

Provisional edition

Tuesday 20 April 2021, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of sitting num 10

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Please be seated.

Please be seated colleagues.

The photos are done I hope.

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

I would like to ask you, with all my kindness, to sit down, please.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues the sitting is open.

I just wanted to make a small remark at the start.

I've seen yesterday that at some point of time colleagues asked for the floor for a point of order. May I remind everyone that a point of order is on procedural questions and that it is not some kind of an opportunity to have a political statement.

So if any one of the colleagues here or online wishes to have a point of order the moment they go into substantial issues, with all due respect, I will let's say cut the mic. It will only make us lose time.

Voilà. Our new Secretary General has told me that I have to be severe.

Right? Voilà.

I always listen to the Secretary General.

Dear colleagues, the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights this morning.

The agenda calls for the election of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights in respect to Belgium.

The list of candidates and biographical notices are to be found in Documents 15243 and 15263 Amendment 2.

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.

These elections will take place by individual electronic secret ballot voting between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. today. So everyone is going to be voting in the same fashion. All of you will be voting by individual electronic secret ballot.

Now each political group has appointed a teller according to the rules. The tellers are: Ms Petra BAYR, Mr Sergiy VLASENKO, Mr Damien COTTIER, Ms Feleknas UCA and Mr Alberto RIBOLLA.

I will announce the results of the election at this afternoon's sitting.

For this first ballot an absolute majority of the votes is required. If a second round has to be organised it will take place tomorrow morning.

I will now declare the ballot open, as I've said, between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. today.

Dear colleagues, we now head into the current affairs debate. I do apologise we did lose a few minutes, so it will be a little bit shorter because at 10:00 a.m. sharp we'll start with the allocation of, with the speech of the Bundeschancellor Merkel.

So the first item of business this morning is a current affairs debate on Covid passports or certificates: protection of fundamental rights and legal implications. The debate will last until 10 a.m. sharp and speaking time is limited to three minutes for all members except for the first speaker chosen by the Bureau of the Assembly who is allotted seven minutes.

The debate will therefore end at 10 a.m. sharp.

In the debate I call first now Mr Damien COTTIER.

Mr Damien COTTIER I don't know where you are.

Ok.

You have exactly seven minutes.

The floor is yours.

Current affairs debate: Covid passports or certificates: protection of fundamental rights and legal implications

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear Colleagues,

In the face of the global pandemic of COVID-19, the way out of the crisis is through vaccination. This is being done in stages in the various countries and at a varying pace from one region to another.

In the face of this pandemic, which has led to considerable restrictions on fundamental freedoms everywhere, the project of certificates or "passes" to certify one's vaccination status has gained ground. Although some people, including those in this Assembly, are opposed to such a document, it is clear that many states are planning to use it.

There are at least two dimensions to this prospect: an international dimension relating above all to the possibility of travel - and here the concept of an international vaccination certificate is basically not new - and the national dimension, since it is sometimes envisaged that this certificate will be used to enable vaccinated persons to benefit from alleviations in relation to restrictions on freedoms.

These prospects offer opportunities: the lifting of restrictions on fundamental rights when they are no longer justified by public health considerations for certain segments of the population is, in itself, an important and welcome prospect.

However, the prospect of a vaccine certificate also raises many questions, both ethical and legal - important questions, sensitive questions. Let me mention a few of them, Mr President.

In many places, the possibility of being vaccinated is still not based on an individual choice, but on the possibility of access to vaccines which, for public health reasons, are therefore reserved as a priority for certain categories of the population. There is therefore a risk of discrimination. This is all the more true

because, if we are not careful, the vaccinated population group can benefit from a double advantage: increased protection for its health but also regained access to individual freedoms and benefits that remain limited for other groups. If we are not careful, there is a risk of a two-tier society.

We must therefore ensure that the criteria for choice are objective, that they are linked to public health and that we do not vaccinate groups of a certain origin, religion or sexual orientation more slowly, for example. For instance, we must check that the basis for decisions is not arbitrary. We also have to watch out for the risk of stigmatization of non-vaccinated groups.

The question of access to the services of the state and of institutions that perform state tasks - think of transport or education, for example - should remain guaranteed.

The question of access to services provided by private providers is more complex, since private economic actors enjoy, in principle, fairly broad economic and contractual freedom. However, here too, in certain cases, access to these services may deserve a degree of protection, particularly when it comes to access to essential goods or services, such as the purchase of food.

Important issues also arise in relation to data protection - in particular health data which are worthy of special protection. The cashier in a supermarket or the barkeeper should not know about and store data about my health.

Furthermore, the risk of a two-tier society that I mentioned will also increase the risks of falsification of certificates or the development of parallel and clandestine markets for vaccines.

As we can see, the risks are numerous and complex. And important questions are open, of an ethical and legal nature, as I said.

We must not, of course, paint a black picture. We must not, Mr President, see the glass as half full. We must be pleased with the gradual return of our freedoms, and we must not focus solely on the negative aspects of such a system. We must, however, be aware of the potential abuses and ensure that the necessary precautions are taken. It will therefore be necessary for states to address the issues of proportionality, lawfulness and purpose in an appropriate manner. Data security will also have to be ensured.

As for harmonization between countries, while this is desirable for the international dimension of the certificate, its recognition and security, it must not diminish its degree of protection.

An important aspect will be to treat in a similar way are the different means that lead to immunity or to the absence of transmission risk. In addition to vaccination, consideration should also be given to those who have recovered, if they have subsequent immunity, and to those who have recently tested negative. In German, the "3 Gs" are used to refer to these additional statuses: *geimpft*, *geheilt*, *getestet*.

Finally, care must be taken not to create technological barriers by forcing the use of a smartphone for this certificate. Access to paper must remain possible for people who wish to do so because they fear the use of their digital data or because they are elderly or disabled and cannot, or do not know how to, use a mobile phone well enough.

The Secretary General, Mr President, was right to recall in an information document on 31 March the obligations of states in this context with regard to several conventions: the European Convention on Human Rights, of course, but also the Social Charter, Conventions 108 and 108+, the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime and the MEDICRIME Convention. The Secretary General's important document invites states to use the Council of Europe's conventions and principles as a compass in this matter.

These issues will be less intense, of course, if vaccination campaigns are in full swing and all categories of the population have rapid access and herd immunity is created. However, if the phenomenon lasts longer and new variants are added to the mix, then these questions will become particularly acute.

National parliaments and this House have a role to play, Mr President, in ensuring that the states - and the European Union - deal with these issues and strike the right balance.

It is therefore fortunate that we are having this debate today. It is also desirable that a report be submitted to the Assembly, which is why we have tabled Draft resolution 15257, which will make it possible, on the basis of a report that I will have the honour of drawing up, to make findings and recommendations.

I thank you.

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

We will now begin the list of speakers.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We now go on the speakers list.

First we will have the speakers on behalf of the political groups and then the other colleagues who will inscribe themselves.

We will start with Ms Maria JUFEREVA from ALDE, who will be followed by Mr John HOWELL.

Maria, now you have the floor. Three minutes, please.

Ms Maria JUFEREVA-SKURATOVSKI (Estonia, on behalf of ALDE): Thank you.

We have to remind ourselves that vaccine passports are nothing new. We have been using them for travelling internationally for a long time already. However, we have come to a point where a passport is not only for travelling anymore, but it is also considered for access to our everyday services. In Israel, for example, vaccinated people are already using an app on entry to gyms, pools and cultural venues. The particular question in respect of Covid-passes concerns the mutual recognition of such passes worldwide, and not only within the European Union. Another particular question raises in terms of danger of discrimination for those countries, which do not have yet enough access to COVID-19 vaccination. We have to keep in mind all these issues to ensure equality.

This brings us to the question of non-discrimination in access to public, parapublic and private services by people who cannot, do not want for different reasons or will not be vaccinated. We may come to face a really complicated situation when people who refuse to or cannot be vaccinated demand that all services and freedoms be guaranteed to them as well. At the same time, we have to ensure the protection of personal data while implementing the use of Covid-passes, in order that such certificates would not be turned into an additional surveillance measure.

As an Estonian citizen, I am a firm believer in digital solutions. Signing documents electronically and voting online are pillar stones of our society. So I have no doubt that there is a solution that will help us travel and access vital services while keeping health risks at a low level and also protecting our sensitive data. But I think people who want to use paper should not be forced to use digital tools in this case, and this solution also should be available for them.

The European Commission has presented a proposal to create a Digital Green Certificate to facilitate the safe free movement of citizens in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. A Digital Green Certificate will act as digital proof that a person has been vaccinated against COVID-19, received a negative test result or recovered from COVID-19. The Certificate will be free and accessible either digitally or via paper format. It will come with a QR-code with a digital signature to protect it against falsification and it will contain necessary key information.

We should support fast proceedings and implementation of a digital certificate of vaccination in order to return to normality. However, in the same way we must ensure that the basic freedoms of citizens and human rights are not violated because of insufficient access to vaccination.

We need to offer our citizens an effective and transparent digital solution that will meet all necessary requirements in respect of basic human rights and freedoms. At the same time, governments have to continue with the necessary steps to stop the further spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

We will now go to Mr John HOWELL, who will be followed by Mr Andrej HUNKO

John, you have floor.

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, on behalf of EC/DA): Let me say at the beginning, the passports of this type need to be looked at from two angles. First, for international travel and secondly, for domestic usage in our own countries. The former -the international aspect of it- is largely outside our control, in that whatever

we may want to do, if other countries want to see us have a passport, we will have to follow if we want to travel to those countries. This is no different to inoculation against yellow fever, for example, and I recall, in the past, in my numerous visits to Nigeria, for example, that I still have an arm that is full of all sorts of inoculations because I wanted to travel there.

In the case of the latter, though, I can see, in essence, in principle, I can see no difference between requiring a driving licence to drive a car, and a health certificate for Covid. The idea that somehow this automatically creates a two-tier Europe, I don't believe is actually true. It depends on what such passports are used for and when they are introduced: for example, if they are introduced fairly early on before a large number of the population has been inoculated. Too early to answer now, particularly in view of the work that we are doing.

Now a range of options are being considered to encourage people to receive the the Covid-19 vaccine. And what we need is to make sure that we have a very good review of the situation. What we need is a review into whether Covid-status certification could play a role in opening up our economies and reducing the restrictions on social contact and improving safety.

Of course, Covid-status certificates raise complex ethical and discriminatory issues that would need to be worked through. And this is something that I know that we are all conscious of and I welcome the fact that we are considering these issues, but we also need to bring in clinical and ethical experts, as well as businesses and their representative organisations. And indeed, we should not forget the members of the public as well. And certainly in the UK, such a call for evidence from the public has generated over 50,000 responses, and I urge you to look at this situation as well.

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

We will now move on to Mr Andrej HUNKO who will be followed by Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE.

Andrej, you have the floor.

Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, on behalf of UEL): Thank you, Mister President,

Can you hear me?

All good.

Okay, thank you very much, Mister President,

Yes, this is a very important debate we are having here. I would like to start by saying that vaccination is, of course, one way out of the pandemic. We can already see in some countries where vaccination is very far advanced that the pandemic seems to have been overcome, for example in Israel or in Gibraltar.

But we have a problem: the distribution of vaccines in Europe and worldwide is very uneven. That, of course, can also lead to increased inequalities if the vaccination card - if rights are snapped onto it.

I would like to remind you of our resolution from the end of January, where we decided that vaccination must be voluntary, that it must not lead to discrimination and that a vaccination passport may then only be used for medical purposes.

I want to remind that the Secretary General, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ sent to the member States a document on 31 March, calling on all 47 member States that here the Convention and rights must be respected.

The Emergency Committee of the World Health Organisation also warned a few days ago, particularly in view of the unequal distribution of vaccination, that by linking certain rights, for example the right to travel, this inequality could be exacerbated.

I believe it is important that maximum data economy be exercised when collecting data for such vaccination cards and that data protection not be circumvented. I think it is important that not only the vaccination status - if I want to travel, for example - should be established, but also the possibility of antibodies or even that travel should be made possible by means of tests, as is already partly the case today. Basically, we have an extreme inequality within Europe as far as vaccination is concerned. This must be overcome and also worldwide.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Now we come to Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE, who will be followed by Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA.

Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE, you have the floor.

Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE (Turkey, on behalf of SOC): Mr President,

Lockdowns or Covid passes? Public health or private rights?

The truth is these questions should not be either/or questions, they should actually be both-and statements. Both lockdowns and Covid passes may infringe certain fundamental rights, both bear the risk of being discriminatory in a sense. Lockdowns will treat everybody as infectious and risky and, unless accompanied by strong welfare state support and direct income transfers, they lead to significant erosion and socio-economic inequality. Covid passes will discriminate against those who are unable to or unfit to be vaccinated.

Therefore, whichever road we take, we have to ensure a framework that protects human rights and ensures non-discrimination.

Both lockdowns and Covid passes can only be effective in the long run if an inclusive and comprehensive vaccination program is achieved. This should be the core of our discussion. Every single individual (and globally every single individual) should be vaccinated and nobody should be left out. If not, the need for lockdowns will be forever. If not, Covid passes will become discriminatory instruments from the outset and discriminatory based on socioeconomic status, where the rich are vaccinated, both as individuals or as countries, while the poor await. Discriminatory based on age, where seniors are vaccinated and the young await, where discrimination based on gender will be prevalent, where pregnant women will not be immunized.

So, given the inequalities in vaccination, Covid passes that rely on vaccinations will only regenerate further inequalities. So the core issue we should be discussing is how to ensure a fair, equitable and comprehensive global vaccination program. Not a discussion of whether we prefer lockdowns or Covid passes. We have to guarantee vaccinations for everybody.

The quantity of vaccines that are demanded is actually easily foreseen. So the question is supplying sufficient vaccinations. And here I'd like to remind that we actually agreed as an assembly that vaccinations should be accepted as public goods. We have to revisit patent policies that actually hinder vaccination supply. We have to increase the number of production sites and facilities globally. And once globally fair and equitable vaccination is achieved, then Covid passes will not be discriminatory or not even a necessity at all.

And we have to ensure that scientific evidence drives this decision making process. Evidence regarding the extent of immunity provided by vaccination, whether the vaccines are protective against new virus variants, whether antibody titer tests should be required. And science should not be the only guiding force, but we should also have transparency as our governance motto and we should ensure privacy is well protected.

Covid passes will include biometric and health data, and this is data that should be owned by individuals, not by monopolies or states.

In ending, we do not face a choice between protecting public health and securing human rights. We should aim for both with balance and proportionality. We should ensure equitable and fair vaccination unless we wish to have discrimination. We should aim to achieve all.

Thank you very much.

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

We now move to Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, after whom we will go into the list of other speakers. The first on that list is Mr Vladimir KRUGLYI.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, you have the floor.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, on behalf of EPP/CD): *Merci Président,*

Chers collègues,

I would like to start my speech with words of gratitude to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejčinović Burić, who issued guidelines recently to governments to safeguard human rights using such certification or immunisation. This particular document highlights the relevant human rights standards for

addressing the issues of vaccine passports and underlines the importance of stepping up efforts for all of us to produce and administer vaccines in an equal manner, in line with the requirements of the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine – called the Oviedo Convention – so that restrictions on individual freedoms can gradually be reviewed as broad immunity in achieving among all populations.

Moreover, in terms of ethics, one of the main issues in the order of vaccination in the event of a shortage of vaccines and logistical constraints. This very Convention, which is basically the only legal binding instrument at international level in this field, requires that member States, for instance, of the Council of Europe, take measures to provide equitable access of healthcare, to provide appropriate quality, taking into account health needs and available resources of the countries. And this priority is to provide to health and social care workers, at the first place, and limit the impact of COVID-19 on the functioning of health and social care system. But due to uneven, excessive vaccine, vaccination passports can really become a tool for violation of the human rights.

On the other hand, the possible use of vaccination certificates, as well as immunisation data, for the purpose other than strictly medical, for example, to give individual exclusive accesses to rights, services or public places, raises numerous human rights questions. It should be considered with the utmost caution. This is why many states and organisations are currently shifting from idea of passports to certificates. A vaccination certificate is a medical document that will make travel safer but not create privileges for their owners. Digital solutions must be implemented and therefore, in addition, it is important that there are unified approaches and know the need to establish a separate application, for example, Denmark, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom have already declared about the readiness to use the e-health system for vaccination certificates. The e-health system optimises the use of vaccine and also helps make a necessary management decision.

Dear friends, we now thank all medical workers who fight for millions of lives across Europe today, tomorrow and every day. Thank you, dear colleagues. *Merci le Président.*

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

We now head into the list of speakers.

First on my list is Mr Vladimir KRUGLYI, who will be followed by Mr Claude KERN.

Mr Vladimir KRUGLYI you have the floor.

Mr Vladimir KRUGLYI (Russian Federation, NR)*: Mr President,

Dear Colleagues,

This subject of the so called COVID passports is a very sensitive one for many citizens. Any decisions must be taken on the basis of non-discrimination and without any politicisation. I would like to remind you that in the January session we adopted an amendment to a resolution that in fact was opposed to introducing such passports.

Now in most cases this is a document with a QR code that contains medical information about the type of vaccine, the time of vaccination and the presence or absence of a negative reaction. The passport can be provided to those who have been vaccinated or to individuals who have the anti-bodies because they have the disease. Yet, there won't be a full verification of presence of anti-bodies in all vaccinated individuals.

Those in favour of the passport are putting an equality sign between the fact of being vaccinated and the presence in the individual of immunity against COVID-19. It's just not true. As we all know, at least 10% of individuals that have been vaccinated do not develop immunity. In some studies that 10% figure goes up to 30%.

A second important point is that at the present time there are no clear indications as to the time for which such passports will be provided because the length of the immunity is very individual. In some individuals they're immune for only one or two months according to studies.

Dear colleagues, the main objective of such passports would be to limit the transmission of the coronavirus infections. The passports don't fulfil that, however. This would limit travelling throughout countries of individuals who don't have such a passport, and that would limit the right of individuals who cannot receive such a passport for reasons which are beyond their control. There can be individuals who have medical counter-indications to be vaccinated. There is also the problem of insufficiency of vaccines. Some citizens can't receive the passport because they simply can't be vaccinated. There is no access to vaccines.

It's significant also that the COVID passport would be given only to individuals who have been vaccinated with a vaccine that has been approved in the European Union. Very often, however, individuals don't have the possibility to choose the vaccination that they will receive.

All of these factors can be perceived as violations of human rights. From my point of view, then, we should not support the introduction of COVID passports.

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

I now call Mr Claude KERN, followed by Mr Luís LEITE RAMOS.

Claude, you have the floor.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on free movement have already been put in place between member states within the European Union. For example, travellers are required to take various types of proof such as medical certificates or negative test results. Some people are now proposing that this system be extended to all member states to allow access to restaurants, sports facilities or museums, for example. This is already the case in Israel, where a certificate can be issued if you have been vaccinated or have recovered from a SARS-CoV-2 infection.

It will be necessary to continue the fight against the virus in the coming months and, unfortunately, some restrictions may still be necessary. Should vaccination or recovery from infection with the virus then be a condition for lifting the restrictions? This would, in effect, mean making vaccination compulsory in order to carry out many activities.

This raises several questions. Imposing vaccination violates the rights and freedoms of the individual, in particular the right to physical integrity, which comes under the right to respect for private and family life guaranteed by Article 8 of our Convention. Similarly, Article 5 of the Oviedo Convention stipulates that any intervention in the health field may only be carried out after the person concerned has given his or her free and informed consent. Moreover, within the European Union, there is no obligation to vaccinate in 15 member states. When the European Court of Human Rights is called upon to rule on a vaccination obligation, it assesses the situation *in concreto*. Taking into account the principle of proportionality, the Court assesses the seriousness of the disease, the side effects of the vaccines and the consequences of non-vaccination for the complainant.

Therefore, it seems to me impossible to legally compel citizens to be vaccinated by restricting their freedom of movement if they do not do so.

Furthermore, it is not known whether vaccination affects contagiousness. A person can be vaccinated and still be infected with the virus. If the vaccine prevents severe forms of the disease, there is no indication today that the vaccinated person cannot spread the virus. Since this scientific uncertainty remains, and in order to guarantee respect for everyone's individual freedoms, no passport or certificate should be issued on the basis of vaccination alone.

For my part, I approve of the choice of the European Commission, which has proposed that the digital green certificate should make it possible to prove either vaccination, or recovery following COVID-19 or a negative test result. This certificate would be intended for use at EU level to facilitate free movement between member states, but it seems to me that it offers prospects that could be of interest to all Council of Europe member states.

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

We now give the floor to Mr Luís LEITE RAMOS.

Luís, you have the floor.

Mr Luís LEITE RAMOS (Portugal, EPP/CD): Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

I am sincerely grateful that we are having this debate on COVID-19 passports or certificates.

As you know, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, which I have the honour of chairing, proposed a topical debate on the same subject, with one small difference: we proposed to look not only at human rights and legal implications, but also at public health.

The fundamental rights concerns are valid and will be addressed by others. It is my duty to remind you of the public health implications, the double entry of vaccination certificates. Firstly, pharmacovigilance, i.e. ensuring that vaccines are safe and effective. Secondly, infection control, or ensuring that international travel does not cause new infections.

On the first objective, pharmacovigilance, the COVID-19 vaccination certificate has already proved invaluable. On the second objective, infection control, the COVID-19 vaccination certificates will be almost useless. The reason is that the vaccines available - thank goodness they are there, do not misunderstand me - are not designed to stop infection but rather to prevent severe forms of disease and death. When a country requires you to be able to prove your yellow fever vaccination, it is not only to protect you from infection but also to protect itself. If you are vaccinated against yellow fever, you will not be able to catch or transmit it. This is not the case with the COVID-19 vaccines available to you.

Although you are less likely to get infected yourself if you are vaccinated and your viral load is lower, there is still a risk of becoming infected. With the new variants, the effectiveness of existing COVID-19 vaccines appears to be decreasing. Even having had a severe infection with the original virus last year does not provide sufficient protection against the P1 variant, for example.

In other words, the use of COVID-19 vaccination certificates, the design of new passports or passes to open up borders to international travel or to allow risky activity during a pandemic are taking us away from our number one public health and infection control goal. All this will prolong the pandemic and lead to more suffering and death.

That is why the World Health Organization is equally opposed. The best way to stop this pandemic is to follow the guidance that the Assembly has given in Resolution 2361. We need international cooperation and coordination to ensure the safe, effective and equitable distribution of vaccines against the virus throughout the world. That is our challenge today.

I thank you for your attention.

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

We now move to Ms Larysa BILOZIR who will be followed by Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE.

Is Larysa in the room? You have the floor.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear Mr President, Dear colleagues,

In March your commission presented a project of Covid passports that will include not only information about vaccines but also information about past illness and negative test on Coronavirus, but on the whole Europe has not yet come to consensus. Opponents talk about the possible violation of human rights and suggest not to rush. The World Health Organization does not currently consider vaccinations to be a guarantee of preventing transmission of the virus. Also, in acute shortage of vaccines, the solution can be ultra fast tests of COVID-19 for travel, that can help people to return to normal life.

One thing is clear: vaccination should not be an obligatory condition for visiting certain places, and those who cannot get vaccinated should not face restrictions.

It seems like a good thing that a passport will ensure movement between EU countries and beyond, but the question is will it be possible to reconcile the idea of Covid passports with the right of EU citizens to freedom of movement?

Formally such grounds are found in article 29 of the EU directive on the right of citizens to move, which states that certain epidemic diseases may require the introduction of quarantine measures restricting freedom of movement, but now we are talking not about sick people, they're not the question in this solution. We are only talking about the vaccinated, and vaccinated on the scale of countries and continents.

The idea of using Covid passports in the context of the right to enter the EU is of particular concern. In fact, the realization of any human right is made dependent on equal access to resources. Lack of vaccine when more than 100 world countries still not have access to vaccines against Coronavirus infection.

Just think about it. Only 10 countries have over 75% of available vaccination doses. In the case of implementation of the vaccine passport system they'll be a division of people into groups which will also be subject to unequal treatment. These key groups may include vaccinated people with ranking vaccines to good or bad, healthy or not vaccinated people, the most suspicious group, people who have been ill-ranked by the time frames, patients with chronic diseases who are contra indicated for vaccination.

So there are many hidden pitfalls in whether there will be exceptions to the general rule and an interesting picture emerged caused by the Covid virus. For the sake of fighting some countries are even ready to destroy economy, block social ties, restrict cultural space, and now particularly legalise discrimination through passport.

We shall not forget that international law defines unequal treatment as discrimination. The consistent fight against it is the most important value for democratic Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

We now move to Ms Sena Nur ÇELİK, who will be followed by Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

Sena, you have the floor.

Do we have Sena?

I do not see Sena?

So we will take the following one and come back to Sena afterwards.

Next one on my list is Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK. Yevheniia you've got the floor. You are in the room, I think? There you go.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): Dear Colleagues,

I want to start my speech with a reminder of the role the Assembly played during the flu pandemic of 2008-2009.

The Assembly in particular argued the approach taken by the World Health Organisation in the estimate of the pandemic threshold and medical treatment method. Did the Assembly bring an added value to the process? Yes. Without a doubt. The only point for criticism was that the Assembly entered the game, so to say, too late.

To this end I want to congratulate the colleagues who initiated the most acute current affairs debates for today.

At first sight the COVID passport, a globally recognised certificate, is the only possible precondition to return into living as usual in the globalised world with non-restricted freedom of movement.

In terms of the negotiation process we have to enhance the Assembly's dialogue particularly with the World Health Organisation to ensure the protection of human rights especially for the most vulnerable populations.

People in need of travel because of health conditions and reunions of families shall be among the top priorities. Travel for education, asylum seekers, seasonal workers, the list is far from being exhaustive. The main idea is to delink the vaccination and the issuing of COVID passports or certificates from the notion of money and wealth, being that the individuals or states.

In its legal dimension the debated issue refers to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms signed in Rome in November 1950. The Convention establishes a right to freedom of movement that cannot be restricted but for the prevention of the spread of infectious diseases.

It is necessary to emphasise that the Convention doesn't even allow in principle to limit the freedom of movement to avoid a risk of collapse for the health system, one of the reasons given to justify the lockdowns. The question according to the Convention is simply whether a person poses a threat to public health.

Moreover, the European Court of Human Rights determined in the case of *Enhorn v. Sweden* that the essential criteria, it says, in the lawfulness of the detention of persons for the prevention of the spreading of the infectious diseases are whether the spreading of the infectious disease is dangerous to public health or safety. The detention of a person is in fact the last resort in order to prevent the spreading of the disease because less severe measures have been considered and found to be insufficient to safeguard the public interest. When these criteria are no longer fulfilled, the basis for the deprivation of liberty ceases to exist.

Obviously, mass introduction of the COVID passports and certificates requires the introduction of the new instruments of the international law. Otherwise the mass appeals to the European Court of Human Rights are inevitable.

I want to conclude by expressing the sincere hope that the EU Digital Green Certificate won't become the new paper curtain between the EU and over a dozen of remaining Council of Europe member States where the EU visa regime used to apply.

Thank you very much.

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

We now have Mr Aleksander POCIEJ, who will be followed by our last speaker today, Mr Allal AMRAOUI.

Alex, you are in the room I suppose?

Alex, you've got the floor. There you go.

No, Alex does not want to have the floor. Which gives us a little bit more time for Madam Merkel.

So then we go to our last speaker of this morning who is Mr Allal AMRAOUI from Morocco. We specifically welcome him. You have the floor.

Mr Allal AMRAOUI (Morocco): Thank you, Mr President.

We are living through the greatest ordeal our world has seen in decades, in an increasingly globalised context in the fight against COVID-19. And as the number of people vaccinated and thus immunised increases day by day, the question arises of those certificates and passports that are supposed to allow us to resume normal life within our borders and beyond.

We all aspire to a collective immunity that would allow the restart of sectors of the economy that are currently deeply affected, such as tourism, events, import-export, but also activities as basic as restaurants, cinemas or the entertainment industry.

However, it must be admitted that the definition and the outline of this precious document are still unclear and poorly defined. People who have validated their immunity, especially those who have been vaccinated, are beginning to wonder about their mobility. Will they continue to be subject to travel restrictions? When will they be able to travel abroad? Will host countries allow them to return? These are questions that are being asked with even greater urgency as several countries are already adopting the vaccine passport and as the debate over the vaccine passport continues to rage around the world.

It should be remembered that a certificate of vaccination is not a world first. The International Health Regulations require a certain number of vaccines, as a number of colleagues have pointed out, particularly in tropical areas. At present, we are faced with a new viral disease that poses many problems for humanity. This type of measure, such as this certificate, is entirely legitimate. It is based not only on individual benefit but also on the benefit to the community, that is, to stop the spread of the disease in order to protect ourselves and our fellow human beings.

However, in order to implement such a system, we must first ensure that vaccines are available to everyone. If we start requiring vaccination certificates at a time when vaccines are only available to 5 or 10% of the population, then there will be inequalities, an infringement of freedoms. And in the absence of full access to vaccination by the general public, any possibility of circulation in favour of certificate or green passport holders would be negatively discriminatory to the non-vaccinated, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

Another concern raised by this vaccine passport is the use of personal health data. This data could be used for good or bad purposes, particularly by the Big Pharma majors.

Finally, to succeed in this challenge, all the countries of the world would have to operate, which is far from being the case at the moment.

Thank you for your attention.

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

We come to the end of our current affairs debate.

May I remind you that the Assembly is not asked to decide on any text. However, among demand it might be referred by the Bureau of the Assembly to the responsible Committee for a report.

The next point on the agenda will be the allocation of the address of Ms Angela MERKEL , which will start at 10 o'clock, so we've got a few minutes.

Those who are still outside please come in.

May I also recall each and everyone of you that the voting on the judges has started. We do not see much movement on the voting so please do vote between now and 2 o'clock because this is one of the most important duties that we have as an Assembly, most specifically to decide on the judges of the Court in Strasbourg. I call on each and everyone who hears me now, and also on those who do not, please vote on the judges.

We will reconvene in a couple of minutes when we have connection with Ms Angela MERKEL.

Colleagues, it is 10 o'clock.

Please be seated.

We also welcome our colleagues ambassadors in the room. As you requested you've got your spots so please be seated.

Madam Secretary General, thank you for being here.

We will start in a minute or so.

Please be seated.

Dear colleagues, we have Madam Merkel on the screen.

Chancellor Merkel,

Your Excellency,

All of you present with us today,

Madam Secretary General,

Dear ambassadors,

My good friend Rolf,

German ambassadors,

All our colleagues in the room,

We have more than 100 in the room, or more or less, and more than 120 or 130 online, so it is practically a full house.

Address by Ms Angela MERKEL, Federal Chancellor of Germany

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): I would like to welcome you, Chancellor Angela Merkel, wholeheartedly to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Unfortunately, you cannot be with us physically because of COVID-19.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): However be it remotely, it is obviously an honour to welcome you again to the Parliamentary Assembly.

Indeed, you addressed our assembly in April 2008, where you highlighted its vital contribution towards unity and common understanding in the defence of the principles of democracy, human rights, peace, justice and solidarity.

Indeed, it is only by working together that we can tackle these challenges. It is better, as I said yesterday, it is better to become part of the solution instead of remaining part of the problem, and I have to commend the German presidency under the leadership of your ambassador, because we did have a lot of work done on artificial intelligence and the fight against hate speech, and also on the ongoing reflection on how to bring Europe closer to the people.

And may I remind each and every one that the whole of Europe is not only the European Union, it's a little bit more than that. But we'll get into that tomorrow with Mr David SASSOLI.

Now as Germany, Madam Merkel, prepares to celebrate its 70th anniversary of membership of the Council of Europe, we applaud its commitment and contribution to strengthening our fundamental values, our organisation, and we really look forward to hearing your vision.

Just for practical reasons, we will have your address after which we will have questions: first of all by the five political leaders and then we will group the questions into sets of five.

Without any due delay, because we've got 78 people who wish to put a question to you.. Madam Chancellor, it won't be possible, but if you said that you can stay until 3 p.m. in the afternoon, we will comply, no problem.

But anyway, we will take as many as possible and without any delay, Madam Merkel, it is a great honour for me as President of the Assembly to give you the floor.

You have the floor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Dear Mr President, dear Rik DAEMS, Madam Secretary General, Mr President of the Court.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Seventy years ago, the Federal Republic of Germany became a full member of the Council of Europe and this membership was an important step towards Germany being able to take on international responsibility following the Second World War, which had been triggered by Germany, and its responsibility before the Shoah. Germany was offered an opportunity for reconciliation at that time, and that was truly a great leap of faith. The Council of Europe was the first intergovernmental organisation in Europe and the first international organisation to welcome Germany back into the community of nations.

The deprivation of everyday life in the post-war period left many people facing an uncertain future. All the more remarkable was the farsightedness of statesmen who even then drew a picture of the future of a united Europe. Statesmen such as Winston Churchill, for example, who said in Zurich in 1946 that we have to share our common heritage, and that is the way in which prosperity and happiness can be achieved.

With the founding of the Council of Europe, this vision took shape, with it came the hope of a better future, a promise of being able to live together in peace, freedom and prosperity. A promise, however, that for the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe could only be fulfilled decades later after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The founding and work of the Council of Europe is an expression of how we see ourselves as Europeans. What values shape our societies and hold them together, and what fundamental expectations we have of member states.

The Council of Europe has always been committed to strengthening human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights in 1950 reflected a new understanding of the human person and the role of the state. Citizens are not simply the subjects of their state, but have comprehensive rights and freedoms. The state must respect and protect these rights, so the Council of Europe is there to sound the alarm if they are at risk in a member state. But the Council of Europe went one step further at that time, making it possible for citizens to sue their own state, for the respect of their rights and freedoms, before the European Court of Human Rights. That was revolutionary and it is an achievement of which we can still be proud today. From Lisbon to Vladivostok, this Court is the court of last resort for victims of violations of fundamental rights.

Looking back today, we can say that many post-war hopes for a better future have been fulfilled. Today, Europe is the continent with the highest human rights standards in the world. The European model of democratic welfare states and market economies guarantees a quality of life that is the envy of many around the world - just think of education, medical care and political stability. This is precisely what we owe to the work of the Council of Europe. A look at Europe's external borders and at Eastern Europe shows us, however, that even today peace and security, stability and prosperity can by no means be taken for granted. The situations in Belarus, eastern Ukraine and Crimea, in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh or, of course, in Syria and Libya are in some cases more than just worrying. Everywhere we see that human rights and fundamental rights, not least freedom of expression and freedom of the press, are coming under pressure and being undermined. If we were to allow or simply overlook the way in which fundamental values and rights, which are at the heart of the constitution of democratic states, are being disregarded, then we would be accepting that the European project itself would be called into question. Because the seriousness with which we take the human rights situation in other countries always reflects on how seriously we take the preservation of fundamental values in our own countries.

That is why we gave priority to the rule of law during the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union last year. This also applies to our current chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The rule of law is an indispensable basis for citizens' trust in the state and its institutions. Citizens must be able to trust that the state will implement the law laid down by their representatives and that it will do so under the control of independent judges. It is precisely this trust that is an essential prerequisite for a functioning and thus stable democracy. We all know, however, that trust is fleeting. It must be earned and earned anew every day by the representatives of the state. Only with sufficient trust on the part of the citizens can crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic be overcome.

In many respects, however, we are facing an enormous challenge here - for health care and research as well as for the economy and social coexistence. The pandemic is without doubt also a test for our democracies. Interventions in individual freedoms in order to combat the pandemic must meet strict conditions and require special justification. They must be temporary, necessary, appropriate and proportionate. The rule of law not only creates confidence in a state's own society for good cooperation; but also for international cooperation. Because if we are to have proper crossborder cooperation, that can only function on the basis of a rule-based order - that is, through jointly agreed rules that are also jointly observed.

A correspondingly reliable order is the basis for peaceful and also economically profitable relations between states, for companies and investors need the security of the rule of law in order to be able to plan and calculate sensibly. If they have to take economic risks, they must also be able to rely on the fact that, should the worst happen, they will be able to defend their rights against any breach of contract before independent courts. So those who promote and strengthen legal certainty always promote prosperity at the same time. In addition to promoting the rule of law, the Council of Europe also makes an essential contribution to greater international reliability through its fight against corruption. A rule-based order is also an essential prerequisite for peaceful coexistence.

It is contrary to our common fundamental values when the sovereignty and integrity of states is called into question and disregarded, as we are seeing in Crimea or Nagorno-Karabakh. The Council of Europe can play a decisive role here, but only if all the institutions of the Council of Europe work closely together. Therefore, I can only encourage you, President Rik DAEMS, to continue to work consistently for close and trustful cooperation - between the governments and parliamentarians of the member states as well as between the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers.

A good sign of this cooperation is the new joint mechanism by which the Council of Europe can react to violations of its fundamental principles in dialogue and in an appropriate manner. A rules-based international order is also necessary in view of the major challenges of our time, which no country can tackle alone. This is true with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change or the rapid developments in cyberspace with all their opportunities, but also their risks. The security of users can only be guaranteed across borders, and this means that the Council of Europe is also called upon when it comes to protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law, for example in the application of artificial intelligence - a priority of our Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

In the Parliamentary Assembly, also, you are devoting your attention to precisely this issue. I very much welcome this, because also in the digital world the focus must always be on people and their dignity. Human rights can only be fully protected in a constitutional order in which the separation of powers and the

independence of the judiciary are also respected. This makes it all the more worrying that today, even in some EU member states, the separation of powers is being called into question and the independence of the courts is being curtailed.

The European Court of Human Rights is open to the more than 800 million people in Europe if they feel that their rights - although guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights - have been violated in their respective national legal systems. Unfortunately, rulings of this Court are repeatedly implemented slowly, only partially, or not at all. It is precisely in cases where people are wrongly imprisoned that the implementation of the judgments, the release of the detainees, is particularly urgent and necessary. Our obligations in the Council of Europe to protect human rights are not up for discussion, which is why national law cannot take precedence over the obligations arising from the Convention. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe has also made this very clear in its report.

It is important that the Council of Europe and the European Union cooperate effectively on issues of fundamental values and rights, which is why I am pleased that negotiations on the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights were resumed during the German EU Presidency and are now being taken forward. Accession would fill a gap in the European human rights protection system, which I believe is in all our interests. May marks the tenth anniversary of the first signing of the Istanbul Convention. This Convention sets internationally unique standards for the protection of women against violence, especially domestic violence. I therefore deeply regret that Turkey has withdrawn from this Convention. I would have liked it to remain a member. I would also like to see the member states of the European Union that have not yet ratified the Convention do so. Women's rights are human rights, and violence against women cannot be ignored. It is a crime, and, as such, violence against women must be named and punished, all the more so now that it has become apparent that violence against women has increased even more in these times of crisis. I would therefore ask you to promote this Convention and its consistent implementation in your countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, 70 years ago Chancellor Adenauer compared the Council of Europe to a European conscience. Since then, times have changed and with them the challenges; but not the fundamental values on which Europe is built and which constitute its identity. You all bear political responsibility, you are all part of the European conscience today. I can only encourage you to remain vigilant and committed to bringing Europe's fundamental values to life. To bring attention to human rights violations and to enforce human rights.

Thank you very much. Now I look forward to your questions, certainly I cannot answer all of them - over 70 - but we still have some time and in that time I would like to answer as many as possible.

Thank you very much.

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

My uncle, who was a mayor for more than 36 years used to say, "I cannot answer all the questions on the same day". So, we will see what we can do on that one.

Thank you for your address. I also specifically thank you for raising the Istanbul Convention. I can tell you that this will be in the coming months an absolute priority of the Presidency in order to convince those who signed and did not ratify it to do so, but also the get more countries on board concerning this Convention because, as you rightfully said, women's rights are human rights. Also, thank you for mentioning very strongly that the common standards we share that are enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights go over national interests over national legal aspects. The compliance with the judgments of the Court are, therefore, of the utmost importance.

We will now head into the questions. As I said, we have 78. We will see how far we get and as long as you stay onboard, Madam Merkel, I will keep on having questions put to you. So just give me -at some point in time- a little sign that time is up. We will have first the five political leaders who put a question to you, or the political groups. They will be doing so one by one. After the five political groups, we will group are questions by five.

Without any delay, we will head into the questions now. First for the Socialist Group we have -let's see- Ms Thorhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR, after whom we will have Mr Aleksander POCIEJ for the Group of the European People's Party.

Sunna, you have the floor.

Go ahead, Sunna.

Ms Thorhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR (Iceland, on behalf of SOC): Dear Chancellor,

Thank you very much for your inspiring speech.

One of the focal points of the Council of Europe's work is the fight against corruption. It is an important foundation for the rule of law and the trust of our citizens.

Here in the Council of Europe there was a major corruption crisis around Azerbaijan in 2018. We have investigated this and drawn the necessary conclusions. In addition, we have called on member States to also address this matter in their jurisdictions.

Some authoritative members in this connection came from Germany. I would like to ask them what Germany has done to clarify the matter and what is still intended. Have the relevant Members of Parliament and others, if any, also been sanctioned? What is the status of Mr Axel FISCHER in your party and what general measures have been taken to prevent future cases?

Thank you once again.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): *Danke.* Frau Merkel, you have the floor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Yes, thank you.

Of course, we have dealt with this Azerbaijan matter. I share your opinion that this was a very unpleasant event, which must also be comprehensively clarified. We have seen it through the code of conduct for Members of Parliament. The German Bundestag has also dealt with it very thoroughly and, of course, taken it seriously that the code of conduct was violated by the Members of Parliament Eduard LINTNER and Karin STENZ, against whom Mr LINDNER is also being investigated by the public prosecutor's office. Ms STENZ, for example, was reprimanded by the German Bundestag, so we have dealt with this matter very comprehensively. It must also be said that all those involved in this Azerbaijan affair have, I believe, also had to endure very critical discussions in public. I believe that both the transparency of the Council of Europe and our national follow-up have made it possible to prevent such things from happening in the future.

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

We now move to the next question for Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ, who will be followed by Mr Olivier BECHT from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ in the room, you have the floor.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, on behalf of EPP/CD): Madam Chancellor,

Allow me, on behalf of the EPP Group which I chair, to pay tribute to your work as Chancellor in favour of European integration.

Despite the crises, you have managed to preserve and strengthen Europe's cohesion while preserving our values. I would also like to congratulate you on the success of the German Presidency of the Council of Europe. I am very pleased to hear that you are in favour of the European Union joining the European Convention on Human Rights.

My question concerns Europe's relations with the Russian Federation and Germany's attitude, which seems ambiguous to many of us. While relations are currently very tense with the Navalny affair and the clashes in eastern Ukraine, Germany remains committed to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline across the Baltic Sea, which raises many concerns for your allies in the East. Do you not think, Chancellor, that Europe should be more united and speak with one voice to the Russian Federation?

Thank you very much.

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

Madam Chancellor, you have the floor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Yes, of course, we are always stronger when we speak with one voice, and I am also very glad that we do so in large parts of the relationship.

If we take the case of Alexei NAVALNY, then I would like to emphasise once again how important it was that there was this ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Yves ROCHER. The Court of Human Rights said here that it was arbitrary and obviously unfounded. It was also possible to reiterate that this was not the case, that it was arbitrary and obviously unfounded. Also again the order for release was done and, especially in these days, we are in great concern about Alexei NAVALNY. The German government together with others is also campaigning for him to get the appropriate medical care. We are very concerned here and try to make our influence also clear. Overall, we have a lot of conflicts with Russia, which unfortunately also make our relationship difficult, of course, but I'm still someone who always says we have to talk to each other. In the case of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, Germany and France have created a permanent mechanism through the Minsk format, where we support Ukraine in its concerns. Recently President Emmanuel MACRON and I have spoken again with Mr Vladimir PUTIN and also Mr Volodymyr SELENSKYJ, because the situation is worryingly tense, particularly due to the concentration of troops by Russia on the Ukrainian border.

We must remain in dialogue. Germany has, above all, also campaigned for Ukraine to remain a transit country for Russia's gas exports to the European Union, and I know that there is controversy surrounding Nord Stream 2. I am also aware of the position of many member States on this issue, and we in the European Union have also found a common position on the approval of such pipelines by amending the directive on the internal energy market. However, I would like to point out that it is not the gas from Nord Stream 2, which is not even flowing yet, but from Nord Stream 1 that is worse than the gas flowing through Ukraine and the gas coming from Russia via Turkey. So, I have the impression that perhaps with Nord Stream 2 we are fighting a conflict that is much broader and that touches on the question of how far we want to trade with Russia, especially in the energy sector. Germany has decided to build Nord Stream 2 here, but I know it is a political battle that many see differently. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasise that we have agreed common sanctions, both in the case of Alexei NAVALNY and in the case of Crimea and the annexation and occupation, or the separatists in the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk again and again as the European Union. This common ground is very important for me. So, I believe that we also have a lot of common European approaches or EU approaches to Russian activities, which make us stronger overall.

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

We now move to the question from Mr Olivier BECHT on behalf of the ALDE Group, to be followed by Lord David BLENATHRA for the Conservatives.

I think that Mr Olivier BECHT is in the room.

Alas, no, he is in his car. Olivier, you have the floor.

Mr Olivier BECHT (France, on behalf of ALDE): I welcome the French Prime Minister to my constituency; you will excuse me, Chancellor.

I have two questions to put to you on behalf of the ALDE Group.

First, I would like to know, at a time when the Council of Europe is launching its report on the COVID-19 health pass, what your position is on this idea of a "health pass" and whether you would consider it useful for states to follow the recommendations of the Council of Europe.

Finally, after more than 15 years in office, during which you have followed in the footsteps of the founding fathers, I would have liked to know your advice for the future so that Greater Europe remains united. In other words, what concrete cooperation according to the method of the founding fathers, the de facto solidarity, what to create so that States – I am thinking in particular of the Russian Federation and Turkey, which sometimes take a different path – remain faithful to our values?

Thank you very much.

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

Madam Chancellor, you have the floor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Yes, thank you,

First of all, best regards to the Prime Minister of France, Mr Jean CASTEX, when he comes to your constituency and secondly, yes, what can we do. The Council of Europe is an institution which, admittedly, despite all the common values, is home to States with very different political characteristics. We have seen that France in particular has been very active in ensuring that Russia continues to be a member of the Council of Europe in recent years and because - and I support this - we are shaped by the fact that we also have to discuss critical issues with each other. I have just mentioned the example of Alexei NAVALNY and Ukraine, and I could name others, but I do not think it would be right if we no longer had any channels of communication at all. In other words, the Council of Europe has the task of putting up with very different opinions and attitudes, and that is what shapes it. In this respect, it is, so to speak, more controversial than the European Union although we also have these tensions in the European Union.

I would urge that, wherever possible, we should be able to endure this tension, because political situations can, of course, change and, particularly in countries where, in our opinion, the rule of law is not so well developed, we can help people - see Russia, see Turkey - by standing up for their human rights, by giving them a voice, by having the European Court of Human Rights pass its judgements and by then, so to speak, enforcing them.

But the spectrum of political opinion is broad, and perhaps it has become even broader in recent years. In 1989/1990, there was certainly hope that we would move closer together, and now we are going through a period in which things sometimes diverge.

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

We do not have a connection with Lord David BLENATHRA as I understand, so we move to Mr Georgios KATROUGKALOS on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

Do we have Mr Georgios KATROUGKALOS online?

You have the floor.

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

Madam Chancellor, we see a rise in tension between the United States and Russia and China. Do you think that we are on the brink of a new Cold War? Should Europe try to prevent such an event? And do we have – does the European Union have – the necessary strategic autonomy from the United States for that?

And a second question, if I may, you have referred to all frozen conflicts in Europe, but you forgot Cyprus. Although it concerns an occupation by foreign troops of a sovereign EU member state. Next week we are going to have a conference on the Cyprus issue with the participation, as an observer, of the European Union. What do you have to comment on that? What is your position for a viable solution of the Cyprus issue?

Many thanks, Madam Chancellor and welcome to our Assembly.

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

I will give the floor to the Chancellor.

Just one small remark Madam Chancellor: can you address the question on the Covid passport as we had a debate on it before?

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): No, I have not mentioned the Cyprus conflict, but it should nevertheless be resolved and we are pleased that a new round of initiatives by the European Union and the United Nations is about to be launched, that negotiations are to be held again. We also stand by the framework that the United Nations has set. I believe that these negotiations will be difficult, but I have also spoken time and again with the Turkish President about the fact that we absolutely need progress here, because Cyprus's legal concerns must also be seen by us here.

Secondly, I think we should be very careful about projecting the concepts of past times onto the present day, so to speak. History does not repeat itself very often and that is why we are seeing a major conflict between the United States and China, between the United States and Russia, we are seeing Russia and China moving closer together and the positioning of the European Union is of course very important here. I am worried

whether our future global constellation will be one in which we have a complete decoupling, especially in technological terms. When you see how our lives are shaped by digitalization 5G, 6G, Internet of Things. The question then arises, if we do not have any common standards, no common security expectations, how the world then splits up from what is actually a common space of the Internet into different spaces of digitalisation.

The European position here, or the German position in Europe, is that we are trying to establish minimum standards. But the tensions are there and, of course, Europe also has legitimate cooperation interests and needs with the United States of America. We are united in NATO, we can see that we are also partly the scene of cyber attacks and hybrid measures. Particularly in the case of Russia, this hybrid warfare is part of the defence strategy, and we must not be naive about this. That is why we will be very intensively occupied in the coming years with the extent to which we can work together on the major global issues.

Personally, I am in favour of multilateralism, of strong international organisations such as the WTO and others, which can also set certain standards. I do not want this decoupling, but I do see the tendencies. Europe will only be able to make an important contribution here, above all, if the European Union is united on this issue, and we sometimes have to work on that.

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

We will now go back to Lord David BLENCATHRA.

Madam Chancellor, if I may recall the question of Mr Olivier BECHT concerning the Covid passport, if you would have a reflection on that since we had a debate on the issue before you were with us?

Now we go to Lord David BLENCATHRA. I hope he is online.

Okay. He's requesting to speak.

I hope we are not hacked Madam Chancellor. You never know.

David, where are you?

No.

So apparently we got a connection problem with the UK.

So we will move on with the next five questions. If in the meantime we've got Lord David BLENCATHRA back on board we will give him the floor.

The next five questions that I will group, Madam Chancellor, are the ones from Ms Nicole TRISSE, Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, Ms Laura CASTEL and Ms Petra BAYR.

We take five at once and then please you can have the floor and answer to the elements within the questions, and I recall also the issue of the COVID passport.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): I start with the first on my list, the head of the French delegation, Mrs Nicole TRISSE.

You have the floor.

Ms Nicole TRISSE (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mr President.

Madam Chancellor,

On behalf of the French delegation, allow me to begin by paying tribute to your deep, sincere and decisive commitment to Europe.

I would like to thank you for your commitment to Europe, which is deep, sincere and decisive. You were the first woman to be elected to the Federal Chancellery and you have held the highest political positions in your party and in the German government. You are an example for many women who want to enter politics.

As you know, we in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are also committed to improving the place and role of women in politics, but there are still many glass ceilings and resistance. From your experience, what advice and what proposals could you make to promote this emancipation of women, politically, in the exercise of responsibilities throughout our continent?

I recall the question that was asked by my colleague Mr Olivier BECHT on the health passport, I would also like to have your analysis and your thoughts.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We now have the second question on our list, which is by Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN.

Fiona, you have the floor.

Go ahead, Fiona.

Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN (Ireland, ALDE): Thank you, President.

And you're very welcome, Madam Chancellor.

You've always been a true champion of democracy, of international cooperation, of hope and of solidarity. Your inspirational leadership played an absolutely crucial role in managing the European financial crisis and negotiating the stimulus package, which of course we will need more of post-Covid.

I also want to acknowledge your compassion and humanitarian response to the migration crisis. You truly led the way in Europe.

I share your concern that Turkey has withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention. There is no doubt that gender-based violence which has no social economic or geographical boundaries is one of the most prominent human rights violations in the world, and sadly we had another femicide in Dublin this week.

Could you expand on what you think we need to do to tackle this and how we can of course support the victims of gender-based violence?

Thank you Madam Chancellor.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We now go to our third question in this list, which is by Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Oleksii, you have floor.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Chancellor Angela MERKEL,

I have a question I wanted an answer to. "Yes" or "no"? - Is Vladimir PUTIN a murderer?

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): So, we go to our next question, which is by Ms Laura CASTEL.

Ms Laura CASTEL is in the room.

You have the floor.

Ms Laura CASTEL (Spain, NR): Madam Chancellor, thank you for your speech.

In Europe the entry of the extreme right parties is altering the fragile human rights systems that has cost us so much to build and threatens the lower democratic standards.

I want to draw your attention on the infiltration of neo-Nazism ideology in the Spanish Army. Here are a few examples. We have Air Force members glorifying the Fascist regime and defending extermination of 26 million Spaniards, and soldiers singing neo-Nazi songs in official facilities.

In Spain the head office of the army is the head of state, it is the King. Therefore, there were no sanctions, no accountability. On the contrary, the tolerance is outrageous and the government is minimising the problem. With that situation in mind, I would like to ask you what input and suggestions you could give us according to similar situations happening in Germany. How did you address the issue in Germany?

Thank you again, Madam Chancellor.

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

We now go to the fifth question on this list, which is from Ms Petra BAYR.

You have the floor.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC): Good morning, Chancellor,

Joe Biden is probably right when he says that the U.S. is back on the constructive international stage after four - let us put it diplomatically - after four rather difficult years. The announcement that U.S. foreign policy is to be guided by a human rights-based policy also gives hope, I think, of creating a new axis, a new alliance, a transatlantic alliance, between the U.S., Canada, and Europe in dealing with very many international crises.

I'm thinking, for example, of Myanmar, where a completely rabid military junta is shooting children. I'm also thinking of Brazil, where under a completely uncontrolled COVID policy a silent genocide is happening against indigenous people. But I'm also thinking of IS, Boko Haram, and other organisations that have now evaluated their terror as far as southern Africa.

How do you see the chances for a new transatlantic peace policy guided by human rights?

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

Before giving the floor to the Chancellor may I recall that we all have some common rules of decent speeches in this house.

May I call on everyone, also Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, to stick to this normal decency between colleagues.

Madam Chancellor you have the floor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Yes, with regard to the vaccination certificate, the European Union has agreed that we should develop digital vaccination certificates at national level and that there should then be a gateway, an interface, which would make them compatible throughout the European Union. So far we have not discussed -we have dealt with the technical issues, but not with uniform European standards- what the rights are that derive from such a certificate.

In Germany, we are now beginning this very exciting discussion on how to treat people and citizens with regard to vaccination, which is very important, even in the midst of the pandemic situation. But I want to make one point, we will also have to look at this very much from the point of view of mutations, because we have the vaccines, their effectiveness with the known virus types is there, but whenever mutations occur, there is of course the danger - see the Brazilian mutant - that vaccinated people are perhaps not as safe from the new mutations. That will occupy us for many years to come. Apart from that, the WHO vaccination certificate, which I believe is internationally valid, is the basic basis for us, even if we do not see it digitally.

I can only emphasise once again that the pandemic in particular has led to violence against women, once again, being a major issue in our country. We must be careful that the pandemic is not a development that ultimately sets back much of what we have achieved in the area of equal rights - in terms of violence against women in the domestic environment, but also in terms of the emancipation of women as a whole in the professional sphere, in bringing up children. Germany will certainly pay particular attention to this in the coming years. In Germany, we are also trying to strengthen women's rights wherever possible and, above all, to pay special attention to the possibilities of protection for women, such as women's shelters, emergency hotlines, where women can call when they are subject to violence. Especially under the conditions of the pandemic, this work is, of course, harder everywhere and we are trying to provide as much support as we can.

As far as Vladimir Putin is concerned, I say this in my own words, when it comes to criticism of him, I do not keep quiet about it. I also say it in personal conversations and that is my way of dealing with the fact that we do not agree with everything that happens in Russia with regard to human rights. I have singled out the issue of Alexei Navalny, but I could of course mention many other human rights issues with regard to Russia here as well.

Then there is the question of neo-Nazism in the army, we have also had such incidents in Germany and there it is very important that the most resolute clarification is carried out, that things are made transparent and that they are also made public. For us in the *Bundeswehr* it is very, very important. We have the principle of internal leadership management - the principle of *Innere Führung* - that means that all ranks are not only militarily trained, but are also politically able to talk to the soldiers and to promote democratic principles. So on the one hand, this means being tough on extremism of all kinds, especially right-wing extremism, but on the other hand it also means political education, political work, soldiers are citizens in uniform and you must, so to speak, commit to the country's fundamental democratic values.

The question about the new transatlantic partnership. Yes, there are very many points of contact and opportunities for joint action here, you have listed a large number of the global conflicts. Of course, we cannot tackle everything at once, but we hope for very constructive cooperation in the fight against Islamist terrorism, in dealing with Syria, in resolving the Libyan crisis and, of course, on issues such as Myanmar.

Now, this week, there will be a major climate conference initiated by Joe Biden, in other words, cooperation in the area of climate. Here, too, despite all the differences, China and Russia will be involved, and in this respect the agenda is full. The tasks, as you have already suggested in your question, are comprehensive. We will now, step by step, coordinate our positions with the United States of America. There are certainly some different approaches. However, there is one point I would like to make, which we are working on very closely at the moment, and that is that we are trying to bring the Iranian nuclear agreement back to life, and that is very good news that we can now do this again together with the United States of America.

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

We will now try to have Lord David BLENATHRA back online on behalf of the European Conservatives Group.

He is.

Okay. Let's hope it works.

David, you've got the floor.

Lord David BLENATHRA (United Kingdom, on behalf of EC/DA): Good morning,

I am so sorry. I'm having problems connecting the United Kingdom to Europe this morning. I assure you it's nothing to do with Brexit.

Chancellor, you have 15 years of experience as a world leader. Which country do you consider a greater threat to world peace and our western democratic way of life?

Is it Russia under President Putin or China under President Xi? And what should NATO do about it?

Thank you.

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

Madam Chancellor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Mister President, Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I have not quite answered one question in full; I should say what my experience is against the glass ceiling for women and careers. I think we need very conscious promotion of women, including through legal standards. For many years of my life, I have relied on voluntary action. I have to admit quite openly that it has proved necessary in Germany, for example, in business enterprises, on supervisory boards or management

boards, to regulate by law that women be included there. Lo and behold, whenever the legal regulation is there, there are enough women who can fill it. They are then role models and role models for others. We must continue along this path.

Now to your question, to the biggest threat in the world, that is now such a somewhat difficult question. I would like to say that... What strikes me is that there is a tendency - and from my point of view this has happened historically more than once before - that after 70 years, after our institutions have existed for 70 years now - that is, after more than one generation - in which, for example, the time when we hardly have any eyewitnesses left from the Second World War from the time of National Socialism, from the Holocaust, that in this situation institutions, which were created as teachers from these terrible events, are called into question more than they were in the decades before.

The imperfection of these institutions, whether it is the United Nations or other multilateral institutions, is brought very much to the fore. Thus, these institutions are weakened without having new, better institutions. If, everywhere, places are called into question, in other words, the UN Security Council is not particularly functional, the things of the United Nations are not enforced, if we have more and more such phenomena that people no longer believe in multilateralism, then I think we are in danger, so to speak, of first resigning ourselves to the fact that we have no duty to find diplomatic solutions.

Then there are harsh words. Harsh words then quickly turn into provocative actions. If you look at how this is going in the South China Sea and how this is taking place in Taiwan, military conflicts can arise again from something like that. That is why I believe that we are living in a time in which we should now - I am already the older generation - but those of us who grew up after the Second World War should very very carefully protect and nurture the institution that was founded back then and not simply throw it away. Otherwise, we will be living in a world in which conflicts can arise unexpectedly and unintentionally, so to speak, without us having the appropriate resolution mechanisms.

This is something that is shaping our time right now. As difficult as it is, I am someone who is always in favour of diplomatic attempts, of talking. As long as you are talking, you are not stepping on each other. I see in our time in many places such a crumbling apart of certainly imperfect, yet still important institutions.

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

We now go to.... We still have a little bit of time to our next five, if we can squeeze it in there.

Four minutes sharp.

Okay, well in that case we will have two questions. The two on my list are Mr Zsolt NÉMETH and Ms Nina KASIMATI.

So Zsolt is in the room. Zsolt, you have the floor. Make it short so that your colleague can have the second question.

Thank you, Chancellor.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA): Thank you President.

Madam Chancellor, greetings to you on behalf of Hungary and congratulations to the German presidency, both in the European Union and in the Council of Europe as well. Hungary is going to take over the presidency from Germany.

My question relates to the issue of national minorities. In this organisation we deal with national minorities. The 100 million in the Council of Europe, but the 50 million inside the European Union as well.

You may be aware that the citizens' initiative called Minority SafePack was rejected by the Von der Leyen Commission, which was a great surprise to many of us. It seems that the European Union turns down the issue of 50 million minority people inside the European Union. Do you see any chance that it can be reversed, in the process probably of the future of Europe debate?

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

Our next speaker is not online so, Madam Chancellor, you have your last question and please elaborate on any issue that you wish to touch upon outside of the questions that have been put to you.

You have the floor.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Yes, I am not quite sure about the facts of the last question. I think that minority policies are very important and, in this respect, I am surprised if the European Union is now suspicious of not taking minorities seriously. But it is also a question - if I may say so - of every country being bound to deal properly with its minorities, some of which have special rights, and that is the way things are in Germany. We have, for example, the Danish minority or the Sorbian minority. It is important that they feel protected in the country in which they are the minority. But certainly I will investigate further and I will take your question as an opportunity to do so.

However, I would like to thank you overall. I think that questions have already shown that there are many conflicts pending. We have not had any Russian, Turkish or Azerbaijani questions, but I have mentioned all the areas of conflict and I would simply ask all members of the Council of Europe to value this institution, even if some of them have very fundamentally different views on many issues. It is the place where people talk, it is the place where very different positions are exchanged.

However, we simply have to say that there are inalienable human rights, that they are individually assigned and that every political system, however different it may be, is called upon to take these values seriously in the spirit of a fundamental idea: the conscience of Europe, as Konrad Adenauer put it. That is the bond, and that is why there is a minimum level of human rights. I think it is good that you, who are working courageously in the Council of Europe, also point this out again and again in the Parliamentary Assembly and do not make any compromises.

I thank you all for your work.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Merkel, for your words.

We do believe in multilateralism. I hear a bit of, as a Belgian, of the Harmel Doctrine: you keep on talking until you agree to solve problems, and as I said, in my introduction, I would rather be on the side of the solutions instead of staying on the side of the problems.

Thank you very, very much. You still have some time in your Presidency. I see your ambassador down here so probably, Mr Rolf Mafael, I will try to find a way to sneak into Germany although with the sanitary conditions, who knows. We can still have some nice results, which you already have had in your Presidency.

Madam Merkel, thank you very, very much for having been with us. Unfortunately not physically, but we do appreciate the message that you have decided to share with us specifically on the value of this institution, which is on again the problem-solving side and not on the problem-creating side.

Thank you very much and who knows maybe in the future we see each other physically.

Ms Angela MERKEL (Federal Chancellor of Germany): Yes. Thank you and best wishes.

Debate: The Assembly's vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe

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

Can you come in front, since you're the rapporteur?

Let's try to function as, between brackets, normal as physically possible.

Where is Pavel? Come on guy, you have to be here too.

Okay.

Dear colleagues, now the next item of business this morning is the debate on the report with the title the Assembly's vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe. It will be presented by Mr Tiny KOX on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

Thank you Madam Secretary General to be with us for this debate since it is a little bit interlinked with the institution.

This debate must conclude at the latest at 1 p.m.

In the beginning of the afternoon we will address the amendments in a swift way.

I call on Mr Tiny KOX the rapporteur. You have seven minutes to open the debate and you will have a further three minutes to reply to the debate at the end.

Again at 2 p.m. we will head into the amendments.

Mr Tiny KOX you have the floor.

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

Next month the Committee of Ministers will consider the strategic framework for the Council of Europe.

The Bureau of the Assembly decided to agree with your proposal, Mr President, that the Assembly should make its own contribution to this most important process.

The Committee for Political Affairs and Democracy was asked to prepare, in time, a report on the Assembly's vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe.

The Committee granted me the honour of preparing this report, which I am happy to present today to the Assembly.

Mr President while preparing report I could make use of many recent reports of this Assembly, and I received important input, amongst others, from the Secretary General, the Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers, deputies and several other ambassadors.

The members of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, the Committee Secretariat and our Secretary General of the Assembly provided me with great support to present this report today to you.

Mr President, to begin with it's obvious that all strategic options that we propose must contribute to fulfilling the statutory goal of the Council of Europe as enshrined in its 1949 founding act that says "to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress" (Article 1 of our Statute).

The Council of Europe's overall priority therefore should be, in these challenging and sometimes dangerous times, to remain the pillar of democratic security and genuine multilateralism in Europe and preserve its identity as an independent forum for political dialogue and cooperation. Related to this, Mr President, the Council of Europe's unique convention system, with the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter at its core, must be further enhanced and upheld by designing new instruments to respond to emerging challenges.

The implementation of the Convention on Human Rights in all member states must remain the top priority for the Council of Europe.

The accession of the European Union to the Convention will surely strengthen the relevance of the Council of Europe and the Convention as Chancellor Merkel just said, and should therefore be a priority as well.

Later today the president of European Parliament will address us and tell us how much a priority this accession is to his Parliament.

Mr President, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic the Council of Europe must rise more than ever to social challenges currently facing the peoples of our continent. Therefore, the Council of Europe needs a stronger emphasis on the protection of social and economic rights.

The Council of Europe must also continue to promote genuine equality and respect of human dignity and combating discrimination on any ground. Groundbreaking conventions such as the Convention on the Prevention and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence have already become a global gold standard. Now their efficient implementation must be a key priority for us.

The Assembly already shared the conclusion in the Athens Declaration of our Ministers of Foreign Affairs that life and well-being on our planet is contingent on humanity's collective capacity to guarantee both human rights and a healthy environment for the future generations. Now Mr President, it is of high importance to work

towards new legal instruments aimed at ensuring the right to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment for present and future generations. I'm looking forward to our June Part Session. Our Assembly will debate a whole range of reports on this important topic.

The paramount importance of the United Nations Development Goals demands the improvement of our cooperation between the United Nations and the Council of Europe. In June the Secretary General of the United Nations will address this Assembly at your invitation, Mr President.

New technologies, in particular artificial intelligence, may have a negative effect on human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Therefore the Council of Europe should use its strategic position to provide the necessary guidance and support for creating global regulatory frameworks for artificial intelligence.

The Council of Europe should also give priority to strengthening the role of civil society organisations and national human rights institutions in its work, with specific emphasis on engaging with young people and the children.

Mr President, the Council of Europe must continue its search for common responses to societal challenges, problems challenging the rule of law, notably corruption, money laundering, terrorism and violent extremism, by means of effective implementation of relevant legal instruments and mechanisms, or by establishing new ones where appropriate.

Monitoring of member states' obligations and commitments constitutes a very important means of ensuring cooperative action for all member states to comply with their duties. However, many simultaneous merging procedures by various institutions and bodies may lead to a "monitoring fatigue". Therefore a more structured coordination in the Council of Europe is needed between all monitoring activities, as well as coordinating its monitoring activities with the other international organisations in order to achieve more synergy, avoid unnecessary duplication and alleviate the reporting burden for member states.

Mr President, in its cooperation with other multinational organisations the Council of Europe should engage in promoting the global outreach of its legal instruments, many of which have played already a pioneering role.

Both the Assembly and our national parliaments should strengthen our contribution as guarantors of our organisation's core values.

Finally Mr President, in order to ensure the strategic relevance of our organisation there has to be an effective synergy between its two organs: the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers. The new joint procedure which allows the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers to act together in case of blatant violation by a member state of its obligations under the Statute may play an important role both in preventing and in finding ways to end or correct such violations. I am most happy to hear Madam Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, who recognised this step forward.

To conclude, Mr President, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy supported the proposal that I made with a large majority. I hope the Assembly will do the same so that our voice on strategic priorities will be well heard by the Committee of Ministers.

Thank you very much. I'm looking forward to your interventions.

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

We now move to our speakers list, where we call each and every one of you. You have maximum three minutes to intervene.

The first on my list is Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO who will be followed by Mr George LOUCAIDES remotely.

Oleksii, you've got the floor. Three minutes max.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, on behalf of EC/DA): Dear Colleagues,

It is an extremely important question, and "strategic priorities of the Council of Europe" are such important words. Now, just several minutes ago, Chancellor Angela MERKEL reminded us of the words of Konrad Adenauer who said that we are "the conscience of Europe". The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Council of Europe in general, "the conscience of Europe": such important words. She said that many things changed, but this is something which will not change. In 50 years but maybe we will not be discussing the question of artificial intelligence or some other question, which is a lot of words about them in the report of Mr Tiny KOX.

There is not any word in the report by Mr Tiny KOX save for one, about territorial integrity of member States, about the sovereignty of member States, about peaceful resolution of conflicts in Europe. We have wars in Europe, and I just want to remind you about this. It seems to me that many of us just forgot about this. I took with myself this flag, just just take a look at this flag.

[Interrupted by President Rik DAEMS]

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): This is something which is not allowed in the Assembly.

We do not allow for any country..

Mr GONCHARENKO, may I ask you to stop.

Okay, can someone please go?

This is incredible.

OK. I would like you to stop now. Okay. Stop now. Do not force me to ask you to leave the room.

Thank you. Thank you. Okay, may I ask to please ask Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to leave the room?

Enough. Please.

Please, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Well, I will be extremely clear! This is not the first time that you in an extreme way abuse the right of speech. I will refer this incident again to the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs and I will be very clear that this is not the first time. This is a house of democracy. We treat each other with respect and we try to solve problems instead of creating them, okay?

So you do not have the floor, please, sit down or leave the room. Please, sit down or leave the room. You do not have the floor! You do not have the floor!

May I ask... okay, this is the last time you will have this kind of an incident under my presidency Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO. I will refer you to the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs and I will be extremely harsh on this situation because this is not the first time that you do this, in a very unacceptable way.

We now move to the next speakers. Keep quiet, please. You do not have the floor!

We go to our next speaker, which is Mr George LOUCAIDES. You have the floor.

Madam Secretary General, may I ask you to prepare a report on this incident.

Mr George LOUCAIDES (Cyprus, on behalf of UEL): Good morning, Mr President.

Dear Colleagues,

Allow me to thank our Rapporteur, Mr. Tiny KOX, for his excellent Report.

Despite what Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO's already said.

The Council of Europe has been a strong pillar in safeguarding democracy and fundamental human rights and freedoms through international co-operation for the last seven decades. There is a growing need, though, for the Council of Europe to further enhance its relevance in promoting peace through multilateralism. Stepping up efforts to respond to the multifaceted challenges facing today's world, and more particularly those pertaining to human rights and the rule of law, should remain at the forefront of our concerns.

As a treaty-based organization, the Council of Europe Conventions, when translated into national legislation, can form the basis for the implementation of targeted policies, providing better protection and guarantees for different vulnerable groups that are often victims of multiple discrimination.

Moreover, pressing challenges, such as the pandemic, climate change and the growing democratic deficit in many member States, call for prompt, collective and effective responses. Further enhancing co-ordination and deepening the institutional dialogue already in place between the Committee of Ministers and the PACE must continue to be a priority. In this respect, we commend Mr Tiny KOX's invaluable contribution for the creation

and adoption of the joint procedure mechanism. Regarding the need for new, more agile and proactive instruments to address emerging global challenges, we welcome the four-year strategic action plan, aimed at ensuring the political relevance and efficiency of the Council of Europe in the years to come.

Member States' financial contribution is critical for the proper functioning of the organization. Obviously, the Council of Europe cannot invest in democratic security and supervise the implementation of the Conventions through its specialized Monitoring bodies, without adequate means. Equally important is the protection of citizens' social and economic rights, as enshrined in the European Social Charter, even more so, in light of the ongoing pandemic and its unprecedented consequences.

We also strongly support the accession of the European Union to the European Convention of Human Rights, which will enhance the role of the Council of Europe and multilateralism.

Finally, the Council of Europe must aim at the greater participation of civil society, human rights institutions, activists and NGOs in all its activities, and encourage a more active role for national parliaments. It is crucial for our organization to uphold its statutory independence, its credibility and its unique expertise in promoting European values and principles and our common vision for a more democratic, safe and inclusive society.

Thank you.

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

We now have Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE for the Socialist Group.

Selin, you have the floor.

Ms Selin SAYEK BÖKE (Turkey, on behalf of SOC): I salute everybody on behalf of the Socialist Democrats and Greens Group.

Freedom House 2021 report reveals the ongoing democratic recession. It shows that global freedom has been declining for the 15th consecutive year. "The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2020" shows a similar backslide in rule of law. Globally, more countries declined than improved in the rule of law score for the third consecutive year.

Clearly we stand at a historical crossroad. A crossroad where the very principles regarding our organization's existence are challenged by various political actors including our organizations' very own members.

Will our organization revamp itself back into the pioneering role of truly being the guarantor of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law or will it allow for the erosion in these very principles that gnaw away the core of the organization?

At such a time when the very core of the organization is under attack, any strategic vision for the Council of Europe has to focus on building up institutional resilience and this requires strengthening the already existing instruments we have in hand.

We have achieved protection of both first and second generation rights with the European Convention of Human Rights and the European Social Charter. Now it is time for the third generation rights of solidarity. We need to catch up and be the tailwind with our new conventions, the right to a healthy environment, the right to benefit from artificial intelligence. And clearly what makes this system invaluable is the groundbreaking conventional system that is legally binding. As such, any challenges from member states in the implementation of conventions and even to the existence of the conventions becomes an existentialist question for this organization.

How will the Council of Europe respond to this existentialist challenged? The guiding principle, I think, in answering this question should be sticking to our value-based political will, avoid shifting into short-termist transactionalist policy frameworks, not politically negotiating court judgments, not negotiating the lives of refugees, not negotiating on the core principles that make up this very organization, avoid corruption which feeds transactionalism.

This, and ensuring the existing base of expertise and knowledge, translates into actions, has to be a core part of our strategic priorities.

For example, how do we get the Venice Commission involved in protecting democracy and rule of law when member states unconstitutionally start withdrawing from human rights conventions? Ultimately, any strategic vision should be aimed to unite around our principles, not lose members through constructive dialogue to achieve binding outcomes from conventions, without hindering national sovereignty.

Clearly it is us who gives the flesh and blood to the institution as individual representatives, as national delegations, as political groups. Therefore, it is upon us to call for all democrats of the world to unite at a time when the rise of authoritarianism is gnawing up on our very own organization.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): I now give the floor to Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Marie-Christine, you have the floor.

Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ (France, on behalf of EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President.

I thank the rapporteur for his report.

The report you are presenting is of great importance as it constitutes the Parliamentary Assembly's contribution to the forthcoming ministerial session of the Committee of Ministers scheduled for May 2021, at which the ministers are expected to discuss the Council of Europe's strategic framework, based on the Secretary General's proposals.

As a statutory body bringing together representatives of all national parliaments of the member states and reflecting all political views, including the opposition, the Parliamentary Assembly has a duty to contribute to the ongoing reflection on the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe. The strategic priorities must, as a matter of priority, contribute to defending the core historical values of the European Convention on Human Rights. As you recall, the Council of Europe is the largest European organisation, bringing together all European states except Belarus and the Holy See.

All member states had committed themselves to the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Council of Europe's priority was to continue to ensure its implementation in each country, ensuring that it remained the guarantor of the four pillars of human rights, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and democratic security. The accession of the European Union to the European Convention on Human Rights must continue to be a strategic priority for the Council of Europe.

Monitoring procedures are necessary to ensure that member states meet their obligations, but they sometimes lead to a sense of sanction or fatigue. You propose better co-ordination of these procedures: this seems to me to be a desirable development. I would also suggest that a more structured and transparent framework be put in place to rule out purely politically motivated requests for procedures.

Over the 70 years of its existence, the Council of Europe has developed a unique legally binding convention system, consisting of more than 220 conventions. I am not going to list them all, but some texts, such as the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse and the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, have acquired world-wide reference status and their effective implementation must remain an absolute priority. All the more so because, as Turkey's announced withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention unfortunately illustrates, nothing can be taken for granted.

Like you, I welcome the importance of the new Joint Procedure, but I would draw your attention to the fact that care must be taken not to place too many constraints on the economic players, as this could weaken the whole ecosystem. You want to emphasise the protection of economic and social rights: be careful not to weaken the ecosystem. Adapting to new challenges is a necessity; calling into question our entire economic organisation is not, in relation to your safe, healthy and sustainable environment.

I am delighted that you consider that the Council of Europe is in a strategic position to create a global regulatory framework for artificial intelligence: this is necessary to prevent the situation worsening.

In conclusion, I thank you for all the work you have done, which I think is very necessary.

Thank you, Mr President.

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

We now go to our next speaker on behalf of the groups. I have got Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK on behalf of ALDE.

Yevheniia, you have got the floor.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, on behalf of ALDE): Dear rapporteur, dear Assembly members,
I congratulate Mr Tiny KOX on his work and his topic choice.

The comprehensive human rights challenges of the current world are very clearly emerging in relation to environment and digital transformations. That is why it is very important to stick to the fundamentals of the Council of Europe, which has to contain enough flexibility to address mentioned environment and digital transformations and newly emerging challenges. The flexibility is the precondition to tackle this rise in concerns.

As the rapporteur correctly states under the scope of the report, the Assembly performs as a political driving force of the Council of Europe. To be a driving force, the Assembly has to look and move in one direction: sustainable peace, protection of human rights and the rule of law. That is hardly possible when the member states are in open ongoing military conflicts. In this counter-balance, PACE receives the growing added value and this role has to be acknowledged more than before.

Over 800 million citizens of the Council of Europe are now undergoing the non-precedented restrictions caused by the pandemic. This is the moment to open the Assembly's eyes and ears as wide as possible to prevent unsolicited discards of human rights and freedoms. That is the edge entailing the global informational order which is highly recommended to articulate at this Plenary.

We all have to contribute to ensure that the Assembly remains the pillar of democratic security and successful and effective multiculturalism in Europe, as well as the cornerstone of the European political architecture. The starting point for this shall be making more than 220 legally-binding instruments with the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter obligatory and fully implemented by all the member states.

Thank you.

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

Next on my list I have Ms Marietta KARAMANLI who will be followed by Mr Alain MILON.

You have the floor, Marietta.

Ms Marietta KARAMANLI (France, SOC): Thank you, dear colleagues. I welcome them from France.

Our discussion is about the Council of Europe's strategic priorities for the coming years. The report by our colleague, Mr Tiny KOX, is an important one, with two clear frameworks and three observations that I wanted to share with you.

The first is a reminder of what the Council of Europe's *raison d'être* is, namely a forum for discussion, if not consensual, then at least driven by the idea of a reasonable synthesis in favour of freedoms; a forum for developing the right to democracy and improving people's rights in a given geographical area, which is a reference point in the world; and a forum for inspiring democracy, too, for other states and for other international organisations. That means defending and promoting what are our comparative advantages - to use the economists' term - namely the promotion of a body of law in which States and governments accept that their powers are limited and people's rights are enhanced, and which is driven by the idea of justice.

My second observation concerns the context in which these organisations are defined. It is true that the report mentions it, but it is a new and disruptive fact. The COVID-19 pandemic, far from being overcome, has changed the lives of our citizens and is therefore changing the way in which our democratic institutions operate. Everywhere, the freedoms to come and go, to assemble and to decide whether or not to accept certain care, the right to access school and to work, have been called into question in the name of a supreme, acceptable goal - namely, to protect oneself and others - but, nevertheless, as we know from experience, many of the limitations on rights accepted in times of crisis remain afterwards. Therefore, the issue of expert opinions in support of decisions taken during a crisis raises many questions. In this respect, the Council will

have to continue to monitor closely the impact of the current health crisis, as well as a possible future crisis, and their effects on the pillars of the democratic system, including the functioning of parliaments. All of this, therefore, relates to the issue of social rights, which the rapporteur emphasises.

Finally, I shall speak about social freedoms. This will be my last observation because, everywhere, the issue of real equality is now competing with that of identities, which sometimes supplants it and often conceals the idea that not all women and men have the same rights and that solidarity is not automatic. In this respect, it is appropriate to recall the priority that the Council must give to the rights of migrants faced with war, persecution, economic and climatic inequalities and to renew our ideas and proposals in these areas so that the fight against inequalities is the foundation on which freedoms and rights, of which the Council is one of the most eminent pillars, are rooted.

That is what I wanted to share with all my colleagues, and I hope to see you more closely soon.

Thank you.

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

I now call Mr Alain MILON, followed by Mr Leonid SLUTSKIY.

Mister Alain MILON, you have the floor.

Mr Alain MILON (France, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear Colleagues,

"Every member of the Council of Europe must accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and collaborate sincerely and effectively in the realisation of the aim of the Council".

This excerpt from Article 3 of the Statute of the Council of Europe is binding on our states and on us collectively. It is a demanding ideal that sometimes contradicts certain national decisions, and whatever difficulties we may have in translating its principles into concrete action, it is a goal that serves democracy and, of course, serves our fellow citizens.

The European Convention on Human Rights is a unifying text, not a divisive one. The 220 or so conventions developed under the aegis of the Council of Europe help to safeguard and promote the ideals and principles that form our common heritage. It promotes the economic and social progress of the member states, as stated in Article 1 of the Statute. Indeed, the Council of Europe has been very active in setting standards, which is internationally recognised. I am thinking in the first place of the European Social Charter, which is a veritable cornerstone of social rights.

I agree with our rapporteur's call to those member states that have not yet done so to sign or ratify the revised European Social Charter and its additional protocol providing for a collective complaints system. I think it is important for the Council of Europe to emphasise the protection of economic and social rights, as called for by the Committee of Ministers in Helsinki.

I am also thinking of the many conventions that help to promote genuine equality and respect for human dignity and to combat discrimination. In this respect, I would like to mention in particular the Istanbul Convention, from which Turkey has announced its withdrawal after being the first state to ratify it. I am sorry about this because it seems to me that it sends a very negative signal, not only with regard to the work of the Council of Europe, but also and above all with regard to combating violence against women and domestic violence. This is an objective that I believe to be at the heart of our values. Equality, inclusion and respect for human dignity must remain priorities for the Council of Europe.

I will of course support the draft resolution before us.

Thank you for listening.

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

We now move on to Mr Leonid SLUTSKIY.

Mister SLUTSKIY, you have the floor.

Mr Leonid SLUTSKIY (Russian Federation, NR)*: Thank you President.

It's a great honour and pleasure to be able to speak on this item.

Mr Tiny KOX is one of the most authoritative members of our Assembly and the draft resolution has many important points about an important inclusive political dialogue as the fundamental bedrock of our organisation. Multilateralism, democratic security. At the same time it suggests how we should proceed in future.

We have this question of the Monitoring Committee that was established in the 1990s when there was an upsurge in the numbers of member seats of the Council and procedures needed to be introduced to cover the new members so that they would adopt the key principles of the Council of Europe: rule of law, independence of justice and so on.

Now, this process has become extremely broad discussing all sorts of random issues. We think there's a need to move on from country monitoring to thematic or situational monitoring which can check on a given situation on any country in the Council of Europe and not just on the so-called new democracies.

Thus, we can say that today we need to reflect this in the report. Unfortunately, it's not reflected in the report at present. There are 20 countries now who are under some sort of monitoring procedure at present, whether it's monitoring or post-monitoring or other processes. When it comes to monitoring them, we feel that we should transform this into thematic monitoring.

Mr Tiny KOX has referred to Article 1 of the Statute of our organisation which aims to keep high on the strategic agenda the search for common responses to societal problems and defending the common patrimony of the Council of Europe's countries.

If we want the Council of Europe to play its role to the full, and each member State should be able to play that role to the full in this part of the 21st century. Once again I'd like to thank Mr Tiny KOX for this report. I'm sure that we need to pay the most thorough attention to the European political architecture which is referred to in Article 7 in the draft resolution. An architecture predicated on equality among member States where the Council of Europe will play the role as a cornerstone and bedrock for that process.

Thank you, Mr Tiny KOX.

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

I now give the floor to Ms Nicole TRISSE, after whom we will have Ms Naira ZOHRABYAN from Armenia.

Nicole, you have the floor.

Ms Nicole TRISSE (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mr President.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, it is a good thing that our Assembly can debate and express its views on the priorities of the Council of Europe,

It is fortunate, normal and legitimate that our Assembly should be able to debate and give its opinion on its vision of the Council of Europe's priorities.

This debate seems to me to be all the more crucial as the values of the Council of Europe have recently been dealt real blows, reminding us that progress in favour of human rights is never a definitive achievement. I would point to the decision by some member States to renege on their commitments under certain emblematic conventions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the Istanbul Convention.

The sad reality is that the Council of Europe must first of all, before even considering new fields of action, endeavour to safeguard the implementation of the 220 or so legally binding conventions that have been adopted under its aegis for the greater benefit of the 800 million people living on our continent.

The report by Mr Tiny KOX rightly emphasises that the "core business" - if you can call it that - of our Organisation remains relevant. However, the Council of Europe must also adapt and project itself into the future. In this respect, I fully agree with what Mr Tiny KOX has proposed.

The Council of Europe has to respect human rights, especially the protection of women and children, promote economic and social rights, fight discrimination - all discrimination - take account of new technological challenges and affirm the right of new generations to live in a safe, healthy and sustainable environment.

However, if it is to remain indispensable, if it is to remain audible, particularly in the face of international organisations which are also concerned with human rights and the rule of law, it must evolve in order to be more efficient and coherent.

From this point of view, the avenues proposed by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy for more structured co-ordination of the various bodies seem to me to be fundamental, as does the development of co-operation with other international organisations, particularly the European Union.

I am optimistic, however, because the Council of Europe, which has not been spared by crises in recent years, has managed to adapt and modernise without losing its soul. New procedures, such as those for the initiation of joint sanctions against states failing to fulfil their obligations or the "trialogue", have been introduced in just a few months. This shows that, far from being old and venerable, at the height of its 70 years of existence, the Council of Europe remains an organisation that wants to be agile, that must be agile and that has its place in the world of today and tomorrow.

Thank you.

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

We now go to Ms Naira ZOHRABYAN.

I think Naira is in the room.

Naira, you have the floor.

Ms Naira ZOHRABYAN (Armenia, EC/DA): Dear Colleagues,

We are discussing a very important report, the strategic priorities of our institution.

In recent years, the Council of Europe and our Assembly have undergone very strange transformations in the determination of their priorities. I find it disconcerting, to say the least, that the Council of Europe, which seems to have become an anti-Russian club, has chosen the number one Russian opposition figure, Navalny, in all its latest agendas. And yet, what is happening in the 21st century in some Council of Europe member states is quite frightening. A few days ago, an exhibition of unprecedented cynicism opened in Baku, the exhibition of military spoils confiscated by the Armenian side in the recent Artsakh war. And you should have seen how Mr Aliyev proudly walked through the helmets of fallen Armenian soldiers. You should have seen how Azerbaijani children were having fun, choking the mannequins of Armenian soldiers. The issue of this fascist exhibition in Baku should have been one of the priority issues today.

Dear Colleagues, it is gratifying that today our Assembly is finally debating the issue of Armenian prisoners of war. Six months after the war, we have hundreds of prisoners of war in Azerbaijan, while Azerbaijan not only refuses to provide the European Court of Human Rights with accurate information on Armenian prisoners of war, but cynically declares that there are not prisoners of war, ignoring international law. I want to understand why the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has not yet visited the prison in Baku to see the inhuman conditions in which the Armenian prisoners of war are being held.

Dear Colleagues, alongside us, the European member states Azerbaijan and Turkey are cynically violating human rights. When Mr Aliyev declares that they won this war it is because they raised a whole generation of young Azerbaijanis with hatred for the enemy. This racist and Armenophobic statement must be discussed by our institution, otherwise we violate the fundamental values of our organization with false agendas.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We now move on to the next speaker, who is Mr André VALLINI.

André, you have the floor.

Mr André VALLINI (France, SOC): Mr President,

I call Mr Tiny KOX to support the report.

The report by our colleague Mr Tiny KOX is a continuation of our work and highlights the many challenges facing the Council of Europe today.

The report underlines the need for the Council of Europe to remain the guarantor of human rights and the rule of law and to promote effective multilateralism in Europe. It is an ambitious agenda, all the more ambitious today in a time of inward-looking attitudes and heightened tensions between states.

We can welcome the fact that in 70 years the Council of Europe has become the organisation that brings together all European states, with the exception of Belarus and the Holy See, around the core values affirmed by the European Convention on Human Rights, our founding text. We can also congratulate ourselves on the fact that our Organisation has made it possible to conclude more than 220 conventions – as has already been mentioned – on major issues: I am thinking of the European Social Charter, the Istanbul Convention and the Budapest Convention.

The draft resolution rightly highlights the growing challenges and new threats to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. It is right to state that the Council of Europe should address those challenges by promoting a contemporary, up-to-date and comprehensive vision of human rights.

However, the main issue for us today is the implementation of our basic texts, and the fundamental enforcement of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. It is essential that the Assembly remind all its member states of this without hesitation, and I am thinking in particular of Russia and Turkey.

It is therefore essential that the organisation, our organisation, in all its components, takes ownership of and, where appropriate, implements the new complementary joint procedure, which allows the statutory bodies to act together in the event of a flagrant violation by a member state of its obligations.

In these troubled times, the Council of Europe cannot, and must not, be satisfied with declarations. It must act and assert itself as a credible and effective organisation.

I will vote for the draft resolution and I thank you.

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

We now move to our next speaker, which is Mr Andreas NICK, who will be followed by Mr Oleg VOLOSHYN.

Andreas, you are in the room, you have the floor.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD): Mister President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe must be implemented and defined in three main dimensions.

Firstly, there is the thematic focus: protecting human rights, safeguarding the rule of law and pluralist democracy through our institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Venice Commission based on the European Convention on Human Rights, a centrepiece of our organisation and a world model for a human rights protection system.

Secondly, there is the geographical scope for over 800 million people in 47 member States with very different priorities: in the European Union with new challenges, in the Western Balkans, in the Caucasus with specific challenges, but also with regard to the big neighbours: Russia, Ukraine and Turkey.

Thirdly, there is the parliamentary dimension, which is particularly important to us, hence my special thanks to Mr Tiny KOX for this report, which was produced at short notice and with which we also want to introduce our parliamentary perspective in time for the Committee of Ministers' deliberations in May. This includes the strong institutional role of this Parliamentary Assembly in the election of Council of Europe bodies in governance, but also in the implementation of procedures such as monitoring and the newly established joint procedure.

I am honoured that the Political Affairs Committee recently appointed me as rapporteur for the report *The Council of Europe as a Cornerstone of the European Political Architecture*.

I look forward to taking up many of these things and then developing them further in this report to define the place of this organisation in the concert of other international organisations, the EU, the OSCE, NATO and others in Europe.

I believe that we do not want to be more of the same and compete with others, but that we need a clear profile and a clear division of labour along the dimensions of law, security and economic prosperity, and that many of the new issues and tasks that you are facing, including for our organisation, are accurately described in Mr Tiny KOX's report. We cannot be everything to everyone, but we need a focus that allows us to have and maintain a very specific profile in this concert of organisations in Europe. This must be achieved both thematically and geographically, as well as in the strength of the parliamentary dimension. This report provides an excellent stimulus for this and I am pleased that we will be able to continue the discussion on these issues with my report in the coming months.

Thank you very much, Mister President.

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

We now move to Mr Ahmet YILDIZ, who will be followed by Mr Zsolt CSENGER-ZALÁN.

Ahmet, you have the floor.

Mr Oleg VOLOSHYN (Ukraine, SOC): Gentlemen,

First, as the representative of the Ukrainian Parliament, I would like to apologise to all of you for this disgraceful performance, which unfortunately, I saw just recently executed by one of my colleagues. As a patriot of my country, I just do not want you to judge Ukraine by this really disgraceful situation. The Ukrainian Parliament is definitely not a circus, unfortunately we just have some clowns in there.

[The President asks the speaker to put on his mask]

I would like to commend the swift and very appropriate reaction of Mr Rik DAEMS on this occasion. I really believe that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable in this Assembly and I assure you that most, the vast majority of, Ukrainians are polite, well-mannered and really European people who do respect rules.

Now about the report: a really brilliant report, very modern and even the language of the report, I think everyone agrees with that, shows that Mr Tiny KOX understood the principle that Assembly should move ahead together with it all and develop around it. And definitely, this Plenary, this Assembly, should be a place for reconciliation and for inclusive dialogue, and not a place for fighting between the countries and for the continuation of the confrontation. This place was established by the great predecessors of us in order to help nations to come together, not to deepen the gap between them, not too deepen the conflict between them, and that is what I do stand for and watch a large part of Ukrainians do stand for.

The only remark I would like to make is that there should possibly be more focus on the defence of such a basic principle – a basic European value – the freedom of press. As you might know, on 2 February this year, Ukraine became – set a very disgraceful precedent – we became the first state which imposed sanctions on its own citizens. With these, Ukrainian citizens were deprived of the right to a fair trial. So three TV stations (112, News One and ZIK) were silenced with one presidential decree upon the decision of the National Security Council citing security concerns. But we all know that all dictatorships do always cite security concerns when they do want to silence the freedom of press. So I think that this situation should be well addressed by our Assembly and it should become a real part of the dialogue with the Ukrainian government because the conflict with Russia is no justification for any silencing of the opinion of the press.

In general, I fully agree with the recommendations of the report and the resolution and I would like again to stress that the constructive majority of the Ukrainian Parliament really believes that this Assembly is for dialogue, not for conflicts.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you. We now move to our next speaker, Mr Zsolt CSENGER-ZALÁN.

Zsolt, you are in the room. You've got the floor.

He will be followed by Mr Ahmet YILDIZ.

Mr Zsolt CSENGER-ZALÁN (Hungary, EPP/CD): Thank you for the floor, Mister President.

Dear Colleagues,

First of all I would like to congratulate the rapporteur for his excellent job.

The common reflection on the longer-term mission of the Council of Europe based on the Secretary General's strategic framework is timely and important. While keeping our political and institutional independence, the continuation of the good co-operation and constructive dialogue between the statutory organs of the organisation is essential for the effective functioning of the Council of Europe and for its strategic relevance.

The Council of Europe must continue delivering on its core mandate and traditional tasks, e.g. the protection of the rights of national minorities, while reacting to new and evolving challenges as well, such as the emergence of new technologies or climate change. Therefore, stability, predictability and continuity on the one hand, and flexibility on the other is needed to be able to adapt to the changing realities.

The creation of the new complementary joint procedure as a last resort instrument was an important step in the framework of solving the institutional crisis of the organisation. Nevertheless, the Council of Europe must remain a pan-European forum for dialogue and co-operation among its 47 member States and beyond. The Council of Europe's strength lies in its ability to promote dialogue and co-operation.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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

We will now move to Mr Ahmet YILDIZ.

He will be followed by Mr Dara CALLEARY.

Ahmet, you are in the room, you have the floor.

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

I congratulate the rapporteur Mr Tiny KOX on this very principal issue for the organisation. I know it is not an easy task to cover everything. That's why I have three questions orally.

Indeed, it is well known by everybody but we should remember here again. One is about accession of the EU to the Convention – it should be on equal footing and it should not distort the convention system at all.

Secondly is the sustainability of the fiscal situation of the organisation. As we agreed the pandemic already put pressure, financial pressure, on both the organisation and all member states, and we are not certain yet how long it will continue. That's why we should start thinking about a flexible and a sustainable way of financing the organisation without any interruption to the functions in the near future.

Thirdly, on the role of the Assembly within the Council, we can neither exaggerate nor degrade the role of the Assembly. Indeed we have a well-established understanding and practices on the role of the Assembly within the organisation over decades, so it should be proportional.

Why am I saying this? As everybody knows here and the President admitted sometimes, sometimes these days unfortunately some national priorities prevail. Or sometimes group priorities prevail over the values. And sometimes in the parliamentary atmosphere the vital interests of some member countries are ignored. These may cause unsustainable offers, unsustainable practices. We should avoid this and especially the complementary procedure should be a last resort, as its name suggests.

Thank you very much.

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

We now go to Mr Dara CALLEARY, who will be followed by Mr Samad SEYIDOV.

Dara, remotely, you have the floor.

Mr Dara CALLEARY (Ireland, ALDE): I wish to congratulate, and thank, the rapporteur Mr Tiny KOX for his work on this important report.

The report is clearly internal-looking. Much of our debate has been quite internal-looking. But for us to protect the Council and protect the role of the Council, we must engage with young people across the Council's member States.

The rapporteur has mentioned that in his presentation today. I'd like to investigate with him how he intends to do that. Otherwise, we risk this institution despite all of its great achievements and despite all of its great work becoming irrelevant to a new generation. If we become irrelevant, then we will run out of steam.

So, I think as we look at this report and as we go to the ministers meeting, we should challenge ourselves on how we engage with younger members and younger citizens who are more engaged in our agenda, are more engaged in the issues of the agenda of the Council of Europe outside political structures, and they are within political structures. I think as a Council and as an Assembly we must try and merge both.

Thank you very much, Mister President.

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

We now move to Mr Samad SEYIDOV, who will be followed by Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO.

Samad, you have the floor.

OK. Apparently... OK. Samad, are you on board? There you go. You have the floor.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Thank you very much, Mr President.

First of all I want to express my gratitude to the rapporteur, Mr Tiny KOX, for this very timely and very important report, because time has come to think about the priorities of the Council of Europe, of our work. And from this point of view, Mr President, I want again to return back to the opening remarks which you made at the very beginning of this session. They were very very essential, very very important.

The first one: we shouldn't use PACE as a political tool for other reasons. So important, so timely. Unfortunately my colleagues from Armenia each time try to use this Parliamentary Assembly for their own political reasons. Parliamentary elections coming in Armenia and maybe Ms Naira ZOHRABYAN wants to be again a member of the parliament, that's why she is so aggressive and she is so biased.

The second very very important point that we should not only talk about the country, but we should speak with the country. So important! And I think Mr Tiny KOX is absolutely right that we should change, we should do something with the monitoring process. This monitoring process is not acceptable. It is not enough. We can see a lot of biased approach, now good opinion of Azerbaijan, but tomorrow we are going to discuss the question about Azerbaijan, which is not so fair, my dear friends.

The third very important point, Mr President: we have to be a part of the solution. So timely! Unfortunately we can see see that situation is a little bit different – now we are talking about the peace. We wanted to be a part of the solution, some group of people, especially my colleagues from Armenia, again with revenge attitude, again with war thinking try to change and mislead the moods in the assembly, which is absolutely unacceptable.

That's why, Mr President, if we are able to take into account the recommendation of Mr Tiny KOX and your recommendation, we will believe in multilateralism. Not like Madam Merkel said, that we don't believe in multilateralism. No! We still believe! We want to believe! We don't want to use this organisation as a tool in the hands of those who are thinking about war not about peace.

Thank you very much, Mr President, and again thank you Mr Tiny KOX for your timely report.

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

We now move to our next speaker remotely, Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO, who will be followed by Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN who is in the room I think.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO first, you have the floor.

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

Thank you Mr President.

Talking about strategic priorities of the Council of Europe we should take into consideration two important factors, two important things.

First of all, real, not abstract, problems we face.

Second, concrete solutions to these problems.

What are these problems?

I'll take a risk to single them out.

First of all, no implementation by some member states of the decisions given by the European Court of Human Rights.

What can be the solution to this acute problem?

I think such a solution can be strict policy on the part of the Council of Europe with regard to the violators. Non-implementation of the decisions by the European Court of Human Rights cannot be tolerated any more. Each violator should be faced with a dilemma: either to leave our organisation or to strictly implement decisions of the European Court of Human Rights.

Second problem which I view is extraterritorial effect of human rights violations. In other non-European regions, for example, we hear time and again about acts of genocide committed or crimes against humanity committed beyond Europe. Such crimes are crimes against the whole humanity, not only against people of these countries. We should not ignore such crimes. We should develop specific special mechanisms allowing us to address these crimes.

Third problem is the prevention of wars leading to massive violations of the basic human right to life. I understand that our organisation is not about preventing wars. It's not about security. But we should take into consideration the fact that war leads to massive violation of human rights. Again we should also try to find a solution to this problem.

Finally, the problem related to police brutality. The problem of unjustified and excessive use of force by police. I believe that to solve this problem we need to develop a special convention.

Unfortunately I haven't found these problems and solutions to these problems in the current report. Nevertheless I hope that these problems will be addressed in the future.

Thank you.

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

And we now move to Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN and who I believe is in the room. Vladimir, you have the floor. You will be followed by Mr Paul GAVAN remotely.

Vladimir, go ahead.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Honourable Mr President,

Honourable colleagues,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me congratulate Mr Tiny KOX for this excellent report. It is quite important to have the document which actually shaped the strategic priorities for our organisation for upcoming years. It is quite important that we have in this document, also, the current challenges this organisation faces and it is quite important when several emerging rights are mentioned as priorities for our organisation. But we should not forget about the core values of this organisation. We should not forget about the core rights, which should be also respected and which should not be underestimated even in the situation of the current challenges we face. The Council of Europe and PACE as a statutory organ and driving force of this organisation, is both a forum for the political discussions and dialogue and is also the pillar for democratic society and security.

I would just like to say that this Organisation was created to prevent any other horrors of the Second World War. This Organisation was created to be a watchdog for the protection of human rights, for the securing of rule of law and for respecting democracy. This organisation was created to say "never again" to the Holocaust, crimes against humanity and all the other wrongdoings. Just a couple of minutes ago, Chancellor

Angela Merkel referred to Konrad Adenauer who said that the Council of Europe is the "conscience of Europe". But let us ask each other the question, whether we are still the conscience of Europe, whether we are sincere with each other and whether we are still a value-based organisation.

Yesterday, I heard a speech that led me to the books of George Orwell, because my Azerbaijani colleagues mentioned, for example, that "we are starting to wage war because we want peace"; "in reality, there is no national minority because if the national minority lives together, the national majority becomes a minority and it should be respected"; "we are for multiculturalism, that is why we are destroying the cultural property of a mono-ethnic society." Yesterday, my country was accused of being mono-ethnic. I am afraid, ladies and gentleman, that during the upcoming part of the session, my country would be accused of being a democratic state. Where are we going?

Ladies and gentlemen, more than 200 Armenian prisoners of war are under Azerbaijani custody. We have reasonable grounds to believe that their lives are in danger, that they may be subjected to torture. I would like just, once again, to say to all of you, ladies and gentleman: it is not a political issue, it is an issue of human rights, it is the issue of democracy and their rights should be respected. And as a postscript I would like just to say, it does not matter, it would be automatic monitoring or country monitoring. You will be in each and every country until you did not change the policy of your state.

Thank you.

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

Of course, it would be nice if each and everyone sticks to the subject on the agenda. I'm not saying that all the other elements being brought on the Assembly are not important.

We now have Mr Paul GAVAN, who will be followed by Lord Richard BALFE.

Mr Paul GAVAN remotely, you have the floor.

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL): Thank you Mr President.

I want to begin just by condemning the antics of Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO earlier in this debate. The last thing we need is a return to the politics of the 1930s.

I want to offer my full support for this excellent report and congratulate rapporteur Mr Tiny KOX. The resolution sets out key priority issues that are of strategic importance to the Council of Europe and that deserves careful consideration by every delegate attending this Assembly.

In the short time available I want to highlight just a couple of the key points before making reference to the issue of funding and resources.

We must all support without equivocation the call in this resolution for all states to respect and fully execute all judgments of the Court of Human Rights. A failure to do so would undermine the role of the Council of Europe as the pillar of democratic security and effective multilateralism in Europe.

I want to particularly welcome the inclusion of the accession of the European Union to the European Convention of Human Rights as a strategic priority. Mr Tiny KOX puts the potential of this very well describing the promise of a single common legal space from Reykjavik to Vladivostok without exception.

I have to say I find it extraordinarily disappointing that progress has been so slow on this issue in recent years particularly now with the ever more disturbing trend towards a fortress European Union. A EU that locks human beings out, puts them in camps in Turkey and allows them to drown in the Mediterranean rather than offer them a route to safety.

The relegation of rights of migrants and refugees and the much criticised activities and lack of accountability of the Frontex EU border force must continue to be highlighted by this Assembly.

I also want to welcome support for the call within this resolution for the Council to put a strong emphasis on the protection of social and economic rights. These are rights that have been under attack for decades now through an ideology of neoliberalism with hugely damaging consequences for workers and families across Europe. We witness a race to the bottom in terms and conditions and an increase in low-paid work and the marginalisation of trade unions and workplace democracy.

I particularly welcome the inclusion of the European Social Charter as a strategic priority and fully support the call for all member states to not just sign but fully live up to this document. In this regard I have to regretfully yet again highlight the continuing failure of the Irish government, my own government, to legislate for collective bargaining rights as set out in Article 28 of the Charter.

How much longer will Irish workers have to wait before they can have the human right to collective bargaining established in law?

Finally Mr President, the issue of funding. The move from zero nominal growth to zero real growth is welcome but clearly not enough. I have to contrast the ever more obscene amounts of money spent by member states on military expenditure while discontinuing reluctance to properly fund this human rights body is maintained. This does beg the question. What does this tell us about the reality of European values today?

Colleagues we must do better.

Thank you.

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

I thank Mr Tiny KOX for the quality of this report, which stresses the new challenges the Council of Europe today faces.

Of course, the draft resolution rightly stresses the growing challenges to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, as well as the emergence of new threats that require an adaptation of the legal framework. The Council of Europe, with the benefit of its extensive and recognised activity in negotiating international standard-setting instruments, is certainly well placed to rise to these new challenges.

However, while the issue of law is crucial, the challenge of the cohesion facing the Organisation, and of the affirmation and ownership of its values seem to me to be even stronger in bringing us together.

The draft resolution before us welcomes the Athens Declaration, adopted in November 2020 by the presidency of the Committee of Ministers. This declaration reaffirms the commitment to unity in Europe and to greater solidarity between nations. It reaffirms the commitment to the principles of the rule of law and the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This text is obviously a noble intention, but I cannot fail to note that it has not been supported by all the states. I cannot fail to notice, and this part-session illustrates this once again, that there are elements of fragmentation, that tensions are emerging, and that multilateralism is being challenged in favour of more national approaches.

Mr Rik DAEMS said it yesterday in his opening speech. The European Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe conventions are not instruments that can be used against any specific state. The European Convention on Human Rights is our common benchmark, a benchmark that is demanding but must not be taken hostage. Let us not yield the exigencies of belonging to the Council of Europe, nor the execution of the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. In this regard I wish to stress the essential role of our Assembly and in particular of the Monitoring Committee, not to mention the importance of the new joint complementary procedure.

I share the aim of the resolution. Yes, the Council of Europe is and must remain the pillar of democratic security, the guarantor of human rights and the rule of law as well as a platform fostering effective multilateralism in Europe. However, this means further strengthening the credibility of our Organisation and championing more forcefully the protection and promotion of the rule of law, human rights and democracy. This is the responsibility upon all of our shoulders.

Thank you.

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

We now move to Ms Nigar ARPADARAI, who is in the room, who will be followed by Ms Tamar TALIASHVILI. Nigar, you got the floor.

Ms Nigar ARPADARAI (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Dear Colleagues,

Europe cannot be defined solely in geographical terms. It is, first of all, an idea so attractive that over centuries people and countries choose to navigate towards it, embracing European identity.

Today Europe is a civilizational and cultural construct, that expanded well beyond the natural borders of European "peninsula" of the Eurasian continent over last few centuries. Today, one of the most important questions is the question of where the European border of Europe stands. This is not a geographical question either. It is a question of the future of Europe, its security and prosperity.

I'm very grateful to the esteemed colleagues for this discussion. It is very timely. There is a whole set of issues that need mending. Old and current conflicts, separatist regimes, refugees and humanitarian crisis cases, quality of democracy and adherence to human rights.

But most, importantly, there is a trust issue. The so-called old European democracies see steps and actions of many of its eastern peers through the lens of suspicion and doubt. Eastern countries often interpret both fair and unfair criticism of human rights and democracy records as the tool for political pressure, not of standing by principles. Sometimes both sides are wrong, but sometimes they are right.

Today we see clear isolationist tendencies. One can justify them with pandemic measures, economic, political or security considerations. But we entered the period of sovereign egoism. I believe it is a very dangerous and self-destructive path for our part of the world.

Big Europe is the chance for peace and prosperity. Small isolated Europe is the way to calamity for all of us. This is a known historical fact, and it is shocking that we have to relearn it now in the 21st century. For my country Azerbaijan, big Europe means connectivity, access to large markets and strong democratic tradition. For our western peers it means economic, political and security dividends. We all need each other.

The Council of Europe is the largest and oldest platform to relaunch such dialogue between countries of Europe. There should be a process of recognition of the problem and there should be a programme of political will to launch a large trust building process. It will require compromise and hard work. It will also require vision that we often lack carried out by current issues. But it is unavoidable if the dream of a large and peaceful Europe is still alive.

Thank you.

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

We now move to Ms Tamar TALIASHVILI who is in the room.

You have the floor.

She will be followed by Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS remotely.

Ms Tamar TALIASHVILI (Georgia, SOC): Dear President, dear colleagues.

I salute the rapporteur, Mr Tiny KOX, for the comprehensive presentation as usual.

In the light of the confirmed vision of the Assembly for the Council of Europe as a guarantor of human rights and the rule of law, let me recall the groundbreaking judgment of the European Court of Human Rights.

This judgment confirmed Russia's occupation and effective control over the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia. This historic decision adds further weight and raises the role of the European community's demand that Russia ceases its blatant violations of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia's actions threaten the right to life and the fundamental rights and freedoms, including the cultural identity of the people living in the Georgian territories.

For instance, recently Zaza Gakheladze was wounded and illegally imprisoned for more than 12 years by occupation forces. This incident is a good attestation Russia's breach of the EU-mediated 2008 ceasefire agreement and a gross violation of the fundamental rights and freedoms.

We demand from Russia immediate release of all the illegal detainees.

It is important that the Council of Europe gives due consideration to the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and effectively pushes the occupying force to stop its illegal occupation and practice of human rights violations in occupied regions and territories adjusting to the occupation line.

I recall impressive opening words by the president Mr Rik DAEMS saying that it is important to be part of the solution.

Indeed, the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe should prioritise the making of the solutions.

That's within its priorities, I believe Council of Europe shall stress this strategic importance and play its vital role in resolving the conflict peacefully, and combat the threat to the territorial integrity of its member states.

Thank you.

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

We now move to Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, who is in the room, I believe, who will be followed by Mr Ziya ALTUNYALDIZ.

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA you have the floor.

Sir, can I ask you to keep your mask on?

Thank you.

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA (Austria, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, I will speak in German.

It was Chancellor Angela Merkel who said today that Europe has the highest human rights standards in the world, but at the same time she pointed out that Europe's external borders show us that peace, security and prosperity cannot be taken for granted.

This brings me to the heart of our strategy here. Fundamental values and rights must not be disregarded; if they are disregarded, then trust is lost and nothing is more important to us as individuals, as politicians, but also to the institution, to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, than trust, confidence and credibility. If we have lost that, we have lost everything. And that is why I am very grateful to Mr Tiny KOX for his work, because it goes right to the core issues of what we have to concern ourselves with, and should form part of a strategic approach. After all, anyone who reads the latest reports from Amnesty International, as far as member states of ours are concerned, will see that we are facing challenges to remain credible ourselves and it is good if we can talk to colleagues from these countries rather than talk about them.

I believe that there is one basic prerequisite for this, and that is mutual respect, but the second basic prerequisite, in addition to respect, is that our criticism is taken seriously by those members and that we do not always immediately take up a defensive position and regard this criticism as unjustified. I have listened very carefully to previous speakers from states that are increasingly, and in my view justifiably, subject to our criticism. Here, the Parliamentary Assembly must ensure that these four fundamental pillars that are our hallmark – respect for human rights, an independent judiciary, democracy and, of course, the rule of law – we have built up a very good institutional system, and we must not talk it down, we must not allow that to happen. Where there is room for improvement, we must improve it, but we must also protect these institutions.

With this in mind, I would like to express my sincere thanks for this work, which will, of course, receive my support.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): *Danke Ihnen*, we now move to Mr Ziya ALTUNYALDIZ, remotely, who will be followed by Ms Maryna BARDINA.

Ziya is not connected. We then move immediately to Ms Maryna BARDINA, who is in the room.

Maryna, just a second, because apparently we got..

I have the other one first and then you will come after.

So, we have him on board?

OK, Ziya, you have the floor.

Mr Ziya ALTUNYALDIZ (Turkey, NR): Thank you Mr President.

Dear colleagues,

First of all I would like to begin with the appreciation of the rapporteur for his valuable work.

As you all know, the PACE and Committee of Ministers have been working in successful coordination in this report and to contribute on strategic priorities for the coming years of the Council of Europe.

I think we all agree on Council of Europe's main priorities are the human rights, the rule of law, independence and democracy.

I'd like to underline the importance of providing an efficient environment for multilateral cooperation and both comprehensive and inclusive dialogue and cooperation.

Dear colleagues, not only member states but also the whole world tries to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This tough fight has taught the importance of acting and sticking together. For this reason, I strongly share the solid cooperation framework as a strategic priority for the Council of Europe.

In addition to these environmental issues are also one of the most important points of the global agenda as you may be aware. Let me share some facts. We are losing 1.2 trillion tons of ice each year. The earth's surface temperature has risen about 1.2 degrees Celsius and global sea level rose about 20 centimetres in the last century.

As you all know, clean water, clean energy and combating climate change are a few of significant elements of 19 life-changing Sustainable Development Goals. To this regard I would like to underline that both PACE and Council of Europe's contribution to Sustainable Development Goals are more than essential and valuable.

Moreover, my dear friends, artificial intelligence is a technology that is transforming every walk of life in every day. It is a wide-ranging tool that enables people to rethink how we integrate information, analyse data, and use the resulting insight to improve decision-making.

I myself, as the chair of the Sub-Committee on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, and the rapporteur of the Report "Legal aspects of 'autonomous' vehicles", do share that regulations about AI should keep on showing respect for human rights and democratic values. They should be obtained as a result of a comprehensive, inclusive, coordinated framework among both and international bodies.

To complete, my friends, I would like to thank all the contributors for developing strategic priorities of the Council of Europe. I believe these contributions would become significant policy recommendations and the Committee of Ministers will kindly care about them.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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

We will now move to Ms Maryna BARDINA, who is in the room. She will be followed by a Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, remotely.

Maryna, I do apologise for just a moment ago but do take the floor.

Ms Maryna BARDINA (Ukraine, ALDE): Okay, thank you.

Dear Colleagues,

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the rapporteur Mr Tiny KOX, who presented the vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe.

On the one hand, the report contains very important points, for example the value of the Council of Europe multi-annual strategy on gender equality that is emphasized. I agree that such complex document as strategy has become a powerful tool for mainstream and gender equality in member States. It has been a good attempt to unify our approaches on women's empowerment.

On the other hand, this past report is too idealistic; it does not correspond to the reality. It is true Council of Europe conventions as well as recommendations have become gold standards, but let's talk about the real implementation.

It is clear that some member States, for example the Russian Federation, ignore the scope of international human rights standards. Despite all human rights violations committed by this State's authorities, its delegation still participates in Assembly sessions.

Significant weakening of the PACE sanctions mechanism as provided by the resolution on strengthening the decision-making process or the Parliamentary Assembly on powers and voting took place without any constructive steps by the Russian Federation as well as against the background of Russia's non-compliance with its commitments and base resolutions.

For this reason I believe the report should be improved to respond to the real challenges the Council of Europe faces today.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We now move remotely to Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, who will be followed by Mr Erkin GADIRLI.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS is not there? Okay, but if they are not connected at their spot, we are going to skip it.

We now have Mr Erkin GADIRLI in the room, I believe. Okay, Erkin, you have got the floor.

Mr Erkin GADIRLI (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Thank you Mr Chairman, and I would also like to thank Mr Tiny KOX, the rapporteur, for the very balanced report. Although I have some disagreements, although some of those disagreements are ideological, with some elements in this report, I cannot agree from the legal point of view, but I do not want to be a troublemaker today.

You know what what we are witnessing now, of course, it is a new reality, big tech, artificial intelligence, pandemic: none of these problems were created by the member states, and in fact, as the practice shows, all member states – without any exclusion – were – and still are – unprepared and do not have a clue how to deal with these problems. And all these problems, not originated from the states, create additional problems for human rights. So this problem is duly reflected in the draft report.

But I, as a lawyer, I would be very cautious about the new generation of rights, especially so-called environmental rights. We now see some potentially dangerous attempts to, for example, invoke Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to life, would then take environmentalist context. Article 2, neither textually nor contextually, is capable of protecting what is called "environmental rights", it should not be expanded to such a to such an extent. This will lead us to what is called rights fetishisation. Rights fetishism is not good.

So, and my last comment, of course, today's discussion of this report started very emotionally by the comments from Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, but I want to support him on one particular thing. I think, I believe, that this report should reflect territorial integrity. It talks about one of the strategic goals, which is to achieve a greater unity among member states, and how can you achieve a greater unity if some states threaten territorial integrity of other states. Some may disagree with me. I want to remind you of PACE Resolution number 1416 2005, it was about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. One particular statement, Paragraph 2. It says, I quote: "the Assembly reiterates that the occupation of foreign territory by a member state constitutes a grave violation of that state's obligation as a member of the Council of Europe."

Now I think this could have been reflected in the report and I think that the Ukrainian delegation is completely right on this.

Thank you.

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

We now move to Mr Aleksandr BASHKIN who will be followed by Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA.

Aleksandr, remotely, you have the floor.

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

Colleagues,

I'd like to thank the rapporteur for the constructive tone and focus on strengthening the Council of Europe as a pillar of European security in the increasingly complex international situation. The significance of such political discourse is only growing.

At the same time, it's important to stress that the legal system of the Council of Europe will only implement its role if it relies on a uniform application of the key element: the European Convention on Human Rights.

A free interpretation of the fundamental principles of the ECHR, which we've been witnessing in recent years, has led to the appearance of double standards in assessing the implementation by member states of the principles of defence of human rights.

The idea of establishing a super-coordinating monitoring mechanism would mean creating a new leaver of pressure on a given state. Furthermore, it's quite likely that monitoring of an individual country in this way is discrimination and should be conducted in respect of common problems.

Colleagues, for more than a year we've been witnessing fierce rivalry in the divying up of PPE and access to vaccines amongst the countries of Europe on the basis of economic or political grounds. The Assembly should analyse this trend and step up its quest for mechanisms for common European cooperation in combating the disease. It's obvious that the Council of Europe affords its own basis for developing common European cooperation in order to resolve new threats. They include the threat of terrorism, the strengthening of neo-fascist attitudes in Europe as well as uncontrolled migration and environmental disruption.

The rapporteur appropriately draws attention to these problems, but such cooperation should not be politicised and it should not from the outset, but carry within it the virus of preordained biased approaches.

We agree with the opinion of Mr Tiny KOX about the role of the European Court. This is a unique instrument in the system of international judicial bodies. We can't understand why the European Union has for many years been eschewing a solution to the question of its accession to the European Convention.

However, I'd like to draw attention to the need for the European Court to strictly follow the principle of subsidiarity and the mandate laid down for it by the European Convention. A departure by the court from this framework is the road to distorting legal purity and the political neutrality of its judgements.

In conclusion, I'd like to stress that the Assembly needs, in addition to designating its strategic goals, to carry out a regular study of specific problems that hamper their achievements. Without such an analysis, the remarkable report of Mr Tiny KOX may simply remain a compendium of wishful thinking.

Thank you.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you. We now move to Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, in the room, who will be followed by Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA, I hope I said that right.

Mariia, vous avez la parole.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): We salute this report.

It's definitely on time and the Assembly vision was actually in need of strategic priorities for all of us, for the member countries and us colleagues as concrete representatives of constituencies and peoples of 47 member states.

Our delegation would like to stress the best principles, of course, that the Council of Europe must condemn the combat to threat of territorial integrity and security of the member states and that was enshrined in many resolutions that you have passed before.

Of course, the authority of the European Court of Human Rights has to be strengthened as well, and we know that there are member states who don't comply with that. Moreover, the national law can never prevail above the international one, and this is a rule that we all condemned.

I would also like to stress that the report might have looked in a more compliant way if we would be speaking about the growing threat of the national propaganda never to be twisted or viewed in another member, rather than speaking from your heart or speaking about the issues that we have in member states. So propaganda and the right to speech which is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights can never be twisted, and that should not undermine the general democracy and freedom of speech.

However, dear colleagues, we have heard a great intervention of Chancellor Merkel who pointed out the modern threats, and that is very much linked to conducting fair and democratic elections. And of course we are talking about social networks, mass media and cyber attacks. This is where we all have to join in common efforts to fight such abolishments.

Merci, Président. We salute the report.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you. We now move to Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA, who will be followed by Ms Ingjerd SCHOU, remotely.

Yuliia, you are in the room I suppose. Yeah, you have got the floor.

Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA (Ukraine, ALDE): Mr President,

Dear Mr Rapporteur,

Dear Assembly,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you Mr KOX for the presentation and your reminder that the Council of Europe was established based on the idea and value of persevering peace based upon Justice and international cooperation is vital for the preservation of human society and civilisation. Members of the Council of Europe have proved their devotion to the spiritual and moral values, which are the common heritage of their peoples and the true source of individuals' freedom, political authority and the rule of law, principle which formed the basis of general democracy. We can find these ideas in the preamble of the Statute of the Council of Europe, which all members have to respect and implement. That is what the Council of Europe was established for and that is the essence of its existence.

The report points out that the Council of Europe overall priority is to remain the guarantor of human rights and rule of law, independent of justice, the pillar of democracy security to provide the uniquely platform for a multilateral cooperation in Europe. Such great words, extraordinary ideas but have they recently been fulfilled? And how could we react as a European community if some countries try to manipulate it and use this form for their own political gain? The fundamental values and regulations of the Council of Europe, as well as the international law, have been grossly violated by the Council of Europe member countries which consistently violate this Statute of the Council of Europe and persistently ignore the Assembly resolution, rules of procedure, as well as fundamental values.

It is undefeatable that after 70 years of Council of Europe work, European countries still have threats to their territorial integrity and still face military aggression by one of the Council of Europe members. Goal twelve is dedicated to equality, national minorities and non-discrimination. I do believe that it is highly important to translate Council of Europe standards to national policies. But first we must call those Council of Europe member countries that have not ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages for the Council of Europe to do so urgently. It is one of the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe, global community as well as artificial intelligence.

The Assembly adopted many resolutions and recommendations last year and now it is high time for member countries to learn them, to raise awareness, to discuss how they can be implemented. But what to do when resolutions are ignored by individual members of Council of Europe? A new strategy should focus on really reaction, so I am MP and also support the Environmental Policy Council of Europe.

Thank you for the attention.

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

We now move to Ms Ingjerd SCHOU if she is connected, is she?

She is not, then we move to the next speaker who is Ms Laura CASTEL, in the room.

Laura, are you here? *¿estás acá?* OK. *Tienes la palabra.*

Ms Laura CASTEL (Spain, NR): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues,

I want to congratulate the rapporteur, Mr Tiny KOX, for this work which focuses on the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe and what is most important: what is our vision about that.

I want to emphasise several points of the report which I believe are very important.

Firstly, the Council of Europe's overall priority is to reaffirm itself as an independent forum for a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue. For us, for my party, it is very important this concept.

Secondly, increasing challenges to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly need to be responded to with firm action, for without meaningful dialogue, including with those who disagree, this is not possible. That's a very specific and important point.

Finally, to stress the need to ensure a proper protection of parliamentarians and journalists.

I highlight those points because without inclusive political dialogue with those who disagree there can be no political solutions, no democratic society, no advancement in human rights. The European Court of Human Rights has rightly given states very little margin to restrict debate, particularly those regarding public interest. Indeed, the absence of dialogue deteriorates values, it nullifies us as human beings. Political adversaries become enemies and the reasoning gives room to hate speech, populism and the end of democracy.

So, in conclusion, political dialogue for political issues, debate instead of criminal code, not using state powers against political opponents: that is the basis of respecting democracy. Without the above we risk having a new and very lawful despotism.

Thank you very much, rapporteur.

Thank you very much, President.

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

We will now have our last speaker on our list which is Ms Ingjerd SCHOU, remotely.

Ingjerd, you have the floor.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD): Thank you so much Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Let me start by thanking Mr Tiny KOX for this well written and comprehensive report.

I also welcome the idea of a four year strategic framework for the Council of Europe, and I believe that Mr Tiny KOX's report is a good contribution to the discussion on such a framework.

I fully support his vision on the strategic priorities, his recommendations and conclusions.

I appreciate Mr Tiny KOX's emphasis on the core values and the core tasks of our organisation. That's being a watch dog for human rights, and monitoring and safeguarding democracy and the rule of law. This should always be clearly underlined in any Council of Europe strategic document. In order to succeed in this we must make sure that our organisation remains relevant, and continues to be an attractive and unique platform for pan-European dialogue.

We must also make sure that our member states fully respect their membership obligations. The solid legal framework provided by the Council of Europe must be efficiently implemented. Especially the carrying out of the European Court of Human Rights judgements.

Dear colleagues, the accession of the EU to the European Convention of Human Rights is listed as one of the strategic priorities, and Mr Tiny KOX draws special attention to this in his report. This is an important priority. The political decision to work towards this goal was made at the highest level a long time ago. Yet the process of putting this decision into practice has stopped due to legal difficulties. I sincerely hope that we can soon find a solution to this.

Accession is important. It would strengthen the credibility of the EU and the relevance of the Council of Europe and the Convention, for all its citizens and its member states.

Accession of the EU to the Convention should therefore be urgently followed.

Thank you, Mister President.

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

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

Unfortunately we now have to interrupt the list of speakers due to time constraints.

We did manage to have 28 out of 38 which is a lot.

The speeches of members on the speaker's list who have been present physically or remotely during the debate but have not been able to speak may be given to the table office for publication in the official report, of course provided that speakers who are connected remotely can report their actual presence when the debate is closed.

I remind colleagues that typewritten text must be submitted electronically no later than four hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

Before giving the floor to Mr Tiny KOX may I all remind that we are still in the middle of the voting for the judges. So please for those who did not vote yet I would suggest that you do so.

Now I call on Mr Tiny KOX, rapporteur, to reply.

You have three minutes.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Mr President.

And thanks a lot to all colleagues who participated in this important debate and they emphasised all kinds of elements that we should take into account.

Some colleague said this is too idealistic and that's something that is a realist conclusion, but may I remind everybody that when in '49 in Strasbourg the Council of Europe met for the first time reality was far worse than reality today: the continent was in ruins and the ideals then that Europe should work to greater unity was observed in those circumstances, you could say. But, as Chancellor Merkel said rightfully, many achievements have been made since then. Europe has united. It is a miracle for me. It is a miracle that 47 member states of the Council of Europe indeed have united themselves in one Council of Europe under one convention, under one statute.

And, yes, Mr President, there are huge gaps between the ideals that are formulated in the statute and in the convention and in the two hundred other conventions and reality. And there are many expressions today in this hemicycle, but, dear colleagues, if we indeed, as some of the colleagues said, do not consider the Council of Europe and especially its Assembly as an arena where we have to fight each other, but we consider that the uniqueness of the Council of Europe and its Assembly is that it is an *agora* where we meet, in spite of all our differences between these 47 member states and in all these 47 member states themselves. Then it is worthwhile, over 70 years after the foundation of this organisation, to cherish the fact that we are together, despite our differences, and that we should have a new vision on how to continue.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe has presented her strategic priorities and thanks to the President also this Assembly took the chance to react to it and today we formulate our Assembly's view on the strategic priorities as we think. And I have included a lot of reports that we have dealt with here recently. So I did not invent a lot of things. No. I did combine a lot of things.

But today I hear overwhelming support for the idea of the Secretary General that we should have strategic priorities because, as some colleagues said, we cannot do everything at the same moment.

Nevertheless, we have a huge obligation to take care of the first generation of human rights, civil rights, the second generation of human rights, economic and social rights, and the third new generation of human rights, for example, that we go on to environment, climate, but also to the rights of women and children.

Altogether, Mr President, yes, it is a bold programme that is formulated in this resolution. We are not sure whether we are able to comply with it, but if we do not have the same boldness that our predecessors had over 70 years ago, then the Council of Europe is going nowhere.

If we are courageous enough to formulate these strategic priorities there is a chance, there is a chance, that the Europe of the next 10-20 years will be a better Europe than it is now. And that is an effort that is worthwhile to be dealt with.

Thank you very much, Mr President.

Thank you very much, colleagues, for this fine debate.

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

I just got a small note from the Secretary General on the basis of what you said, saying that the Assembly is an agora not an arena.

Mr Chair of the Committee, do you wish to have the floor?

You have it for three minutes.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Chair of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): ... for your participation, both Secretary General in this debate.

I would like to thank you as this is probably my first appearance as the Chairman of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy to express my gratitude for your unanimous support yesterday in my election.

In a few weeks the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will hold a ministerial session organised by the German Chairmanship. This is the whole target of our exercise. On this occasion the ministers are expected to consider the strategic framework for the Council of Europe on the basis of proposals by the Secretary General.

On January 21 the President of the Assembly suggested that the Assembly should make a contribution to this discussion. The leaders of all political groups agreed and accordingly the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy was asked to prepare a report. I'm grateful to Mr Tiny KOX for completing this important work in just a few weeks and for producing a concise but comprehensive report which was adopted unanimously by the Committee on March 30.

Our debate today was an opportunity to reiterate the views of the Assembly as a statutory organ with general competence and priority issues that we deem of strategic importance for the Council of Europe for the years to come. This is fully in accordance with the statutory role of the Assembly and its responsibility as a political driving force for the Agora of the Council of Europe.

I am grateful to many colleagues who have contributed to our debate today. This interest shows that you care for the future of our organisation and that you believe in the work that we are doing here.

I hope that our message will be heard by our colleagues in the Committee of Ministers who are also to some extent welcome here.

But our work does not stop here. As it is stressed in the draft recommendation submitted to you today, the Assembly shall continue its strategic reflection on the future of the Council of Europe. The ways to do it?

One is to further increase its political relevance.

Secondly, preserve and reaffirm its own identity as an independent forum for comprehensive and inclusive political dialogue and cooperation.

And thirdly, ensure that it remains the pillar of democratic security. Yes, democratic security which was asked by so many people here. And a successful and effective multilateralism which we are all committed to.

We stand ready to engage in a constructive institutional dialogue with the Committee of Ministers on this matter.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

The debate is closed

Votes on the resolution and recommendation will take place this afternoon sharp at 2 p.m., which will be a few seconds after the closure of the voting on the judges. So once again, those who did not vote yet on the judges, please do so. It will stop sharp at 2pm and then I suppose, Tiny, at 2 p.m. and two seconds or something like that, we will start voting on the amendments.

Thanks to the Chair of the Committee. Many thanks to you as a rapporteur. Thanks to all of you for having participated. Also thank you, Secretary General, for being here because it does imply the connection between the Assembly, yourself and the Committee of Ministers.

See you at 2 p.m. sharp.

Next sitting at 14:00