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

Please take your places.

We're going to start.

I hope that some other of our colleagues of the ALDE Group are going to come in here.

Okay, we'll have to start.

Good morning, dear colleagues.

Please take your seats.

Welcome, my good colleague and friend President of the European Parliament David SASSOLI. We are very glad to have you on board.

Members are trickling in because as you know they had the group meetings. So I'm like ringing my bell to get them in. Anyway, they are almost all coming down.

As a matter of fact, just for your information, we have our second session in a hybrid manner. Basically it's a physical meeting but those who cannot be with us are online. Just for your information, we have more than 100 members of parliament coming down to Strasbourg out of more than 20 countries. If I'm correct we got about 150 online. So there's a big audience for you, Mr President, which is normal because we are related institutions, the European Parliament and ourselves.

We did have an occasion to meet briefly, it was kind of a speed date at the beginning of last year and we did convene that we would meet a bit regularly but Covid decided differently.

As you know, we have a cooperation agreement that we would like to put in practice where committees meet, where bureaus meet, but as I said the Covid decided differently and I suppose it converted you as well as myself in some kind of a crisis manager trying to adapt and overcome.

I know that you did in a very nice and good way with your parliament, of course with the support of all of your services. And I can tell you that we from our side did the same with the support of all of our services and again, this is our second meeting that we are having in a so-called hybrid fashion as you do with your parliament in Brussels now.

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.

Anyway, if for any reason you might consider coming down to Strasbourg, be it yourself or be it the whole or part of your Parliament, I mean, my Secretary General, our new Secretary General Despina, is fully available to share expertise and I'm sure that the French authorities, I don't know, Marie Fontanel, there she is, from whom we had fantastic cooperation, will do the same.

We got almost like a fixed building outside the parliament for all the testing. It's incredible. Anyway, we cross our fingers, we touch on wood that everything continues to go well, but I'm sure that whatever you consider to come down to Strasbourg that our expertise might be valuable.

The issues obviously that you will touch upon I suppose will be the accession of the European Union to the European Convention of Human Rights. Maybe remind our colleagues that this is something that is not to be decided upon, because it has been decided in the Treaty of Lisbon. Now the Treaty of Lisbon is already, I think it is already valid since December 2009, if I'm not mistaken. So that's like 12 years ago.

Anyway, needless to say that maybe it is time to do so and I don't think there's any problem between your parliament and ours in order to have the elements in place. I know there's no problem but I suppose there is still a little bit of a fast going on between courts maybe, in order to decide on some details, and hopefully they can do so quickly.

May I also permit myself to congratulate you with this initiative of the conference on the future of Europe and you also have an online platform created for citizens and, as I read, also for parliaments.

So, Mr President, dear David, I permitted myself to go on your online platform and luckily yesterday we had a big debate in our Parliament concerning the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe. Our Secretary General has made a big document on it saying: okay, where do we go? Where do we put our priorities in the coming years? And as an Assembly we contributed to that with our own report, namely a report on the strategic priorities of the Council of Europe in the coming years.

I took word with its rapporteur, Mr Tiny KOX, of course I took word with the Secretary General and I took the liberty, Mr President, on your online platform, to post it.

Now to be sure that you got it, I also sent it to you by mail and so you may consider it as a humble first contribution of our Assembly to this formidable exercise you're heading into, and you may consider it being a contribution of over 600 members of parliament out of 47 countries in Europe.

Needless to say that, as far as we are concerned within the context of European Convention of Human Rights and the values that we share, that we do believe that an exercise in Europe involves the whole Europe: we call it the greater Europe. And I do hope that to the extent of the appropriate, but of course this is for you to decide, we are available to contribute even more. But again, I permitted myself, I took the liberty, as they say in nice English, to already go on your platform personally and on behalf of the Assembly I posted the document that we, by the way, adopted yesterday by unanimity minus one vote. We always need one negative vote, you know, otherwise it's a bit too obvious.

But you know that, you're the president of a parliament. And so I took the liberty of posting this as a contribution to the formidable task you got ahead of you. And as I understand you will be starting that conference on 9 May, which is in about two weeks. So I suppose everyone is getting a little bit nervous and, once again, might you consider coming down here I can tell you I'll be here and I'll cross the "*passerelle*". Just for our colleagues to know: we got a *passerelle* between our two parliaments, so we might build a bridge between the two of us.

So, without any due delay I am extremely happy to have you onboard, Mr SASSOLI, and we will hear your address after which obviously you will have some questions of members of our Parliament and, as we always say in the Parliament, those who put a question are the owner of their question, but you obviously are the owner of your answer.

Having said this, without any further delay, dear President, dear friend, dear colleague. Dear colleagues, please, now may I have your attention for the address by the President of the European Parliament David SASSOLI.

You have the floor.

Discours de M. David SASSOLI, Président du Parlement européen

Mr David SASSOLI (President of the European Parliament): Thank you, Mister DAEMS, President, for your kind words.

Honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address the plenary session of your Assembly today. I too would have been delighted to be with you in person, in Strasbourg, and the European Parliament also hopes to return to its usual activities soon. Because Strasbourg embodies European history well, to perfection, and that is part of our shared DNA. Why do I say DNA? Because I would like to remind you that in a few days we will be celebrating the anniversary of the signing of a text that changed the course of history in our continent, and that is the Statute of the Council of Europe.

It was 1949, just a few years after the end of the Second World War, which caused immeasurable losses and left Europe in a state of desolation. On the ashes of that conflict, some great visionary leaders had the courage to build the foundations of our edifice, the foundations of modern Europe.

The Statute states that the aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve greater unity among its members in order to safeguard and realise common ideals and principles and to consolidate peace, of course. These are the very seeds of the European integration that we have been working for, together, for 72 years. It is not, perhaps, a very long period of time, but it is very long in terms of European history. It was a historic moment, a real turning point for Europe.

It was the Council of Europe that first embodied the community of values that shapes our continent, the European space as we know it today. Individual freedom, political freedom, respect for the rule of law, democracy, human rights: these are the values that make up our identity. Our institutions were founded on these principles, open institutions that want to strengthen and modernise themselves. And through the European Convention on Human Rights, these values have been translated into rights for all citizens, whose respect is monitored by the European Court of Human Rights.

Rights that you also defend in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Your assembly, which gives voice to the continent of Europe, today represents 820 million citizens. It paved the way for transnational parliamentarianism and has also been a source of inspiration for us here in the European Parliament.

Similarly, the enormous progress made by the Council of Europe is a cornerstone of the institution that I have the honour of chairing. I am thinking, in particular, of the almost complete abolition of the death penalty on the European continent or, again, the development of instruments enabling us to protect the rights of children, women and the most vulnerable. Another significant example is the constant support given to the democratisation process in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since 1989. Over the years, the Council of Europe has created standards for human rights, for democracy, with which we measure ourselves daily and which guide our work every day.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we are in the midst of a major crisis, that of the COVID-19 pandemic. Edgar Morin, in a recent debate on the post-pandemic world, which I organised here in the European Parliament, described this crisis as "total". And I think he was right. Because the pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives: health, relationships with others, work, education, the economy. It has exposed our weaknesses and the all too great inequalities in our societies.

However, paradoxically, the pandemic has also reminded us to what extent we are all interdependent. There is only one way out of a crisis of this magnitude: through solidarity, within Europe and with the rest of the world. To prevent future crises and improve our responses, tomorrow's world will have to be structured more than ever around cooperation, multilateralism and solidarity.

The response we have given to the pandemic at the level of the European Parliament, at the level of the European Union, has demonstrated, once again, the relevance of an old observation made by one of our founding fathers, Jean Monnet: that Europe is built through the crises it faces. Faced with an unprecedented health situation, we adopted policies that would have been unthinkable only a few months earlier. Through the

negotiation and adoption of an economic recovery instrument and the multiannual financial framework, we have proposed a model of sustainable development for the European Union that focuses on social justice and environmental justice.

We have also taken, what I would call, a historic step forward in terms of respecting the values that define the identity of Europe. From now on, funding from the European budget is no longer unconditional. As the European Parliament has long been demanding, the budget is linked to the respect for the rule of law, which is at the heart of any democratic system.

This model is original, it is our model, it has no equal in the rest of the world. We should be very proud of this.

As you rightly said in a resolution adopted in October 2020, the pandemic has also been a test of the resilience of institutions at the national and international level. This test has shown the extent to which European solidarity is needed to respond effectively to a crisis of this magnitude. It is now clear that we need to equip the European Union with new instruments, to adapt its competences, to transfer its powers, so that we can tackle the challenges we face more effectively and more quickly.

And it is in this context that on 9 May we will be launching the Conference on the Future of Europe, to which the Chairman, Mr Rik DAEMS, has already referred. Our aim is to offer a moment of reflection on the lessons of this crisis and on how to strengthen and update European democracy.

Which is the best time to do this? Well, at present. There is no better time, and after COVID-19 it would be too late. That is why it is very important that this reflection on ourselves, on the efficiency, effectiveness and modernisation of European democracy, takes place now.

We need a more efficient, more flexible, more resilient and also more democratic European Union. The Conference will be an unprecedented event, offering all European citizens, public opinion, our young people, organisations in the world of work and business and our national institutions the opportunity to shape the future, their future. National and regional parliaments, as well as civil society, local actors, researchers, our universities will also play an important role in this debate.

At the same time, the European Parliament will also learn lessons from the crisis we are going through. In order to keep the flame of democracy alive, we have been forced to change the way we work in the face of the pandemic. This has been reflected in all our institutions. In order to continue debating and legislating, we have had to adapt and renew. Now is the time to think more broadly about how our Assembly works to ensure that it embodies the democratic ideal we want to represent.

The fact that we are initiating debates in so many areas within the European Parliament and, more generally, in the European Union, is based on a very simple observation. The world of yesterday, the world in which we lived before the pandemic, will never return. It is our duty today to imagine and build a better, fairer, more equitable and more environmentally friendly world.

We must build the world of tomorrow, bequeathing to our younger generations a heritage of values that can dialogue with the contemporary world, that can defend respect for human rights, human dignity and freedom. We must guide this process.

And I am particularly concerned that our values are being put to the test today, more than ever, everywhere else in the world. Freedom is in decline worldwide. Less than half the world's population lives in a democratic system. Only 80 of the 197 recognised countries have a democratic system.

Disinformation is gaining ground. Populism, nationalism, xenophobia and authoritarianism are ideologies that have a large following among large sections of the world's population. The pandemic has served as a justification for them to undermine the rule of law and democracy and to strengthen authoritarian tendencies.

This is the world in which the European Union finds itself living today.

Let's be honest: these values so dear to Europe are not indestructible. And that is why their defence requires all our energy and determination.

The withdrawal of Turkey from the Istanbul Convention clearly shows that we are witnessing a regression as regards to respect for human rights and democratic principles. Women have suffered disproportionately from the consequences of the pandemic and from an increase in violence against them. This decision, the decision of the Turkish authorities, has inflicted a severe blow to the progress made in this field.

The European Parliament will continue to be vigilant, to campaign for a reversal of the decision on the withdrawal of Turkey from the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, as we have always done, we will demand that all the member states of the European Union ratify this Convention immediately, rapidly, and that the

European Union also accedes to it. And we will also continue to insist on the application of the judgments of the European Convention on Human Rights concerning Turkey, which has been a member of the Council of Europe for more than 70 years.

This afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, you will be discussing the situation in Belarus, a subject which, as you know, has been the focus of attention of our institutions and, of course, of the European Parliament for some time. In December last year, I had the honour of awarding the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to the democratic opposition in Belarus. The determination and courage of the citizens in that country are a lesson in freedom. And we have an obligation to support their legitimate demands and to denounce with all our might the countless human rights violations perpetrated by the regime in Belarus. That is why last month the European Parliament launched a platform for combating impunity in Belarus. The crimes and human rights violations that have been committed must be punished. And I call on you to cooperate, to work with us to ensure that this happens.

Tomorrow, you will also discuss under urgent procedure the arrest and detention of Alexei Navalny. I am very concerned, we are all very concerned, about his health, about his conditions of imprisonment. I think we should join forces to make sure that the Russian authorities urgently provide Alexei with all the medical assistance he needs. The European Parliament will continue to call for his immediate and unconditional release and to do whatever is necessary to bring this about.

76 years after the end of the Second World War, peace still does not reign in our continent. Last year, two partner countries of the European Union, two member countries of the Council of Europe, faced each other in a war that caused the loss of many lives and brought unspeakable suffering to their populations, reminding us that no conflict is frozen forever. That is why we must step up our efforts to support peace in the European continent.

And in this context, I am particularly concerned about the deployment of Russian troops along the Ukrainian borders and in the illegally annexed territory of Crimea. A de-escalation of tensions is essential and it is vital that Russia takes a step back and respects its international commitments.

For the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and your Parliamentary Assembly are natural allies. And together we must support each other in our efforts to promote human rights and to develop and consolidate peace. From the Western Balkans to Moldova — you had the pleasure of hearing the new President, Maia Sandu, during Monday's session — from Georgia to Ukraine, I want our already extremely significant cooperation to be further strengthened.

The impact of artificial intelligence on human rights is another area where we should certainly cooperate more closely. A common reflection on this issue could help us find the right balance between protecting the rights of citizens and supporting technological development.

Your expertise, knowledge and experience is very valuable to the Parliament. And the opinions and reports of the Council of Europe have been key reference points in proceedings under Article 7 concerning Hungary and Poland.

Your resolutions and positions have often served as references to the texts adopted by your Assembly, as well as to the opinions and reports of the Venice Commission and the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. Our joint election observation missions have also provided us with many possibilities for cooperation and the opportunity, of course, to work together.

However, we should go further. We should not stop and we should not have taboos. Let us work together, committee to committee, in those areas where there is added value. Let us work together within the political families and, of course, let us strengthen the cooperation between our two administrations even more.

I look forward to the day when the links between our institutions will be further strengthened by the accession of the European Union to the European Convention on Human Rights. The resumption of accession negotiations demonstrates our determination to achieve this objective, of which the Parliament has been an active player and promoter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I began my speech with a reference to the history of the last century, which created the conditions for the emergence of democratic, innovative and even revolutionary institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Union. The twentieth century is now part of history, and we are faced with new challenges.

Faced with these new challenges, our two assemblies should jointly intensify their efforts to respond to all situations where, within the European continent, the progress made in the field of human rights and democracy is being called into question.

Thank you for this opportunity and I am here to listen to your questions as well.

Naturally, I wish you well during this session.

Thank you.

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

I'm not going to linger long on them although I could.

Just reminding that as you say we are natural partners and we should join forces. And since I'm Belgian, I'm not so far away from Brussels you know. So who knows, I'll pop in and put some of your intentions into practice which I would really welcome on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly.

Let's head into the questions because otherwise I'll be under fire of my colleagues down here.

Our habit is the following Mr President. We have one speaker per political group in the beginning. After each question of course you are the master of your answer. After these five first questions we head into five questions together, and we see in function of the time you have available how far it brings us.

As far as I'm concerned this house can stay open until 9:00 p.m. at night but I don't suppose you've got so much time. They have got so many questions I can tell you.

Let's head into it.

We have our first question on behalf of the Group of Socialists, Greens and Democrats, which is Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN from Romania.

Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN, you are in the room I suppose.

You have the floor, one minute.

Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN (Romania, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much Mr President.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and also the Socialist Group, we are valuing very much the strategic partnership functioning between the Council of Europe and the European Union. And currently, as you know, we are working hard to deepen our strategic partnership, taking into account on one side the historical role of competencies of the Council of Europe in the domains of human rights, democracy and rule of law, and human rights and on the other side, the new EU rule of law mechanism the other standards. Key goal: EU accession to the European Convention of Human Rights.

We should support strongly from a political point of view the process of negotiation that was relaunched last year, possible cooperation on some other fields: convention, social rights, European Social Charter, how to value the expertise of bodies like the Venice Commission, GRECO, ACRI, MONEYVAL and some others, deepening the ties between the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly, and last but not least, valuable contribution of the Council of Europe and I say to the conference on the future of Europe.

May I ask you to comment further on these important priorities, opportunities, but also challenges, trying to avoid unnecessary duplication and competition. Thank you.

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

May I ask the following questions to remain within the one minute.

I know this is a unique opportunity.

Mr President you have the floor.

As concise as you can be will allow more colleagues to make questions.

You have the floor.

Mr David SASSOLI (President of the European Parliament): Yes, thank you.

I think this is a decisive area when it comes to strengthening our cooperation.

You know I think that the European Parliament is of course mindful of the need to ensure respect for the rule of law.

I have talked about the rule of law and the fact that it be made conditional when it comes to funding under the budget.

As I say there are no taboos. The European Union as a global actor has strong, robust identity credentials in that respect.

Everything is possible, nothing should be excluded, in our respective areas.

We are a legislative body. We are governed by priorities when it comes to the functioning of the European Parliament. But when we can cooperate I think we should close no doors in that respect.

At the present time in particular, when it comes to the initiative to be launched shortly with the Conference on the Future of Europe, I think issues such as the ones you have raised must be the centre of our attention.

Nothing can be excluded, nothing is taboo and we must, of course, enhance our efficiency and performance.

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

I can assure you that in this House there aren't any taboos as you say.

We go to our second question.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

You have the floor.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much.

Mr President,

On behalf of the PPE Group, I would like to thank you for your very direct and firm presentation. You do not hide behind diplomatic language which, above all, does not mean anything from time to time.

It is true that democracy, the rule of law and human rights are fundamental values that are the essence of the European project. Even though the Council of Europe has acquired recognised experience and expertise in this field, with the mechanisms of the European Convention on Human Rights, we need the European Union at our side.

In this respect, I welcome the willingness of the President of the European Commission to set up a new European mechanism to protect the rule of law.

I would like to ask you about the relationship between the European Union's action and the role of the Council of Europe. I am thinking in particular of the European Union's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights and the dialogue between the judges in Strasbourg and Luxembourg.

Thank you very much.

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

You have the floor, Mr President.

Mr David SASSOLI (President of the European Parliament): Thank you for this question, because the European Parliament is a great supporter of this accession and I am pleased with the accession of a new negotiating mandate from the European Union in October 2019 which has unlocked the accession process.

The EU accession to the European Convention on Human Rights will certainly strengthen the protection of fundamental rights in Europe. It is a priority for us and we have stressed this several times.

Parliament will also have to give its consent to the accession agreement and has closely followed the first phase of the negotiations and cooperated with PACE in this regard until 2013. Similar forms of cooperation between two parliamentary bodies would also be useful for the current negotiations, and I believe that you will have the European Parliament at your side on all this.

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

We now move to our next question on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group.

Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN from Ireland remotely.

You have the floor.

One minute please.

Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN (Ireland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you Mr President and greetings from Dublin, President Sassoli, it is very good to see you and to listen to your very valued engagement.

You have said that we cannot return to the world before the pandemic, that we need more democracy, and that we need more solidarity. Can I assure you that we are ready and willing to work with you in the pursuit of that in a very positive way.

Thank you for addressing the issue in relation to Turkey withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention – it is very, very important. But also just to share your concerns in relation to the erosion of human rights of the LGBTI community in Hungary and Poland. And we do need to do more, so do you think that possibly would be done through funding cuts or how do you propose the parliament will deal with it?

I'd also like to ask you about how you think we can balance fundamental freedoms with the introduction of the Covid passport and how we can deal with travel in and out of the EU?

Mr President, a lot of excellent work has been done by the Council of Europe and we want to explore better synergies between ourselves and the Parliament in terms of the important issues that we take.

I wish you well with your conference on 9 May. Thank you.

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

Mr David SASSOLI (President of the European Parliament): Thank you very much.

I think that your question covers some elements that I also tried to address in my statement, but perhaps I can repeat myself.

We need to strengthen our identity. What happened at the end of the year is really important. It is the first time that supranational institutions took measures to ensure that the rule of law was abided by, that a mechanism be put in place to ensure that the rule of law is abided by.

It has never happened anywhere, it is unprecedented, and we have no similar examples.

When it comes to violation of individual freedoms in that respect and as a result of measures taken, I think we are in a stronger position.

It's thanks to the cooperation of all the member states, that we now have an instrument that can server to further reinforce our identity.

I think we are consolidating our presence on the international stage. We often forget that there are regions of the world that are close to us, we tend to overlook them, and we're reminded of their presence only in times of crisis! I think we need to be a little more far-sighted.

The Mediterranean is on our back doorstep. We must pay greater heed to relations with countries around the Mediterranean that may be attracted by forms of authoritarianism that could represent considerable dangers.

I believe that this attitude of dialogue and strengthening of our diplomacy is essential. We cannot think of just strengthening the European Union in isolation; it is situated in a broader context, and that is one that is needed to take into account.

Were we to fail to do that, it would be a strategic mistake, in terms of our future. We cannot take the lessons we've learned from Covid-19 and put them in a drawer and just forget about it. That would be a mistake.

The crisis has triggered different dynamics, and we need to be attentive to that. We cannot stand still, because other regions in the world will push ahead more quickly.

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

We now go to Ms Nina KASIMATI for the Group of the Unified European Left.

May I request Lord Alexander DUNDEE to request the floor after this.

Ms Nina KASIMATI, you have the floor.

Ms Nina KASIMATI (Greece, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): President SASSOLI, welcome to our Assembly on behalf of the Unified European Left as well.

I believe we can all agree that the balance in the relationship between the European Union and Turkey has now been obviously absent due to the deviations of the latter from the Council of Europe treaties, as well as due to its violations of international law and European acquis. Thus severely undermining not only the basic pillars of the Council of Europe and EU, namely democracy, human rights and the rule of law, but also the peace and stability in the South Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea which remain Europe's last frontier of democracy.

Mr President of the European Parliament, apart from the positive agenda rhetoric pertaining to the issue, will the European Union, being unavoidably affected by the national foreign policy agenda and the omnipresent economic interests of certain powerful member States, take concrete measures in order to redress the situation with Turkey and if so what is the time frame?

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

Lord Alexander DUNDEE please request the floor.

Mr President. You have the floor.

You have the floor, Sir.

President Sassoli, do you hear me?

You have the floor.

Mr David SASSOLI (President of the European Parliament): Ah, yes, yes. No, I thought there was another question. Excuse me, but we have been very clear on Turkey from the outset.

I remember that in the January part-session, Parliament stated very clearly that in order to open a new page in terms of relations with the European Union, Turkey must find a path that it departed form, a path based on democratic values.

We have been very clear and naturally we also want to follow up on this reading with all the acts which, as you know, will also reach Parliament and which will concern relations between the European Union and Turkey.

However, this question also allows me to make another observation.

We cannot be too distracted by what is happening around us and, I repeat, we need to strengthen our foreign policy. Of course, some of our member states should do some soul-searching in this area too, because to think that we can continue to go our separate ways and then claim that the European Union is not capable of realising its foreign policy objectives becomes a childish contradiction.

And I think some countries in particular should reflect on the situation, because today we need EU foreign policy. There can be no escape for anybody, there can be no ability on the part of our member states to make up for this need.

That is why this is a time when we need to rethink the powers of the European Union to make it more efficient.

After all, what citizen of our Union, of all 27 member states, can be in love with a system that does not respond quickly and efficiently to the needs of our public opinions? Who can be in love with that?

But we have, unfortunately, on many chapters and on many issues the European Union has no jurisdiction. For how many years have many citizens been asking for a European response on migration issues? Instead, the European Union has been forced to take a back seat on many issues.

I believe that this is a fundamental issue. The EU needs the powers to be able to respond quickly, or our citizens will naturally think that the European Union is just a burden and not a great opportunity.

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

We will now head into five questions, Lord Alexander DUNDEE not being online.

In order, they will be: Mr Joseph O'REILLY, Ms Nicole TRISSE, Ms Laura CASTEL, Mr Andreas NICK and Ms Zita GURMAI.

May I really ask all five of you to be concise because time is of the essence, and I know that we can still steal a few minutes from the President of the Parliament.

Let's head on with the first one.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY remotely. You have the floor.

Please as short as possible.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY (Ireland, EPP/CD): Can you hear me?

President SASSOLI, recent violence in Belfast highlights how the Good Friday Agreement signed in 1998 succeeded in preserving peace, human rights, rule of law and democracy. As Brexit poses a threat to the agreement, Ireland was initially to receive 1.02 billion of the 5.4 billion Europe-wide Brexit adjustment bond. France has in fact amended its contribution which would significantly reduce Ireland's share. Could you give your view on this? Could you also comment on the EU-wide distinct economic and resilience fund and its implementation?

Thank you.

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

I know Mr Joseph O'REILLY that the question was not really heard.

It is about the contribution of the European Union to Ireland, the 1 billion and then the resilience fund.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We'll now go to Ms Nicole TRISSE who is in the room.

Nicole, if you can be as brief as possible. You have the floor.

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

Mr President of the European Parliament,

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major challenge for parliamentary institutions in general. Most parliaments have found empirical solutions to continue debating and voting without jeopardising the health of their members.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, at the instigation of its President, whom I thank for his personal involvement, has introduced innovative procedures, and we have been able to resume our sessions here in Strasbourg in a hybrid format since last January.

For reasons that I cannot explain, the European Parliament has not followed in the footsteps of the PACE, even though the European treaties provide for it to sit in Strasbourg. My question is therefore the following, and I associate myself with the members of the Alsatian Parliament present here, such as Mr Olivier BECHT and Mr Claude KERN: why has the European Parliament not been able to do what the PACE, despite having fewer resources, has been able to do without endangering the health and safety of its members and staff?

I thank you.

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

For your information, President, Ms Nicole TRISSE is the Chair of the French delegation in our Asssembly.

We now go to Ms Laura CASTEL.

As short as possible please.

Ms Laura CASTEL (Spain, NR): Mr President, good morning Mr Sassoli and welcome to the Parliamentary Assembly, the place where to foster freedom of debate without censorship.

But not in every country there is a freedom of debate in parliaments. I am talking about Spain. I am talking about the parliament vote which censors the investigation of monarchy corruption, which censors an important law, such as the Amnesty Law. Two weeks ago, a political solution for our political prisoners. I am also talking about courts telling Catalonia's parliament what they can or cannot debate about, destroying the separation of powers and free political debate.

With all this in mind, from your position, being aware that you are now at the core of the human rights and democracy organisation, would you censor democratic debate, Mr Sassoli? Would you tolerate censorship at the European Parliament? Thank you very much.

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

We are very quickly going to have Mr Andreas NICK and then Ms Zita GURMAI.

I know that the Chair of the European Parliament is under pressure there so please, Mr Andreas NICK, very fast.

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

The Council of Europe has played an outstanding role, especially in the 1990s, in bringing the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe up to the standards of human rights and the rule of law. This was an important basis for the later accession of these countries to the European Union.

Today, both organisations are faced with the challenge that member states, especially their governments, are trying to move away from these standards again. Where can we intensify cooperation there, in terms of the Venice Commission, the monitoring procedure and the rule of law mechanism on which the European Union is consulting to resolve the situation?

Thank you very much.

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

Quickly, Ms Zita GURMAI online, please have your question allowing the President to give a start of answer.

Ms Zita GURMAI, you have the floor.

Please make it quick.

Ms Zita GURMAI (Hungary, SOC): *Cari Presidente* of the European institution

Lovely to see you. We should aim to bring European policies closer to European people, how can this happen that a tool of participatory democracy is not being used as its full potential? This resulted in the development of a comprehensive regulatory framework for national minorities being delayed after the European Commission rejected the Minority Safepack initiative despite the wish of 1.2 million European citizens, the support of several governments, and the European Parliament as well. This is concerning for all of us at PACE as the protection of national minorities is a priority in this Assembly.

However, as a former colleague of yours, of the Parliament, as rapporteur for the first regulation of ECI, my question is more overarching. So 576 ECIs were launched, five answered and none of them resulted in a legislative proposal. Do you believe that the legal framework needs amendment? Or the way the current rules are applied should be changed in order to enable citizens initiative to fulfil that original purpose of mine and Alain Lamassoure's work?

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

As long as you wish, the floor is yours.

Mr David SASSOLI (President of the European Parliament): I will have to be leaving you shortly, but allow me just to say that we met with a view of looking at the organisation of meetings with the European Parliament. We were of course faced with considerable difficulty, as indeed were other European institutions.

The European Parliament of course sees members attending sessions of the parliament from 27 member states and the European Parliament is bound by a certain number of obligations in the treaties.

We have been working with the French authorities closely, hand in hand, but unfortunately we found that we were not in a position to comply with the obligation to convene a session of the European parliament in Strasbourg, as a result of a certain number of objective difficulties concerning the transfer or transport of several thousands of staff members of the European Parliament, from their places of work to their places of residence.

The French authorities I think have understood our difficulties, understood our plight but it is important for the European parliament to go back to Strasbourg. We want to return to Strasbourg. At the end of last summer, we thought we would be able to return to Strasboug, but it was not possible because of the objective difficulties and also the health difficulties put in place by the Lower Rhine region and Strasbourg City.

So we do have obligations, we're certainly aware of that, but I think we all know how important it is to defend health and to protect the health of members of the European Parliament and also our staff.

When it comes to tackling the health crisis, we are bound by the directives of our central health authorities. We have cooperated closely with our counterparts on the French side. I spoke only last week to the mayor of Strasbourg, to take stock of the current situation in the city of Strasbourg, the health situation which continues to be rather difficult. But of course we want as soon as we can to return to our city, the city of Strasbough, which, as I said at the beginning of my statement, certainly embodies the history of Europe.

With regards to minority issues, Ms Zita GURMAI, hello there, we have worked together. You were a member of the European Parliament for a long time and you have left us with very pleasant memories of your competence, abilities and skills. You know how attentive the European Parliament is to the situation of national minorities. Every time we have an opportunity to reaffirm this principle of the protection of national minorities, which is often called into question by so many politicians or political attitudes or stances in various countries of the European Union.

The European Parliament has always been a spokesperson, a voice defending national minorities.

We must always turn the spotlight on the difficulties being faced by our citizens. Minority issues are important as far as we are concerned.

The political groups will be looking at the amendments that have been tabled and the texts that you mentioned, but I am sure that the European Parliament will suffer no backtracking in that respect when it comes to the protection of national minorities.

When it comes to the domestic situation in Spain, domestic issues which have been raised by one of the speakers, at the start of the parliament, as we know the Court handed down a certain number of rulings. We are bound by the treaties and bound by the positions adopted by the various political groups on these issues.

I do not remember the question precisely, but in terms of what I have understood, I believe we should be placing emphasis on everything that can assist our member states, whilst at the same time strengthening the presence and the role of the European Union. That, I think is a fundamental issue.

How do we imagine we can emerge from the current Covid-19 crisis and perhaps face the new challenges that will inevitably come our way if we do not adapt our competence, the power and prerogatives of the European Union to the current challenges.

We have seen this year the same European Union acting in two different ways: the functional issues, the multiannual financial framework, the rule of law mechanism; we knew there precisely what our competences, what our powers and prerogatives were, and I think we've done some excellent work.

However, the same Europe, the same people involved, found itself in difficulty on the issues of vaccines.

Why is that? Because the EU does not enjoy the necessary competences; the EU has been forced into a secondary role and has certainly done the best it could. But the EU is not in a position to ensure a unified approach being adopted by all members of the EU.

That is one of the lessons of the Covid-19 crisis: every time Europe has the necessary powers and prerogatives it can react effectively, but when we're forced on to the back foot within the EU, we're faced with difficulties.

I was asked a question earlier about the vaccination certificates.

We will be voting on this measure in the next session, between 26-27 April, and we hope to improve upon the Commission text. We do not want there to be any elements of discrimination vis-a-vis European citizens.

It's an important initiative, because if it is introduced in June, when considerable numbers of our citizens have already been vaccinated, we might be able to consider opening a certain number of activities in an orderly fashion.

It is an instrument, of course it cannot be compulsory, but it can be useful for the orderly reopening of many sectors and activities.

If we look at what's been happening at our borders, when it comes to transport issues for example, a certificate could facilitate the crossing of borders and ensure that everything happens in a more orderly fashion. That should be the spirit, I think, in which we operate. A vaccination certificate can certainly mitigate a certain number of difficulties in which everyone finds themselves.

But of course there must be no form of discrimination and there must be no abuse of the vaccination certificate.

We are convinced of this and we will be very vigilant. We hope to enhance the text of the Commission.

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

I see you've got a lot of passion. It's the same down here in Strasbourg.

I do hope that we can meet in the near future. I obviously hope as you do, to be able to be here.

I see in your answers that you really are a forceful defender of the European Union. May I inform you, that we here, and I myself am a forceful defender of the Council of Europe. As you say, we are natural partners. We should join forces. This is synergy you know. One plus one makes more than two. I do hope in the near future we can do so.

Thank you very much.

I have more than 40 questions still on my list. I don't suppose that will be possible, but we will find some way to get these questions to you or in any other way to link up your Parliament and our Parliament in order to make life better for all of our citizens.

Many many thanks, and I really hope to see you very soon. Thank you President SASSOLI.

May I ask who is going to preside over the meeting now? Mr Andreas NICK, if you can come down just one minute here.

Thank you all for being here.

This was quite an important address by President SASSOLI, and we will without any doubt take some of the elements, Madam Secretary General, into our work in the near future.

Thanks Mr Andreas NICK for taking over.

Débat conjoint : Nécessité urgente d'une réforme électorale au Bélarus / Les violations des droits de l'homme au Bélarus nécessitent une enquête internationale

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Everyone in their seats?

We now come to the joint debate on two reports from the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

The first is titled "Urgent need for electoral reform in Belarus", Document 15253, presented by Lord David BLENCATHRA.

The second is titled "Human rights violations in Belarus require an international investigation", Document 15256 presented by Ms Alexandra LOUIS.

In order to finish by 1:00 p.m. I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 12:30 p.m. to allow time for the replies and the vote.

I call Lord David BLENCATHRA, the rapporteur, to present the first report.

You have seven minutes to present the report and then you will have a further three minutes to reply to the debate at the end.

Lord David BLENCATHRA, the floor is yours.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Corapporteur): Dear colleagues,

Elections in Belarus have never met international standards of freedom and fairness. That is a sad fact which we are familiar with in the Assembly, as we have observed several elections in Belarus, the last one being the parliamentary elections in November 2019, when I had the privilege to chair the Assembly's election observation mission.

Therefore, it came as no surprise when last August, in the aftermath of yet another election which was neither free nor fair, the citizens of Belarus went into the streets to massively challenge the results and protest against the violation of their right to free and fair elections, amongst other things.

So, back in September 2019, when I initiated the motion which is at the origin of the report which you have in front of you today, I had a very clear purpose in mind: to come up with a list of neutral Assembly recommendations on electoral law reform so that the elections in Belarus can meet the international standards of freedom and fairness; that the electoral system can become transparent, accountable and ultimately credible, and that the Belarusian citizens can regain confidence in their own electoral process.

Today, I am proud to present those recommendations to you, which are all based on the previous findings and conclusions of our own Assembly, the OSCE/ODIHR, the Venice Commission, and the Belarusian civil society.

I would like to stress that in the preparation of my report, I have followed an inclusive approach. Thus, I have tried to reach out to all relevant stakeholders, including the Belarusian authorities. Regrettably, the authorities have never replied to the questionnaire that was sent to them and simply ignored my proposal to interact with them directly. Other stakeholders have responded positively, and I would like to thank them here, in particular the civil society representatives who continue to work for a more democratic Belarus, bravely and relentlessly.

Throughout the process, I have been criticised with the same arguments over and over again: that the Assembly did not observe the presidential election last year; that Belarus is a sovereign State, what is more, not a member of the Council of Europe; that our Assembly is not in a position to dictate anything on Belarus or its citizens.

What I say to those critics is simple:

Yes, we have not observed the last election, but that was not our choice, we simply could not, due to the lateness of the invitation and the sanitary situation related to Covid-19. But we have observed elections in Belarus over the last 20 years and have found the same failings every time.

Yes, Belarus is a sovereign state and is not a member of the Council of Europe, but does this make it less European, colleagues? Does this mean that the people of Belarus are less worthy of the values this organisation stands for, and that we should look away? Does this make this Assembly has no right to say what is going off the rails in Belarus?

I say no. And more importantly, I say that it is neither our task nor our intention to dictate anything on Belarus or its citizens. Based on our expertise in electoral matters, we are simply offering our good services and standing ready with practical and technical guidance to reform the electoral system should there be a request in this direction.

Now, I said at the beginning that this report is making neutral recommendations. Let me be absolutely clear though, making neutral recommendations on electoral reform does not mean that the Assembly is neutral on the situation in Belarus: because we are not!

We condemn, as does the draft resolution presented to you, the appalling abuses of human rights and the serious failings of the Belarus electoral system which have persisted for more than two decades. And I am sure my colleague Ms Alexandra LOUIS has much more to say about that in her report. We condemn, as does the draft resolution presented to you in my report, the August 2021 elections as being neither free nor fair.

However, as its title clearly indicates it, the remit of this report is the much- and long-needed electoral reform in Belarus. Thus, my report is narrowly focussed on the electoral law changes that are necessary to set the basis for free and fair democratic elections in Belarus.

Before I finish, I would also like to address an issue that came up several times in the discussions in our Committee. That is whether, the emphasis in the report on the need, ideally, to have an electoral reform before new elections can take place, would impede with possible snap elections in the country.

Now, I have given careful consideration to this issue and I have clearly recognised in my report that “an electoral reform will take time and the fact that it is needed should not be used by the authorities as an excuse for postponing elections indefinitely.” That being said, snap elections cannot take place at any cost. Thus, paragraph 6 of the draft resolution sets the minimum conditions to be respected for such elections to be deemed free and fair, should they take place.

Mr President, colleagues, I am confident that by following a non-divisive path and adopting neutral recommendations, as in this report, we may stand a better chance to sit at the table with the Belarusian authorities, whoever they may be in future, and discuss electoral reform, which is what my report is about. This and other changes to the legal framework are absolutely necessary and will pave the way for a new Belarus that is based on human rights, democracy and rule of law.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Lord David BLENCATHRA.

I now call for Ms Alexandra LOUIS, rapporteur, to present the second report.

You again have seven minutes to present the report and then you'll have a further three minutes to reply to the debate at the end.

Ms Alexandra LOUIS (France, ALDE, Corapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear Colleagues,

I would first like to highlight the work of my colleague who has just spoken on the urgent need for electoral reform in Belarus and to congratulate him on his work.

Dear colleagues,

We have all followed with great attention the courageous protest and peaceful resistance of the Belarusian people after the rigged presidential election last August. A protest movement in which women played a crucial role, led by the opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

And we all learned with horror that the police - if you can still call them that - committed unspeakable violence to suppress the popular movement. We have seen unbearable images of torture and violence against peaceful demonstrators, including women, young people and people with disabilities. All of this was done with total impunity.

This is why the Assembly has decided to prepare concrete proposals to combat the impunity of torturers and their supervisors. We must fight impunity as a matter of principle and as a matter of universal justice, but we must also act as a deterrent. We must send a strong signal to human rights violators that they will be held accountable for their actions.

We have already seen that the Belarusian judiciary is, as it stands, unable - or politically prevented - from delivering justice in such cases. There is simply no prosecution of violent state agents, even in cases of human death. On the other hand, doctors, lawyers, human rights defenders and journalists who try to document and publicise such abuses are criminally prosecuted on the basis of particularly vague laws.

The Venice Commission adopted an opinion, at our request, on the compatibility of some of these criminal laws with European principles in this field. Not surprisingly, it concluded that the laws on the basis of which these peaceful demonstrators and opposition leaders gathered in the Co-ordinating Council are prosecuted are excessively vague.

We must recognise as "political prisoners", according to the definition of this term in our Resolution 1900 (2012), all those imprisoned for participating in the peaceful demonstrations or for publishing information about these demonstrations and their repression, or for assisting the victims of the repression as lawyers or other human rights defenders, and also the leaders of the democratic opposition. Their release must be the first priority.

Our second priority must be to send a strong signal against impunity. The draft resolution of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights makes concrete and clear proposals, including that of supporting the initiative developed within the European Parliament to create a coordination platform that federates efforts at international level to combat impunity in Belarus, by collecting, analysing and evaluating relevant information and evidence. I had the honour to attend this meeting together with the Chairman of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, Mr Boriss CILEVIČS, whom I thank.

The information thus gathered and evaluated can then be made available to national authorities for two purposes. Firstly, to help them make use of the universal jurisdiction of national courts, which too often comes up against practical problems of access to information and, above all, to evidence. Secondly, to help the member States and the European Union to impose targeted sanctions. This is important, for example via the Magnitsky mechanisms already in existence or yet to be created.

As you can see, the draft resolution and recommendation contain many more proposals and demands, addressed to the Belarusian authorities, to our own governments and also to the European Union.

I would like to conclude by thinking of the young people of Belarus, because I believe that within those young people there are the seeds of democracy in Belarus.

In any case, I would like to thank you for your attention and I am obviously at your disposal for any questions or comments you may have.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ms Alexandra LOUIS.

I will now go to the list of speakers for the debate.

First the speakers on behalf of the political groups.

The first speaker is Ms Ingjerd SCHOU from Norway for the Group of the European People's Party.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you Mr President and Colleagues,

The EPP welcomes these two reports, and commends the two rapporteurs on their excellent work. They show only too well what can happen when elections – time and again – are not free and fair.

After the fraudulent elections in August last year, we have seen a Belarus in crisis. There has been an unprecedented wave of violence against political oppositions, human rights defenders, journalists and ordinary citizens.

The electoral system in Belarus is flawed. For more than two decades the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission have pointed to problems in the electoral system. Their advice has not been heeded.

President,

Comprehensive electoral reform is needed in Belarus. Today's electoral system is neither transparent, accountable nor credible. For the Belarusian people, reform is needed for them to have confidence in the electoral process.

An electoral reform as proposed in the draft resolution will aid the long-term stability of the country. It will also assist its rapprochement with the Council of Europe on the basis of the Organisation's values and principles.

President,

The violence against peaceful protesters and human rights defenders, which we have witnessed again and again since the election, cannot be accepted. Those responsible have not been held to account. The reports of serious human rights violations, including torture, are numerous. We cannot stand by silently.

The EPP supports the establishment of an international investigation and the International Accountability Platform for Belarus. We also support making the expertise of the Council of Europe available for this platform.

The only way to reach a peaceful solution is through a genuine, inclusive dialogue between the authorities, the political opposition and civil society. The aim must be new, free and fair elections this year.

Yet again, we urge the Belarusian authorities to end the violence and the use of force and to live up to its international commitments.

Thank you, Mr President.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Mr Frédéric PETIT, from France, for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Frédéric PETIT (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Two hundred and fifty-six: for two hundred and fifty-six days, the Belarussians have been fighting for a new presidential election, and this time a free election.

Of course, they are fighting for their nation, their rediscovered identity, their pride in being Belarussians, in being citizens of a country that lies between Russia and Europe and that must invent a unique and unprecedented place for itself in the 21st century. But more than for a program, they have been fighting since the beginning for truth and transparency. They took to the streets long before August 9, since the lies began during the campaign, with the arrest of the most dangerous candidates.

The bludgeoning, the torture, the humiliations, the rapes, the appalling conditions of the prisons, the coronavirus, certainly make the mobilization less impressive than this summer or this fall. But Belarusians are creating local protest actions, a sort of self-management of protest – the women in black, for example – and it is indeed the Belarusian civil society that is being born in close coordination with the teams of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a refugee in Vilnius, and Pavel Latushka, a refugee in Warsaw. These two capitals are not by chance. Lithuania and Poland are exemplary in their support for this struggle; they welcome Belarusians in exile, they offer Belarusian students the opportunity to continue their studies, and they welcome and finance humanitarian associations and independent Belarusian media. Both countries have a legitimacy, because of the historical, cultural and political specificity of this region, of this neighbourhood; we sometimes forget that.

When Svetlana Tikhanovskaya calls on us, Europeans, to be more courageous, she is also thinking of overcoming divisions and cleavages when we face the essential. Today, it is clear that Europe is not doing enough for Belarus, or that what it is doing is not effective. Despite the rigging of the ballot box, Lukashenko is still there, as are his followers, and the number of political prisoners is increasing day by day, week by week, for reasons that are increasingly arbitrary and even surreal.

We must now think of more direct support for the humanitarian associations that take in political refugees, for the independent media and for citizens' committees. We can and must do more: it is urgent. The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is due to meet Alexander Lukashenko tomorrow so that he can use Belarusian territory in his strategy of exerting pressure on Ukraine.

The Council of Europe must be able to meet with the Russian President tomorrow. We are not dealing with tactical issues, with circumstantial issues, with bargaining, but with fundamental issues of the relationship between each citizen and his or her government, which is at the root of the convention that brings us together here – all of us without exception – and this in a country that is the last not to have signed it.

As the rapporteur pointed out in his introduction, this is a matter for all of us here, and to forget it would threaten us all without exception.

I thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): *Merci beaucoup.*

Next speaker is Mr Arkadiusz MULARCZYK from Poland on behalf of the European Conservatives Group.

Mr Arkadiusz MULARCZYK (Poland, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

In my speech, I would like to raise the problem of discrimination against the Polish minority in Belarus. The Polish minority in Belarus are descendants of the Poles who become Belarusian citizens due to boundary changes that occurred after the World War II. The Union of Poles in Belarus [in Polish, *Związek Polaków na Białorusi*] is an organisation gathering the Polish minority in Belarus. Its activities focus on cultivating Polish culture and tradition, as well as supporting Polish education and Polish language learning.

Since the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, the wave of repressions against representatives of civil society has highly increased. The Polish minority members intensified considerably. Five active and prominent representatives of the Polish minority are being held in custody. In this manner, Angelica Boris, charismatic chairwoman of the Union of Poles in Belarus, they are all being accused of incitement to hatred on the grounds of nationality or of religion, and may be sentenced to five to twelve years of imprisonment.

Other activities of the Polish minority are being repressed. The office of the Union and other organisations, as well as private departments of representatives of the Polish minority were searched. Polish teachers and students are being interrogated and intimidated. Public media in Belarus continues its defamation campaign campaign against Poland and Polish people, which includes the interrogation of historical facts regarding Polish action during the World War II.

Belarus is also bound by UN member states' obligations, among them in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, "those persons belonging to national minorities shall not be denied the right in community with the other members of the group to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language." Moreover the bilateral 1992 Polish-Belarusian Treaty on Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation sets out legal basis for protection of the Polish national minority, guaranteeing the the right to freely maintain, develop and express their ethnic culture, linguistic and religious identity without any discrimination.

I am calling for solidarity, condemnation of the action of the Belarusian regime towards the Polish minority, and I think the current situation in Belarus requires not only food for debate in the Assembly and adoption of relevant resolutions on the issue but also justifies addressing a written question from the PACE to the Committee of Ministers on its position toward the ongoing repression.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Mr Tiny KOX from the Netherlands, for the Group of the Unified European Left.

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

After the presidential elections on the 9 August last year, massive protests broke out in the in the streets of Belarus and we noticed a very harsh reaction of the authorities to this peaceful protest. The Parliamentary Assembly by its Standing Committee could already react very soon on what was happening there Belarus

which is the only State and territory of Europe which is not a member State of our Assembly, but nevertheless, is in the midst of Europe. And in that Standing Committee, my group called immediately to condemn all violence by the Council of Europe against these peaceful protesters and to demand immediately release of political prisoners and a rapid consultation between the government and the opposition to organise new elections.

And we offered the assistance of the Council of Europe to Belarus, to both the Belarusian authorities and the opposition. We are now almost nine months later Mr President and the situation is still most worrying. Instead of dialogue, we see ongoing confrontation, we see a continuation of the oppression, we see ongoing harassment of peaceful protesters, arrests of citizens, long sentences against people who participate in the protest and there is no way that we can foresee new presidential elections as it is now.

Today, the Assembly reacts with two reports in which we give proposals on how to overcome the situation in Belarus and we offer our best services.

I thank both rapporteurs Ms Alexandra LOUIS for her report it on human rights violations and the need for an international investigation and Lord David BLENCATHRA for his report on how to organise free and fair elections, at last, in Belarus and the need for an electoral reform. I am very much in favour of what Lord David BLENCATHRA said we do not order Belarusian authorities, nor Belarusian the opposition to do anything, we propose them to do things and we offer our help. I think the excellent report by Lord David BLENCATHRA gives the authorities and the opposition in Belarus the possibility to start to have an electoral reform that in the end could indeed lead to free and fair elections. And the same goes for the report of Ms LOUIS, free and fair elections and oppression of oppositions, free all political prisoners and international investigation, these are clear proposals of the this Assembly and I hope that we will support them.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The last speaker on behalf of the political groups is Mr Fourat BEN CHIKHA, from Belgium, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Fourat BEN CHIKHA (Belgium, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr Chair,

Dear members of the Assembly,

In Belarus protests broke out on 9 August following the national elections. The protests continued until the end of the year. LGBTI people and activists have participated and supported the protests from the beginning. Some brought rainbow flags to the protest to be visible and to make a statement about our existence and participation and steps towards democracy. I am gravely concerned by the increased support of mass detention, intimidation and torture, including sexual violence.

Statements from LGBTI people and their allies in Belarus highlight that torture and ill-treatment against participants in peaceful protests have become commonplace in detention centres. But LGBTI detainees suffer greater violence and abuse due to the prevalence of anti-LGBTI hatred among law enforcements. These violations are coupled with impunity stemming from the authorities' unwillingness to conduct effective criminal investigation into allegations of torture and lawyers are being denied full access to their clients in detention. Conditions of detention are inhumane: detained people have no access to food, water and personal hygiene products. And 20-50 people were put on the floor of an eight-person cell.

LGBTI activists warned that even if Lukashenko resigned, their fight would be far from over as they live in constant fear of harassment, violence and physical abuse by state and non-state actors. Persecution and fear are lived reality for the majority of LGBTI people in Belarus due to the lack of protection of their fundamental rights by the state and stigmatisation among society.

In a context of widespread LGBTI-phobia and discrimination, Belarus provides no protection to LGBTI people, or equality and safety. Law enforcement and the judiciary are often overlooking motivated crimes against LGBTI people. Moreover, police themselves engage in discrimination and harassment, intimidation and gross violation of rights towards LGBTI people.

In the light of this information, I reiterate that freedom of assembly is a universal human right which has been grossly violated by the Belarusian government. It is vital to ensure the right to freedom, to peaceful assembly and guarantee participation in peaceful protest without limiting the rights of participants including LGBTI

people. It is vital that governors ensure that all prisoners of conscience in Belarus are released immediately and unconditionally, and that prompt, effective and impartial investigation of the circumstances of their arbitrary arrest and all reported human rights violation of detainees are initiated.

Belarus must condemn violations against LGBTI people by law enforcement.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

This concludes the list of speakers on behalf of the political groups.

The next speaker is Lord George FOULKES from the United Kingdom.

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you very much for the opportunity of saying a few words.

I want to speak in strong support of both reports and to thank the rapporteurs for doing an excellent job.

I am concerned about, particularly, about the political prisoners and their conditions. First of all, I think we should make prisoners that have been arrested without good reason – I've got a list of the so-called reasons put forward by the authorities – and they are held in without mattresses, having to stand up, without exercise. It is really inhumane conditions that they are suffering and we should protest very strongly in every possible way against these conditions.

But I want to make a very strong plea about individual action that members of parliament can take. I know some in many countries have already taken it, I have taken it here in the United Kingdom, and that is to adopt a prisoner. By agreeing to adopt a prisoner, you give that prisoner some hope, some encouragement. I have adopted Stepan Latypov and I have been in touch with him, I have sent him messages and I have heard back that, that gives him some hope, some encouragement. I hope more of our colleagues in every country, every member country of the Council of Europe, will do that. We will build up – just as we build up pressure against this unfair detention, against the dreadful conditions that they are held in – we will also give hope individually to those prisoners.

I hope that that plea will be picked up by members of this Parliamentary Assembly.

Thank you, Mr President.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Mr Mihail POPSOI from the Republic of Moldova.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Republic of Moldova, EPP/CD): Honourable colleagues,

There is no discussion that Belarus is a European country, that Belarusian people are European people, that they appreciate democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and they crave all these fundamental freedoms just as much as any of us do and any of our fellow citizens.

Unfortunately, these fundamental freedoms are being denied to them every day, and equally unfortunately, there is very little international reaction that would change this reality. In Eastern Europe, there are many issues with fundamental freedoms and Eastern partnership countries have struggled a great deal. Yet Belarus, to our great regret, stands out in the worst possible case. I would like to express solidarity with the people of Belarus, first and foremost, and to call upon each and every one of us and our member States to do more to help the people of Belarus, because in the 21st century, in the heart of Europe, people should not be denied their fundamental, very basic democratic freedoms that are at the core of this organisation.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Mr Koloman BRENNER from Hungary.

No, you have to use the other system because of the online.

Mr Koloman BRENNER (Hungary, NR): Thank you for speaking, Mr President,

Mr President, first of all I would like to congratulate both rapporteurs on these two very courageous reports, in my view.

I also agree with the previous speakers that we must show great solidarity with the citizens of Belarus here in this Parliamentary Assembly.

As Vice-Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament and a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, I organised a special session last August so that we could emphasise this solidarity and support for the citizens of Belarus. On behalf of the largest opposition party, my party, Jobbik, I also wanted to underpin this with a text.

I believe that free and fair elections are an important basis for a well-functioning civic democracy. Especially coming from a country like Hungary, I would like to emphasise this, because next year we will also have parliamentary elections and again they are unlikely to be fair, as shown by the OSCE report on the elections in Hungary in 2018.

Once again, I would like to emphasise that in Europe, where we stand for common values and human rights and civil rights, especially here in the Council of Europe, it is important that we always show solidarity when there are countries where authoritarian leaders disregard and undermine all these values. I believe that the international community should be called upon, as is done here in these reports, to take a clear stand on this.

And of course there are always geopolitical considerations. No one here in this Assembly should be too naïve to disregard that, but it is precisely the Council of Europe that should continue to stand up for the fundamental values of civil democracy, for human rights and especially for the rights of these citizens of Belarus, who did nothing other than demonstrate peacefully and criticise what was apparently not a free election. It is very, very important that we all show solidarity. That is why I would once again like to praise and support these two reports.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Many thanks Mr Koloman BRENNER.

The next speaker is Mr Dimitri HOUBRON from France.

He is not in his allocated seat. I'm not sure if he is anywhere else in the chamber, or online.

If that's not the case, I will give the floor to the next speaker which is Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO from Ukraine.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteurs for their brilliant work. There really are two brilliant reports and today we can really adopt powerful, mightful resolution.

What is going on in Belarus now? We have a usurper and dictator, Lukashenko, which is killing his own people. Over more than 30,000 people were put in jail. Hundreds of political prisoners just now, right now. Belarus is like a concentration camp inside Europe. What he is doing with people and with human rights there is absolutely awful. I want to share with you the story of one lady, Ekaterina Andreeva, who is a journalist. She prepared the book *Belarusian Donbas.* We published this book in Ukraine, and that is why I know her personally. She was sentenced for two years in prison, you know for what? Just for streaming from protest a meeting. Just for streaming as a journalist. For her journalist work. Nothing else. She was not even taking part in it. She was just streaming and two years for this bright lady. It is absolutely awful what is going on there. Why is it possible? Because Lukashenko now is on two pillars: first, there is brutal violence from law enforcement forces, but they are now not law enforcement forces, they are Lukashenko's private army and, secondly, by Putin, by help of the Russian Federation. Tomorrow, Lukashenko will fly again to Putin. Those are the two pillars that make this awful regime possible, here in the centre of Europe.

I think that in our Resolution we are putting absolutely clear steps as to what should be done. A road map to free, democratic Belarus. How it should be. That is: first, stop the violence, stop political repressions, and we are addressing to all governments to make any cooperation with Belarus and Belarusian authorities

conditional to stopping the violence and to the freedom of political prisoners. Secondly, change of electoral system. Thirdly, new democratic elections and not somewhere in the future —this year— and after this we will see an absolutely different Belarus.

By the way, language is important not BelaruSSian people, Belarusian people, and they have their right to be part of European family. That is very important. I am sure that the first thing that will be done by democratic Belarus is to join our organisation, to become a member State of the Council of Europe, because it is the only country, a European nation, which now is not inside our organisation. That is why it is very important to support this. That is why we need to do it. That is why we need to say that Lukashenko is not a president but a tyrant and we cannot have any co-operation with him and that resolution answered all these questions clearly and powerfully. So, it is very good. In the end, I want to address to the Belarusian people: *Brothers, we are with you; we are for your freedom. Long live Belarus!* [in Belarusian]

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS from the United Kingdom, online.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you very much, Mister President, and allow me with others to thank Lord David BLENCATHRA and Ms Alexandra LOUIS for their reports. The spirit, as well as the letter, of each of those reports is to be honoured. The Council of Europe strives not only to be critical of wrongdoing, which is of course proper, but also to offer a way to better days and the spirit of these reports is so admirable.

I, like my dear friend, Lord George FOULKES, have adopted a prisoner in Belarus. He is just 17 years of age, though 16 when he was arrested in August last year, a young man named Mikita Zalatarou. He has been held without trial. He has been sentenced subsequently in a trial to five years of imprisonment. He has epilepsy. He is unwell. He has problems with himself, but he is a fine young man. It is distraught parents who tell the tale of his life. It was in Gomel in southeast Belarus just a week after the disturbances there on the 10th that he was arrested.

I cannot believe that a country that can hold its head high in the international community can descend to the kinds of treatment that they have inflicted upon this young child: the lack of independence of the judiciary, a failure to protect children, a deprivation of liberty, and being held in solitary confinement -the conditions which Lord George FOULKES referred to are conditions that he has survived in- lack of access to a lawyer, no responsible adult to be with him at crucial moments in all of this. His appeal comes up in two days time. He is in detention in solitary confinement. The case has been rigged against him. I think that the voice of Mikita Zalatarou should ring loud and clear to all the peoples represented in this Assembly and even beyond that Belarus must change and take advantage perhaps of possibilities put before it by the two reports that we are considering in this morning's debate.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ from Lithuania.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Mister President.

First of all I would like to thank both rapporteurs, Lord David BLENCATHRA and Ms Alexandra LOUIS, for their very comprehensive and well-balanced reports and recommendations as adopted by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of PACE respectively.

Thank you very much, dear rapporteurs, for taking on board my amendments tabled individually, and also with a group of colleagues for today's plenary.

A few remarks regarding the context of adoption of these two important reports and current developments in Belarus:

As we know a political crisis is unfolding in Belarus as the result of the falsified election last August. Ms Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the democratic forces of Belarus, has proposed dialogue with the representatives of the regime as a peaceful way to solve the current crisis and avoid its escalation. Despite

fear and intimidation almost 800,000 citizens of Belarus voiced their support for this proposal through an online platform. In response to this suggestion, the regime of Lukashenko accused Ms Tsikhanouskaya and 16 other leaders and activists of the democratic forces of terrorism.

I think our position should be clear. It is one more attempt to silence democratic opposition in the country and a pure provocation by Lukashenko's regime, because Tsikhanouskaya cannot and will not be considered a terrorist under the international law. No way.

Our mission, as I understand it, is to encourage a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition as the only way to cease the violence, human rights violations and to hold new democratic elections to resolve the political crisis.

Tomorrow Lukashenko is going to Moscow to meet President Putin. Let us see if the sovereignty of Belarus will be sacrificed tomorrow.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ from Switzerland.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC): Thank you, Mr Vice-President.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I must tell you that I was not really surprised by the popular reactions last summer after the presidential elections, which President Lukashenko won by a landslide.

I want to tell you a story. In November 2019, I went to Minsk with the delegation to observe the parliamentary elections and I saw some interesting things: everything was calm, very calm. However, I witnessed peculiar elections; in fact, elections without visible voters. For example, the system provides for early voting for four days – four days, I believe – but no one is in or in front of these polling stations.

According to the NGOs, and I was able to stand in front of one of these polling stations for a while, no one came. But the good news is that on Sunday, polling day, when the polling stations opened, we were already told that the turnout would be around 30 to 40%. Look for the error. The voting starts; no voters, let's say maybe one person here or there. We set off, with our driver and interpreter, into the countryside towards the East of the country. And there, almost always the same scenario: we arrive in villages with polling stations that are empty, or almost. But around the polling stations, there is a lot of activity. Events are organized to attract the crowds: films for children, games for children, a sale of food at low prices, but each time, nobody or almost nobody. In the offices, the reception is generally excellent, provided that you don't ask too many questions. We feel that the assessors are rather tense and suspicious if we insist too much; there is a phone that is picked up to call I don't know who. We are offered cakes, tea, folk dance groups liven up the atmosphere.

At the end of the day, we arrive at the place where we are going to observe the counting of the votes: it is in Minsk. A fast, opaque counting, carried out by civil servants who transgress some rules of the electoral code without any problem. The results are in: an overwhelming success for the President's supporters, with an excellent turnout.

Dear colleagues, there was indeed a miracle in Belarus, a power that was voted for by phantom voters. So, in August 2020, 80% of the vote for President Lukashenko and 10% for his opponent: that is a fine joke. The people in the street, by their numbers and determination, have returned the true result of the vote. The cheaters were too greedy and caught red-handed. Yes, Lord BLENCATHRA, Belarus and its people deserve a true and fair electoral process.

That is my testimony, I will say no more. I sincerely hope for the best for this country, ideally its entry into the Council of Europe soon and, finally, the respect of human rights and the establishment of a real democracy in Belarus.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS from Lithuania.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS have you requested the floor?

Okay.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Hello, thank you.

Thank you, Mr Andreas NICK, for your wonderful chairmanship on this most terrible question: that in the middle of Europe, we are starting to have a Soviet-type concentration camp. It is a Gulag established by [Belarusian president] Mr Alexander Lukashenko under the auspices of [Russian president] Mr Vladimir Putin. Tomorrow they will speak about how to strip part of the independence, part of the statehood, of Belarus.

Now in this house, it was announced yesterday by [German Chancellor] Mrs Angela Merkel that the Council of Europe is the "consciousness of Europe", a parliamentary Assembly. You should at least clean us from those guys who are coming to represent Belarus from their so-called parliament.

The parliament of the Belarusian Republic is not a parliament, it is a part of a dictatorial executive machine to repress Belarusian people. So if you remember [former special rapporteur on Belarus] Mr Christos Pourgourides' report from 10 years ago, it was a non-reportable situation, exactly about the situation in Belarus, which become twice as bad during the rapporteurship of Mr Pourgourides.

The so-called parliament of Belarus just adopting a framework, who is a terrorist in Belarus? Terrorists become President-elect Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Terrorists are every political prisoners around 400, and terrorists are from the press. And two Belsat [Poland-based independent broadcaster] journalists have just been sentenced to two years in jail.

The 'terrorists' are 400 political prisoners, who are lawyers, advocates... They are now banning private companies inside of Belarus. They will be establishing, from now on, only state lawyers, who will be defending so-called political opponents. That means that they will be on the side of the prosecutor's office. It is absolutely clear that the last law established against lawyers in Belarus, not represented by private offices, but presented only by the state, means it is the last step in creating a Gulag in the middle of Europe.

I would like to say that we should strip ourselves from this so-called pleasure of seeing those guys in our Assembly. I would like to just ask not to meet them again while they are representing Mr Alexander Lukashenko's regime, the members of their so-called parliament.

I want to say again that I would like to ask you to support the amendments to this report. The amendments by Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO and Ms Laima ANDRIKIENĖ.

It would be good if you would say "Long live Belarus" [speaks in Belarusian], and support the amendments to those reports.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Mr Sergey FABRICHNYY from Russia, but I'm not sure if he's connected.

He is not connected?

So I will give the floor to the next speaker, Ms Nicole TRISSE from France.

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

Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe, but we cannot remain indifferent and passive in the face of the massive violations of human rights and the rule of law perpetrated by the regime in that country, particularly since 9 August 2020.

The two reports we are debating here, the quality and scope of which I welcome, are in my view closely linked.

The first, by Ms Alexandra LOUIS, is a damning account of the violence, arbitrary arrests, torture and political pressure against the aspirations of Belarusian civil society. The second, by Lord David BLENCATHRA, outlines the legal conditions for a lasting end to the crisis and the hope, in the long term, that Belarus will join the Council of Europe.

The origin of the crisis is political and electoral. The crisis is unquestionably political, because the Belarusian people are fed up with the authoritarian, corrupt and inefficient regime that has been in power since 1994. Electoral, inevitably, because the regime relies on obsolete rules that are contrary to international standards for elections. All this illegitimate regime wants is to stay in power at all costs.

The election of 9 August 2020 was marked by very serious irregularities. The Belarusian people were not deceived: they braved the persecution of the authorities and the security forces for weeks and months on end to demonstrate peacefully. This courage, which has led to thousands of arbitrary arrests and imprisonments, to more than 500 recorded cases of torture, to deaths and to thousands of complaints that have gone unheeded, commands our respect and places an obligation on us.

An obligation, yes. We must help these people, who are only asking for free and democratic elections. This means that we must be able to have recourse to a universal jurisdiction. We must send a strong signal to the regime's executioners, who must be prosecuted and punished. International organisations such as the Council of Europe should be able to take action against the Belarusian authorities through stronger economic measures.

Finally, Belarus must be able to emerge from this nightmare by overhauling its institutions and its electoral system. In this respect, we here have a duty to help them, to accompany them, with our resources, our tools, our conventions and our values.

Ladies and gentlemen, Belarusian civil society is watching us and still has hope, despite everything. Let us not disappoint them. Let us act! Let us condemn the intolerable acts and abuses of a rigid and illegitimate regime.

I will vote unreservedly in favour of the resolution and recommendation that are before us this morning. I thank the two rapporteurs for this important work.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ms Nicole TRISSE.

The next speaker on the list is Mr John HOWELL from the United Kingdom.

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Thank you Mr President.

I would like to begin by giving my warmest congratulations to both rapporteurs who produced excellent reports on this.

A number of people have said that Belarus is not of course a member of the Council of Europe. If it were a member of the Council of Europe, in the face of these elections, it would be chucked out because this is not an acceptable way of behaving.

Nobody could have sat there after the elections and watch the mass protests with a hard heart and not sided with those protesting.

As we have heard many of those protesters have been arrested and some have been tortured. Many of those who were arrested on trumped-up crime charges have been given long jail sentences to carry these through.

There are a huge number of human rights problems in Belarus. A huge number that have to be solved not with the help of the European Court of Human Rights, but through their own efforts.

I would draw your attention to Lord George FOULKES' request that the people adopt a better Russian protester to provide them with the comfort that having that link provides.

We must above all bring to book those that have been committing these human rights violations.

Elections in Belarus have never met international standards as far as freedom and fairness are concerned. So it shouldn't cause us any surprise that these last elections didn't meet the standards either. I think it is right for us to make our opinion known even though Belarus is not a member of this Council. It is absolutely right that we make our criticism absolutely plain in in these circumstances.

What we are after is an election system that doesn't simply say that our request is about time trying to stitch one up on Russia. This has nothing to do with Russia at all. It is to do with Belarus itself and the integrity and independence of the electoral system in Belarus.

I think that where we stand on that is an important marker for the sort of Council that we wish to be and for the sort of values that we wish to see adopted right across Europe, and indeed, at the very heart of Europe, which is what Belarus is.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Ms Petra BAYR from Austria.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC): Thank you, Mr Chairperson.

Viktar Barushka is a political prisoner from Belarus whom I have sponsored, as previous speakers have done for other political prisoners.

Viktar is 32 years old, a businessman and he was arrested by the police on 18 October 2020 on his way home after a demonstration on a Sunday when he ran away from the police. He was beaten after his arrest, abused, including being raped with a baton and had to spend 12 days in intensive care afterwards.

He, Viktar, is accused of intentionally causing grievous bodily harm to a person in the performance of an official function. On 27 January, Viktar was sentenced to 5 years in a penal colony and at the appeal trial on 6 April, where the Austrian ambassador was kindly present, this sentence was upheld.

Viktar is one of hundreds of political prisoners in Belarus and I pay my utmost respect to all these incredibly brave men and women because, despite knowing about their personal dangers, about their personal vulnerability, they continue to demonstrate for democracy and for truly free elections. Viktar and all the other political prisoners and all those who continue to demonstrate for their fundamental rights, all those deserve not only our full respect but also proper political support, bilaterally and multilaterally.

An independent investigation is essential to clarify how the police and the law enforcement agencies in Belarus deal with and violate human rights, but a change is also needed in the way the authorities deal with people who demonstrate for their rights, for free elections, for democracy. This is just as much a prerequisite for dialogue as an electoral system that really makes it possible for the people of Belarus to express their political will in an undistorted way.

I think we really should take that as a prerequisite too, and I would also like to thank both rapporteurs for these excellent reports, and I very much hope that it really can be a basis for us to enter into dialogue with Belarus and, above all, for improvements in the human rights situation in the country.

Many thanks for their work.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Many thanks.

The next speaker on my list would be Ms María Valentina MARTÍNEZ FERRO from Spain, but she's not in the seat allocated.

Is she elsewhere in the room or online?

That doesn't seem to be the case.

The next speaker on my list is Mr Scott SIMMS, observer from Canada.

Mr Scott SIMMS, can you request the floor again so we can connect you?

Mr Scott SIMMS (Canada): Thank you very much Mr Chair.

I hope you can hear me.

From way across the ocean it's always an honour to speak in front of the Council in this particular Assembly. For several reasons. I've been doing it for quite some time and I've always been impressed with two very important things.

Number one, I want to congratulate the rapporteurs for their very good report on this, very comprehensive and illustrative. Speaking of which I also want to thank some of my colleagues here who have spoken before me who bring some vital reflection to this debate by illustrating some of the people involved in this situation. Political prisoners, people oppressed in Belarus, and Belarusians that are going through this right now who want a much better world than what they're experiencing currently. I want to thank them, in particular Ms Petra BAYR who just spoke, also Lord George FOULKES, who talked about adopting protester prisoners. I'd want to congratulate him and others who have done the same.

In Canada we take great deal of pride in what we call Elections Canada. It is our agency that is separate to governance. It is separated, runs on its own. It is answerable to our Parliament, but it certainly runs in its own place to make sure that we have fair and equal elections.

Many of the hallmarks that have been illustrated throughout this report, recommendations by this Assembly, by the OSCE, by the Venice Commission, bring some vital aspects to basic tenants of our democracy. Things such as maintaining a national voter's list, the ballots and the printing of the ballots and the independence of the counting of elections whether they be at a federal level or a sub-national level. We take pride in making sure that all these are followed intensely.

So one of these things that were said in the report and I want to illustrate is rapid and essential changes without the full legislative process can only be an interim solution. This is a small step to a great change that has to happen in Belarus where free and competitive elections have not yet become the normal practice as it has been illustrated many times.

You know, in Canada very soon we're looking at legislation to combat disinformation amongst the public through social media. When I think about this a lot of it pales in comparison when I see the examples from Belarus regarding arbitrary detention of political opponents, human rights defenders, journalists, media workers, election workers. It's astounding for someone like me who grew up in a situation as many of you with an independent election system.

The goal of reintegration of Belarus into this Assembly may seem so far off but is something that for me even as an observer from Canada is going to be a long and patient process. But it's well worth striving for.

Thank you to the Assembly for this moment.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list would be Mr Artuss KAIMIŅŠ from Latvia, but he is not connected online as far as I see. No.

Then I will give the floor to Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN from Finland.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC): Mr President, thanks very much.

My first words, I am very, very grateful for both Lord David BLENCATHRA as well as for Ms Alexandra LOUIS for the reports they have made. Very crucial, important items, human rights situation in Belarus, as well as the situation of election reform needs.

The Assembly has chosen a path to write first these two reports concerning the past and the present situation. And fair enough, the reports are very important and thanks very much also for the useful discussion that we have conducted here. There will be a third report, which I am actually rapporteur, on inclusive national political process in Belarus. That report will not be a document itself, it is more about processes. Our approach really speaks about national processes so we are not looking at it in an East-West confrontational way, but in terms of confrontation between past and future in Belarus. It is also inclusive in the way exactly expressed here, we are not only speaking about the country but with the country, we try to have a dialogue with all relevant political stakeholders in the Belarusian society. So that's the next step for our work.

I have one problem on this report and it relates to Ms Alexandra LOUIS's report on human rights. There is an important paragraph, number 8, and you mentioned that an impunity platform should be created. True, but there is also an amendment on that one made by Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO. If the amendment which says that there is a need to also create a permanent group on human rights issues by the Assembly, I think it is a bit awkward from the point of view that we tried to create an inclusive process itself. If the question about that para-amendment is about impunity I can see it. But if it is creating a parallel structure, a permanent structure, which is more demonstrative in this format as it is made there, it does not help our process of creating this inclusive national process in Belarus. That is why I am not in favour for that amendment. If the interpretation is an impunity case, I can understand it, but in this format I am against it. I do not particularly like it.

But I am very much in favour for Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO's words saying that the ultimate aim for all of us is that Belarus will become a full member of the Council of Europe. It is obvious that is the aim, that would mean absolutely electoral reforms and human rights respect as we have now stipulated in our reports.

Thank you very much, Mr Chair.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Ms Boriana ÅBERG from Sweden.

Ms Boriana ÅBERG (Sweden, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues, thanks Lord David BLENCATHRA and Ms Alexandra LOUIS for their excellent reports.

What currently is happening in Belarus is beyond horrific.

For decades a constant of Lukashenko's dictatorship has been crimes against human rights. But now the situation is extremely concerning.

The number of political prisoners has passed 350. What is taking place is unprecedented in the history of modern Belarus. People are being arrested for no reason and refused contact with lawyers until in prison.

In prison, prisoners sleep on the floor and the cells are so cramped there is barely enough air. The guards pour bleach on the floor to cause severe nausea among the prisoners leaving them nearly unable to breathe or see. It's unbelievable that this torture is happening in Europe today.

The price of protesting against the regime is extremely high. Women who demonstrate, pregnant, with the social services taking over care of their children. During the spring session, the Belarusian Parliament prepares new severely repressive laws aimed at intimidating people from resuming protests against the regime. Among others, there's a law about extremism that would make it easier for the authorities to declare people and organisations as extremists.

There is also a media law that would forbid media from reporting about non-permitted demonstrations and enable easier withdrawal of journalist accreditations. Additionally, a law that would allow employers to fire employees participating in demonstrations. All of this is for Lukashenko to build a façade of control after last autumn's chaos.

What is occurring in Belarus shows that the imposed sanctions are not working. Belarusian people need and deserve all support in the fight for human rights, democracy and justice. As Alex Bielinski said, if we want to prevent Belarus from turning into a huge black concentration camp, we need to actively support the Belarusian people today.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Mr André GATTOLIN from France.

Mr André GATTOLIN (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mr President.

Ladies and gentlemen, Belarus is a blot on the map of Europe.

Belarus is a sad blot on the map of Europe. It was the only country that had not signed the European Convention on Human Rights and was therefore not a member of the Council of Europe. It is also the only country that has not yet abolished the death penalty. It is a country, and the two reports that have been presented – and I should like to congratulate Lord David BLENCATHRA and my colleague Alexandra LOUIS in particular – are quite exemplary in demonstrating the electoral rigging, but also the abuses that are produced by this regime.

I would add to this that, just yesterday, the NGO Reporters Without Borders published its World Press Freedom Index: Belarus has fallen further back and is ranked 158th out of 180 countries. This is the worst ranking in Europe.

As we know, this country has been ruled since 1994 by one and the same man: Alexander Lukashenko. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that our body, our Assembly, has looked into the unacceptable practices used in this country to stifle democratic opposition. In 2004, our excellent former Cypriot colleague, Mr Christos Pourgourides, published an excellent report on enforced disappearances in Belarus, following an extremely thorough investigation which is a reference in the field. I regret that there is no mention of it in the texts, but there are so many negative references.

I happen to be the rapporteur for this Assembly on enforced disappearances within the Council of Europe. For two years, I have been working regularly with Christos on these issues because he is continuing the investigation, and Deutsche Welle, moreover, did an excellent report a year and a half ago on the follow-up.

The report highlighted the role of Mr Dmitri Pavlichenko, the former head of a special police unit, who was accused of leading a death squad that abducted and executed four political opponents of Mr Lukashenko. It would seem, in view of the demonstrations last August and September, that this man, who had disappeared for a while, has reappeared to stigmatise dark forces against the activists.

There have been cases of temporary enforced disappearances. I believe that it is the role of this Assembly, and it has already been the case, moreover, to remind all its members, all its member countries, to sign and ratify the International Convention against Enforced Disappearances, because that is also how we will impose common rules of freedom of law.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker on the list is Lord Simon RUSSELL from the United Kingdom.

Lord Simon RUSSELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Yes can you hear me?

I congratulate the two rapporteurs on two excellent and uncomfortably timely reports. I previously spoke on Belarus during our January 2020 session – a coronavirus lifetime ago – to debate on the progress report on the November 2019 parliamentary elections. The PACE monitoring mission was headed by Lord David BLENCATHRA and I had the privilege of being one of its members. That progress report informs and echoes the first of the two reports we are discussing today. I totally agree with and support all of the points made in paragraph 5 of the draft resolution. We saw almost all of these activities with our own eyes. But as paragraph 115 of the explanatory memorandum points out, we have been making the same points about the election system in Belarus for over 20 years. Is today in anyway different?

As one reflects on the travesty of the presidential election last year and the brutal cynicism of the systematic escalating, silencing, terrorising and demonising of anyone deemed to be an opponent, one is forcefully reminded of George Orwell's insightful comment on totalitarian regimes in his masterwork *Animal Farm.* This is one of the seven commandments to the Animal Farm pigs: "all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others". How can one attempt to influence such a regime? I fear that we are moving rapidly back into an era of sabre-rattling realpolitik, epitomised by a combination of brute physical force and a vainglorious and largely empty rhetoric. It seems that Belarus cannot be influenced alone, we must also influence Russia. No mean task as most of us are painfully aware. There are no easy solutions but we must do what we can.

Like my colleagues Lord George FOULKES and Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS, I have adopted a victim of the regime's intolerance and arrogance, Ruslan Acosta, was arrested for the crime of carrying a red and white flag and was then sentenced to three years in a penal colony for a false allegation of assaulting a police officer. Ruslan and all of his fellow prisoners deserve our support. It may only seem a little but if a lot of us each do a little the mathematics ultimately will allow us to prevail.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

It is now 12:30 p.m. and I must now interrupt the list of speakers.

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 provided that speakers connected remotely can report their actual presence when the debate is closed.

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

I now call Lord David BLENCATHRA to reply. You have three minutes.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Corapporteur): Mr President,

First of all I am grateful to everyone who has spoken in this excellent debate and I particularly welcome the comments, the unanimous comments from members on my report.

I wish to thank Ms Ingjerd SCHOU from Norway, Mr Tiny KOX, Lord George FOULKES, Mr Koloman BRENNER from Hungary, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS from the United Kingdom and Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ from Lithuania, Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ from Switzerland, Ms Nicole TRISSE from France, Mr John HOWELL United Kingdom, Ms Petra BAYR from Austria, Mr Scott SIMMS from Canada, Ms Boriana ÅBERG from Sweden, Mr André GATTOLIN from France, Lord Simon RUSSELL of United Kingdom, and he speaks with authority having been on the electoral mission with me in 2019, and of course I also thank Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN from Finland. I also look forward to reading his report in June.

Now we have had no criticisms today, but let me just denounce for the last time, and I hope never to say so again. We've often been accused of dictating to Belarus. We are doing no such thing. We've been asked by the Belarus authorities to observe their elections. It is therefore legitimate to make suggestions on how those elections can be improved.

I believe my report presents a neutral menu of the central election law changes if Belarus is to have a free and fair election system recognised by all Western democracies as meeting international standards. It is then up to Belarus to deal with our recommendations.

So colleagues, let's be clear what we're calling for here. It's not something extraordinary, but it's the norm for all free and fair elections as recognised by international standards. And what are they?

What we're saying to Belarus is to remove obstacles to political parties and candidates registry, stop candidates be registered or deregistered for often minor technical reasons. Let's have effective controls on ballot boxes. Let's have a properly balanced Central Election Commission, and all the law and election commissions under it. Let's have a central public register of electors so that we can make sure that names are not being added again and again. Let us reform the ballot counting so it is transparent, with observers permitted to observe properly and fully and results declared publicly. That's no involvement of state institutions, of employees of state institutions in the electoral processes and have them openly campaigning for pro-government families. That's not right. Let's help ensure that there is balanced media coverage for all parties and candidates.

Colleagues, that is not rocket science. It's not some concept of an absolutely theoretical perfect electoral system which the world has never seen before. It's just the norm in all Western democracies which aspire to international electoral norms.

Therefore colleagues I commend my report for the agreement of this Assembly.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy wish to speak?

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, you have three minutes.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): First of all, I would like to express my full solidarity with the democracy movement on behalf of our Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. And secondly, I would like to express my absolute solidarity with our Polish colleague, Mr Arkadiusz MULARCZYK, who asked us to condemn the anti-minority intimidation against the Polish minority in Belarus. And I would like to call on all Council of Europe institutions and instruments to follow very closely the situation of the Polish minority in Belarus and to put into motion the instruments that the Council of Europe is having in this regard.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to focus and congratulate the work of our rapporteur, Lord David BLENCATHRA, who has done a remarkable job in identifying the most pressing issues requiring change in the Belarusian electoral system and in presenting a set of recommendations to address them, based on 20 years of work on election observation, including by this very Assembly.

Despite being very relevant politically, electoral reform is essentially a highly technical issue, but this report is proof that even technical issues can be presented in a very inspiring way, as we could hear Lord David BLENCATHRA, as well in live. But above all, I would like to comment the non-divisive path Lord David BLENCATHRA has chosen. He did his utmost to protect the report from elements which may tempt it with the

accusation of bias. And he is not insisting on the neutral tone of his report for the sake of being neutral, but because he believes – and our Committee follows him on that – that this is how we may stand a chance to sit and discuss electoral reform with the authorities in Belarus. I invite you all to support this approach.

Yesterday, the Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed this Assembly and emphasised how important it was to maintain dialogue, sometimes against all odds. I sincerely hope that we all agree with that statement and in the same spirit, the draft resolution, which is presented to you, calls for an inclusive national dialogue in Belarus to ensure a peaceful way out of the present crisis. Belarusian people deserve peace and a country based on human rights, democracy and rule of law.

We should support this call and we should support the rest of the recommendations in the two texts presented to you. I believe that Belarus will be, in the end, the 48th member of our organisation and Europe will be fully reunited.

Therefore, I invite you to vote in favour of the draft resolution and the recommendation.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Chairman.

I now call Ms Alexandra LOUIS to reply.

You have three minutes.

Ms Alexandra LOUIS (France, ALDE, Corapporteur): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues,

I would first like to thank you for your very committed remarks, which are very powerful messages to the Belarusian people, who must know that they are not alone in their demand for fundamental rights and freedoms and in their aspiration to democracy.

Many things have been said, particularly about these violations of human rights; I am obviously thinking of the acts of torture and arbitrary detentions, which have been very well described, but also of the persecution to which minorities of all kinds are unfortunately subjected, for reasons that are still very vague.

There is also the issue of freedom of the press and, more broadly, of freedom of expression. In Belarus, it is complicated and often impossible to connect to the Internet; what seems so simple to us, who live in the comfort of democracies, is not possible for the citizens of Belarus.

In the face of this situation, my report and that of my colleague propose to provide guidelines, tools, to get out of this impasse. It is obviously possible to get out of this impasse.

The Belarusian people, like us, are demanding this universalism of rights in order to be able to aspire to have free elections and also to have a judicial system that guarantees freedom. Today, in Belarus, lawyers and journalists are prevented from working; the judicial system is not able to respond and, what is worse, is based on particularly vague texts which, in a way, guarantee arbitrariness. That is why my report obviously includes measures aimed at those Member States that have the possibility of taking action, particularly through the mechanisms of universal jurisdiction but also with these famous Magnitsky laws.

I believe that it is also important to say things, to look reality in the face and to denounce them: that is our duty. We are impartial, but we are not completely neutral: I think that the difference is important. We must say things, we must be demanding in terms of democracy and the rule of law. I believe that this is why we are here today.

I would like to conclude by saying that there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to get Belarus out of this impasse, that dialogue today is very complicated, but that I think it is an avenue that we must continue to explore.

I also believe, and I would like to finish with this, that we must absolutely fight against impunity. Throughout Europe, when crimes, offences, or in any case attacks on human rights, go unpunished, in a way it sends a message throughout the world that these crimes can flourish. It is therefore very important to condemn them verbally, but also to ensure that the people responsible for these acts, individually or collectively, can one day answer for their actions before national and international courts.

I thank you once again for your commitment to the issue of Belarus.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Madam.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights wish to speak?

I think Mr Boriss CILEVIČS is online.

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Mr President,

Belarus is not yet a member state of the Council of Europe but it is a part of Europe and we cannot stay indifferent to gross and systematic human rights violations which occur there on a regular basis.

Indeed, as many speakers in this debate said, we must strongly deplore what is going on in Belarus. In my view statements are not enough. We must ensure that all those who are personally guilty of these violations, all those perpetrators, must be held to account.

The report by Ms Alexandra LOUISE suggest the ways in which this can be done. This indeed must be done.

We must work together in close coordination to develop synergy with the European Union, the OSCE and other international organisations.

I would like once again to draw attention to the coordination platform which has been established by the European Parliament that has more resources to support local NGOs. The main goal is to document and verify all allegations of human rights violations so that all member states and international organisations can act.

I congratulate Ms Alexandra LOUISE for her very serious work. I believe that this is really a very good report and it really serves as the main goal that no violation of human rights Europe, whether in the territory of the Council of Europe or beyond it, no violation of human rights must go unpunished.

Once again I would like to Ms Alexandra LOUISE for her excellent work and I call upon all members of the Assembly to support this report and the draft resolution.

Thank you President.

Ms Vilja TOOMAST (Estonia, ALDE): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mr President,

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to thank the authors of both reports, Lord David Blenchatra and Ms Alexandra Louis, for their thorough work and the preparatory investigations they have made for drafting the reports. I also think that the proposals the rapporteurs have highlighted in the concluding remarks of their reports deserve attention.

Estonia follows the developments in Belarus with great concern and finds that the political crisis in Belarus, which has been going on for more than eight months, has reached a stalemate that can last for years. At least as long as Russia’s political and economic support to Lukashenka’s regime continues.

We also condemn the ongoing violence against political opponents, human rights defenders, journalists, medical workers and other people. The physical and psychological violence of law enforcement officers against the prisoners is unacceptable.

Estonia also expresses indignation about the activities of Belarusian KGB who entered the opposition leader and former presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and 16 other persons, including member of the presidium of the opposition’s Coordination Council Pavel Latushka, in the list of organisations and persons connected with terrorist activities.

Estonia has taken a very active position regarding the issue of Belarus. With our allies, we have been upholding this topic in the EU, in OSCE and in the UN bodies.

In the OSCE, we together with a group consisting of 17 participating Member States invoked the Moscow Mechanism, which constituted a report by impartial expert Professor Benedek on violation of human rights during the post-election period. Belarus did not join the report, did not nominate its own co-rapporteur and did not give Professor Benedek permission to visit Belarus.

Estonia with 18 countries express their full support for the establishment of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, an international and independent platform for the collection and preservation of evidence of serious human rights violations committed during and after the presidential elections in Belarus in 2020.

Estonia is allocating €30,000 for the platform.

We have also supported various EU sanctions, the last of them was the third round of sanctions imposed on 17 December 2020 against 88 individuals (including Lukashenka) and 7 entities (three private and four state-owned companies that support Lukashenka's regime). Estonia supports imposing additional sanctions against Belarus.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Rapporteur, dear Assembly members,

I congratulate the Ms. Louis on the excellent Report, as well as the draft Resolution and draft Recommendation with the cornerstone idea to launch the international investigation on the violation of human rights in Belarus.

I'm grateful for the underlining the role of Ukraine in protecting the human rights activists fleeing from neighboring Belarus.

Unfortunately, the political prosecutions and imprisonment, harassments and persecutions of journalists and human right activists, lawyers were very numerous in Belarus and are ongoing.

From the historical perspective, Belarus used to be the Assembly member split because of the violations of human rights and refusal to abolish the death penalty. With a lack of the dialogue, over 20 years after the situation with human rights in Belarus just worsened.

One of the points, listed in the draft Resolution, looks very much relevant to the current situation: "the initiative developed within the European Parliament on creating a co-ordination platform to combat impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations in Belarus, to help national law enforcement authorities exercise universal jurisdiction ".

What can be done relatively quickly is to strengthen personalized sanctions against those perpetrating human rights violations, including police, prosecutors and judges.

Thank you.

Mr Markus WIECHEL (Sweden, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mr President,

Our Assembly owes major thanks to our two Rapporteurs for their excellent reports in our debate today on the situation in Belarus.

Reading these two reports is a bit like travelling back in time, back to a society seemingly stuck in a 'time warp' - to a long-gone European era where innocent demonstrators would be arrested, beaten, sometimes tortured, and then vanish without a trace. We see indespicable and inhumane acts, sanctioned by the illegitimate Belarusian authorities.

For long periods of time, you would not have much news from Belarus. But then occasionally, the situation in the country would burst into open view. This happened most recently in September of last year. Then the country's seemingly eternal President Lukashenko was reelected in a massively deceitful election. Once again, he claimed the post that he has had since the country's very founding in 1994 – all of 27 years ago!

Of course much of the country reacted with frustration. We could see huge but peaceful marches in favour of democracy, and act bravely against Mr Lukashenka's ever-tightening grip on absolute power and his cruel banning of any opposition.

So, what can we do in our Parliamentary Assembly to assist in the rise of democracy in Belarus? Especially when we know that a big country to Belarus's immediate East is determined on preserving its longstanding political links to it, including a 'State Union' arrangement. Or that communist-authoritarian China is also busy building ties to it, not least because it feels an ideological relationship with President Lukashenko.

Still, there is plenty of room for action on our part, as our two Rapporteurs make clear. We must take up their proposals, not least using the Council's weak links with Belarus within the context of such bodies as our Venice Commission on Democracy through Law, and our GRECO anti-corruption set-up.

To sum up, 'time warps' are not forever. The youthful demonstrators in Minsk and elsewhere – several of whom I have met with personally, will have their day. Let us only hope and work for that day to come soon, and to be peaceful. The Belarusians deserve it, and so does Europe.

Thank you, Mr President.

Ms Maryna BARDINA (Ukraine, ALDE): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank both rapporteurs for incredible work did over the discussed issue. Numerous cases of human rights violations in Belarus shown us its inability to fulfill international obligations to protect citizens from torture and inhuman treatment and to conduct prompt and impartial investigations of such cases.

Facts of violence, torture, mass arbitrary arrests, inability to identify law enforcement officials, violations of freedom of expression and the facts of other violations shocked the European community.

Human rights defenders say the judicial system of Belarus has failed to bring to justice all those responsible for human rights violations against protesters and persecuted the victims, not those who committed the crime.

People from groups of youth, children, women, elderly people who participated in peaceful demonstrations were in a particularly vulnerable and unprotected position. At the same time, as Ms. Louis has mentioned in her report, the courage of women of Belarus, who have been in the front line at all levels, has impressed all of us.

The Council of Europe, being the bulwark of human rights, the rule of law and democratic values in Europe, should react and establish mentioned advisory platform to gather and assess evidence of mass and systemic violations of human rights against participants of peaceful demonstrations in Belarus and stand for the transparent investigation process.

We all need to be together with Belarusian people whose rights are violated and who cannot be protected by their State.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Rapporteur, our group in the statement of March 26 strongly condemn the repression by the Belarusian authorities against members of the opposition, journalists, members of NGOs and citizens:

As confirmed by the report on human rights violations in Belarus of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 23 March last, human rights violations, arbitrary arrests, torture have increased following the electoral fraud observed during the presidential elections of 9 August 2020. This report, like the one issued by the OSCE, also notes the attacks on the freedom of the press and the deterioration in the safety of journalists.

The regime, now at the end of its rope, has decided to attack minorities, in particular the Polish minority in Belarus, by trying to make them an "enemy" and a "scapegoat" to divert the attention of the public opinion. The rights of the Polish minority in Belarus are violated by the Belarusian authorities, as illustrated by the recent arrest of Ms. Andzelika BORYS, President of the Union of Poles in Belarus, and Mr. Andrzej POCZOBUT, correspondent of the newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, that my polish colleague Mr Arkadiusz Mularczyk forgot probably because this newspaper is critical by the Government.

I solemnly call on the Belarusian authorities to put an end to this repression and demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. And this is very important what Mr. Gonczarenko as said few minutes ago. Belarus is only European Country that is not member of Council of Europe.

We must do everything for citizens of Belarus to bring them to integrate our organisation because as said M. Popsoi the Belarusian people share our values our culture and European destiny

Vote : Nécessité urgente d'une réforme électorale au Bélarus / Les violations des droits de l'homme au Bélarus nécessitent une enquête internationale

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Chairman.

I declare the debate closed.

We come to the consideration of amendments.

The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy has presented a draft resolution in Document 15253, to which three amendments have been tabled in the draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

The amendments will be taken in the order in which they appear in the compendium.

I remind you that speeches on amendments are limited to one minute.

We will start with the consideration of the draft resolution and then we will consider the draft recommendation.

I call Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ to support Amendment 1. You have one minute.

Is she around?

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you very much Mr President.

Amendment number one is on paragraph 6 and as you can see what we proposed – nine of us, nine members of the Assembly – to replace the words, which were in the original text, "calling for caution as regards the holding of snap elections on the basis of the current electoral system, the Assembly" with the following words "the Assembly is aware of the calls from national and international actors for holding snap elections on the basis of the current electoral system" and the rest is as in the text.

I think it gives clarity because we really are aware of those calls and we are saying that this should be mentioned in the in the draft resolution. Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against this amendment?

Online? No one?

Okay.

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee agrees.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The Committee is in favour.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

Members present in the Chamber should use the hemicycle voting system.

Members participating remotely should use the remote voting system.

The vote in the hemicycle and via remote voting is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

77 in favour, 13 against, 16 abstentions.

The amendment is agreed.

I apologise to Lord David BLENCATHRA who apparently wanted to speak against this amendment, but his request to speak appeared on the screen after I had already received the response from the Chairman of the Committee. So maybe we need to make sure we speed up in calling for the floor because there seems to be a significant time delay. I cannot keep this open for a minute or two while we proceed. I'm sorry.

We come to amendment 2.

I again call Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ to support amendment 2.

You've got one minute.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Amendment 2 is on Paragraph 9 of the draft resolution.

In this paragraph we have the following text: "The Assembly calls on the Belarusian authorities and all relevant stakeholders to urgently initiate a broad-based and inclusive national dialogue to ensure a peaceful way out of the current crisis and opening the door for necessary reforms benefiting all Belarusian citizens."

What we proposed with the group of colleagues is the clarification of this part of "relevant stakeholders", adding after those words the following: "including all opposition representatives and civil society".

Please support.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I understand Lord David BLENCATHRA now wants to speak against this amendment. Is that right?

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Corapporteur): It's just to say I'm not opposed to the amendment, I wasn't opposed the last one. I thought as the rapporteur I could add my comment to say I was in favour of the last amendment.

I'm in favour of this amendment. I always intended that all relevant stakeholders would include the opposition and civil society. This amendment makes it absolutely clear that all relevant stakeholders do include these relevant groups.

Thank you Mr President.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): We are in favour.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

Members in the Chamber use the hemicycle system.

Members participating remotely should vote using the remote voting system.

The vote is now open.

I declare the vote closed and call for the result to be displayed.

95 in favour, 11 against, 14 abstentions.

Amendment 2 is agreed to.

We come to Amendment 3.

I call again Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ to support Amendment 3.

You have one minute.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you Mr President.

Amendment 3 is again on the same Paragraph 9. It's only a proposal to replace one word which is "initiate" with the word "conduct". The text will look like as follows, I quote: "The Assembly calls on the Belarusian authorities and all relevant stakeholders, including all opposition representatives and civil society, to urgently conduct a broad-based and inclusive national dialogue..." and so on.

Please support.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

I think we have four or five requests to speak online, which makes it a bit difficult. We can only accept one speaker against.

Is anyone clarifying what they want to speak about?

Okay. Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS wants to speak against the amendment.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, one minute.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Mr Chairman I'd like to support.

I'm on the side of Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Can I please ask that when we ask for people who want to speak against an amendment that only those call for the floor who want to do this. Because this is confusing.

We still have three requests to speak and we do not know where to allocate them.

I have a request to speak for from Mr Halil ÖZŞAVLI from Turkey.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Sorry Mr Andreas NICK for that.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): He's not even around.

Okay.

He's not in his chair.

Another technical mistake.

I think I'll give the floor to Lord David BLENCATHRA who is the rapporteur.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Corapporteur): Thank you Mr Chairman.

I'm sorry if I have caused confusion by seeking to speak as the rapporteur.

I just wanted to make it clear that I'm in favour of this amendment.

I'm always impressed when colleagues from other countries who do not have English as a first language pick a better word in English than I do. So I'm very happy here to change the word "initiate" to "conduct", and I recommend acceptance.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

What is the opinion of the Committee Mr Zsolt NÉMETH?

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): We are in favour.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

Again members in the Chamber please use the hemicycle voting system.

Members remotely should use the remote system.

The vote is now open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

100 in favour, 13 against, 12 abstentions.

The amendment is agreed to.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 15253 as amended.

Members present in the Chamber please use the voting system here.

Members remote please use the remote voting system.

I declare the vote open.

I declare the vote closed and call for the result to be displayed.

103 in favour, 16 against, 14 abstentions.

The draft resolution in Document 15253 as amended is adopted.

Congratulations to the rapporteur.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Document 15253. I remind you that a two thirds majority is required.

Members present in the Chamber and remotely please use youre respective systems.

I declare the vote open.

I declare the vote closed and ask for the result to be displayed.

103 in favour, 16 against, 14 abstentions.

The draft recommendation in Document 15253 is adopted.

Congratulations again to the rapporteur.

I have a request on the floor from Mr Samad SEYIDOV which is I think not the right point in time, but it may be a point of order.

May I ask for a bit more diligence when asking for the floor? It confuses the proper unfolding of the deliberations.

The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented a draft resolution, Document 15256 to which three amendments have been tabled, and the draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

The amendments will be taken in the order in which they appear in the compendium.

I remind you that speeches on amendments are limited to one minute.

We will start with the consideration of the draft resolutions and then we will consider the draft recommendation.

Amendment 1, for that we have an oral sub-amendment.

I call on Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support amendment 1.

You have one minute.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

This is a very important amendment. I raised this issue in January during the address by Mr Heiko Maas, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, to our Assembly. That we need such permanent body that will look after human rights situation in, first of all human rights situation, in Belarus.

He, in his answer, supported it. After this I spoke with Madam Secretary General Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ. She also supported it. I hope that after adoption of this resolution and recommendation —I want to ask and to put it to the protocol of our meeting— to go forward and immediately to do it because the situation is so awful: thousands of people in Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania. We need to help them.

Thank you so much.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I have been informed that Ms Alexandra LOUIS wishes to propose an oral sub-amendment, as follows:

In amendment 1, replace the words “Council of Europe permanent group or similar institution on the situation in Belarus, primarily on the protection of human rights" with the following words: “an ad-hoc working group within the Council of Europe tasked with monitoring the human rights situation in Belarus and contributing to the aforementioned Belarus Accountability Platform.”

In my opinion, the oral sub-amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7.a.

Is there any objection to the oral sub-amendment being debated?

There is no objection here. There is no objection online.

As fewer than ten members object to the oral sub-amendment being debated, I call Ms Alexandra LOUIS to support her oral sub-amendment.

One minute.

Ms Alexandra LOUIS (France, ALDE, Corapporteur): Thank you, Mr President.

You have reminded us, therefore, of the verbatim of this sub-amendment, which obviously shares the ambition of the first amendment, but which aims to specify, very clearly, the outlines of this ad hoc working group in order to make it fully effective.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): *Merci.*

What is the opinion...

Does anyone wish to speak against this oral sub-amendment?

This does not seem to be the case.

What is the opinion of the mover of the main amendment?

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, please.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Yes, I support it fully. Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

What is the opinion of the committee?

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS?

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): President, the Committee supported the sub-amendment with a large majority.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I will now put oral sub-amendment 1 to the vote.

Members, please, use your respective voting system.

The vote in both systems is now open.

Thank you.

I declare the vote closed and ask for the results to be displayed.

96 in favor, 20 against, 13 abstentions. The oral sub-amendment 1 is agreed to.

We will now consider the main amendment as amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

So, it does not seem to be the case.

What is the opinion of the committee?

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): The committee is in favor with a large majority.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you,

Members should use the respective voting systems in the hemicycle or remotely.

I declare the vote open.

Thank you. The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed: *94 in favor, 20 against, 12 abstentions.*

The amendment 1 as amended is agreed to.

We come to amendment 2.

I call for Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support amendment 2.

You have 1 minute.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you.

Yes, that's also a very important amendment because what is our roadmap to tackle the situation in Belarus?

First certainly to stop political repression, second, change the rules of elections because with these rules it is impossible and, thirdly, to have these new democratic elections.

But when? Not somewhere in the future, but this year. Because since August last year Belarus doesn't have legitimate power because Alexander Lukashenko is not a legitimate president, he is an usurper. And that is clear for everybody.

So it's very important to have new democratic elections as soon as possible.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

What is the opinion of the rapporteur?

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): The committee is in favor with a large majority.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

So the committee accepted the amendment. I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

Members, please, use your respective voting systems.

I declare the vote open.

Thank you. The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

96 in favor, 21 against, 12 abstentions.

Amendment 2 is agreed to.

We come to amendment 3 and I call for Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support amendment 3.

You have one minute.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you.

It is also important because in addressing to European Union we already have in recommendation the point that all cooperation with Belarus authorities should be conditional on stopping political repression and making political prisoners free.

But in the point about member states we, for the moment, don't have it.

So I think we need to put it and to make all cooperations with Belarus authorities, all cooperations, political, economical, financial conditional to what is happening there with human rights and stopping of political repressions and making political prisoners free.

Because in other case they will just die. That’s so important to do it and I ask all of you for support.

Thank you.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

No one here. Anyone online?

What is the view of the committee?

Mr Boriss CILEVIČS (Latvia, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): The committee is in favor with a large majority.

Mr Andreas NICK (Germany, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote on both respective voting systems.

The vote is now open.

Thank you.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

95 in favor, 20 against, 14 abstentions. Amendment 3 is agreed to.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Doc. 15256, as amended.

Again, use your respective voting systems.

The vote on both systems is now open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

102 in favor, 23 against, 13 abstentions.

The draft resolution contained in Doc. 15256, as amended, is adopted. Congratulations to the rapporteur.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation also contained in Doc. 15256.

Again, members, please use your respective voting systems. The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

98 in favor, 22 against, 13 abstentions.

The draft recommendation contained in Doc. 15256 is adopted. I also congratulate the rapporteur on this success.

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting this afternoon at 4:00 p.m. with the agenda which was approved on Monday morning.

Thank you. The sitting is adjourned.

Demandes d'explication de vote

Ms Annicka ENGBLOM (Sweden, EPP/CD): For the record, I would like to mention that during the vote on amendment No. 1 to the draft resolution on the "Urgent need for electoral reform in Belarus", my intention was to vote for, and that I voted against by mistake.

Ms Jette CHRISTENSEN (Norway, SOC):

Prochaine séance à 16h00