 million, from €2 million to €5 million. However, is still too small money, too little compared to the sums allegedly spent by some countries to spread their propaganda. So in this case, we are urging European Union to spend more money.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS spoke now to support Amendment No. 9. Now I ask Mr KOX to support the sub-amendment. I'm sorry, Mr Andreas NICK, obviously, Mr Andreas NICK to support sub-Amendment No. 1.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): I think the Committee was in favor of the sub-amendment to replace the words "budget allocated to" with the words "support for" because it's not in our responsibility to decide about budgets of other institutions.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thanks.

And now we deal first with this sub-amendment.

Anyone wants to speak against this sub-amendment that Mr Andreas NICK just supported?

No.

Then what is the opinion of the mover of the main amendment, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS?

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Now, I'm supporting this amendment and I'm supporting, like it was agreed, the sub-amendment in our Committee.

So I'm supporting both, and I'm supporting the proposal from the Committee side and by the rapporteur.

Thank you.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And obviously the Committee is supporting this.

So the vote is open now.

The vote is closed.

The sub-amendment is approved.

Now we come to the main amendment, as amended.

Does anyone who wish to speak against that amendment?

No.

The opinion of the Committee?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy):
The Committee was in favour by a large majority.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And now the issue on the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Result.

It's approved.

Amendment 10.

If it's so that you want to withdraw it, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS please.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Yes.

I'm obliged to... the amendment number 10.

It goes about our common... "united forces using all possible cooperation to examine the measures taken by the European Union to combat disinformation." Disinformation. It's about combat disinformation. This amendment is aimed at putting emphasis on the work of the European Centre of Excellence for countering hybrid threats, other centres in Helsinki and established in 2013 and to cooperate with, even with NATO. NATO is mentioned. NATO is mentioned like everyone who is cooperating fighting disinformation.

That's all.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Sorry about my misinformation about the intention. You wanted to support the Amendment 10, you made it now.

Somebody wants to speak against?

Mr Tiny KOX.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): Mr President, a lot of organisations do a lot of good work, but to focus only on one of these organisations does not make much sense and it also does not pay tribute to the others.

So I think it was wise for the rapporteur not to mention this in his resolution and it would be wise not to adopt this amendment therefore.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Committee opinion?

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, Chairperson of Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy):
The Committee was against by a large majority.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Total. It's rejected.

Ladies and gentlemen, now we are in the final stage concerning this draft resolution, so now concentration. We need a simple majority. We are dealing with the whole resolution as it was amended.

The vote is now open.

The vote is closed. This draft resolution is agreed broadly. Congratulation for rapporteur, congratulations for all of you.

This issue is now solved.

We have an half minute break. We change the chair. I thank you very much for your good cooperation.

Joint debate: Organ transplant tourism / Combating trafficking in human tissues and cells

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): And now we come to the first joint debate on two reports, both from the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development.

The first is titled "Organ transplant tourism" (Doc. 15029) presented by Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, and the second is titled "Combating trafficking in human tissues and cells" (Doc. 15022) presented by Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN.

We will aim to finish this item by about 12.40 p.m.

I first call Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, rapporteur, to present the first report. You have 13 minutes in total, which you may divide between presentation of the Report and reply to the debate. Please.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mr President.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a report, a resolution, which deals with a very key issue of human rights and, above all, of human dignity. At the same time, it is an appeal to all our member States to sign the Council of Europe Convention on Combating and Preventing Organ Transplant Tourism, which has been in force since 2018. We currently have only 9 signatures, and this Council of Europe Convention is the only instrument of international law.

It is one of the largest and most profitable criminal activities currently taking place. People travel to other countries, organise organ transplants, pay for them, and there are middlemen involved as well. And these organ removals are not always ethical, medical or however justified.

It involves the issue of human trafficking, it involves the issue of human trafficking of women and children, it involves the issue of refugees, and it addresses how organs are removed from the deceased. The resolution also contains a specific reference to China.

Not always are those who 'donate' the organs -- and please put this in quotation marks -- able to defend themselves against it. Poverty and need are often in the background; they are the underlying causes of these donations. There is an Istanbul Convention according to which this type of organised crime, this type of criminal activity, has to be dealt with by countries throughout the world at the international level.

We have to know when an organ is donated, and how and under what circumstances it is donated. This is a horrific crime that should not take place. Given that this is one of the most lucrative crimes occurring on a daily basis, too little is happening. That's why we need this resolution and this reminder.

Let me begin by saying that I have taken over this report. Liliane Maury PASQUIER first took it up; she then became President of our Assembly. She was followed by Stella KYRIAKIDES, who became the EU Health Commissioner. As you can see, as former chairman of the Social Affairs Committee, I am in the fortunate position of being able to complete the work of these two important women here and to present it to you.

I ask you and appeal to you to give this resolution broad support -- there is only one amendment and it was adopted unanimously -- and to take action in your own countries. We need this cooperation and we need the ratification of this Convention. The WHO and the International Red Cross are also involved in this serious issue.

And another thing: If I remove organs illegally from a country, for whatever reason, then I do not have those organs available for the people in my own country. And the fact is that there is always more demand for organs than there are donors.

And as a last remark, in Israel in 2008, they passed a piece of legislation in the Knesset with only two votes against and the situation changed 180 degrees. Today it is one of those countries that has shown that when action is taken on a particular front, it is for the benefit of the citizens. And in this case, it has stopped that movement of people travelling somewhere to Thailand, Colombia, the Philippines or wherever to get illegally donated organs.

So I think it's very important to take up this particular issue. Look at those wonderful examples: that example from Israel. We have been very impressed by what has been done. We need such examples, and we have seen them on the ground. We were very, very impressed by how an entire country -- Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Justice, Health Minister -- stood behind an action. And until 2008, Israel was at the top of the list of evildoers. Now it is one of the countries that is putting the most pressure on the States to cooperate here, which is also pushing this cooperation group under the Istanbul Convention.

But our countries have something to do, namely to sign our Council of Europe Convention, which is the only one that is an instrument of international law.

Thank you.

Mr Oleksandr MERESHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, you have seven minutes remaining.

I now call Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN, rapporteur, to present the second report.

You have 15 minutes in total which you may divide between presentation of the report and reply to the debate.

Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN (Netherlands, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues,

At first, I would like to thank Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for presenting his excellent report on "Organ transplant tourism". It reads like a medical thriller, when it was not that this is about real lives, real lives getting destroyed when we do not continue our fight against illegal activities like organ trade.

As Mr Stefan SCHENNACH stated in his report, "a solid legal framework regarding organ transplant already exists". This in contrast to the limited attention that has been paid to illicit and unethical activities associated with the procurement, processing and clinical use of human tissues and cells. This is perhaps because society is less familiar with the use of tissues and cells, although this happens far more often than organ transplantation.

Chair,

Before I continue to present my report, I first want to thank Mr Serhii KIRAL from Ukraine who initiated this report. Mr Serhii KIRAL was an active member of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development for many years. But following the elections in Ukraine last year, Mr Serhii KIRAL left the Assembly, and I find it a honour to be subsequently appointed as the rapporteur for this report.

This report primarily focuses on the trafficking in human tissues and cells for transplantation and research. While the use of tissues and cells in the development of medical products can be a highly lucrative area, and important ethical concerns are raised, this is a complex issue that deserves a separate report by the Assembly. Also this report doesn't cover the issue of trafficking in blood and its derivatives; this also requires a different approach.

In bio-technology there is a rapid evolution that makes it difficult to regulate – and to prosecute – illicit activities. The Council of Europe has a mandate to protect human rights as well as expertise on human cells and tissues.

It is therefore well placed to support decision-making on what activities should be criminalised and ensuring that these decisions are respected.

Today, human cells and tissues are routinely used for medical purposes. It includes corneas, heart valves, skin, stem cells, sperm and oocytes. I would like to underline that these new technologies help to save lives, improve quality of life and help individuals to become parents. But the use of human material for transplantation and research however raises ethical and legal questions, which are addressed in this report.

For the purposes of transplantation and research, cells and tissues can be removed either from living or deceased donors.

While currently there are no official statistics on trafficking in human tissues and cells, experts believe that the largest instances of tissue trafficking occur with respect to deceased donors.

But there are also indications that some cases of trafficking in tissues and cells result from trafficking in human beings.

For example, recently, last year in September, it was mentioned in the news that Europol detected a criminal organisation in Greece, which traded in oocytes. For this purpose, donors were brought to Greece from Bulgaria, Georgia and Russia, possibly under false pretences. As actors in the criminal organisation, Europol also arrested a lawyer and a gynaecologist.

In the context of ongoing poverty, and Mr Stefan SCHENNACH has already referred to that, we cannot ignore that people are willing to donate body material for money. But how to prevent exploitation of these vulnerable people? Are the existing mechanisms sufficient to protect them from coercion, fraud and abuse?

Not only are such illicit activities human rights violations, they are also a threat to public health, as quality and safety requirements are often not respected, which might lead to the transmission of infectious diseases. And in the just mentioned case there is also a significant risk for the health and fertility of the donor, down to repeated and improper harvesting of oocytes.

However, trafficking in tissues and cells does not necessarily involve trafficking in human beings. For example, when human tissues are procured from a deceased person. This may be the reason why an internationally accepted definition of trafficking of human tissues and cells is still absent.

But procurement and trade of tissues and cells from a deceased person without due consent on the part of the family members is considered as an occurrence of trafficking in human tissues.

Various ethical and safety-related scandals have been reported from illicitly obtained tissues from deceased persons, such as procurement without consent or authorisation, inadequate testing, inaccurate or false donor files, irresponsible allocations and illegal trade. However, knowledge about the true extent of these illicit activities remains limited.

These illicit and unethical practices undermine public trust and support. Scandals cause a drop in confidence in all types of donor-derived substances and result in reluctance to donate bodily materials. And in return, this is not in the interest of people whose quality of life depends on the availability of sufficient, compatible and safe donor-provided tissues and cells.

The existing international legal framework includes provisions to ensure the quality and safety of tissues and cells by specifying the principles of consent, prohibition of financial gain and authorisation requirements. These principles, however, are not fully implemented and their violations are not systematically prosecuted. The prohibition on financial gain, which is a universally accepted principle for such donations, is not always easy to uphold. Income disparities create opportunities for profit-making and abuse.

I note that many European countries have developed comprehensive legal frameworks in the past decades. Within the European Union, strict control measures were introduced to ensure quality and avoid illicit practices. So Mr Serhii KIRAL noticed on his fact-finding visit to France that there was little margin for illicit and fraudulent activities, as the regulations were very strict, and it was impossible to pay for human tissues and cells. While imports were common in the past, today they are no longer needed in France, except for reasons of compatibility between donors and recipients. France is now largely self-sufficient and does not depend on other countries (which have lower standards on protection against abuse).

So this good practice can guide us towards a legal instrument. And I would like to refer to the good work already done by the European Committee on Organ Transplantation, and in particular its report on "Illicit and unethical activities with human cells and tissues". The report addresses the need for the elaboration of an international legal instrument to protect donors and recipients. Gaps in international legal frameworks are identified and the Committee reiterates its concern with respect to a lack of agreement on what constitutes illicit activities in this area.

In this light, I recommend to the Assembly that the Committee of Ministers initiate the drafting of a legally binding Council of Europe instrument against trafficking in human tissues and cells, possibly in the form of an additional protocol to the Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs, and ensure that such a legal instrument provides a definition of illicit activities, and includes a mechanism for regular data collection and analyses on trafficking in human cells and tissues.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN for a very interesting presentation of a very important topic. You have three minutes remaining.

In the debate I call first Mr Jokin BILDARRATZ.

Mr Jokin BILDARRATZ (Spain, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group)*: Thank you very much Mr President.

We are looking at two reports we consider very positive, very comprehensive, which give us an overall vision of this situation, which describes the risks stemming from lack of legislation, regulation, or lack of cooperation between states. These risks are true for organ transplant tourism or the trafficking in human cells and tissues.

With regard to transplant tourism, something we consider as essential is this discrepancy between the existing need for transplants and the supply of organs, bearing in mind the shortage of available organs.

When patients take part in transplant tourism it's not just a matter of two parties, the receiver and the donor of the organs. There is also the involvement of healthcare professionals, hospital managers, administrative staff, public officials. In some cases they're involved in illegal activities.

According to the figures, just one fifth of persons who need an organ transplant will receive one. That gives us an idea of the magnitude of the problem.

If we look at the human situation here, we have to understand that the person receiving an organ is somebody who will be in poor health and has an urgent need for a transplant. This situation can cause a lot of frustration, powerlessness, despair. Of course the donors are often, in some countries, amongst the poorest in the population. So there is this problem with this discrepancy between supply and demand of organs.

We need a public debate about this. We need public awareness and we also need a response from the public administration so as to better address this situation in a more organised way. We also need international cooperation.

With regard to the second report on trafficking in human tissues and cells, it's a far more recent issue, it's very complex. It's a recent research field. We feel that it's essential to have an international regulatory framework under the leadership of the World Health Organisation.

As the resolution says, there is no universally accepted definition of what trafficking in human cells and tissues is. This is one of the first difficulties we have. We also make sure that there is coordination of information, in particular about the public tissue and cell banks. We also need an international framework to ban certain practices linked to remuneration of persons giving their tissues and cells. We need to make sure about consent.

All of these measures are indispensable.

Thank you very much.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): I call Mr Ulrich OEHME.

Mr Ulrich OEHME (Germany, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear Colleagues,

Organ trafficking, tourism and the illegal removal and distribution of tissues and cells are deeply inhumane practices. According to Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, everyone has the 'right to life'. However, this does not mean that preserving the life of one human being should come at the cost of shortening, impairing or even ending the life of another.

On behalf of my group, I would like to thank the rapporteurs -- past and present -- for preparing the reports. They show that the danger of commercialising the human body is not a pipe dream or a conspiracy theory, but it is reality. As both reports show, there is a flourishing business with human bodies and tissues, above all because States do not properly fulfil their supervisory role, and also because scandals have led to a loss of confidence of potential donors in existing systems.

I think we can all agree on the causes of these illegal transactions. Advances in medicine mean that many patients can be relieved or even cured of their ailments through transplants. However, the high demand is not matched by sufficient donors.

To make matters worse, the pursuit of profit turns the human body into a commodity that can be gutted and harvested commercially and extensively. This violates the principle of the inviolability of physical and psychological integrity and, above all, the dignity of the human being, whether dead or alive.

We must therefore discuss this issue in this particular Chamber in order to put forward proposals as to how we can substantially improve the willingness of individuals to donate in our countries and how it is carried out. Only in this way can we put an end to illegal and criminal activities.

The example of Israel shows us that by decoupling control from financial interest, by appreciating/recognising donors and their relatives, and by comprehensively educating the population, that better results can be achieved than a decision simply forced by the state. If we follow such examples in our countries, each State should then be able to cover the demand for donor organs in its own country as far as possible.

Only if we manage to monitor transplantation activities through national and international measures and improve national prevention programmes will we be able to prevent money-hungry people from making a profit from the slaughter and harvesting of human beings.

Despite all these calls for supervision, monitoring and restriction, it should still be possible to carry out research and innovation. Because if everything were simply banned, the member States of the Council of Europe would very quickly lag behind the development of other less-regulated countries. This would place us in an even greater dependence than we already are.

This is why we need a sense of perspective and foresight in this issue. We must demand a stop to the exploitation of people and their bodies, but what we must not demand is a complete standstill of science and economics.

I wish us every success in implementing these plans. May this reduce the suffering of the sick, respect the dignity of donors and encourage research.

Thank you very much.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I call Mr Tiny KOX.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

I would like to start to compliment both rapporteurs Mr Stefan SCHENNACH and Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN on their reports on organ transplant tourism and combating trafficking in human tissues and cells. I indeed hope that the Assembly will be able to recommend today to the member states to sign, ratify, and implement relevant global and Council of Europe conventions and to support proposals made in the report to develop binding legal instruments to tackle these developments.

I believe that the adoption of these reports is an important step. They will have to be thoroughly followed in order to bear fruit, not only by governments, but also by us parliamentarians who should monitor the effect of interpretation of international legal instruments. They should also sensitize our citizens and stakeholders on the negative effects of organ transport tourism and trafficking in human tissues and cells.

Mr President,

Countries that can list themselves as countries of origin.. I'm sorry now I'm now going to the report on organ tourism.. countries that can list themselves as countries of origin of victims of trafficking of human beings for the purpose of organ removal and trafficking of organs should understand that one of the factors which contributes to people willing to sacrifice their organs in a legal way in reward for money may be caused by deep social inequality and poverty. Therefore the fight against the latter should be part of a holistic approach

of the report mentions as well as the fight against corruption in healthcare institutions. Necessary attention should also be given to children in care of social services and the child welfare systems as it's not unknown that, due to their potentially unstable living conditions, physical distance from friends and family, traumatic experience, and emotional vulnerability. Children involved with child welfare are at risk for being targeted by traffickers who are actively seeking children to exploit.

Therefore, it's imperative that child welfare agencies be at the forefront of the response to and prevention of human trafficking, which might result in organ removals as was also set by the Council of Europe's groups of experts on action against trafficking in human beings (GRETA).

With regard, Mr President, to the report on trafficking in human tissues and cells, I pay compliments to the rapporteur and her predecessor for not only investigating the matter but also for proposing a possible path of the solution. By means of recommendations the Assembly asks, if we adopt her report, the Committee of Ministers to initiate the drafting of a legally-binding Council of Europe instrument against trafficking in human tissues and cells, possibly in the form of an additional protocol to the convention against trafficking in human organs.

In essence, Mr President, this is the work that we should do. To adopt resolutions is interesting, but to get the Committee of Ministers involved in the process so that it could end the new legal binding instruments, new protocols, new conventions, that should be the main business. Therefore perhaps this debate should have taken place at another moment in the week. Nevertheless, I thank the rapporteurs and I hope that the Assembly will adopt both reports.

Thank you very much.

Mr Oleksandr MERZHYNSKYI (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Is Ms Laurence TRASTOUR-ISNART here?

Thank you, the floor is yours.

Ms Laurence TRASTOUR-ISNART (France, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President,

I would like to thank the respective rapporteurs of these two texts for the quality of their reports and the relevance of the draft recommendations and draft resolutions. The debate before us today touches on an important subject, prohibiting and combating the assets of the human body, its organs, cells and tissues.

The vast majority of organ sellers and cell donors come from the poorest segments of society. They are cooperating only because of their difficult or even precarious financial situation. They are often misinformed, or even uninformed, about the real consequences of renouncing an organ. Others will have an organ removed through the use of force or coercion by abduction, abuse of authority or vulnerability. In fact, these illegal activities are exploitation of human misery. In addition, transplant tourists are also exposed to much higher than average mortality risks.

These practices violate the principle of non-commercialisation of the human body. This principle is inseparable from the dignity of the human person. We must fight against the health professionals, intermediaries and other offenders who are responsible for this outrage and who are making huge profits while the risks of punishment are very low. The Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Person is clear: the human body and its parts must not, as such, be a source of profit.

We need effective multilateral legal tools to enforce this fundamental principle. International cooperation needs to be strengthened. Harmonisation of policies and practices in Europe should therefore be a priority in the fight against these scourges. I wish to recall that the Council of Europe already has a powerful tool: the Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs. This is the only genuine international criminal law framework for combating organ trafficking, which allows criminal prosecution of organ transplant tourism. It dates from 2015, it has been in force since 2018 and yet only nine member states have ratified it. As proposed in one of the reports, the Council of Europe should draw up an additional protocol to this convention in order to combat in a binding and effective manner this particular subject. The draft resolution aims to ratify and implement it.

Taken as a whole, the two texts we are examining can provide concrete and strong responses to combat these abuses that compound human misery and suffering.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I call Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President. Dear colleagues,

It is customary to say that everything has a price, but in this case, life and death are priceless.

I'm a doctor and I'd like to give you a little medical insight into this whole thing. Decisive medical advances have led to spectacular medical breakthroughs over the years in the field of transplantation: surgical advances, but above all progress in the field of immunosuppressive treatments, anti-rejection treatments, especially with the appearance of cyclosporin.

We started with the kidneys, a long time ago, liver, heart, lungs, marrow, etc. At the time, before this cyclosporin, transplantation was a big problem, with a risk of rejection, with the need for perfect compatibility between donors and recipients. It was a complex, complicated medicine; it required very specialized care. There were long waiting lists, extremely long waiting lists, because people were really looking for the most compatible person. Any deviation was very risky, even deadly.

Times have changed with the advent of cyclosporin. These medical advancements are allowing real miracles to take place.

At the same time, more and more grafts are needed; people are living longer, the age of transplants has risen and there are actually not enough donors. And since everything can be bought, why not organs?

Since then, all kinds of drifts are possible. With money, we have buyers who can be in contact with donors. In this area, we see it all: in some developed countries, there are stories of trickery in which doctors are involved - or organizations - that actually favour people who can afford to pay.

Then, organs can be bought, for example in the third world, from the poorest of the poor. There is also the area of sordid crimes in China, where we all have in mind the story of a person who is drugged and attacked in a restaurant toilet and ends up with an organ missing.

These are all unacceptable scandals. I would like to make it clear here that what I find very shocking is that there are always doctors involved. So it's a real ethical problem.

In this story, there is a whole series of victims. The rapporteurs have talked about them: people who are maimed for life or even killed; people who give money for money, who often, because they come from poor countries, are not really paid the right price for their sacrifice and who often have secondary problems; people on waiting lists, who function normally but who are penalised.

I would just like to end on this point, and it has already been said: transplant patients take enormous risks. In fact, by going to certain countries, the necessary checks are not necessarily carried out. People can therefore be at risk at the time of transplantation or unknowingly be inoculated with chronic infections such as hepatitis or HIV.

We really need to promote organ donation; we need to solve all these problems, inform, punish. This is truly fundamental.

For me, what is a priority is that, in the medical field, there should be a correct deontology, throughout the world, so that things really happen correctly.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): The rapporteur will reply at the end of the debate.

But does Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN wish to respond at this stage?

No?

Then in the debate I call next Mr Igor KAGRAMANYAN.

Mr Igor KAGRAMANYAN (Russian Federation, NR)*: Thank you very much, Mr President.

First of all I would like to thank Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN and Mr Stefan SCHENNACH and the Secretariat of Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development for the excellent work done in the preparation of these very important reports and resolutions.

Over the last years, in Russia, as throughout the world, the transplantation of organs and tissues has developed considerably in order to deal with the treatment of diseases with serious consequences for the health of human beings.

A successful development of a transplantation system depends on a donor system which is effective and regulated. It is the government's job to make sure that this particular system is in place to protect the rights of the citizens and to leave no room for illicit removal and selling of organs. It is necessary to draw from international experience and requirements enshrined in international agreements and conventions to do so.

The Russian Federation strictly observes what has been adopted by the World Assembly of the WHO 2005 and 2010 as concerns... Which is essentially the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity as related to the application of achievements in biology and medicine.

Over the past ten years European countries have joined forces to put together a legal mechanism for the methodical regulation of these particular issues. That takes place at the Council of Europe level and at the European Union level.

The Russian Federation is actively participating in the Council of Europe Committee on Organ Transplantation, the CDPTO. As part of the Committee's activities, organ donation and illegal removal and sale of organs is regularly discussed. The consolidated position of the member states of the Council of Europe is reflected in the Council of Europe Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking of Human Organs. The Russian Federation is signatory to that.

We have to welcome all national regulation as concerns the controlling of all levels, the entire cycle of circulation of tissues and cells. When looking at the particular possibilities, we have to of course take into consideration the Santiago de Compostela Convention. Should there be a protocol for that? Since the Santiago de Compostela Convention includes nothing about the trafficking of cells and human tissues, I feel that this ought to be a separate convention overall.

I think, indeed, it is very important, the fact that we've looked at this particular issue is very encouraging. I consider it important to note that our Assembly, in these very difficult and turbulent times, has taken up this issue. This issue which is of utmost importance because it concerns our health.

Thank you.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

And now I call Mr Aleksandar ŠEŠELJ.

Mr Aleksandar ŠEŠELJ (Serbia, NR): Thank you.

Distinguished colleagues,

Today we are debating on organ transplant tourism. It looks like everybody has forgotten about the resolution 1782 from 2011 "Investigation of allegations of inhuman treatment of people and illicit trafficking in human organs in Kosovo and Metohija" and the Dick Marty report.

The resolution states that numerous concrete and convergent indications confirm that some Serbians and some Kosovo Albanians were held prisoner in secret places of detention under the KLA control in northern Albania and were subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment frequently before ultimately disappearing. Organs were removed from prisoners at the clinic on Albanian territory and taken abroad for transportation.

And the person behind these crimes, this ex-KLA leader and the current president of the so-called Republic of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, and these terrorists and war criminals are respected and accepted by the elite international community, most of the Western countries that recognise the Republic of Kosovo and even stood next to Mr Macron and Ms Merkel under the Arc de Triomphe during the Hundred Years of World War I ceremony.

And for the hypocrisy to be even bigger, a condition of the European Union for Serbia is to recognise the independence of the so-called Republic of Kosovo.

I must say that there are no honourable men and women in Serbian politics that are ready for such an action. Serbia will never accept the illegal occupation of its territory. We insist that the European institutions, the European Union, the Council of Europe, every international institution investigate and punish all responsible for organ trafficking in Kosovo and Metohija, and stop supporting a terrorist state in the very heart of Europe.

Thank you.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): First the list of speakers. I call Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN to reply. You have four minutes remaining for your contribution.

Ms Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN (Netherlands, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, Chair and thank you all colleagues for this debate and your support. I also want to thank you die hard colleagues for your patience to stay with us during this final debate in the last part of the session of PACE 2020.

I first start to apologise that Mr Stefan SCHENNACH because he has to leave down to the schedule change from this meeting this morning. He had to leave to catch his transport back home. I'll try to answer where possible on both the reports. But as I said, I am glad for those who are still here. It has been a long week, a tough week for all of us. I'm glad to be in the position to present a report about this subject, an important report, as also rephrased by Mr Tiny KOX and Mr Igor KAGRAMANYAN, I hope, from the Russian delegation, I don't know if I pronounce his name right.

About the two reports, they are in the core business of this institute, initiating the drafting of binding instruments to protect human rights and to prevent vulnerable people from coercion and abuse. I took note of the concerns I heard you had mentioned the protection of both donors and receiving persons but also about the lack of regulation and the lack of organs. I also listened well that there is a need for good regulated organ donation programmes in all the countries. I think, that first, we have to take on to prevent illegal organ donations. I also heard concerns about professional ethics and that there has to be international standards for all professionals on how to act with the use and transplantation of organs, cells and tissues.

Here today, we can do something about the situation by urging the need for strengthening the international cooperation in this area and regulations in the area. Please, I will ask you to support the recommendations of this report. I heard there are no amendments, only one that's supported unanimously in the in our Committee. I would like to keep it short, and I want to keep it short. Please vote in favour of this report. I wish you all a safe journey home. But not before I have paid my gratitude to the Secretariat for the good work they've done. And Julia, thank you for supporting my report. Thank you.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, Mr John HOWELL, wish to speak?

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): Just very shortly, Mr President.

I think I agree with Mr Tiny KOX that this is such an important debate that it would have been much better to have held it when the chamber was full. But that doesn't mean that I don't thank completely all of those who participated in this debate and who have made the debate very very interesting indeed.

I would like to thank also the rapporteurs for their excellent work that we've seen in these reports and I think that the one thing that we should remember is that they have both mentioned the ethical dimension of these reports and the need to take that into account.

And finally, let me add my thanks to the Secretariat for their excellent help for the production of this report and for the work that went into it.

Vote: Organ transplant tourism / Combating trafficking in human tissues and cells

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I would like to thank all of you for participation in this very important debate.

The debate is closed.

Thank you.

Now we come to the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development. The Committee has presented a draft resolution, Document 15029, to which one amendment has been tabled.

I understand that the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development wishes to propose to the Assembly that the amendment to the draft resolution, which was unanimously approved by the Committee, should be declared as agreed by the Assembly.

Is that so Mr John HOWELL?

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): That is true.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anyone object?

No, no one. As there is no objection. I declare that amendment 1 to the draft resolution has been agreed.

Now we will proceed to the vote of the draft resolution contained in document 15029 as amended.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed. The draft resolution in document 15029 is adopted.

We will now consider the draft recommendation contained in document 15022 to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in document 15022.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed. The draft recommendation contained in document 15022 is adopted.

We turn now to the progress report of the Bureau.

This morning the Bureau has proposed several references to committees. They are set out in the progress report document 15036 addendum 3. These references are submitted for ratification by the Assembly in accordance with article 26.3 of the rules. Are there any objections to this references?

There are no objections. The references are approved.

I now propose that the other decisions in the progress report document 15036 addendum 3 be ratified. Are there any objections?

There are no objections. The progress report is approved.

The final business today is to constitute the Standing Committee.

The membership of the standing committee is fixed by rule 17.1.3 as follows. The president of the assembly, the vice-president of the assembly, the chairpersons of the political groups, the chairpersons of the national delegations, and the chairpersons of the general committees.

A full list of members is set out in document Committees 2020. The standing committee is accordingly constituted.

I am pleased to be able to announce the names of our voting champions. Those members who have taken part in votes during this part session. They are Mr Maurizio BUCCARELLA, from Italy, Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN from Norway.

I congratulate to them. And to those who have not been mentioned: keep trying. We have small gifts for the champions and invite them to come and collect these gifts.

We have now come to the end of our business.

I would like to thank all members of the assembly, particularly rapporteurs and chairpersons of the committees for their hard work during this part-session. I would also like to thank all the vice-presidents who have assisted the president by presiding over sittings of the assembly this week.

They are Sir Roger GALE, Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ, Mr Akif Çağatay KILIÇ, Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN, Ms Inese LĪBIŅA-EGNERE, Mr Oleksandr MERZHKO, Mr Andreas NICK, Ms Nicole TRISSE, Mr Egidijus VAREIKIS.

In addition I would like to thank the staff and interpreters both permanent and temporary, who have work hard to make the part-session a success.

The second part of the 2020 session will be held from the 20th to the 24th of April 2020.

We have now come to the end of our business.

I declare the first part of the 2020 session of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe closed.

The sitting is closed.

Thank you.