



Provisional edition

Monday 19 April 2021, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the part-session

Opening of the sitting No 8

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Please be seated, dear colleagues; we are going to start.

Madame Secretary General,

Mister Deputy Secretary General,

Madame Secretary General of the Assembly Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOUS-TSOVILIS, let me specifically welcome you as this is your first part-session. Let's hope everything goes well. I'm sure it will. I would like to say to our colleagues that it is very enjoyable to work with Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOUS-TSOVILIS and her team because we have a lot of work to do, and it goes in a very good fashion.

Members of the Assembly, colleagues, ambassadors, for those who chose to be with us, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to start with the following. Dame Cheryl GILLAN, a great European and a most appreciated colleague left us on April 5. A tireless champion of democracy, Dame Cheryl GILLAN was a remarkable member of the British delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe since 2013. She was also a member of the Bureau of the Assembly and vice-Chairperson of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, and Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

In the Committee she was a defender of democracy, rule of law and human rights, but also an inspirational woman for all of us. A compassionate and caring colleague, and great companion with a great sense of humour, Dame Cheryl GILLAN will be sorely missed by all of us.

I invite you all for a minute of silence to honour her memory.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen,

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.

Let me start by thanking everyone who is here with us in the Chamber. It is always good to see each other in person. Of course, I would like to welcome all those who have joined us through their small or large screens. I am pleased that more than 100 members have agreed to attend this session, which, for me, is basically a face-to-face session. If all the members had come, dear Despina, we would not have a hybrid session. But as, unfortunately, there are colleagues who are unable to join us, the face-to-face session has automatically turned into a hybrid session.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the French authorities and their Ambassador, Mme Marie Fontanel, for all the work they have done. You will have seen outside, they are truly experts at organising sessions of our Parliamentary Assembly here in Strasbourg. It is really a pleasure to work together with the French authorities and, of course, we shall fully respect the health measures. I hope that you have all been outside to do your test and, if there is anyone who has not done so, I will send you outside, I can tell you that. I also ask you to respect all the sanitary and distancing measures. I know that often, after an hour or two, it's annoying to have this mask on your nose, but if I see someone who doesn't have the mask on his or her nose, I will warn them. I want to ask you to respect all the sanitary measures that have been put in place thanks to the French authorities and the good work of our own services, with the cooperation, of course, of the Secretary General and the ambassadors. We have all been living through this COVID-19 crisis together for a year now, and it is not easy to overcome, but we are doing our best to do so.

For translation purposes, I will continue to conduct the meeting in English, as I told you before. So it will be easier for our translators to follow me.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Dear Colleagues,

Just as an opening remark briefly, COVID-19 has obviously affected all of our citizens' daily lives.

We hope that the vaccinations go fast and swiftly in order for us to be able to welcome even more of our colleagues in the hemicycle in the near future, but it also affected the daily lives of the people, of citizens.

We mourn the death, unfortunately, due to this crisis. We do hope that medical science evolves quickly in order to administer vaccines to all. Not only all citizens of our member states, but all citizens throughout the planet, because as you all know, as long as everyone is not vaccinated the problem will persist.

It also affected other issues of daily life such as fundamental freedoms. Sometimes, in some of our members states and beyond, the abuse of not having fundamental freedoms is an issue that the Secretary General has addressed. On several occasions we did too. Pandemic laws, specific laws, emergency laws. We do see that not only where it is needed to restrict fundamental freedoms because of the sanitary situation, we do see some abuse. Alleged abuse of these laws for other means than just sanitary purposes.

It also affects our work. I'm very glad that we have a number of colleagues here now. But just to give you one example of the extent to which this affects our work, I don't know whether you realise this, but our Committee Chairs and vice-Chairs haven't had a single meeting with their colleagues, not even in a hybrid manner, since January last year. That's 15 months that our Committee Chairs, our Committee vice-Chairs our members of Committees were not able to see each other physically. This is obviously extremely important. The same goes in part for rapporteurs. Luckily we tried to get back on board deciding that, to a certain extent, we do get back into the logic of observing elections. This is also why in January already I told you we have to reboot to a certain extent taking a calculated risk, which we are doing today again, to go in hybrid mode.

Now in April again we do this. As a matter of fact we do make progress because today we had the first physical visit of a head of state, the President of Moldova.

We have a full agenda, dear colleagues, and we've got very important people who will address this Assembly allowing you to put questions to them. We've got obviously the President of Moldova Ms Sandu, we also have Chancellor Merkel, we've got President Sassoli, we've got the Secretary General of the OECD Mr Gurría, we've got the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr Roth, we've got our own Secretary General, we've got the Human Rights Commissioner, Ms Mijatović. So there's a lot of work that we have on our plate and on top of that we've got, if accepted of course, two urgent and two current affairs debates on very important issues. It comes to show that the work we are doing, out of the Presidency amongst others, is to make this Assembly as politically relevant as possible. I think that we are in part succeeding to that goal, be it on the conditions that are not so easy.

Physical contact is essential. We know that. The people that we have here with us today will allow me and yourselves to contact amongst each other. As I said before, in order to convince colleagues or be convinced by colleagues you just need to meet physically. It is not possible through a screen and it does affect the result of our work however hard we are working.

Another effect of this is that you see some kind of a trend of deviating, if I may say, from the essence of what our organisation stands for. The fact that you cannot meet with colleagues has an effect that you turn to yourself and that in a certain number of countries you start to have the national interests become more important than the shared values. I tend to say that this is not abnormal but it should not become normal. As a matter of fact it should not even exist. I know it is difficult through the screens but still the physical absence of getting together makes this trend visible. If there's one big example of that it is the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention, Madam Secretary General.

I think that it is in part also because of this trend that we see that now national agendas tend to go over the international multilateral shared values, shared standards and agendas that we stand for. We even see that in this case conventions, and in this specific case, it might be that this Convention is used as a political tool for other means. This is a shame. I hope it doesn't continue and although we might understand the reason behind, this is within the context of let's say that we agree to disagree. I disagree and I hope that this trend doesn't continue and I, together obviously with all of you, I hope and certainly with our Secretary General will try to go against this trend. As a matter of fact in part with over 100 of our colleagues present here I hope that we can go counter-current of this kind of trend and make sure that values do go over interests. Obviously within a context, I have said it before, of equal standards. I will not stand for double standards. I only stand for equal standards and for values going over interests.

PACE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as we all know is the political voice of the organisation. We have to raise issues. We have to call the problems out. We have to make our opinion clear and we can do so in a fierce way. Of course within the boundaries of decency if I may say so.

But then at the same time I had this reflection last night concerning this that, is it enough to raise the issues? Why am I saying this? Because there's a big difference between raising an issue and addressing an issue. There is a world of difference. If I make a comparison, it's a bit like talking about a country or talking with a country and its political responsables from the majority and the opposition. It's a very different thing and it gives rise, as far as I'm concerned, to quite a fundamental question which becomes very pressing also because of this situation of COVID-19 not allowing us to be physically with each other.

The question somewhere or somehow would be the following. Should we as an Assembly become part of the solution to the issues we raise or should we as an Assembly stay at the stage of only raising the problem? It's a basic question. Should we be part of the solution or should we be part of the problem or stay part of the problem? This is really fundamental.

I, as President of the Assembly and I hope many of you, wish to be part of the solution after obviously having raised the issue in a very clear way, having raised the problem. Now, parliamentary diplomacy as far as I'm concerned should lead the way to becoming part of the solution for that is what matters.

Dear colleagues, to the 830 million citizens in Europe that we have pledged to defend in terms of this one legal space of 47 member states, we have pledged to uphold, to defend and even expand their human rights, their fundamental freedoms in the context of rule of law and democracy. This is what we all pledge to. Not only our countries, but each of you, individually, is supposed to have pledged to that.

Therefore let me once again, which I stated over a year ago in my inaugural speech, let me quote Mr Spaak, our first president 70 years ago, for he said, "if I have to choose between a perfect and a better world I will choose for the better world. Why? Because we can create this better world ourselves. Let alone we have the openness, the willingness and above all the courage to do so." So I stand for this quote. Let's all together try to make a better world. Let's all be part of the solution and not stay just on the side of raising the problem.

As you know I'm a very optimistic guy, so I think from an optimistic point of view that we can and that we should. For I think that it is our duty. Just quoting someone else, Karl Popper, most of you may know him, he said "optimism is a moral duty". I do believe that. Optimism is our moral duty.

Thank you and let's get to work.

Dear colleagues, the first issue on our agenda, the first item on the agenda is the examination of credentials of new members, the names of the representatives and substitutes are in Document 15264. If no credentials are challenged the credentials will be ratified.

Miss Despina, is there any challenge?

No. Okay. Then these are ratified.

I have to go through my papers because we are prepared for everything all the time.

Then we go to the election of the Vice-President of the Assembly. In this case it is in respect of the Republic of Moldova.

This is the next item on our agenda.

The nomination that I have received is Mr Vlad BATRÎNCEA. Is there a request to vote on this nomination?

I do not see any. I see on the request list something here.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

Is there a request for the floor in the hemicycle?

I don't see any.

I see Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS that asks for the floor.

Can you give the floor to Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS?

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you so much.

Dear speaker,

Our requests come with some humoristic technical delay and of course the topics are changing and I am supporting all topics just announced by you in the sense of an unanimous voting. I'm not charging anyone from the candidates and not making the request to vote in the Chamber, but I would like... At the beginning, I raised that question to make our remarks and our speeches and I would like to use that to say that everything done by you was okay, but in this case we should enlarge our topics and current debate to have two debates. If you have more important topics and on Friday we have three possibilities we should change our rules and have at least three topics, like for example you create...

[Speaker was interrupted]

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Mister ZINGERIS, thank you, but, you can come back to that when we treat the urgent and current affairs debate. Please, you can ask for the floor then. And may I ask all of our colleagues that we try to stay within the item on the agenda because, as you know, we have an enormously charged agenda, and timing might be of the essence.

May I ask again whether there is a demand for a vote on the Vice-President of the Assembly in respect to the Republic of Moldova? I don't see any. Therefore, it is accepted.

Then we have changes in the membership of committees. This is our next business to consider these changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in document commission's 2021 04 and Add. 1. Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Assembly Committees agreed to? I have to watch out because, strangely enough, in order to read I have to take my glasses off. Then I can't see who might ask for the floor in the hemicycle. No? Then this is agreed to.

Then we come to the proposal for urgent procedure and current affairs debates. Before we can examine the draft agenda, the Assembly needs to consider requests for debates on the urgent and current affairs procedures. The bureau has received the following requests for a debate on the urgent procedure on "The arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny in January 2021" from all five political groups. A request for a debate under urgent procedure on "The functioning of democratic institutions in Turkey" from all five political groups. A request for a current affairs debate "COVID passports or certificates: protection of fundamental rights and legal implications" requested by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe political group, a request for a current affairs debate on "Armenian prisoners of war, other captives and displaced persons" requested by the Group of the European People's Party political group, a request for a current affairs debate on

"COVID-19 vaccination certificates: how to protect public health and human rights?" requested by the social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development Committee, and a request for current affairs debate on the "Russian threat to the pursuit of peace in Europe" requested by the Ukrainian delegation.

Now at its meeting on Friday of the Bureau, the Bureau agreed to the two urgent procedure debates and to the first two applications for a current affairs debate.

I remind that the Assembly can hold a maximum of two current first debates in same part session. A lot of requests. First, we will consider the requests for urgent procedure debates. Then, once this is finished, we will consider the requests for current affairs debate.

Now we get into request for debate on the urgent procedure.

The first one is "The arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny in January 2021". On Friday the bureau agree to this request. Does the Assembly agree with the bureau's recommendation?

I see no request for the floor, so I consider this to be accepted. Done.

I have to go to my pages, please. Now we come to the request for debate under urgent procedure "The functioning of democratic institutions in Turkey". On Friday the bureau agreed to this.

I do apologise. I just skipped one page too many. I propose that the topic of the debate that we just agreed upon, "The arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny in January 2021", would be referred to the committee on legal affairs for report. Okay? No objection? Thank you.

Then, we go to the request for debate on the urgent procedure concerning the functioning of democratic institutions in Turkey. On Friday the bureau agreed to this request. Does the Assembly agree with the bureau's recommendation? I believe so. Thank you.

Then we have to see. I propose that the topic of this debate... I do apologise, but you're so far away! You are standing up, so you have the floor.

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

Although I am always open to any dialogue -and your visit to my country will be a turning point on this- from my misdemeanour, I should inform this august body that frequent debate in my country doesn't help anything. It is sometimes backfiring. That is why I urge the Assembly to postpone this to another session because the issues here cannot be dealt with in one week, two weeks, one month; some of them require systemic changes. When concerning judicial issues, we should wait for the decisions of the Judiciary. Sometimes these debates call inconsistency in the public opinion, for example, on the Istanbul Convention when representatives of the majority from those countries, which still haven't ratified the Convention for 10 years. When they criticise, it causes a lot of consistency and questions. That's why I think it is not time. It does not merit now any debate on my country. Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ahmet, who is the Chair of the Turkish delegation for our Assembly.

Who wishes to speak in favour?

I see Mr Tiny KOX. Tiny, you've got the floor.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL): Thank you very much, Sir. Mr President, yes, it would be better that we should not have to discuss the developments on democratic institutions in Turkey time and again but reality is that circumstances do ask for it. To just book a visit to Turkey to address these important issues with regard to the rule of law, pluralist democracy, the respect for verdicts of our Court and the Istanbul Convention. So I think that's the reason that five political groups do ask this Assembly to have this urgent debate in this week.

Thank you very much.

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

We had someone against Ahmet YILDEZ and someone in favour.

Ahmet YILDEZ, do you request a vote on the issue?

Okay. Mr YILDEZ requests a vote.

I inform the Assembly that the Bureau was in favour and also inform that in order to overturn the decision of the Bureau you need a two-thirds majority.

Members present in the Assembly should use the hemicycle voting system, which is in front of you, as you know. Members participating remotely should vote using the remote voting system.

Those who are in favour of holding this urgent procedure debate should vote YES, in order for there not to be any misunderstanding. Those who are against holding such a debate should vote NO.

Are we ready, Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU-TSOVILIS, with our systems? Because this is the first we're going to have.

The vote in the hemicycle and the remote voting is now open. Please vote.

Please vote, specifically those of you who are remotely connected.

The vote is closed.

Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU-TSOVILIS, can we have the results after they have been compiled? You know have this intricate system of voting *in situ* and remotely. I have on my screen: "result compiling in progress".

We have 87 members in favour, 32 against and 13 abstentions. Basically, there's no two-thirds to overturn the debate.

Thank you very much.

I propose that this topic of this debate we have just agreed on be referred to the Monitoring Committee for report. Is this okay?

Thank you.

Then, we now come to the current affairs debate, where we have an agreement of the Bureau or a proposal of the Bureau. We now come to the request for current affairs debate on "COVID passports or certificates: protection of fundamental rights and legal implications". At its meeting on Friday, the Bureau 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?

It is accepted, and the request for a current first debate is therefore approved. The debate will be opened by Mr Damien COTTIER.

Then we go to the second request, which is the request for a current affairs debate on "Armenian prisoners of war, other captives and displaced persons". At its meeting again on Friday, the Bureau approved this request and therefore recommends to the Assembly that the matter be debated during this part-session as set out on the draft agenda as issued.

Does the Assembly agree to this recommendation?

I see some requests for the floor or not. I see one, two, three colleagues asking for the floor. How does this go? Is this like one in favour, one against, or can anyone take the floor in the current affairs debate? I can only take one in favour and one against. So, I will take Mr Samad SEYIDOV, who is, I think, asking for the floor remotely. Am I right there? Okay, so give the floor to Mr Samad SEYIDOV, please.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Thank you very much, Mr President, for giving me the floor. And I want to express my gratitude to you for your excellent opening remarks where you absolutely rightly mentioned that we should not only talk about the country, we should talk with the country. And that's essential.

On this point of view it seems to me that this kind of topic is an attempt to use the parliamentary assembly in a not so right direction. Azerbaijan is talking about peace. Azerbaijan is already doing its best for peace and any attempts to present the question in an absolutely not understandable way just exaggerate the situation, just create more obstacles for peace. That's why of course as head of the delegation I am against this kind of current affairs debate.

Thank you very much, Mr President.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr SEYIDOV. I recall to our colleagues that the Bureau is in favour of holding this current affairs debate. I take it that Mr SEYIDOV asks for a vote. So we will now vote on the Bureau's recommendation to hold the current affairs debate: Armenian prisoners of war, other captives and displaced persons.

I remind the Assembly that the decision requires a simple majority. Members present in the chamber should use the hemicycle voting system, members participating remotely should use the remote voting system. Just to be clear again, those who are in favor of holding the current affairs debate should vote "Yes". Those who oppose holding this current affairs debate should vote "No".

The vote is open. Please vote.

The vote is closed. Can we have the results, please?

Compiling in progress. It's a bit like the Eurovision song festival, right?

And the votes are: 93 colleagues have voted in favor, 21 have voted against, and 18 abstentions.

Therefore the current affairs debate is accepted.

The first speaker I have been informed would be Mr Alain MILON.

Thank you for this.

Colleagues, let's now go to the next item of business which is the adoption of the agenda for the second part of the 2021 ordinary session: Document 15241 provision 2. The draft agenda submitted for the Assembly's approval was drawn up by the Bureau on 18 March 2021 and it was updated last Friday.

I remind you that we have just agreed to hold two urgent affairs debates and two current affairs debates.

It is proposed that the current affairs... I will come to you in a moment, please. I would appreciate not getting cut off in the middle of when I'm trying to inform our colleagues.

So I remind you that we have just agreed to hold two urgent affairs debates and two current affairs debates. It is proposed that the current affairs debates take place on Tuesday morning and Tuesday afternoon and that the urgent procedure debates will take place on Thursday as set out in the draft agenda.

I would also would like to draw your attention to the extension of the Tuesday afternoon sitting which will now last, if I understand it well, from 2 to 6 in the afternoon.

And finally, in view of the large number of registered speakers, and in order to allow as many of them as possible to speak, the Bureau asks rapporteurs to limit their speaking time to 7 minutes to present a report and 3 minutes to reply to the debate.

Before accepting the agenda, I have a request for the floor. You have the floor.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Merci, le President.

I'm very sorry. I tried to raise my hand but it was not visible. I try to follow the rules of procedure all the time.

My point of order was concerning the application of the Ukrainian delegation for one of the topics of the current debate which was called "Russian threat to the pursuit of peace in Europe".

We do not intend to put it to a vote. The Bureau has taken a decision. But I would like to take this opportunity for the Assembly to hear that currently the Russian troops, over 100,000 soldiers, are surrounding the borders of Ukraine and the ceasefire was broken. So it's not a threat only to Ukrainian territory, Ukrainian independence...

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): I do apologise for interrupting you, but in a point of order we do not go into the substance. However I believe that whatever you have to say is important.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Absolutely, dear chair, I just wanted to take this opportunity to ask colleagues to sign a statement instead of this debate.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): With all due respect. I mean, we're having a very charged session. I understand why you asked for the floor, but please stick to what we are used to doing and which is within the rules. When you ask for the floor for a point of order, it has to be on a point of order. You will have ample occasions in other debates maybe also in the sidelines to raise these issues, you and anyone else. But please refrain, dear colleagues, from abusing of points of order to make a political statement.

Having said this is there any remark as to the draft agenda?

No. Then the agenda is agreed upon.

As I said, COVID-19 just is something that makes us a little bit more nervous. I understand that, so please settle down, and let's have a continued good meeting.

Now we have the adoption of the minutes of proceedings of the Standing Committee. The minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee in Strasbourg on 19 March 2021 has been distributed. This is a per 2021 PV01, I mean I'm just reading what's on my paper here, I don't really understand it, but okay.

I invite the Assembly to take note of these minutes.

Any remark?

No? Good.

Then we come to the next item on the agenda, which is a debate on the progress report of the Bureau of the Assembly and Standing Committee, Document 15263 and addendum 1 and 2, which will be presented by Mr Aleksander POCIEJ.

The debate must conclude by 12:30 because at 12:30 we will hold the ceremony on the Václav Havel Human Rights Award. I hope that you will stay on board for this ceremony.

I will continue, then, this afternoon at 5:00 p.m. Is that correct? After we hear from the President of the Republic of Moldova at 4:00 p.m.

May I call Mr Aleksander POCIEJ to present the progress report?

I don't know whether you are in the house. You are. You have seven minutes to present your report. Then, we'll have a further three minutes to reply to the debate at the end.

Mister Aleksander POCIEJ, you have the floor.

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

If you will allow me, I will remain seated. Speaking with a mask on is already no fun, but if I remain standing, it could end badly.

Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to present to you the latest progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee of our Assembly, covering the period from January to April 2021. I will not go into detail about all the activities in the report, but will concentrate on the main actions and the five political priorities.

The first priority was, of course, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of democracy and the functioning of our Assembly. The virus has changed our habits and lifestyles and has had an impact on the functioning of our democratic institutions. Thanks to new technologies, such as video-conferencing, parliaments have been able to adapt and continue to exercise their legislative and oversight role. This is also the case for our Assembly, which plays an essential role in Europe in defending and promoting its values, democracy, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. I would like to pay tribute to our President, our Secretary General and all the people in the Parliamentary Assembly who have helped to organise this session in a hybrid format. The Assembly was not confining democracy but keeping it alive, even in the midst of a pandemic.

The second priority is the Navalny case. I will speak here about the poisoning of the political opponent Alexei Navalny, and then about his arrest and detention in a penitentiary in inhumane conditions, and about concerns about his health. We must be demanding of Russia to remind it of its international commitments, particularly under the European Convention on Human Rights, and demand the immediate and unconditional release of Alexei Navalny.

The third priority will concern the worrying developments in Turkey, of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, including the arrest of several opposition MPs and his withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. This subject has given rise to several reports and debates in our Assembly. Here too, as parliamentarians who are members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we must call on the authorities in Ankara to respect international conventions and the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

The fourth priority is the situation in Belarus and the repression by the authorities following the demonstrations by citizens challenging the election of President Lukashenko under dubious conditions. We call on the Belarusian authorities to immediately release the thousands of people arrested following these demonstrations and to engage in a genuine dialogue with the opposition.

The fifth and final priority concerns the situation of Armenian prisoners following the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On 1 February this year, the Bureau of our Assembly received a letter from the Chairman of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on the basis of a report on the lack of co-operation from the Azerbaijani authorities regarding the situation of political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

I could also mention many other activities carried out by the Bureau and the Standing Committee, including the election observation missions to Bulgaria and those planned for Albania and Palestine. But I will not go into too much detail: you will find the full summary in the written report.

I thank you for your attention.

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

To start the debate I've got my list in front of me. I will first call on Ms Petra BAYR. Spot 74. Last time I didn't see you were here so I again apologise. You have the floor.

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

I would like to tackle three issues, starting with the Istanbul Convention. Aleksander POCIEJ already mentioned it, which is really of great concern as I am considering that a kind of proxy war is taken place at the moment and is shaped by mere ideology and intentional misunderstanding of the term "gender". Let me clarify and demystify this concept of gender. To do that, allow me to quote the famous and landmark philosopher David Bowie. I quote: "Gender is between your ears not between your legs".

The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, Turkey already has done that unlawfully, in my understanding. It will go into effect in by June, and Poland is debating about it currently in the parliament. This has, for sure, only one single result which is to weaken the position of women who are victims of gender-based violence or of domestic violence. No country ought to have an interest to get out in the end. So, please, I really ask you to rethink these decisions, which have been already taken, or which are in the process of being taken. I also want to encourage all those countries who have already signed the Convention to ratify it. Those who haven't signed it so far, please also to sign it.

The second issue I would like to tackle is the PACE representation of different institutions. We had a document on that in several Bureau meetings. The very first draft of the list had a ridiculously low number of women. I'm really very happy that we agreed to put the list back to all the Committees so that all the Committees would reconsider the nomination of their representatives. Now it is much better, indeed, but we still will not win a prize with this list, to be honest.

That brings me to my first third and last point. I have to hope that in the course of this year, we will change the rules of procedure concerning gender representation, both in the Assembly and in relating institutions, in a way that the rules will be unambitious and assist our Assembly to mirror the composition of our constituencies. Ms Nicole TRISSE is the rapporteur in the Committee of Rules of Procedure. I wish her much energy for this important work, which is not more or less than the fundament of a balanced policy representing diverse experiences, knowledge, and needs we have, our constituents have. I think that's a policy we really should urge for.

Thank you.

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

Second on the list and probably we will be able to have two more, including Mr Andreas NICK, because we have to start sharp at 12:30 p.m. with the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize Ceremony. But please note that after the President of Moldova we will continue this debate at 5 p.m. So I now give the floor for three minutes to Mr Andreas NICK, who is at spot 393, I've been told.

Andreas, you have the floor.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, on behalf of EPP/CD): Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by reminding you again of the sad news that Ms Dame Cheryl GILLAN, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, tragically passed away at Easter. As First Vice-Chairperson of that Committee, I would like to say a few words in memory of Cheryl. I had the opportunity to work very closely with her from the beginning of last year and also taking her place on many occasions during her illness, especially in recent months. None of us would have guessed, however, that she would pass away so soon.

I would like to follow up on this by thanking the rapporteur: we held our first hybrid meeting here again in January, under difficult conditions caused by the Covid pandemic, and we have continued the intensive work in our committees over the past few months, and we are continuing to do so now, no matter how challenging.

I believe it is a central issue, not only for us here in the Council of Europe, but also for all our member states, to demonstrate that liberal democracies, states governed by the rule of law, respect human rights, and protect our citizens better than others under the challenge of a pandemic, and uphold rights, even in difficult circumstances.

Mr President, Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen, in the agenda for this part-session, we are again seeing issues of enforcement of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, an issue central to our political debate. We have just scheduled two extra debates on this issue for Thursday with regard to important member states, the Russian Federation and Turkey.

Ladies and gentlemen, we will not be able to resolve everything here in this Assembly, but the question of enforcement of the judgments of the ECtHR is one of the main obligations for the Member States in the Council of Europe and we must pay attention to that. Secondly, because we have also heard reports on the election of judges, we must also pay careful attention to the integrity of the people involved in the European Court of Justice and the judges elected. That is why it is essential that the pre-selection procedure for the proposals made to us by the Member States also meets the necessary procedural requirements.

Let me conclude by saying once again, as head of the German delegation, that we are of course a little sad that the German Presidency is being made somewhat more difficult by the conditions of the pandemic, but we are nevertheless pleased and very grateful that we have been able to set some priorities in terms of political priorities, particularly as regards enforcement of judgments, but also on other issues. Tomorrow, Chancellor Angela Merkel will speak to us – it is also the 70th anniversary of Germany's membership of the Council of Europe, always a date that is a particular cause for joy and gratitude for us in Germany. The Council of Europe was the first institution to readmit the country to the international community after 1945.

Together with the German Ambassador, I would like to invite you to an exhibition in the lobby on 70 years of German membership – I would be pleased if you could have a look over the next few days.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We still have time for one more speaker, Mr Jacques MAIRE. You have three minutes, then we will continue with the ceremony.

The debate on this report will continue at 5 p.m. this afternoon.

Jacques, you have the floor.

Mr Jacques MAIRE (France, on behalf of ALDE): I am delighted to have the opportunity to conclude this morning on this subject.

I believe that what is very important, indeed, in what our colleague Mr Aleksander POCIEJ has said, are these five important axes. What has not been addressed in the report but I would like to stress is the importance of your trips, both to Moscow and to Ankara. You did so with the agreement of all the groups. I would like to emphasise the importance of your visits to Moscow and Ankara, which you did with the agreement of all the groups, and I would like to repeat what our colleague Mr Samad SEYIDOV said earlier. It is not a question of negotiating our principles, our values and the application of the European Court's decision. It is clear that with COVID-19, human relations being absolutely impossible, walls can only go up when we do not talk. I really hope that it will be possible to take the same approach with Poland, with which we also have difficulties, as we did very recently with these two other countries.

I just wanted to say very quickly that, among the very important issues that have been raised, Belarus does pose a particular difficulty for us. It is very important that this dialogue takes place. It is difficult for them to be members, and that is why we are really calling for our fellow rapporteur on the subject, Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN, to go to Belarus not just to talk about that country, but also to talk with it.

I would also like to say a few words about the announcement of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: it was all the more unfortunate and painful because it was made practically on the day of our last current affairs debate. It was perceived, frankly, by us as a real provocation. I think that your mission, once again, will make it possible - I am sure - for Turkey to avoid extremely strong, even definitive, measures being taken against it. I think that it is in the particular interest of the Turkish Government, but also of the Turkish population, men and women, to ensure that these guarantees are fully consolidated.

Finally, I would like to express my concern about the renewed tension on the border between Russia and Ukraine. We do not have the time here for a current affairs debate on the subject, but it is nevertheless a matter of great concern, which is growing day by day. From this point of view, we call for a declaration to be signed by as many people as possible.

I will end, of course, by mentioning the subject of the week: the situation of Alexei Navalny, which we find absolutely unacceptable. The state of his health is deteriorating day by day. I am sure that this subject will be considered in detail during our session, but I thought it was important to mention it again here.

Thank you very much.

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

We will now move on to the Václav Havel Prize ceremony.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): There is a question for a point of order. We will take that at the start of the afternoon, because we really have to stick to the timing for this very important prize. So after the President of Moldova, we will take this point of order on board.

So colleagues, I declare open the ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

Before inviting you to watch a short video on the prize, I should like to welcome our three shortlisted nominees. We are living through unusual times, and due to the ongoing crisis, this is going to be the first, and we sincerely hope the only, time this ceremony takes place online.

However, I'm very happy that the nominees can join us remotely and connect with those of us in Strasbourg, and fellow colleagues, parliamentarians in the 47 member states who have opted to attend remotely

For us to be able to see the nominees I will invite them now to push the button request to speak so that they can appear on the screen.

Please, request the floor. Despina, if you can see how we can do this. We have, voilà, one, two... please, request the floor.

Okay, let's hope that it all works.

Madame Lusenge, voilà. So now we have still a third one that we need to welcome. Where is the third one?

So, we're trying to get this connection done because this time we went quite far away in some instances in order to get everyone on board.

Can I ask the Drukpa Order Nuns to refresh and ask for the floor again because apparently there's a hiccup here. So, Drukpa nuns, if you can refresh and request the floor again.

It seems to be the case, voilà.

Welcome to all of you and obviously we have the sister of one of the nominees. Very glad to have you all on board, which allows me now to invite all of us present here and remotely and also our three nominees to watch the video.

Please start the video.

Video speaker >> On 10 May 1990, the President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic entered the Assembly chamber of the Council of Europe. It was an emotional Parliamentary Assembly that welcomed the former political dissident, the figurehead of the Velvet Revolution. 1989 brought an end to the Communist Regime. In his welcoming address the Assembly President paid tribute to the courage of one of the key figures of the opposition in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic: "And you, Mr President, are a symbol of the victory of freedom over totalitarianism."

In his speech the philosopher president and atypical politician spoke of his years of opposition when dreams took the place of hope. "Everything seems to point to the fact that we should be not be afraid of dreaming of what seems impossible, if we want something impossible to become a fact and a reality. Without dreaming of a better Europe, we shall never be able to build it".

Following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which marked the end of the liberalisation process of the Prague Spring, Václav Havel remained faithful to his convictions. As chairperson of the Circle of Independent Writers, his commitment led to the banning of his plays. The international community quickly became aware of this dissident. In 1977, Václav Havel co-founded Charter 77, an organisation defending human rights in Czechoslovakia. Because of his activities he was imprisoned on three occasions, for almost five years. In 1989 the crowd spontaneously placed Václav Havel at the head of the Civic Forum, an association uniting opposition movements. He became a key figure in the Velvet Revolution.

Almost a quarter of a century later, in March 2013, the prize was launched in Prague to honour what Václav Havel was and what he did. Since then the prize is awarded each year by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, in partnership with the Václav Havel Library and the Charter 77 foundation, to reward outstanding civil society action in the defence of human rights.

For the eighth edition of the prize, the three candidates shortlisted are: Loujain Alhathloul, the prominent women's rights activist known for defying the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia and for opposing the Saudi male guardianship system; the Nuns of the Drukpa Order, a group of young Buddhist nuns promoting gender equality, environmental sustainability, and intercultural tolerance in their home villages in the Himalayas, they are known for their delivery of supplies after an earthquake struck Kathmandu in 2015; and Julienne Lusenge, a Congolese human rights activist who has been documenting sexual abuse and acts of violence against women in Congo. She was instrumental in obtaining convictions of perpetrators who enlisted child soldiers and collected evidence of sexual slavery.

In 1990, Mr Havel spoke in Strasbourg of the immense strength embodied by the ideals of the Council of Europe. Referring to the organisation's emblem, he said that to him the 12 stars did not express the idea that the Council of Europe would succeed in building a heaven on earth, as there would never be a heaven on earth. "In my opinion these 12 stars are a reminder that the world can become a better place if we have the courage to raise our eyes to the stars"

The Václav Havel Human Rights Prize pays tribute to this distinguished European, and it also pays tribute to all those who, through their determined and tireless work, bring us closer to the ideal of a better world.

Prize Award Ceremony: Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

Lina Alhathloul (Saudi Arabia, on behalf of Loujain Alhathloul, Prize-winner of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): Thank you very much.

So first of all, I just want to say that I deeply respect the Kung Fu Nuns and Julienne Lusenge's work and now I go on with my speech.

So, good afternoon everyone. I'm Lina, and I'm speaking today on behalf of my whole family, as Loujain cannot be present to thank you herself.

Loujain cannot be present because, although she's been released from prison, she is still silenced inside the country. My sister Loujain spent a thousand and one days in prison. Her crime: fighting for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Loujain sacrificed herself to fight for a better life for Saudi women. She campaigned for our right to drive, to protect abused women and to end the male guardianship system. Because of her activism, Loujain was kidnapped, deprived of finishing her studies, illegally imprisoned, brutally tortured, put in solitary confinement for months and now, sentenced as a terrorist.

For years now, the Saudi regime has been trying to tarnish her image, to erase any support and to make her forgotten. But the more time passes, the more Loujain proves to the world how incredibly brave, resilient and attached to her values she is. She has now become a symbol of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. A symbol because there are thousands of detainees going through what she has been through. But silence has become the norm in our country. A police state that will even put families of detainees under a travel ban and force them into silence. Thankfully, some of us are out of the country and free to speak. Free to become Loujain's silenced voice. But our voice alone is not enough, the world needs to recognise her sacrifices and to know who Loujain is.

We would therefore like to thank the Václav Havel awards committee for choosing Loujain this year. International support is the only way we can expose injustices and protect the victims. We are truly honoured by your support. Thank you for giving us strength to continue the fight.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much for these words, and above all for the courage of your sister and her commitment in defending the cause of human rights and women's rights.

Thank you very much for having delivered these kind and important words on behalf of your sister Loujain.

Ladies and gentlemen this concludes our ceremony.

Thank you for having joined us.

Dear colleagues, now I conclude this ceremony.

I was very happy to have all three of you on screen.

Congratulations obviously to Loujain who has been awarded the Vaclav Havel prize, but as I said in the beginning, you all deserve it.

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

This concludes our ceremony.

We will reconvene at 4 p.m. with the President of Moldova.

I hope to see all of you after Covid-19: whether in Saudi Arabia, in Congo or with the Kung Fu nuns, I will be very glad to be able to meet you in person.

Thank you for being here and thank you for all the work you are doing.

Next sitting at 16:00