



Provisional edition

Monday 25 January 2021, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the part-session at 11:30 am

Opening of the sitting num 1

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): Good morning,

Could I remind all members who are connected via the remote system to ensure that they are connected using their correct email address which has been registered and validated by them earlier within our database. Please connect yourself with the correct email address. If you do not do that you will have no voting rights during the sitting. You will be not able to vote. I repeat: check that you have connected with correct email address previously registered and validated by you in our database in order that you can have access to voting during this sitting and subsequently during all further sittings and committee meetings.

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen, the sitting is open.

I declare open the first part of the 2021 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, the year 2020 was the most difficult year for our Assembly. Out of all the 22 years I spent here, the Covid-19 pandemic posed enormous challenges for our organisation. I wish to thank all of you for facing these challenges with dignity. Particular tribute should be paid to our Secretariat, led by the tireless Secretary General, Mr Wojciech SAWICKI for his professional, dedicated and creative efforts to keep the Assembly working.

The Council of Europe in general, and our Assembly in particular, substantially contributed to upholding European standards during the pandemic. We adopted a number of essential resolutions, recommendations and guidelines aimed at strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law, especially with regard to justifications for and limitations on the restrictions placed on citizens' rights under the European Convention of Human Rights in order to fight the pandemic. The pandemic disproportionately affected vulnerable groups: women, the elderly, people with low income, LGBT, asylum-seekers and migrants, and national minorities. In some member states, vulnerable groups are scapegoated and attempts are made to deepen their exclusion and alienation, in particular with regard to LGBT persons and national minorities. We should reinforce our efforts to protect these groups and resolutely combat any attempts to justify discrimination, in particular under the pretext of N-type endemic measures.

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.

The current crisis highlighted deeply-rooted prejudice and stereotypes in our societies. It spawned new populist groups in Europe and provided existing ones with new slogans and conspiracy theories, such as Covid deniers or anti-vaxxers. Such new populists may well succeed in entering parliaments and therefore may appear in our Assembly too. We must be prepared to face also this challenge.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am convinced that even and especially under the circumstances of growing tension, deprivation and despair, our Assembly must continue to fulfil its mission of a watchdog for democracy, human rights and the rule of law everywhere in Europe. This should include, sooner rather than later, Belarus, whose brave people are challenging their authoritarian regime. A famous German philosopher said, "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger". As we see today, the ominous virus failed to kill our Assembly. Let's work together to make it stronger.

Ladies and gentlemen, the first item on the agenda is the examination of credentials of members for the 2021 Ordinary Session of the Assembly.

This year, given the circumstances, the deadline for submission of the credentials was midnight on Monday 18 January.

The names of the representatives and substitutes are in Document 15215, which is available both in the hemicycle and on extranet.

If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified. Are any credentials challenged?

If so, please ask for the floor by raising your hand (for those present in the Chamber) or via the Kudo system.

So first, I would like the Secretariat if someone is asking for the floor in the hemicycle.

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): Yes, Mr President.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA from Ukraine is asking for the floor.

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Secretary General.

Before calling a member to speak at this point, I remind the Assembly that the rules on challenging credentials require the member challenging credentials to state first which credentials are being challenged, so which delegations, whether the challenge is under Rule 7 (Procedural Grounds) or Rule 8 (Substantive Grounds), and the reasons for the challenge.

So, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, the floor is yours, please.

Examination of the credentials

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you very much dear Chair.

Mr Chairman, in 2019 the Assembly welcomed back the Russian delegation in order to relaunch a political dialogue with the only objective to better protect Russian people. On the contrary, the Russian authorities persistently continue to shrink political and civil liberties. The targeted campaign against the leader of the opposition and thousands of Russian citizens confirm the conclusions of the Court of Human Rights that the aim of the ongoing political process is to suppress political pluralism and therefore effective diplomacy, which is the central value of this organisation.

Russia's continued repressions and human rights violations in the occupied territories, in violation of many PACE resolutions, namely 1990, 2034, 2063, 2132, in which the Assembly condemned the grave violations of international law committed by the Russian Federation with regard to illegal annexation of Crimea, militarily occupied in the past, and resolution 2261.

The Russian Federation maintains amendments to Article 79 of the Russian Constitution, which allow not to comply with the decisions of the bodies established by international treaties. The mere argument that Russia continues to monitor and dialogue is not enough. A country engaged in such dialogue of life is to refrain from acts.

And today we witness the total ignorance subvention which requires strong answers from the Assembly in the name of citizens from 2019.

Finally the fact that the Russian delegation includes members elected in the constituencies including illegal annexed territories, constituencies, is an additional compelling indicator of Article 3 of the Statute.

And, I'm finishing: on behalf of my colleagues I challenge therefore the credentials of the Russian Federation delegation on substantive grounds under Rule 8 on account of serious violation of Article 3 of the Preamble of the Statute, as well as Russia's failure to honour its obligations and commitments.

Sorry for a delay in my speech. Thank you, dear chair.

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA.

Dear colleagues, please, try to be brief and to respect the rules including the limits to speaking time.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA is challenging the credentials of the delegation of the Russian Federation on substantive grounds under Rule 8 of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure. Under Rule 8 your challenge must be supported by at least certain members from at least five national delegations. Under the changes to our rules introduced in November 2020 by Resolution 2349, I will invite those who support this challenge to indicate their support using the available voting system.

Members present in the chamber should stand in their place and use the voting system of the Hemicycle by voting yes. So, please, stand up and also vote. Members who do not support the challenge should not vote at all. Members participating remotely should vote using the Kudo system. Those who support this challenge will vote Yes. Those who do not support the challenge shall not vote at all.

So now the vote in the Hemicycle and via Kudo is now open.

So, 10 more seconds.

Colleagues, I hope that everybody has clarity with regard to how to handle this rather complicated combined voting system.

The vote is closed, and we ask for the results to be displayed.

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): The results will be displayed in a few moments. We have to combine the results of the vote in the Hemicycle and the votes which were delivered via the Kudo voting system.

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, President of the Assembly): Yes, I see that in Kudo we have 26 votes, right, and how many votes in the Hemicycle is not available to me, so I'm waiting for the Secretariat to calculate all the votes, and also to check whether the members who supported the challenge belong to at least five different national delegations.

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): This is coming soon. I can tell you now, before it is published, that the combined results of the vote from both systems is 38: 38 members who supported the request, 26 via Kudo and 12 from the Hemicycle, and members who voted belong to more than five parliamentary delegations.

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Secretary General.

So the challenge has the support required under the Rules of Procedure. The credentials of the Russian Federation delegation are referred without debate to the appropriate committee for a report, and to the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs for opinion. I propose that the appropriate committee in this case is the Monitoring Committee because the challenge was on the grounds of fulfilment of obligations and commitments undertaken before the Council of Europe.

So are there any objections to the proposals that the appropriate committee in this case is the Monitoring Committee?

I see no one asking for the floor, so this is approved. The Committee shall report back to to the Assembly within 24 hours if possible.

So this is agreed to. Accordingly, the credentials of the Russian delegation are referred to the Monitoring Committee for report and to the Committee on Rules of Procedure for opinion.

The President will make proposals for the examination by the Assembly of the Committee's report when we consider the draft agenda. I remind you that members of a nation or delegation whose credentials are challenged may sit provisionally with the same rights as other Assembly members until the Assembly has reached a decision. However, those members shall not vote in any proceedings relating to the examination of credentials which concern them.

Are there any further challenges?

I don't see any in the Hemicycle or in Kudo.

So I conclude that other challenged credentials set out in document 15215 are ratified and I welcome our new colleagues.

Ladies and gentlemen, the next item on the Agenda is the election of the President of the Assembly as set out in the document you received AS/Inf (2021) 03.

I have received only one candidature: that of Mr Rick DAEMS from Belgium, incumbent President of our Assembly. I therefore declare Mr Rick DAEMS elected President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for this Ordinary Session.

Congratulations Mr DAEMS. Rick, I welcome you to the Chair.

Election of the President of the Assembly

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Dear Colleagues, all of you, thank you very much for your trust.

This is one of the toughest elections I have ever had in my entire career. Thank you. Thank you.

Let me tell you that last year I confided to you that I would be at your disposal full time. I gave my word, and I kept it. This time, I pledge again to be at your service full time because I believe it is more than necessary. It is not easy, but it is necessary.

Allow me then, in turn, to wish you all, Madam Secretary General, Madam Deputy Secretary General, those who are connected by video, the Committee of Ministers, all those who are following us, colleagues elsewhere, colleagues here, a warm welcome to the first plenary session of the year, knowing that this is the first plenary session in a year.

This has given me pause for thought, because a former colleague of mine sat in Parliament for more than 50 years, always elected on his own preferred route - I can tell you that we tried to get rid of him but it was not possible. More than 50 years! One day, he said to me: "Rik, politics is about knowing how to do things, but above all about making people know". And so: did we know how to do it? Well, yes, I think so. We have developed the triologue with the Committee of Ministers in order to co-ordinate and synchronise our actions. We have adapted, modified and overcome the rules so that we can work and achieve results. We approached COVID-19 with reports which - in part - substantially helped the Committee of Ministers to draw up the Athens declaration which we ourselves took on board, which affirmed our adherence to our values and, above all, which drew the red lines in which we must remain in order to effectively protect all our values and ensure that we do not fall into the trap of a new "normal".

Yes, we changed our working method to a kind of thematic work, which enabled us to deliver substance on artificial intelligence to the Committee of Ministers. I commend the German chairmanship for ensuring that today we are actually working on a set of binding and non-binding standards on artificial intelligence.

Yes, we have seen the emergence of a new generation of rights. For example, the fact that today, under the banner of free expression, we allow ourselves to lie, even though the right to know the truth is important. Yes, we have seen once again the emergence and urgency of the environment connected with human rights, bearing in mind that 12 years ago, this Assembly made a recommendation to the Committee of Ministers to draw up a protocol. And so, yes, we did.

I would like to join Mr Boriss CILEVIČS in saying thank you and hats off to our Assembly team: more than 80% of people under the eminently professional leadership of the Secretary General, who have made all this possible. I would also like to say thank you and hats off to all of you, colleagues, parliamentarians, who have worked during this difficult year, to our Vice-Presidents, who have helped me a great deal, to our heads of delegation, who have pushed their members to be active, to our heads of groups, to all the people around and, above all, to our committee chairs, who have made it possible.

But what about "letting people know"? Let us not be naïve. The year 2020 was partly a lost year in this respect. That is true. Know-how is very important, but making it known is even more important so that everything we do is reaped in our societies, benefiting more than 430 million citizens in 47 countries. Apart from the virtual road of the 47, which works well, we have not been able to connect physically - we will do so in part today. We have not been able to do so. We did not experience this very important element, unfortunately. Our monitors have not been there, our observers have not been able to observe, our rapporteurs have not been in the countries to make their reports. It was a year that was partly lost. However, we must not lose the courage and motivation to continue, given the presence of some colleagues, even today, in part.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): And it also made me think of, maybe a very strange reflection, but it came to my mind that trees don't meet, but people do. Trees stand separate to each other and people interconnect, and this is the difference between what we have lived in part in 2020 and what we are trying to reconnect with as of today – interconnect people, and, yes, in part we stood separate from each other and this has not been the best way to work, because you need to meet in order to convince your colleague or to be convinced by your colleague, obviously. And this gives me the following thought: that taking on board the perspectives and the proposals and the ideas and the opinions of your colleagues, taking them on board is very hard if not impossible if you do not meet in person, and so we lose in part perspectives which, by the way, in all of our work has been lost anyway.

And let me show that with a very small example, what we have seen in the political world in the past and will see in the future. But still, if it might be some kind of a guideline, I will try to do it with the help of a simple glass, because being in our country we were rather "perspectiveless". Now, if you look at the glass like that, it is like a rectangle, but then if you look at the glass like that, it is a circle. And even if you look at it like that, it is a closed circle.

Now why am I saying that: because so often we have seen colleagues debating, arguing, fighting over the fact "no, it's a rectangle!", "no, it's a circle!", "no, it's a closed circle!", but, hey, it is the same glass! It is just the way or the perspective you use to look at it. And if the aim is to fill the glass, well, then we should take on board the perspective of our colleagues, and take into account those things that we do not master, such as gravity, in order to take all the perspectives on board, to be able to know that we have to keep and put the glass upward in order for it to be able to contain water.

It may sound French to put it that way, but still if we do not interconnect and if we cannot, are not able to, take on board the perspective, the opinions of each and everyone on an equal basis even, and then make up our minds we will not be able to really conclude in a good way. And so the next question that arises is about "why are we doing all of this?", "why are we all making this effort?".

My brother with whom I've got some connection through WhatsApp because I cannot meet him said "Rick, but why are you doing all that?". Well, the answer is simple, colleagues, at least it is simple for me: it is because we care. It is because we, members of this Assembly, we care about the fact that people are equal. Being equal is not being the same: this is why we are united in diversity. It is because we care about human rights being enjoyed by all of the citizens in the 47 countries. It is because we care that people must be free to enjoy and to be able to pursue their happiness. It is because we are caring about the fact that no one should be above the law. That's what rule of law is all about. Because we think we care, we need to have the people to decide. Parliaments should be on board. That's called democracy: equality, human rights, freedoms, rule of law – democracy. The cornerstones of what we do. This is why. Why? Because we care. And we should go on caring even more than yesterday.

And so what does it mean? It means, for me at least and I hope for all of us, it means that principles go over policies. It means that our common values are more important than our interests. And if I make an analogy to one of the well-known expressions of an American president, I would say: ask not what the Council of Europe can do for your interests, but ask what you should do to defend/uphold the principles and the values that we share and cherish. So I ask you to stop seeing the Council of Europe as a platform for the pursuance of interests, but look at this Assembly as the vehicle of the funding and upholding of the values that we share.

And so, in short, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which to me is the council of the Europeans, that's our name. The upholding and defending and the protecting of human rights as enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights: that is our trade. And the fact that not pursuing the ideal world but trying to make the world better if we have the courage to do so: that is our goal.

Thank you very much. Let's go to work. Let's reboot.

Now, the next item on the agenda is the election of the vice presidents of the Assembly. By the way, I can assure you that you can work with your mask on. It's even an FFP2. So it goes well and I didn't have any remarks from the interpreters, so it seems to work well.

Colleagues, we've got 17 nominations for vice presidents. They are listed in Document AS/Inf (2021) 01. Is there a request to vote? Wojciech? Colleagues?

I don't see any. Since there has not been a request to vote I declare these candidates elected as vice presidents of the assembly. In accordance with Rule 16 of the Rules of Procedure they will take precedence of age. Who is the oldest one? Wojciech, you don't know? We'll know later.

I always have these questions to Mr Wojciech SAWICKI. 16, okay. Then we go to.. because we have to be prepared for everything.

Okay the next item on the agenda is the appointment of members of committees. The candidatures for the general committees of the Assembly have been published as Commission (2021) 01 and Addendum 1. Are these proposals approved? If not, or if any remarks, please ask for the floor, be it in the Hemicycle or through Kudo. Oh, I don't see any. Then therefore they are accepted.

Colleagues, now we come to the proposals for current and urgent debates.

Before we examine the draft agenda, the Assembly needs to consider requests for debates on the urgent and current affairs procedures. The Bureau has received a lot of requests: a request for an urgent debate concerning Mr Navalny, a request for an urgent debate on Belarus, a request for a current affairs debate on prohibition of the Russian minority's language in Ukraine, a request for a current affairs debate on unjustified delay in repatriation of Armenian prisoners of war, a request for a current affairs debate on the actual situation in the temporarily occupied autonomous Republic of Crimea, a request for a current debate on the arrest and detention of Navalny, so we got urgent and current, and a request for a current debate on freedom of expression under threat by big companies. Under Resolution 2350 we can now hold up to two current affairs debates in part sessions.

I can inform you of the fact that the Bureau was in favour of and advises holding two current affair debates: one being a request for a current affairs debate on the arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny and, second, a request for a current affairs debate on freedom of expression, Article 10 of the ECHR on the threat by big tech companies.

Do we agree or do we have... oh, sorry, the Bureau rejected all the other requests for debate, so, just to be clear, we had seven or eight requests and the Bureau advises to hold two current affairs debates, one on Navalny and the other on freedom of expression and big tech.

So we will take them one by one: we will first consider the request for debates under the urgent procedure. On its meeting on Friday the Bureau agreed to recommend to the assembly that the request for debate on the urgent procedure concerning the arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny would be rejected. The Bureau was however in favour of having a current affairs debate on the same topic.

So is the Bureau's recommendation accepted? If not I ask you to ask for the floor. No one in the room. And I have Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, you have the floor.

Election of the Vice-Presidents of the Assembly

Appointment of members of committees

Requests for debate

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues and friends, and especially Rick who I congratulate for his usual election. Thank you for chairing us and chairing us in such a smooth way.

I would like to tell you what is new: the events happening since Friday in Russia. We have 3,500 arrested people, detained, and we need to have at least a resolution in our urgent debate. So the Bureau, when you just discussed on Friday, you had no new evidence of Saturday's events, when thousands of people were arrested – and you should say simply in the resolution of urgent debate "Alexei Navalny go from prison, let's be free, let's free him". And free all other political prisoners.

For that reason, and having in mind that in the Committee on Human Rights most of us present voted in favour of the urgent debate, I would like to encourage you to have a vote for urgent debate, well, it's an exceptional case.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

I would appreciate everyone staying within the time limit, which you almost did, great!

We now give the floor only to one person to oppose the opinion of Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, who wishes an urgent debate.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): I give the floor to Mrs Yolaine de COURSON, who asks for the floor.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Do we vote on.

Okay, Madame de COURSON is trying to get on board.

Here we go. Okay. That is something else.

[Ms de COURSON does not appear on the screen.]

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): If anyone else wishes to speak, I see that Mr Tiny KOX, you have the floor.

We can only have one speaker for the opposing opinion.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): We should stick to the decision. The proposal made by the Bureau with a large majority is that given we already are making a report on the Navalny Case by our colleague Mr Jacques MAIRE, it doesn't make sense to make another one on this issue. So I asked colleagues to follow the proposal to have the Current Affairs debate this week and give our colleague Mr Jacques MAIRE a decent chance to finish his report and then we come back to that in this Assembly.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

As you know, only one speaker in favour and against are allowed. The Bureau was against having the urgent debate.

We shall now vote on the request for an urgent debate. This decision requires a two-thirds majority.

So just to be clear, the Bureau was not in favour and so this vote is about having the urgent debate. So those who want the urgent debate vote "yes", the other ones vote "no".

The vote is open.

Please vote.

Vote closed.

Results please.

I do abide, I mean, hope on your patience because combining the votes takes a little bit more time.

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): Mr President, we are waiting for the results to be displayed. I can give you that which is going to be published soon. The numbers of members voting in favor together by both voting systems is 56. The number of members who voted against is 88. And the number of those who abstained is 6.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): So then the proposal for an urgent debate is rejected.

Okay, I have to go through my pages.

Then, okay, which page? Because this is a lot.

Okay, okay, then we come to the next one:

At its meeting on Friday, the Bureau agreed to recommend to the Assembly that request for a debate on the urgent debate on the worsening situation in Belarus be rejected. I recall that basically the Bureau advised two current affairs debates.

Does anyone wish to have this put to the vote? I don't see it, then it is not on the table anymore.

Okay, which page do we go to now?

Then, before we examine the draft agenda the Assembly needs to consider the request for a current affairs debate. I remind the Assembly that on the Resolution 2350, the assembly may now hold up to only two current affairs debates in a Part Session. We first come to a request for a current affairs debate on the arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny. At its meeting on Friday, the Bureau unanimously approved this request and therefore recommends to the Assembly that the matter be debated during this Part Session.

Does the Assembly agree to this recommendation?

I see someone asking for the floor.

I don't know whether, it's... Mr Bogdan KLICH you have the floor.

Mr Bogdan KLICH (Poland, EPP/CD): Thank you very much for this opportunity. Good morning, everybody.

I wanted to refer to the point concerning the situation in Belarus, being disappointed not only myself but also several colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe, as far as I know – disappointed that this proposal was rejected. We have a dramatic situation in Belarus: we have several persons murdered, we have several persons who are tortured and many Belorussians are detained and arrested. I am pretty sure that the Council of Europe as a Parliamentary Assembly should devote its time to that issue right now.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Mr Bogdan KLICH. Are you asking for a vote? I mean, normally we have passed this point. So this is a reminder to each and every one of you to ask for the floor in time.

Do you request a vote on the issue? Because that will take us obviously back to the point before.

I can't hear you Mr Bogdan KLICH.

Please, open your mic.

Mr Bogdan KLICH (Poland, EPP/CD): Yes Mr President, I ask for a vote.

I'm so sorry to be a little bit late, I tried to be on time but I was not allowed to speak. Thank you so much. I request a vote.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. It's going to take a bit of time. Does anyone wish to speak against having an urgent debate on Belarus?

I have Mr Tiny KOX again.

Mr Tiny KOX, microphone.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): I fully agree, Mr President, with Mr Bogdan KLICH that the situation in Belarus is very worrying and that's the reason that this Assembly already decided to draft two reports on the situation in Belarus. They are under preparation. I think that is the best way we serve the interests of the citizens of Belarus: to go in depth in these two issues and then come up with a clear resolution in order to protect those who are in favor of democracy in Belarus instead of having now an urgent debate.

We already have to report on the preparation. So I would suggest to follow the proposal of the Bureau and not have this urgent debate.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Mr Tiny KOX.

I recall the colleagues that the Bureau decided to propose to the Assembly to have two current affairs debates and so, by consequence, is against this urgent procedure debate.

I will put this now to the vote. Those who voted in favour wish to have the urgent procedure debate. Those who vote against do not. In order for it to prevail it needs a two-thirds majority.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Result, Mr Secretary General.

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): Mr President, the results are the following: 46 members voted in favor, 93 voted against, 14 abstentions.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Then the urgent affairs debate request is denied.

Now we come to the current affairs debates.

The first one is the current affairs debate and arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny. The Bureau was in favor of this current affairs debate anyway.

Does anyone wish to have the floor?

The current affairs debate is approved, the Bureau's recommendation is accepted and the request for a current affairs debate is therefore approved. The debate will be opened by Mr Jacques MAIRE.

Then we have the next current affairs debate which is a request on freedom of expression under threat by big tech companies. On its meeting on Friday, the Bureau approved this request and therefore recommends to the Assembly that the matter be debated during this first part session.

Does the Assembly agree to this recommendation?

The Bureau recommends to hold this debate.

No one has asked for the floor, therefore it is accepted and the request for a current affairs debate is therefore approved. Mr Bob De BRABANDERE will open the debate.

Since we have two current affairs debate, we do not have any other current debates possible.

We go to the adoption of the agenda.

The next item of business is the adoption of the agenda for the first part of the 2021 ordinary session. The draft agenda submitted to the Assembly's approval was drawn up by the bureau on December 9th and updated last Friday. We decided on the debates now. As a challenge to the credential of the delegation of the Russian Federation has been successfully done, we will need to make some changes to the agenda to allow time for a report on the challenge to be debated.

What I would propose, after consulting obviously our Secretary General, would be the following: the debate on post monitoring dialogue with Montenegro planned for Wednesday afternoon will be postponed. It will not be debated in this part session: this is the consequence obviously. The current affairs debate on Navalny will take place at 4 p.m. on Wednesday as the first item of business, the debate on the challenge of credentials of the Russian delegation will take place on Thursday morning as the first item at 9 o'clock, and the current affairs debate on freedom of expression will take place on Thursday morning as the second item of business at 10 a.m., which then will be followed by the debate on ethnic profiling in Europe, a matter of great concern.

In addition to these changes I would like to propose again with the Secretary-General that we extend the sitting on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday by half an hour until 7:30 pm. I hope that will work because, as you see, we did lose a little bit of time on the voting and that we are therefore able to increase the number of speakers in debates in the draft agenda as amended.

Do we have an agreement on these changes of the agenda?

I suppose so.

I see Mr Petr TOLSTOI. You have the floor, from the hemicycle.

Adoption of the agenda

Mr Petr TOLSTOI (Russian Federation, NR)*: Mr President, distinguished colleagues.

Given the suddenness of this question, I propose a debate on freedom of expression and the role of big tech companies. I propose it be postponed to Thursday when there would be more members of the Assembly present. I think this is a topic that is relevant to all of us and when it comes to debate on Navalny, could we perhaps postpone that to Thursday after the debate on credentials? Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Mr GONCHARENKO, you have the floor against.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): President. Thank you everybody and hello to everybody.

I just want to say that it's extremely important to have a debate on the Navalny case on Wednesday – as early as possible – because what is going on in the Russian Federation now it's absolute Stalinism, it's terror against its own citizens, again Novichok against the leader of opposition, chemical weapons, detaining illegally a person, hundreds beaten, thousands arrested, and we cannot wait until even Thursday. The earlier the better. So I would like to ask everybody to support the proposition of Mr President to have a debate on Navalny on Wednesday because that's an extremely important question now.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Okay, in order to make this simple I have heard the proposal of colleague Mr Petr TOLSTOI, I've heard the objection of our other colleague, so I put to the vote the agenda as I propose it and those who vote "Yes" will agree with my proposal, those who vote "No" will agree with the proposal of our colleague Mr TOLSTOI.

The vote is open. So "yes" is for the proposal as I explained it, "no" would be in favour of the proposal of our colleague Mr Petr TOLSTOI.

The vote is closed.

Results, Mr Secretary General.

Mr Wojciech SAWICKI (Secretary General of the Assembly): Mr President, the result is the following: 104 members voted in favour, 27 voted against and there are 15 abstentions.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. Therefore the agenda, as proposed by myself, has been accepted.

Let's now go to the next point of order: the adoption of the minutes of proceedings of the Standing Committee. The minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee in Strasbourg on 4 December 2020 have been distributed. I invite the Assembly to take note of these minutes.

I see a request for the floor. Ms KOVACS you have the floor.

I see that this has been withdrawn so the Assembly takes note of the minutes.

Now the next item on the Agenda is the debate on the progress report of the Bureau and Standing Committee, which is Document 15213 and Addendum 1 and 2, to be presented by Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER. This will be combined with consideration of the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Bureau on the Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Georgia on 31 October 2020, Document 15210, presented by Mr Tiny KOX.

Now, I inform you that the debate must be concluded by 1pm, 1.30pm - so we also extended that one? Okay. So it must be concluded by 1.30pm.

And now I call Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER to present the Progress report of the Bureau and Standing Committee. You have no more than ten minutes to present the report and no more than three minutes to reply to the debate.

Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER I don't see you. You have to ask for the floor. I see you did. Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER you have the floor. Ten minutes max.

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia (31 October 2020)

Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mr President. 10 minutes max it will be. Can I first of all thank you for your speech to start with?

You mentioned a very important thing. You mentioned honesty. That is the watchword not only for all politicians but for all democracies, and that is something we should all learn we've got a lot to do.

The title of this report suggests progress has been made since January last year. I'm not entirely sure about that. Not because of anything we've done, it's just because the situation we are in. As you may know the word progress in English language has a double meaning: both looking backwards and looking forward. I should therefore concentrate more on lessons learned and then summing up a list of failures and missed chances. That can be done by historians. While being confronted with some of the unforeseen travel restrictions the Assembly took several decisions to enabled us to do at least our core activities. Attempting to proceed with the business as usual gradually ended up in disinterest by members and I am worried there are not that many attendees regardless of being physical or virtual.

I made no secret about it. I was not in favor of holding the plenary session in hybrid form and I've always supported the principle that either you can all come to Strasbourg or not. Equality of arms is an important principle enshrined in our convention. Initially this was agreed upon as it was agreed to deal with the most necessities and the most important urgent matters and not for the most sensitive topics. Yet, the agenda of the session seems to be derived strongly from those original principles.

This week will tell us if all these decisions taken by the Bureau were right or not. I do agree, however, that we have to proceed with the elections of high-ranking officials of the Council of Europe and obviously with the election of judges.

In this respect I'd like to remind our Ukrainian colleagues of the terms to propose a new candidate judge are over two years late and if action isn't started soon, then we could have problems. All our governments and parliaments have struggled over the past year with new working methods and civil unrest. There's also a worrying crackdown of the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, privacy, and the freedom of movement.

All these rights are the core principles of the articles of the convention on human rights. With astonishment I take note of the fact that in some countries the limitation of these freedom of rights barely provoked a debate in Parliament and were taken by executive orders of government. If your country hasn't had a parliamentary debate yet on these limitations of freedoms, when will it happened? Then limitations should be lifted.

I urge all countries to do so as soon as possible. We, the Council of Europe, should closely follow up each and every single one of you and the way you're handling this situation, including the United Kingdom.

In October last year we took stock of how things were handled, over lessons learned and expertise to country. So there is no excuse for authoritarian behavior.

2020 also brought the unseen violence and woke demonstrations of the past. I have seen our collective failure in the war of Nagorno-Karabach erupted and we failed there.

We also had an open conflict between Turkey and its neighbors, and we did nothing for the people in Belarus and are still as far as I'm concerned doing nothing.

While Nagorno-Karabach, Eastern Europe, Mediterranean conflicts progress, the finding of some sort of settlement of our neighbors in Belarus bravely keep fighting for their rights, basic rights, and against an unseen and sometimes to visual police brutality.

Belarus may not be a member state but if the Council of Europe, the oldest and respected human rights organization actually on the planet, has no answer to the cries and begs of help from a European country, then really what is the purpose of this organization?

Having said that, I looked at the images of how many thousands of peaceful protesters were treated the past weekend in some of the cities across Russia. Most certainly this organization needs to look at it so very carefully. We have amongst our members former ministers, even former Prime Ministers, former EU Commissioners, and even former a human rights Commissioners. When I look at the experience in office in the life of the collective membership of the Assembly, the general public might look at us as the conscience of Europe. However, this does not translate in how we, as an assembly, act.

Although on behalf of the members of the general public across Europe, especially, we do not allow skulls to be cracked in streets of Kaliningrad or Vladivostok, and innocent Peter Navalny to be locked up for lengthy prison sentences.

The worst part is we can't even blame most of the Russian authorities for it. Many colleagues were absolutely convinced in the 2019 that we should be allowed to let Russia back into the PACE, unconditionally, and all of this because we need to have our bills paid. I will remind you that the interest is still not been paid. I hope these colleagues who've voted in favor of this in 2019 can live with our appalling decision, because now we're seeing the fruits. It's a real hypocrisy amongst some colleagues.

This week we'll see what practical limitations that are from June 19 decision that was made. We really can do anything about it. We do need to rally to impose sanctions and I'm afraid at the moment it is the Russian delegation but it could be others. When I look at these members being in present in Strasbourg this week, I do see in a great reverence the great grandson of one of the most famous writers. We've also got members of Russia with PhDs in law, medicine, economy, constitutional experts, Olympic champions, etc.

We don't really need to tell you what you need to do to demand and look after democracy. Do you really need the U.S. to tell us not to be afraid of our own people? An opposition in government is healthy! It's a democratic thing and that judges should be allowed to make independent decisions, and these topics will not go away.

I think you should realize how many of us have a great deal of experience in this Assembly. While you were here make it worthwhile to accept the assistance and the know-how of people, we're not here to try and stop people doing things, we're here to try and get democracy and the organs of people's of democratic rights working properly.

You're not the only country to struggle with demons. We've all done it in the past, and we've all learnt from this pandemic, among other things, that member states only pay lip service to some in democracy and human rights and then it gets difficult.

As for the Council of Europe and its Assembly: in every crisis there is an opportunity. Soon after summer many things might resume to some sort of normality, we hope. Let us use these months to come however long it may be to properly reform this organization under whoever the new Secretary General will be, whichever one, and the deputy and the judges, to make sure that we are relevant again and to resolve and restore the trust in us, by our staff and by the general public, how to be able to answer the call for help from our citizens across our countries within the member states and within government and also to look after our closest neighbors who are not members.

This may be one of our final opportunities to have relevance.

I ask you, if you're indulgent, because I believe strongly that we have a right to ask for these things. We are proud parliamentarians, we all have the right to be heard, and we all have the right to be listened to. Therefore, I would ask you, colleagues, to take this progress report in the spirit that it's made. It may sound critical but I'd like to think it's there to help to understand and for us to move forward together as a democratic family.

Thank you, Mr President.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER.

I now call Mr Tiny KOX to present the report of the ad hoc committee of the Bureau on the *Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia*.

Mr Tiny KOX from the floor in the Hemicycle, you have three minutes.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, Rapporteur): Mr President, the parliamentary elections on 31 October in Georgia took place in times of Covid. This did not only limit the possibilities of the citizens and the authorities in Georgia, but also our election observation mission. We had to skip a pre-electoral visit to Georgia, could only deploy part of our delegation during the election observation and at first we had to postpone, and later to cancel, a post-electoral permission to the country.

Nevertheless, Mr President, thanks to the excellent co-operation with our international partners and thanks to the assistance given by Georgian authorities, political parties, NGOs and media representatives we still were able to do our work. The results of our mission you will find in your files.

Mr President, the political climate in Georgia was tense before the elections, and remained tense on election day and in the post-electoral period, which has lasted until now. According to the international election observation mission in which we participated together with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the experts of ODIHR, according to that, in the national election observation mission, the parliamentary elections were competitive and overall fundamental freedoms were respected.

Nevertheless, pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process. The dominance of the ruling party in the election commissions negatively affected the perception of their impartiality and independence, especially at the lower levels. Recent legislative amendments adopted following an inclusive consultation process involving Council of Europe and ODIHR recommendations help to provide a legal framework that is, as such, a sound basis for holding democratic elections.

Nevertheless, the state audit office's capacity to effectively oversee the integrity of the campaign financing remained limited, leaving long-standing Council of Europe and ODIHR recommendations unaddressed.

In conclusion, Mr President, these elections were competitive and relatively free: 48 parties and two blocks participated in the elections, out of which 10 parties succeeded to have one or more representatives elected.

The main problem of these elections was not the freeness but the level of fairness. The ruling party did not respect enough the line between itself and the state while campaigning, the international election observation mission concluded. The other main problem is that other parties decided to boycott participating in the new parliament, which goes counter to the very essence of elections – to represent voters. Our co-rapporteurs for Georgia have already called on all these parties to accept their seats in the parliament for the sake of Georgian democratic consolidation.

I think that is wise advice and I also would like to call upon the authorities to check all complaints made about the electoral process and upon the ruling party and other parties to engage in meaningful dialogue to overcome the problems that have risen and to come to a further electoral and judicial reform jointly.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Mr Tiny KOX you ran a bit over time so I will subtract that during the meeting somewhere.

Yeah, being severe is always good.

Okay we will start a debate now. As you know we've got representatives of the political groups coming first and then we go in the order as demanded by the members.

The first on my list is Ms Petra BAYR that will be followed by Mr Aleksander POCIEJ.

Ms Petra BAYR you are in the room. Welcome. And Mr Aleksander POCIEJ is remote.

Ms Petra BAYR you have the floor.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, on behalf of SOC): Thank you very much.

I think the progress report very clearly shows that our last year's work was shadowed by COVID-19. Nevertheless we as PACE proved that we are able to uphold democracy, to protect democratic institutions and the rule of law. But we also saw that we had to diminish some of our normal tools to control democracy. For instance, many election observations had to be cancelled and we also saw that some governments tried to misuse the situation to diminish parliamentary power. But all in all I think that we, as PACE, made it possible to show our people, our electorate, that they can trust democracy.

Of course we also witnessed a lot of negative impact by the virus on human rights. I want to remember the increase of domestic violence against women or the backlash to stereotyped gender roles where it was mostly women who combined homework, homeschooling and care, and had a double and three-fold burden to care for.

We all know children who missed proper education, who missed the contact with their peers and who suffered from isolation. We also all witnessed increasing antisemitism that had a fruitful ground among deniers of COVID-19, vaccination or testing. We also saw that some people, even some governments, blamed migrants or LGTBIQ people for spreading the virus intentionally, which is of course totally crazy. We also saw that we really have to fight for human rights in situations like that.

Together, and only together globally, we will be able to overcome this pandemic. But after that I myself do not want to go back to the old normal. I do not want to go back to a society or two societies that are unequal and that are exclusive. I do not want to get back to an economic system that exhausts both natural and human resources. I think we really should try to think about the restart. To totally restart. The Sustainable Development Goals could be a hint for the direction we could move forward towards.

We, as a Parliamentary Assembly, have to do our homework. If you look at the last pages of the progress report you will see that there is still a very huge under-representation of women. We really have to work on a system that represents and makes visible men and women regardless of their age, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, regardless of their ethnic origin. They all have to be represented here. I think it's really important, so let's try a restart together.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ms Petra BAYR.

On behalf of equality, I have to subtract 32 seconds from Mr Tiny KOX in the future. It will be nine in your case. Let's stick to the three minutes.

Next on my list is Mr Aleksander POCIEJ who will be followed by Ms Maria JUFEREVA-SKURATOVSKI.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ you have the floor remotely.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ, if you can try to reconnect again.

I don't see Mr Aleksander POCIEJ coming on board.

Let's try to gain some time.

We now go to Ms Maria JUFEREVA-SKURATOVSKI. Ms Maria JUFEREVA-SKURATOVSKI you have the floor and we will come back to Mr Aleksander POCIEJ afterwards.

Ms Maria JUFEREVA-SKURATOVSKI (Estonia, on behalf of ALDE): First, my utmost congratulations on your re-election.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the ALDE group, I express the greatest concern towards the situation related to the arrest and detention of anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny in January, the arrest of his peaceful supporters, and more generally about the socio-political developments in Russia. Therefore, we believe that the Navalny case has to be included on the agenda this week and we believe it will be.

Another alarming situation is the worsening situation in Belarus, where the authorities still continue to harass and pressure civil society activists and independent media. We also need to keep the violations against human rights and the rule of law in Belarus on our agenda.

And finally, I will present my comments and suggestions inspired by the detailed and objective report "*Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia*", prepared by my colleague Mr Tiny KOX. In the report, it is outlined that according to the assessments of the international observers, "Georgia's parliamentary elections were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected."

First, on behalf of the ALDE group, I call on the ruling party and the opposition parties to launch large-scale negotiations and take the opportunity to work in parliament together. We see that boycotting is not the best way to represent the interests of the population and to stand for the rule of law and human rights.

Second, we do not support the initiative of the ruling party to withdraw budgetary fundings and other benefits from those parties which do not take up their mandates in parliament. We see that this measure could result in a worsening political situation. We all are looking forward to the evaluation of the Venice Commission in this respect.

Third, we appreciate the creation of a committee to investigate violations that occurred during the last elections.

Fourth, we appreciate the reform of the election system: in 2024 the parliamentary elections will be conducted fully on the principles of the proportional system.

Fifth, we suggest implementing a means for electronic elections instead of using a traditional balloting system.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. We will now come back to Mr Aleksander POCIEJ.

Alex, you have the floor and you will be followed by Mr Martin GRAF.

Alex.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, on behalf of EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Sorry for the technical problems. I will focus on the subject of the elections in Georgia. Georgia has undergone important developments in recent years. While discussions are under way with the Russian Federation on further economic integration of the successionist region of Abkhazia, I would like to reiterate our full support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia.

The establishment of strong institutions and the proper functioning of pluralism are the indispensable foundations of a strong democracy. In this respect, the latest parliamentary elections in October raise questions. International observers from the main opposition parties and Georgian civil society as well as other observers noted shortcomings in the conducting of these elections. The EPP Group is therefore taking a stand to express its concern about the arrest of two opposition candidates two weeks before these elections on political grounds.

Our group has called on the Georgian authorities to uphold democratic principles, to ensure that the election campaign runs smoothly and that elections are free and transparent. Electoral and judicial reforms are essential in order to strengthen trust between the population and the institutions, to consolidate confidence in Georgia's public institutions and to guarantee democracy. The Council of Europe and the European Union should provide assistance in implementing these reforms in order to strengthen Georgia's democratic institutions.

I therefore call for the reinstatement of the post-electoral mission in Georgia, which was decided recently and has unfortunately been cancelled.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): *Merci, Aleksander.*

We now turn to Mr Martin GRAF, after whom we will have Mr Georgios KATROUGKALOS.

Mr Martin GRAF, you have the floor.

Mr Martin GRAF (Austria, on behalf of EC/DA): Dear President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the Rapporteur Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER for presenting this extremely informative report, which is certainly suitable for monitoring the progress of the work of the Parliamentary Assembly in the various policy areas. This report, but also the discussion on it, gives us, and therefore also me, the opportunity to point out urgent challenges of the present and the immediate future.

Ladies and gentlemen, for twelve months now, the scourge of the COVID-19 virus, including mutations, has literally kept our world, and therefore Europe, breathlessly on tenterhooks.

In dealing with the health crisis, massive problems are emerging in a variety of ways in the handling of the core values of the Parliamentary Assembly. We are seeing that in many Member States there is massive disregard for fundamental rights and freedoms. These include, above all, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the rule of law, but also the inviolability of privacy and much more besides. But we are also witnessing an unbelievable intensity of a cartel of a few IT corporations in cooperation with power politicians and radical representatives of the so-called civil society not only trying to decide, but actually deciding what may still be said.

In the past, so-called heretical books were blacklisted, today opinions are put on the digital pyre of Google, Twitter, Facebook, Amazon and YouTube, to name just a few digital censors. In sum, what we are witnessing is that we are in danger of the big loser of our decade being freedom in its entirety, across the board.

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the main tasks of the Parliamentary Assembly and of each individual member will be, on the one hand, to closely observe and also courageously point out in the Member States where, when and in what form IT corporations in conjunction with power politicians and the radical representation of civil society are trampling on and undermining fundamental rights and freedoms that have been painstakingly fought for over centuries and, on the other hand, to urgently and quickly find ways to preserve and strengthen the rule of law despite the health economic and political crisis.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We now go to Mr Georgios KATROUGKALOS who will be followed by Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN.

Georgios, you have the floor.

Mr Georgios KATROUGKALOS (Greece, on behalf of UEL): Thank you Mr President.

First of all my best wishes to you personally and to all our colleagues for a much better New Year.

I think dear Mr President that we have as an Assembly showed good reflexes in the challenging environment of the pandemic. Not only we have adapted our functioning to the new difficult dire circumstances, but we have also responded timely to the substantive challenges of the pandemic to our democratic values and principles.

We have reacted to the new dangers regarding human rights both with respect to political rights and individual freedoms, such as the right of personal movement, right of assembly and freedom of expression, but also to social rights.

We have insisted in the protection of vulnerable groups such as informal workers, women and LGBTQ+ people. Of course, the problems are far from being resolved. Quite the contrary. Health and the work conditions are still demanding and social inequalities have not decreased, but have exploded during the pandemic – a lot of work for us in the months to come.

Our response to challenges to democracy has been also prompt, including the monitoring of elections as in Georgia, where we fully support the report prepared by Mr Tiny KOX and a post-electoral mission there.

We have reacted not only to the decline of parliamentary democracy in some of our countries in general, but also to the individual treatment of our citizens, especially political prisoners. This was the case with the political prisoners in Azerbaijan, where we saw some positive evolution, but also regarding political prisoners in Turkey where we have still to see a positive reaction on behalf of the Turkish state. The case of Demirtaş, a member of the Turkish parliament, is a emblematic. We should seek nothing less than full implementation of the decision of the Court, so that Mr Demirtaş, one of many political prisoners in Turkey, be immediately released and returned to his parliamentary duties. This will be also a clear message to other member states who are eager to arrest opponents instead of fully respecting the rules of democracy and engaging them in a fair and public debate.

We Mr President and our group, the Group of the Unified European Left, is going to actively support and promote the work of our Assembly in the fields of democracy and human rights in parallel with the struggle of the people in our countries for a better and a more democratic future.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, we now turn to Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN in the room.

Titus, you have the floor.

Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN (Romania, SOC): Thank you very much, Mr President.

Colleagues, first of all, congratulations addressed to both rapporteurs for their work, their reports and, of course, conclusions and recommendations that I entirely share from the beginning.

I will focus more on the elections in Georgia in my capacity as rapporteur on Georgia on behalf of the Monitoring Committee together with our French colleague Mr Claude KERN, the other co-rapporteur.

These elections took place after an important legislative reform that addressed the electoral process, and electoral system that was generated by an important constitutional reform that took place previously. This reform was based on an important debate within the Georgian parliament, dialogue, negotiations, sometimes quite complicated, between the power and the opposition in the Georgian parliament and with the assistance and support of, inter alia, the two co-rapporteurs of PACE. It addressed the issue of commitments that were assumed previously by Georgia, specifically on the proportional system that is supposed to be put entirely into force in 2024 after this constitutional reform but asking – and this was our constant position – to take a first step already in 2020. That was happening, and this is why we welcomed the fact that these elections were taking place based on this reform.

As mentioned by Mr Tiny KOX, the international observers that means PACE observer mission, OSCE, ODIHR and some other international observers concluded that these elections were generally, I quote, "generally free, competitive and overall fundamental freedoms being respected". At the same time, signalling once again I should underline, the fact that there are still important shortcomings to be addressed: there were allegations of misconduct. I will not repeat everything that was mentioned by Mr Tiny KOX, but I will add

specifically the issue of polarisation. It's a concerning situation, during the years we see this polarisation and we should encourage both forces – in power and the opposition – to continue to work to diminish this polarisation.

Now I will ask, and I will repeat the position of the rapporteurs, first of all the government, to seriously investigate allegations of misconduct and to address shortcomings based on recommendations of OSCE, ODIHR, PACE, the two rapporteurs and of course the Venice Commission. To the opposition, I will renew our requests based on our mandate that we received previously from the Monitoring Committee to be back in the parliament. They show polarisation generated the refusal of the the opposition to be part of this parliament. This is the right place to debate democratically to improve the situation. And my final comment in 10 seconds, if permitted: we intend as rapporteurs to go to Georgia in the near future and to continue to work together with both the power and the opposition to improve and to continue the reforms, avoiding the duplication of the missions and the role and competencies of the rapporteurs. Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Because you are a rapporteur I left you a little bit more time, but please stick to the three minutes because otherwise we are taking away the opportunity of other people to be on board. The next one on the list is Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, who will be followed by Lord Richard BALFE remotely.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, you have the floor.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EPP/CD): Dear Mr Rik DAEMS, congratulations for your re-election as the President of the Assembly.

I would like to express my gratitude to all of you, colleagues, the new vice-President, on behalf of Hungary. The incoming presidency of the Council of Europe from May this year. I would like to offer my cooperation to all of you.

We had one year without the Parliamentary Assembly. For this reason, I am really glad that finally we can meet again in a hybrid manner. So greetings to you hybrid Assembly, in the plenary, and in your home-towns as well. It was, I believe, the most serious challenge since the end of the Cold War, 1989-1990, that we have experienced in the past one year. It proved that international and inter-organisational cooperation is vital to managing such types of crises.

I would like to congratulate our colleagues in the European Union especially for being able to adopt a rescue package.

On our behalf probably what was most important was our resolution on the Athens Declaration on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly. Congratulations to you, Mr President, for making it possible.

The German EU presidency and the German Council of Europe presidency was, however, vital. We were glad and privileged to have our German colleagues in both very important positions in the past period. I believe that the Council of Europe itself was also successful in its online existence including the creation of the voting possibility. It was needed. Now we are able to vote for our new officials. Congratulations to everybody including the secretary.

I would like to raise two issues which are minority related. One is the fact that the citizens initiatives in the European Union, the so-called Minority SafePack, has been rejected by the European Commission. I think it is a very surprising development against the will of 1.2 million European citizens. Against the overwhelming majority decision of the European Parliament, the European Commission rejected to initiate legal measures. I think we need to investigate closely in our cooperation with the European Union how we can find appropriate remedies for this situation. In general, the future of citizen initiatives in the European Union is questioned. This is the fifth citizen initiative which is rejected by the European Union. There the European Union is going to proceed.

The other one is the Ukraine. I wrote to you a letter, Mr President. I look forward to your active participation in finding a solution to that.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We now move to Mr Richard BALFE remotely, who will be followed by Mr Jacques MAIRE, who is in the room.

Richard, you have the floor.

I do not see Richard asking for the floor, so then I move immediately to Mr Jacques MAIRE, who is pointing no.

Then we move on to Mr GONCHARENKO, who is in the room; I've seen him because he sits behind me normally. He will be followed by Ms Jette CHRISTENSEN remotely.

You have the floor.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Dear colleagues,

Dear chairman,

You see that we had been voting on the Russian delegation credentials recently and I first would like to say thank you to everybody who supported the position of Ukrainian delegation and voted for challenging the credentials of Russian delegation. And I want to address those who didn't support this issue for the moment. Please think. Please think and understand one issue: now it is the war in the world between Russian world and civilized world. What we have seen during the last year? Belarus. In Belarus, absolute violation of all human rights, killing of protesters - people who are protesting - and who helped Lukashenko do this? It was Putin. Putin himself.

Now we have a situation of hybrid *Anschluss* of Belarus by the Russian Federation. When Russian officers of security work there, Russian propagandists - they call themselves journalists but they are not - work there. Russian military forces are there. Russia controls the border between Belarus and Ukraine, for example. So that Belarus question is about Russia and what they are doing. With their support, the dictator Lukashenko is still in his place. Without support of Putin, he would no longer be the president of Belarus. So first of all "Żywie Biełarus". Georgia, still occupied territory by Russian Federation, and Abkhazia, South Ossetia... What has changed? Nothing.

And again, I want to say words of support to our Georgian friends, "Sakartvelos gaumarjos"! But who is guilty? Putin. You see Ukraine: more than 13,000 people were killed from the beginning of the Russian aggression and this year, they were killed again and the war is not over. Who is making this war? Putin. The Russian Federation is inside. What do we see? Navalny case again. Chemical weapon in the 21st century, killing of opposition by the government, by the president himself. He is killing those persons who are against him. First it was Nemtsov, so many names in the Russian Federation, and the last name is Alexei Navalny and after he miraculously is alive, now he is detained in prison! That's all. That's hundreds of people that are beaten. Thousands are arrested. That's what's going on in the Russian Federation now and Putin lives in this palace. Unbelievable! For \$1.5 billion near Gelemdzhik. So this is the biggest thief and corruption in the world and the worst dictator in the world.

So please support the challenging of Russian credentials because this delegation, they are not delegates, they are just those who helped Putin to kill and to make corruption in his own country.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, and now we move to Ms Jette CHRISTENSEN, who will be followed by Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ, both remotely.

Jette, you have the floor.

Jette is not asking for the floor. If she does later on, she will be given the floor. Then we move to...

Yes, she is. Jette, come on board.

Ms Jette CHRISTENSEN (Norway, SOC): Dear colleagues

I will address the situation in Georgia as observed during the election observation mission.

Many parties ran for election, very few had the chance to win. This was due to long standing pressure from the ruling party and information gap concerning a big difference in campaign support and lack of common source of information.

Mr Tiny KOX mentioned the pressure and dominance of the ruling party. This was also to be seen in the streets of Tbilisi when men in black were driving around and celebrating the results before the ballots closed.

I would like to stress the weak difference between state and party, and party and media. Politicians only get the media they deserve and the democracy they make the ground for. The Georgian people has nowhere to go to find common ground for facts and information. This is the politicians responsibility to change.

In a country with economic differences as Georgia it is especially crucial for the trust in politics to have rules for party financing. It would be very helpful for all our countries to have common rules for this.

It was very clear that the people of Georgia want to rule themselves in an open democracy. That is the politicians responsibility to give them the democracy they deserve.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

May I recall to all of our colleagues who log in remotely to put their computer on "floor" because otherwise we have a double sound.

On your screen you have to put on "floor" when you speak.

Next on my list is Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ, who will be followed by Lord George FOULKES.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ you have the floor.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Mr President. I will speak about the observation of the Parliamentary elections in Georgia.

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteur Mr Tiny KOX for the draft report. Allow me to point out that in 2018, I was leading the European Parliament election observation delegation to Georgia to observe presidential elections there. So, I have a good opportunity to compare these two elections in the country concerned in the context of the OSCE/ODIHR conclusions and recommendations from the 2018 elections with the elections which took place in October-November last year and this the draft report of Mr Tiny KOX.

Allow me to be blunt, I cannot agree with your positive assessment of the 2020 elections. According to the local NGOs which have been monitoring the elections in Georgia for many years, those were the worse elections in modern Georgian history and a step back on its democratic development path.

The likely result was a coalition government, the first one in Georgia's history. But something went very wrong on the night of the elections. Ballot stuffing and organized pressure on voters with the help of the criminal elements, marginalization of the representatives of the opposition parties in the electoral commissions and finally – rewriting of the summary protocols by the Central Election Commission – those were the tools deployed by the government to its advantage.

As we know, all opposition parties have boycotted the elections' second round and have refused to take the seats in the Parliament. The negotiation process which has been ongoing for two months now has been stalled, since the government is refusing to move forward on any of the opposition's demands.

All opposition MPs have written an appeal about resigning their seats and within the next 10 days the parliament will have to vote on this and most likely they will end up with a one party parliament.

There is no confidence in the election results in the society. Georgia is in great peril, as the polarization of the political spectrum and society are deepening. The only way to move forward is to return confidence in the election process. All this has to be reflected in the report we are debating today.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. We will now go to Lord George FOULKES remotely.

George, you have the floor.

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you very much, Mr President.

Can I congratulate you on your re-election? And can I also say that you and the others who are in Strasbourg have a great advantage over us who are having to contribute remotely. And can I ask you if you would renew your request to speakers and presidents of parliament to try and facilitate the attendance of members at the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly because of its importance.

Can I now refer to the speech, the rather jaundiced speech, of my colleague from the United Kingdom, Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER. He queries the effectiveness of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Can I remind him that one of the ways in which we can be effective is for our national parliaments to follow up some of our recommendations, and particularly in relation to Russia with the dreadful imprisonment and the way in which the brave leader of the opposition Alexei Navalny has been dealt with.

When I raise this matter in parliament in the United Kingdom, I point out that it is London which is the centre of the activity of the oligarchs surrounding Putin – their investments, their acquisition of property. And we need to take stronger action and relation as to their activities. You know, it's even quite astonishing that our prime minister has nominated the son of a former KGB agent to be a member of our parliament in the House of Lords. That kind of action does not send the right kind of message and the right kind of support to our assembly.

Can I also say that I'm really concerned about unrest in Belarus and I think we need to take stronger action in relation to Belarus. I'm particularly concerned about people who have been in prison, and I've taken part in a very good initiative that is taking place around Europe to adopt a prisoner. And I've adopted Stepan Latypov. There is the message that I put out and I hope that members of the Parliamentary Assembly will follow up the request to adopt prisoners in Belarus and I've sent a message of support to him as through an organisation involved and also directly.

And finally, can I say, in relation to Georgia: I hope that all of us in the Council of Europe, in the Parliamentary Assembly, and our national parliament will support the initiative enabled by the European Union and the United States ambassador to try and find a solution. That, I think, is the positive way forward to encourage the opposition to take part in the transformation in Georgia.

Thank you very much, Mr President.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you Lord George FOULKES.

We now turn to Mr Ruben RUBINYAN, who will be followed by Mr Ahmet YILDIZ.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN you have the floor within the Hemicycle.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues, during the time of the global pandemic, on September 27, 2020, supported by Turkey, Azerbaijan launched large-scale military actions against the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. This offensive was accompanied by deliberate targeting and indiscriminate shelling of civilian settlements and infrastructures, churches, and objects of cultural heritage with a wide range of weapons including band weaponry such as cluster bombs and weapons containing white phosphorus.

This aggression resulted in a 44-day full-scale war. The people of Nagorno-Karabakh were attacked not only by the Azeri armed forces but also mercenaries and foreign terrorist fighters deployed by Turkey to the conflict zone from the Middle East. This fact has been reported by the leaders and state security agencies of France, Russia, and the United States, international media, and human rights watchdogs.

This war saw the most vicious war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Azerbaijani armed forces and their terrorist allies. Numerous photos and videos have been released from Azerbaijani social media sources illustrating violence and ill treatment towards the Armenian prisoners of war and their execution, brutal beheadings, and mutilations of corpses.

The captured foreign terrorist fighters confessed that they were deployed from the Turkish occupied northern Syria to kill Armenian infidels and that they were promised an additional sum for each beheading. These war crimes are the logical continuation of the hate policy against ethnic Armenians that bear systemic nature in Azerbaijan.

Today after the military hostilities have stopped, the most urgent humanitarian issue is the release and repatriation of the Armenian prisoners of war captured by Azerbaijan. The trilateral statement that stopped the hostilities *inter alia* requires the exchange of all the prisoners of war, hostages and other detained persons, and bodies of the dead. After the initial round of exchange of prisoners, hostages and other detained persons,

which should have, however, happened on the agreed all for all principles, Azerbaijan has been refusing to complete the process under various pretexts and up to this state refuses to grant the International Committee of the Red Cross access to all persons protected by the 1949 Geneva Convention.

Furthermore, one month after the trilateral statement entered into force, Azerbaijan launched a new military aggression in the Hadrut region of Nagorno-Karabakh and captured additional prisoners of war. The Azerbaijani side immediately announced the beginning of criminal prosecutions against the newly captured not recognising them as prisoners of war.

Colleagues, Azerbaijan is not getting ready for a peaceful coexistence with Armenians and continues to pose a direct genocidal threat to physical security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Under these circumstances we must make sure that the peace process resumes within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmanship. The further political solution to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh on the basis of self-determination is vital for the whole region.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ruben. We now go to Mr Ahmet YILDIZ who will be followed by Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV. Ahmet, you have the floor within the room.

Mr Ahmet YILDIZ (Turkey, NR): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues, the latest Georgian elections, held in the aftermath of substantial legal reforms, adopted after a compromise following a year-long and inclusive consultation process between the ruling party and the opposition, were of great importance for Georgia in its democratic consolidation.

I would like to recall that the statement of preliminary findings of the Election Observation Mission, which was a joint endeavour of parliamentarians from PACE, NATO PA and OSCE PA, noted the fact that legislative amendments which provided a sound basis for holding democratic elections, were addressing many of the Council of Europe recommendations. As acknowledged by International observers, the elections were competitive, fundamental freedoms were generally respected and most electoral procedures were followed.

Georgian voters expressed their will at the polls and once again demonstrated their strong commitment to democracy. It was particularly impressive to see so many of them coming to voting stations despite the COVID-19. On a negative note, we can regret that the elections could not take place in the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, for obvious reasons. Democracy, through the freedom and rule of law, IS among the shared values at the foundation of our organisation. Member States should therefore be committed to supporting democratic improvement in Georgia, a country which has made clear its aspiration to Euro-Atlantic integration. Meeting the highest Democratic standards is a requirement to progress towards this goal.

With regard to the protests against the results of the elections and clashes with the police, I would like to call on all political stakeholders to act with restraint and responsibility, and to engage constructively in the adoption and implementation of additional reforms. Such efforts are of course important for Georgian progress, on its pathway towards a more democratic political system.

Dear colleagues, I regret that the Armenian delegation still continues the path they followed in the last three decades. I urge them to adopt a new approach, to be in close contact with Azerbaijan, to leave this issue behind in line with international law and the UN Security Council resolutions.

Thank you, for the good of the nation, thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Ahmet YILDIZ.

We will now move to Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV, and I inform colleagues that this is the last speaker on the list due to time constraints.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV you have the floor.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV (Azerbaijan, ALDE): Today is a historic day in many respects. Above all, this is a historic day, because after a sad break in the year, we are finally together in Strasbourg again and gathered again in this hall which is native to us.

The main thing that makes this day historic for me and the Azerbaijani delegation is the event that happened here exactly 20 years ago.

On 25 January 2001, the flag of Azerbaijan was added to the list of flags in front of the building of the Council of Europe, and, as equal members of this prestigious organization, we started our journey.

Today's Azerbaijan is very different from the Azerbaijan of that time. At that time our restored independence that was advancing by overcoming difficulties was nine years old. This year we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the independence of our strong and developed state that is moving forward tomorrow with confidence. Over the past years, Azerbaijan has made great strides in strengthening the rule of law, human rights, and creating democratic institutions in the country. In all this, the invaluable lessons of the Council of Europe family and the path we have travelled together occupy a special place.

When Azerbaijan joined the Council of Europe 20 years ago, it was a country with 20% occupied territory and with one million refugees and internally displaced persons. Today, Azerbaijan can proudly declare that it is a victorious state that liberated its lands from the enemy. In addition, Azerbaijan achieved this without anyone's help due to the many years of experience and the growing strength. Azerbaijan solved the problem perceived as Gordian knot by the Council of Europe, OSCE, and the UN. In doing so, it saved itself and, in fact, carried out the work of these international organizations, thus taking the burden off them.

This is my answer to Mr Rabinyan's slander and lie-filled speech.

Azerbaijan starts the new year with deep confidence, solving its most difficult problem. I wish the Council of Europe to get rid of the problems accumulated over the years and embark on a new, more successful path!

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I've seen that in the list of speakers we were not able, since they appointed themselves a bit late, to have the issue on the Georgian election be addressed by any Georgian colleague, so I will make an exception in giving the floor to the head of the Georgian delegation for three minutes and that is the last speaker for today.

Mr Kakhaber KUTCHAVA.

Mr Kakhaber KUTCHAVA (Georgia, SOC): Thank you Mr President.

First and foremost I would like to thank you and the members of the PACE observation delegation for visiting Georgia to observe the parliamentary elections amid the unusual and challenging circumstances. We much appreciate your support of the democratic process in Georgia.

The recent elections have been extraordinary due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments across the world had to adapt to the new reality of increased health risks without putting democracy on hold. The Georgian government spared no efforts in order for the elections to be in compliance with the international health standards and recommendations, including ensuring the necessary sanitary measures at the polling stations as well as adjusting the existing legislation for those in quarantine and self-isolation to be able to cast their votes. In total, 127 special stations with mobile ballot boxes were established for that reason.

We welcome the largely positive international assessments further shared by the international community which clearly state that the 31 October parliamentary elections were competitive and overall fundamental freedoms were respected. Nevertheless a number of shortcomings have been identified. We very much value Mr Tiny KOX's reporting, and we stand ready to adequately react to the deficiencies observed by the mission. Among those, special attention is paid to the issue of campaign financing, which has been a subject of interest to PACE and international monitors since the presidential elections 2018. The engagement of our international partners in this process carries a great importance. We look forward to receiving the particular recommendations from you.

It is also very important that the opposition political parties participate in this process. Our international partners continue to call on the Georgian opposition to enter the parliament. We remain hopeful that the opposition representatives will take up their mandates granted to them by 800,000 voters and shift the democratic process from the streets to the parliament because up to this time there is not a single piece of evidence of any ground based on which the election results may be questioned.

I've heard a number of concerns raised during the speeches made by the speakers. I can assure you that unfortunately the 21st century sometimes becomes the victim of disinformation. We've seen some of them write online. First of all, there has been not a single arrest of any candidate, especially two weeks before, but in general there is not a single case that can be counted. Local NGOs making the statement regarding this being one of the worst elections, it has to be also mentioned that exactly one and a half months later they made an official statement saying that they've made a mistake which was related to PVT, parallel voting tabulations, and admitted the error, which was the main reason for making this big noise and street actions. It has to be mentioned at the same time that they've made their point to this regard. Local self-governance elections are to be held in 2021 in Georgia and our political party is committed to working, and I'm finishing, with all interested parties to make sure that the recommendations are considered and changes are introduced in the legislation and the standards for election administration process are improved.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

We now come to the end of the debate with just one element potentially more.

Does the rapporteur Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER wish to have the floor?

I inform our colleagues that in any case those who were not able to have their intervention done, that you can basically have your speech sent to the table office for publication in the official report.

Now it is important, colleagues, that the text to be submitted should be in typescript electronically, if possible no later than four hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

I give the floor to Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER to finish up the debate.

Ian, you've got the floor.

Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Thank you so much, Mr President.

Can I just congratulate and thank all colleagues for their contribution?

I think the main thing to take out of this was obviously COVID-19, which so many speakers brought forward.

The democracy, the openness, the not abuse of power, but having to be done. I give one example very simply for you the moment is that the French have a curfew. Is it necessary? Yes, it probably is. Should it continue any longer than it has to? No, it shouldn't. I think that goes for the whole of Europe, including my own country and right across our member states.

The second one is Georgia. I listened to keenly to what Tiny Cox said, but also keenly to all the speakers. About a third of the speakers brought up the situation in Georgia and both sides of the argument. There is obviously a situation and I'm grateful for people not pushing for a vote when they could have done so, because I think this needs to be thought through and sorted out.

Can I come onto the situation in Russia? Members brought this up as well again on both sides. I would urge Russia to please let's start talking without causing problems. I would urge possibly the president and members of the presidential and a member of the court of human rights with the second trial to go to Russia to talk to them and see what we can do.

Finally, on the situation in Armenia and in Azerbaijan, this is obviously a desperately difficult situation. One of the fundamental rights of being a soldier if you are captured you expect to be repatriated to your country as soon as possible when hostilities end. Again, I think it's important both sides recognise this and there, where there are prisoners, who may or may not be wounded, they are sent to their countries to be looked after. If they are in captivity and both countries are have signed the Geneva Convention, they should be looked after, fed, given medical attention, and be treated, dare I say, as a guest as opposed to anything else, and therefore no slave labour, no other working.

Can I just say, on a general note, there were lots of comments about the future of the Council of Europe. I made my position clear because I feel strongly that we need to have our responsibilities change slightly to make sure that we are part of the solutions and never a part of the problem. The great thing about international organizations they should always strive to listen to everybody, take the concerns of the people they represent, and try to make them relevant to the situations that unfold, be they whatever. That I think is the most important thing that we can do.

But the progress of the Council of Europe... I think next year will be the crucial year. Last year has been a write-off. Next year will be crucial because we must establish our rights. That is going to be the return of democracy, the return of free speech, and the return of the citizens' rights.

Therefore, Mr President, I thank everybody, I thank you, and I've been delighted to present the progress report.

Thank you and good morning.

Mr Stéphane BERGERON (Canada): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Ms Mariam KVRIVISHVILI (Georgia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Chairman, Distinguished Colleagues,

First of all, we would like to share our sincere gratitude towards Rapporteur - Mr Tiny KOX and all members of the Assembly election observation delegation for visiting Georgia in October 2020 regardless Covid-19 circumstances and their immense contribution into observing parliamentary elections in Georgia.

Reports from main domestic and international observers concluded that the elections were competitive with fundamental freedoms respected and that parties could campaign freely.

The elections were conducted under a substantially revised legal framework, that showcased progress for the holding of more democratic and transparent elections with higher standards.

The amendments introduced a larger proportional component to the electoral system and lowered the threshold for parties to be represented in parliament. The reduced threshold increased the apparent competitiveness of the elections and resulted having as many as 14 political parties representing people's interest in Parliament of Georgia.

International partners and allies have been actively voicing concerns about opposition's boycott regime and consider it regrettable given that the results for opposition parties in these elections would give them a strong position to execute parliamentary oversight. In the best interest of the Georgia's European Integration and further democratic development all political parties are therefore urged to take up their parliamentary mandates.

Ruling Party remains committed to open and constructive dialogue with all opposition party representatives to advance towards more mature democracy.

Georgia demonstrated that democratic elections can be conducted even amid the global pandemic and once again highlighted that the parliamentary elections represent a milestone for the country in pursuing its western orientation and values.

The health of voters and other involved participants of the electoral process was the main priority for us. Developed special epidemiological protocols guaranteed the fundamental rights of all citizens and gave everyone equal opportunity to participate in the elections including those infected at medical institutions, self-isolated as well as quarantined ones.

We intent to further co-operate with the Assembly and the Venice Commission, with a view to address all the shortfalls identified during these parliamentary elections to continue and strengthen the path of Georgia's democratic development and European Integration. Nevertheless, Ruling Party has already initiated multiple major initiatives and election reforms (such as – creation of an inquiry commission to be led by opposition party representative, integrating digitalized election system effective 2021, etc) which is a vivid demonstration of our commitment to Western values, democratization and guaranteed transparency.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

In 2012 Georgia did what no other country in region has ever done- change of Government through elections. But what has happened in Georgia since is nothing else than democratic backsliding and the October elections is unfortunate proof of that. Yes, the decision not to take up seats in parliament is a hard for outsiders to understand. But, complete loss of trust towards elections as a way to change government would

be worse. Opposition has responsibility, but as in any country Government is more responsible on solving crisis of such magnitude. According to Transparency International we have “state capture” in Georgia – an unelected person, billionaire Ivanishvili who made his fortune in Russia controls all branches of government, including judicial. According to the Central Election Commission’s own official initial protocols published on its website before corrected without recounts, in case of majoritarian ballots, over 53% of all precincts there was either excess of ballots (evidence of ballot stuffing) or ballots were missing (evidence of controlled voting, a so-called carousel fraud scheme). It cannot be that thousands of Georgians all of a sudden decided to steal ballots.

There is a consensus among all of Georgia’s opposition parties as well as NGOs that the October 2020 elections were by far the worst since 2003. If Georgian Dream would be right that the problems did not impact the result – it is logical that they would demonstratively investigate instances of fraud that were filmed on camera. But this is not the case. For example, in Marneuli, ballot stuffing was filmed on video. But that precinct – No 65 – is still counted as genuine. Why? Maybe because its investigation would open a Pandora’s box?

The elections were preceded by a campaign of political prosecutions. As stated in October 9 statement of 45 of Georgia’s most reputable NGOs, incl. Transparency International and the Open Society Foundation, the arrest of two prominent public officials for “treason” and making the case as the main campaign topic was a clear “politicized justice.” Mr Ivanishvili has used the fate of political prisoners as a negotiating leverage against the background of complete impunity for violent attacks against opposition, by GD activists and their proxies.

Recount was done in less than 20 precincts out of the 1700 where it was requested. Even in cases when ballot stuffing was filmed on camera (such as in Marneuli 65) no-one was prosecuted. If Georgian Dream was committed to prove its credentials, it would prosecute perpetrators of such fraud instead of counting that manipulated precinct as genuine.

Mr Claude KERN (France, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Vote: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia (31 October 2020)

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ian. Thank you very much for the report.

Since you referred to me concerning Russia, I can inform you that you know that I was there in December: we had to return because of COVID-19. We had the agreement that rapporteurs could go, but given the situation that has not been possible until now. It is my intention to head out to address all these issues if possible even still in the month of February. But we’ll see.

This being said, we now go to the continuation of this progress report, more in particular to the reference to committees.

Now the Bureau has proposed a number of references to committees for ratification by the Assembly. They are set out in document 15213 and addendum 1 and 2.

Is there any remark or objection to this?

I don’t see any then they are approved.

Then we move on to the other decisions in the progress report, which is also the same document 15213 and addendums 1 and 2. They need to be ratified.

Is there any objections or any remark?

No. Then they are approved.

Before ending the session I have a request from Mr Dmytro LUBINETZ from the Ukraine, who is in the hemicycle and apparently there was a problem with the voting system. For a few seconds, Mr Dmytro LUBINETZ, you have the floor.

Mr Dmytro LUBINETTS (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Chairman, I need only five seconds.

I ask to make a note of my vote in favour of the challenge to the credentials of the Russian delegation.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Dmytro LUBINETTS.

Well dear colleagues, it is 13:32.

That was okay.

Again sorry for those who could not intervene but this will happen again in the next days since we've got many many people wanting to intervene, which is very positive.

The Assembly will hold its next sitting this afternoon at 4 p.m. with the agenda which was approved this morning.

The sitting is adjourned.