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Official report of debates

Opening of the fourth part-session

Opening of the sitting No. 23

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

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

I welcome everyone here and online. We have a good session ahead of us.

I have asked our Secretary General, Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU-TSOVILIS, to tell me how many of our colleagues are present. When we see that we were the first to get out of the COVID swamp, a little bit, we have gone from 80 to more than 100, to 150 in our hybrid sessions. If I have understood correctly, we are now with 270 colleagues in person here in Strasbourg, plus, of course, all the colleagues who have joined us by video, to put it that way.

I would like first of all to thank all the formal official bodies as well as the French authorities, but above all our team, also here inside, under the management of our Secretary General, for ensuring that this session takes place in the most favourable conditions to actually do our work. A big thank you to all of you who have made it possible for us to be together because, as you know, the face-to-face meeting is so much different than seeing each other on a small screen or a big screen, depending on where you are.

As usual I will conduct the meeting in English to make life easier for our translators.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Because if I go from French to English, maybe to Dutch or to Spanish, or what have you, it will make life quite difficult for the translators.

Dear colleagues, I would like to start by paying tribute to Ms Marie-Louise BEMELMANS-VIDEC from the Netherlands and Mr Martin HEBNER from Germany, both active members of the Parliamentary Assembly who served with conviction and commitment the courses and values of the Council of Europe and our Assembly. A colleague, Marie-Louise was also a long-standing, hard-working and devoted member of the selection panel of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

May I invite you to join me in observing a minute of silence in their memory.

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.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Voilà! Problem settled. May I ask you to be seated?

Dear colleagues, I just wanted to share a few thoughts with you at the beginning of this important session and, as a matter of fact, when I drove back home yesterday after the jury of the Václav Havel prize, the emblematic person that Václav Havel is and what he represents, I couldn't get this very well-known sentence from Hamlet out of my head.

You all know that, I mean *"to be or not to be, that is the question",* but the interesting part is the next sentence in that piece, act 3, scene 1, the nunnery. I see a British colleague, he knows all of that. And basically it goes "*to be or not to be, that is the question.*" And then it comes: "*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and, by opposing, end them?*" If you look at that, I couldn't get it out of my mind because what we do as a parliament Assembly is exactly that. We take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. That's basically what we do. And even if you look into the way we have been working the last month, we've been doing that by addressing in a systematic way very important issues, set aside from tackling issues at hand, such as we will be doing in this session.

Madam Secretary General, the Afghanistan issue, the Western Balkans, the Belarus issue, and of course aside of that doing our business in monitoring and what have you, but addressing certain troubles at sea in a very substantial way thematically does give substance to our cooperation with the Committee of Ministers, which is, at the end, what we should do. We did it with Covid-19, where we had all of our reports, we had the guidelines of our Secretary General, and we even had a unanimous support to the Athens declaration in the Assembly, we addressed artificial intelligence where we substantially put some added value to the table of the Committee of Ministers, we re-addressed the issue of violence against women through the Istanbul Convention, and we do have some results to the extent that even we are welcoming today our colleagues from Mexico who are into the process of adopting it.

And at the same time we see the emergence of a new generation of rights. Just to give you a couple of examples: the right to know the truth, meaning the environment we are living in today with fake news and misinformation, there is something like a new right to know the truth, to reliable information. And tackling that for all different angles in a thematic, holistic way in my mind is certainly worth of looking into.

Or just look at the right to privacy. If you see what's happening today, I'm not going to make myself very popular with the intelligence services, but still, there is a difference between privacy and secrecy, so also that is something that might be addressed in a thematic, holistic way.

The right to be equal. Certainly it is an issue and I have to say that over the last month's we do have a number of people who still think and even more people who think that the right of being equal is being the same. No, it's not the case. Being equal is not being the same. On the contrary, being equal is whilst being different still having equal rights. That's what it's all about. And so it turns in my mind from the right to be equal into the right to be different.

Also an issue that might be addressed in a very holistic and thematic way and obviously the item that we will treat in a very substantive way on Wednesday: environment. Clean, safe, healthy, sustainable environment. Is it a human right? I believe it is. And we will address that in a very substantial way in order to deliver substance to the Committee of Ministers.

But coming back to *to be or not to be,* when I look at it from the angle of the Assembly in my view it translates into "to lead or not to lead". You know when you take arms against the troubles at sea, you can follow someone else, you can follow those who lead, or you can take the lead yourself. And this is, Madame Secretary General, what we have been doing for over 70 years. Not always with the greatest success but to the essence it is my conviction that that is what we should do. *To be or not to be* transforms into "lead or not to lead" because, if you don't lead, you don't exist. Very simple.

And so, to that matter, I think that if you look on top of that towards the environmental question there's two great examples that we see in the recent past or the foreseeable future. We got the COP26, you all know that. Committee of the parties, 26, this is a Convention of 1992, dear colleagues. This is the 26th time that a lot of people will be meeting making a lot of effort over 30 years. But, on the other hand, we do have to recognize that the environment is not going the right way after 26 meetings and 30 years with all the efforts that have been made by so many people. Big question mark to me.

And then at the other hand you've got a light going on from the United Nations. I had a discussion with Mr Guterres last year where I told him: why don't you introduce the issue of environment in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At that time, many of the people around him were asking themselves: are you serious?

By the way, I had the same reflection at the beginning of last year when I had the honour and the privilege of addressing this Assembly for the first time when I spoke exactly about that: could we envision to introduce environment into our European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms? And that exactly, dear colleagues, is the debate that we are going to have in the next days, and specifically on Wednesday.

So, the idea, or basically the effort that we will make, is to deliver in a holistic and thematic way all the elements on the table that I hope the Committee of Ministers, I'm looking at them now, not to put pressure on you, because that's not possible, but still, I hope that we can deliver to the substance the whole kaleidoscope of options that might be looked into through a feasibility study to discuss and to decide what is, after a feasibility study, the best way of tackling it.

Would it be by just having guidelines? Would it be by setting standards? Would it be by having binding rules? Would it be through a convention? Or will it be through the adoption of the issue of environment itself in the convention?

So, I do hope that when we deliver the substance as we did with artificial intelligence, with Covid-19, with violence against women, and the other ones coming in the next months and years, I would really hope that we can together look into the issue and see what will be the most appropriate way to indeed establish the fact that a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is a human right, because it is linked to the convention itself: the right to life. What is life worth if you cannot live it in a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment?

And so this is what I wanted to share with you at the beginning that the task at hand for the Assembly is of course addressing troubles at sea, is of course monitoring, but at the same time we should continue on certain important issues in a thematic, holistic way in order to connect to the Committee of Ministers for them to take it on, or not --I hope yes!-- to develop, to look into it, and to do what the Council of Europe as a whole is supposed to do, namely, in a multilateral way, setting standards.

That is basically what we do to the benefit of all of the citizens in our 47 member states and even beyond that being an example.

And that brings me back to the *to be or not to be* that I translate into "to lead or not lead". Are we followers or are we leaders? And if I respond to that simple question "to lead or not to lead, that is the question" my response dear colleagues is very simple. I say, we lead.

Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

The first item on the agenda is the examination of credentials of new members.

The names of the representatives and substitutes are in Doc. 15377. If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified.

Any challenges? I don't see any.

The credentials are ratified and I welcome our new colleagues.

Then it goes in my papers "go to page 11".

So, we just saved ourselves eight pages.

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in document Commissions Committees (2021) 07 and Addendum.

Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Assembly’s committees agreed to?

They are agreed to.

Thank you.

Before we examine the draft Agenda, the Assembly needs to consider requests for urgent procedure and current affairs debates.

I have received the following:

A request for a debate under urgent procedure on “Draft Second Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime on enhanced cooperation and disclosure of electronic evidence”, this is presented by the five political groups. This is basically to feed again into the work of the Committee of Ministers because we need to give an opinion and we took the shortcut of an urgent affairs debate to do so.

Second, a request for debate under urgent procedure on “The situation in Afghanistan: consequences for Europe and the region”, presented by the five political groups.

A request for a current affairs debate on “The Western Balkans between democratic challenges and European aspirations: what role for the Council of Europe?”, presented by the five political groups; all those are presented by the five political groups.

Then we have a request for a debate under urgent procedure on “Increased migration pressure on the borders of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with Belarus”, presented by Mr. MULARCZYK and 23 members of the Assembly; and

A request for a current affairs debate on “Political persecution of indigenous peoples in Crimea by Russia”, presented by the Ukrainian delegation.

The Bureau agreed on Friday morning to the three debates under urgent procedure and one current affairs debate on the Western Balkans.

We first consider each request for a debate under urgent procedure individually. And then we will then consider the requests for current affairs debates.

Voilà!

So we now come to the first request for an urgent procedure debate on “Draft Second Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime on enhanced cooperation and disclosure of electronic evidence”, requested by the five political groups. On Friday the Bureau agreed to this request. Does the Assembly agree with the Bureau’s recommendation?

Agreed.

Good.

Now we come to the request for a debate on an urgent procedure. OK, sorry, I propose that the topic of the debate we just agreed to be referred to the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights for report. Is this agreed to, too?

Thank you.

Then we come to the request for debate under urgent procedure on "The situation in Afghanistan". Does the Assembly agree with the Bureau’s recommendation to hold the debate?

It's very good that I've got someone who tells me that everyone agrees. Thank you for that.

No, continue to do so. It will make life a little bit easier.

I've proposed that the topic of the debate we have just agreed be referred to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy for report. Is this agreed?

Thank you very much.

Good.

Well, there we go to the third request for an urgent procedure debate on “Increased migration pressure on the borders of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with Belarus”. On Friday the Bureau agreed to this request. Does the Assembly agree with the Bureau’s recommendation?

Voilà! Thank you.

I propose that the topic of the debate we have just agreed be referred to the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons for report.

Does the Assembly agree?

OK.

The timing of the three urgent affairs debates will be considered... I will come immediately to that... The timing of the three urgent procedure debates will be considered at the adoption of the agenda, after we have considered the requests for current affairs debates, but I am informed that someone wishes to take the floor.

Mr Sergey KISLYAK wishes to have the floor, and I have to take this.

Mister KISLYAK, you have the floor.

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

I seem a bit surprised by how quickly you are approving these issues for which we have no agreement. As is the case for many of my colleagues, I am against discussing the issue of Belarus because these are baseless, contrived accusations. I don't think that we can find a consensus about approving this as a point on the agenda.

Thank you.

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

So I've got one member who opposes the debate; do we have someone who wishes to take the floor?

I've got someone out there; you've got the floor.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you very much, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO from the Ukrainian delegation.

I'm one of those who signed this urgent debate request and we're sure that that's an extremely important question, when Belarus dictator Lukashenko has weaponised people – migrants – and is using them and we already have casualties on the border. I'm not surprised that the Russian delegation is opposing, because Lukashenko is doing it together with Putin, it's for sure. So we need a debate on this issue for sure.

Thank you very much. I want to ask everybody to support this urgent debate.

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

In order to reject the proposal by the Bureau, my Secretary General signals that we need... so in order to accept the proposal we need two thirds in the vote, is that it?

Mr Sergey KISLYAK, do you request a vote? I suppose you do. I don't have you online, but I suppose you do. Mr Sergey KISLYAK.

Mr Sergey KISLYAK (Russian Federation, NR)*: Thank you very much, you are understood perfectly. Thank you.

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

Now, just for all of you to know, the Bureau was in favour.

We shall now vote on the request for urgent procedure. The decision requires a two-thirds majority. Those who are in favour of holding these urgent affairs debate, which has been proposed by the Bureau, vote "yes". Those who are against holding such a debate should vote "no".

Alex? The vote is not open yet. Alex...

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD): If we are voting "yes", we are voting to health, in favour of the debate, yes. Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Those who vote yes, say "yes" to the debate, those who vote no, say "no" to the debate.

Thank you for the clarification.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed. Results please.

Thank you very much. It is a clear two-thirds majority, so the urgent affairs debate will be held.

The timing of the three approved upon urgent procedure debates will be considered at the adoption on the agenda after we have considered the request for a current affairs debate. We've got two.

We come now to the request for of current affairs debate on "The Western Balkans between democratic challenges and European aspirations: what role for the Council of Europe?"

This is requested by the five political groups. At its meeting on Friday, the Bureau approved this request and therefore recommends to the Assembly that the matter be debated during the part session.

Does the Assembly agree to this recommendation? I'll have to look to my screen. Okay. Good.

So then this has been decided. The Bureau's recommendation is accepted, and the request for the current affairs debate is approved. The debate will be opened by Mr George PAPANDREOU.

Then we come to a current affairs debate request on “Political persecution of indigenous peoples in Crimea by Russia”, requested by the Ukrainian delegation. At its meeting on Friday, the Bureau rejected this request for a debate. Is there an objection to the Bureau's position?

I see to my left, Madame you have a floor.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear President. Hello colleagues.

Many of you are finally here physically. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Secretary General for her personal participation in the Crimean platform at the end of August. We have seen the reaction from the Russian Federation, unfortunately, at the end of August, capturing more than 40 Crimean Tatars. Now they are awaiting prosecution.

We do hope that there will also be a reaction of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; we have already received a list from her. We understand that the Bureau declined it, but we would like to take this opportunity to suggest proceeding with the follow-up of the June file on the breach of the human rights of the Crimean people, which we voted for with a mass majority–thank you, dear colleagues–and to send this issue which is inherited in this topic of the current affairs debate to the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) and to the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

Thank you, dear President, "thank you" (spoken in French).

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

Do you request a vote on the issue? I don't suppose so. I don't see you're requesting it. Therefore the proposition of the Bureau is followed and the current affairs debate will not be held. Thank you.

The next item of business is the adoption of the agenda for the fourth part of the 2021 ordinary session. The draft agenda submitted for the Assembly's approval was drawn up by the Bureau on 6 September 2021, and updated on Friday.

It is proposed that the debates under urgent procedure and current affairs debates that we have just agreed upon; the 3 + 1, will take place on Thursday, 30 September as set out in the draft Agenda. The urgent debate on Afghanistan would take place first in the morning sitting and the deadline, dear colleagues, for amendments will be at 12 noon. The current affairs debate on the Western Balkans will also take place in the morning after the address by the Deputy Prime Minister from Macedonia.

The debate on increased migration pressure on borders with Belarus will take place at the start of the afternoon session, also with the deadline for amendments at 12 noon on Wednesday. This will be followed by the debate on the additional protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime; which will have a deadline for amendments at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

Finally, in view of the large number of speakers inscribed on the list, the Bureau proposes that rapporteurs for reports limit their presentation of reports to 7 minutes, and 3 minutes to reply to the debate.

Is this agreed upon? Thank you very much.

The next item on the Agenda is the Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee. May I ask my Vice President, Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ. Is she in the room?

Voila, I apologise: it took a little bit longer. Please help me in guiding our colleagues in this meeting. Thank you.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues,

As already announced, the next item on the agenda is the debate on the progress report of the Bureau and Standing Committee, presented by Mr Jacques MAIRE.

This will be combined with a consideration of the reports of the Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on observation of the early parliamentary elections in Armenia, which took place on 20 June 2021, presented by Mr George KATROUGALOS; observation of the early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria on 11 July 2021, presented by Mr Alfred HEER; and observation of the early parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova, which took place on 11 July 2021, presented by Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

We will interrupt the debate at 12:25 p.m. for the award ceremony for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

The debate will continue this afternoon at 3:30 p.m.

Now we call Mr Jacques MAIRE to present the progress report.

You have 7 minutes to present the report. Then we'll have a further 3 minutes to reply to the debate at the end.

Mr Jacques MAIRE, the floor is yours, please.

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee

Mr Jacques MAIRE (France, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, Madam Secretary General,

I am very pleased to be able to present this progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee of our Assembly for the period from 21 June to 22 September. As is customary, I shall not go into detail about all the activities that are mentioned in the report, of course. I shall concentrate on a few areas of political significance for our Organisation.

I would like to start by mentioning not an election observation mission but an election assessment mission. I am thinking of course of the parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation. The mission took place between 17 and 20 September and was chaired by our Swiss colleague, Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ, who is known for his temperance. I was a member of the committee, and I would simply like to remind you of the rules of procedure of the Bureau of the Assembly, which decided not to send a fact-finding mission but a limited assessment mission of five people.

There were no long-term observers provided by our partners in the OSCE and the International Bureau of Human Rights, because there was no agreement on the presence, the number of observers. It would therefore have been impossible for our Assembly to observe this election in a credible manner. At the same time, our Bureau felt, after long deliberations and after weighing the pros and cons, including in conjunction with our partner institutions, that our Assembly had a duty to be present on the spot, including to feed our assessment of the political situation in Russia.

The Assembly had to be present, including to provide input for our assessment of the political situation in Russia. We regret that the Russian authorities had not been able to reach an agreement with the OSCE and the Assembly to allow effective election observation, particularly in a difficult context marked by the pandemic.

Then, of course, we were able to observe the new way of organizing the election and the extremely serious criticisms expressed by the opposition. The environment in which the elections were held, in all likelihood, had an impact on the outcome itself and on the ability to choose. We will not go into that at this stage because there are deadlines. These very serious concerns are the subject of a report by President FRIDEZ to the Bureau of our Assembly, and they would be taken into strict account in the accountability systems that we have within the Council of Europe and in the report on the *Honouring of commitments and obligations by the Russian Federation*.

At the same time, I can only note, the good co-operation of the Russian authorities with our Committee in the conduct of its activities, both in connection with the hearings we have held and the visits to the offices.

I obviously encourage the Russian authorities and the Members of the Duma's national delegation to our Assembly to continue, to continue but above all to improve co-operation and dialogue, particularly in the framework of the Monitoring Committee.

We will also see, and this will be done by the Chairmen of the missions later, that we have been able to observe other elections in Europe and beyond – in Armenia, the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria and Morocco – and this proves that the pandemic can no longer be a pretext for failing to meet our obligations to our Organisation.

The five political groups have called for an urgent debate on the consequences for Europe and the region. The five political groups have requested an urgent debate on the consequences for Europe and the region. It is important that our Organisation, which defends human rights and fundamental freedoms, be able to deal with a subject that is a little remote geographically, but which will have major international and European consequences in the period to come.

Finally, I would like to address the issue of Belarus, as we have been doing for several sessions now. The repression of opponents of President Lukashenko and of civil society as a whole continues on a massive scale. We continue to call for the immediate release of political prisoners, of whom there are now over 650. We are also concerned, as evidenced by another request for an urgent debate, about the role that Belarusians seem to be playing in the intensification of migration flows across Belarus' borders with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The words "hybrid warfare" against our states were indeed used in the Bureau: that is a formulation with which I fully agree. It is not possible to continue to use the misery of refugees in political conflicts to such an extent.

I would like to conclude by congratulating our President of the Assembly, Mr Rik DAEMS, who continues to organise the work of the Assembly in an exemplary manner under exceptional conditions. I am also grateful to the French administration and authorities. Let us hope that our work can resume soon, as normal.

Thank you.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mr Jacques MAIRE.

Now I call on Mr George KATROUGALOS to present the report on the Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Armenia.

You have 3 minutes. Mr George KATROUGALOS, the floor is yours, please.

Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Armenia (20 June 2021)

Mr George KATROUGALOS (Greece, UEL, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Madame Chair.

I'm very glad to be among you with this new fresh start of our Assembly.

The political climate in the elections of Armenia have been determined by two rather uncommon factors. The first one was the momentum of the public revolt of three years ago, which has completely upset the political system in the country. The long dominant Republican Party has not even answered its representation at the elections in 2018.

On the other hand, we had the failed war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and the frustration that this defeat has created. The opposition has very strongly criticised the government over this war, and the climate was very much poisoned – very much polarised – inflammatory speech that sometimes went beyond the border of hate speech. The institutional framework was generally comprehensive and following the standards of the Council of Europe. One exception, maybe, is a the relatively high threshold for the parties to enter the parliament: it is 5% of the political parties, but 7% for the coalition, which results in about one quarter of the electorate not being represented at the parliament.

Civil society is very vibrant; generally, freedoms are respected. There are 50 public mass-media broadcasters including nationwide media, both TV and radio stations. Generally, the elections have been held in a professional and efficient way. A fear we had regarding the eventuality of contesting the results of the elections if they were very close, fortunately, did not materialise exactly because there was a very big difference between the first party, which won 53% of the election centre the opposition.

We can say, just to summarise, that the traumatic change which has occurred at the so-called Velvet Revolution of 2018 has been generally re-confirmed in 2021. We have the second democratic elections in a row and that creates a lot of optimism regarding the future of Republican and Democratic situations in the country.

Thank you, Madame Chair.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr George KATROUGALOS.

Now I call Mr Alfred HEER to present the report on Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, which took place on 11 July.

You have 3 minutes, Mr HEER. You have the floor.

Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (11 July 2021)

Mr Alfred HEER (Switzerland, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Madame Chair.

These were the second elections in Bulgaria that took place, because in April Bulgaria was not able to form a government. The elections were held in a competitive and fundamental freedoms were generally respected. The campaign environment was dominated by mutual accusations of corruption between the former ruling party and the provisional government, as well as by efforts by law enforcement to curb vote buying. The elections were conducted under the legal framework, which though overall adequate, was subsequently revised shortly before the elections straining electoral preparations and affecting legal certainty.

The activities of the provisional government and of the former ruling party GERB dominated media coverage or shadowing that of the campaign and of other contestants. The lack of investigation of attacks on journalists, coupled with the criminalisation of deformation contributes to self-censorships. There was machine voting in July again and this was done properly but, of course, we need also to better explain to the people how to use those machines in order that they can be used efficiently.

Overall, the main problem that we face today is the fact that the parties are not able to form a government and we will have a third election in November. The winner of the elections in July were "There Is Such a People" with 24%, the former ruling party GERB had 23.51%, the Bulgarian Socialist Party 13.3%, Democratic Bulgaria coalition 12.6%, Movement for Rights and Freedom 10.7% and Coalition "Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!" 5%.

We hope, and that's our main concern, not the technical aspects of the elections, as I said, they were in line and the cooperation also between the observing bodies and the government was okay. We could observe freely the elections but the main problem is that if, again, no government will be formed after the November elections, it will be a mistrust by the people because you cannot call the people for a fourth time to the elections. I really urge the parties that are involved, now, in the November elections, after we have the results they really should form a government, because people really go to vote in order to have a legitimate government after the elections. Thank you.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mr Alfred HEER.

Finally, I call Mr Stefan SCHENNACH to present the report *Observation of the early parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova*.

You have three minutes.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, you have the floor.

Observation of the early parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova (11 July 2021)

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Madame President. You were a part of our team in Moldova, which was excellent.

First I want to thank our committee in the pre-electoral mission and in the electoral mission for their work together; I had the honour of chairing it.

Mr Tiny KOX said in a committee meeting on election day in the Republic of Moldova that the result was a feast of democracy. Indeed, it was a feast of democracy.

In the pre-electoral mission we were deeply concerned about the polarised environment and the instability and that, for example, nobody could control the funding of candidates and parties.

There was still an open question in the Republic of Moldova as to how many polling stations they had abroad and why it's so different, that there are so few in this country, and so much in another country.

In the end nearly 50% took part in this election. For the first time there is a clear result: President Maia Sandu, who was in the plenary before here, won an absolute majority with her party.

The old deal is no longer necessary of buying members of the parliament to make crazy coalitions. There are now three parties in the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. One is the party of Maia Sandu with more than 52%. The second is an alliance, the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists, of Mr Vladimir Voronin and Mr Igor Dodon. The third is of the oligarch Mr Ilan Shor. Now it's very clear.

I hope that President Maia Sandu and her party will use this possibility which they have to give back the title of "captured country" or the "fool of corruption" and so on.

I hope that justice will also find the former prime minister. Those parties are no longer in the parliament, but those parties still have more than 150 mayors.

I think President Maia Sandu must also be very sensible about how to work inside the country.

We can only really congratulate... this was a very wonderful, peaceful and clear day for the country. It gives a big hope to the citizens of the Republic of Moldova.

Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ (Lithuania, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

The debate will start in the afternoon at 3:30 p.m. and now the next item on the agenda is the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize Award Ceremony. Thank you.

Václav Havel Human Rights Prize Award Ceremony

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, honourable guests, Mr President of the Congress, welcome, [welcomes the two nominees in French]

I hereby declare open the Award Ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

Before I invite all of you to watch a short video on the prize, I would like to welcome the representatives of our three shortlisted candidates, by saying a brief word on why this occasion goes to the very heart of what the Council of Europe represents. Protecting and upholding human rights is our core mission, the very *raison d'être* of this institution, and what we stand for in the Parliamentary Assembly. We are often referred to – and our actions back it up – as a democratic consciousness of Europe. We put the interest of the people that have elected us in the heart of everything we do. And we do not do this alone; we do it together with the people we represent; the thousands of individuals and organisations who share our values and goals, protection of fundamental freedoms and human dignity. Today, with the Václav Havel Prize, we recognise and honour their work, and their sacrifices, to uphold these.

May I ask to play the video: (v*ideo projected in the hemicycle for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.)*

Dear colleagues, all of you present, and online. Dear nominees, to my left, all three of you; a warm welcome to the 9th Edition of the Award Ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize and special thanks to our partners for their cooperation, the Czech government, the Václav Havel Library and the Charta 77 Foundation, members of the selection panel - whose commitment and dedication are fundamental to uphold the work, legacy and values embodied by Mr Havel.

The Prize is not always something that you get, it can also be something that you pay. Mr Havel's work to protect democracy and safeguard human rights came with a heavy price – his own personal safety and well-being. Yet in his mind, and this is indeed today what it's all about, human rights were worth the price of putting at risk and jeopardising individual freedom and personal safety. Was it easy? No, it was hard. Yet with courage, Mr Havel argued it is what it required to make the world a better place.

It is this very word, "courage," that I believe best describes our three present shortlisted candidates, or representatives, if I may say. Just like Mr Havel, all candidates represent, and have shown a willingness to sacrifice their own safety, their own well-being, ultimately, their own freedom, for a greater cause: the protection of human rights of all. And like Mr Havel, the nominees have paid a price for the courage they have shown for advocating for something larger than themselves. Their willingness, however, to pay the price for their convictions; that, ladies and gentlemen, is courage.

Honourable members and colleagues, the three shortlisted candidates, as you have seen on the screen, for the 2021 Václav Havel Prize are Ms Maria Kalesnikava of Belarus, Mr Germain Rukuki of Burundi, and the NGO: Reporters Without Borders.

Ms Maria Kalesnikava is a Belarusian – or a Belarus I should say – opposition leader and the representative for the people's struggle for civil and political liberties. Yet, Ms Kalesnikava's belief in human rights came at a very high cost. She has been detained since September of last year. Her crime? Wanting to have a say in who is in charge of her country. In standing up against a regime that chose force and brutality against peaceful and legitimate protest, she showed that she is ready to risk her own safety for a cause greater than herself. Ms Kalesnikava truly represents courage.

Mr Germain Rukuki is a human rights defender from Burundi. As a tireless campaigner against torture and the death penalty, Mr Rukuki was sentenced to 32 years in prison in 2018 in an attempt to silence him. It is with great relief that we learned that Mr Rukuki was finally released from prison this year, although being still at risk, but I was informed by his sister that he is safe and sound. His determination, which led to his ultimate loss of freedom, tells us that he strongly believed in a cause greater than himself. Mr Rukuki, therefore, truly also represents courage.

The work and perseverance of both Ms Kalesnikava and Mr Rukuki might have never reached our awareness were it not for our third candidate, Reporters Without Borders. Not only do they provide emergency support for the thousands of journalists who risk their lives reporting from the most dangerous of parts of the world, they also take steps to ensure legal proceedings against those who threaten, put at risk or sadly, kill journalists. In their willingness to risk their own safety to let us know what is going on in the world, Reporters Without Borders is certainly an organisation that stands for courage.

Now, picking out the winner, it's a bit of a special word, let's call it the *primus inter pares*, it is never an easy job. The shortlisted nominees all represent causes greater than themselves, and will forever be a source of inspiration to all of us. They all represent what Václav Havel deemed essential: courage.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is now time to announce the – what I would call the *primus inter pares* – the winner of the Václav Havel Humans Rights Prize 2021. And I have to say this candidate, who is quite close to the image of Havel himself. The winner, ladies and gentlemen, is Maria Kalesnikava.

And a big diploma, watch out that it doesn't fall. May I ask you to stay here? May I ask the two laureates to come with me and as I said it's a *primus inter pares,* because in the hearts and the minds of the jury, all deserve this Prize.

Reporters Sans Frontières.

Maybe we can have a photo of the three of you, please? Just in the middle. Voila! And I'll just stand on the side.

May I now yield the floor to the sister of Maria Kalesnikava? Please, Madame.

Maria Kalesnikava (Belarus, represented by her sister): Thank you very much.

I am very glad that my sister received this award. I think she would probably say right now that she dedicates it to all the Belarusian people and to Belarusian political prisoners who fight for their freedom.

I want you to look at Maria and look at her face, her honest and open look. I ask you to see thousands of people, political prisoners and others, who are persecuted for political reasons, who are now in prisons just because they said what they want or what they think. Who are they? They are human rights activists, human rights defenders.

By the way, Ales Bialiatski who was awarded the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize in 2013, is also in prison now.

It's [unintellible name], it's lawyer Maxim Znak, bank chairman Viktar Babaryka, editor-in-chief Maria Zolotova, Igor Losik, journalists Olga Loiko and Alena Tolkachova. It's Alana Gebremariam, she was Tsvetlana Tikhanovskaya's representative for U.S. and student affairs. There are Rita Ris, Galina Derbizh, Igor Kaponaiko, minors, infants actually, they are children that are curriculum interest to talk and hundreds and thousands of people who are in prison today.

This award is assigned in solidarity with the entire democratic board with the people of Belarus. It's also a clear signal to us, Belarusians, that the international democratic community supports us, and we are on the right track. From the other side, it's a clear signal to Belarusian authorities that the world will never bear massive violations of human rights and will not accept what is happening in Belarus now.

If you do not want Belarus to turn into a gulag, we must support the Belarusian people today and now.

In the meantime, hundreds of political prisoners are kept in Belarusian jails in awful conditions and under false and politically motivated accusations, serving unjust and unlawful sentences. The number of Belarusian political prisoners continues to grow, and people are accused of being disloyal to the state. They receive huge sentences, are sent to prisons and sacrifice their freedom and sometimes their lives.

There was already a case of death, under the obscure circumstances, of [unintelligible name] and his relatives do not know what happened to him. There is no investigation, and there are no details.

Freedom is not given in a simple way and Belarus is evidence of this. Belarus is not the only state that has not yet been able to build a stable democratic system. This challenge is global. It depends on all of us, how all the democratic forces of Belarus united in 2020, and how persistently and boldly we Belarusians are now fighting for our freedom. It has already gone down in history.

Millions of Belarusians fight every day for the right to determine our own future, to be free. It is important to remember that the future of the whole nation is at stake. We need to be patient and go to the end.

Thank you very much.

Mr Rik DAEMS (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much for having delivered these words on behalf of your sister, very touching.

And as all of you can see our laureates all deserve it, but obviously the person of Maria Kalesnikava is really in the hearts and the minds of the jury, at least as close as the other ones too, very close to all that Václav Havel represents.

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, this concludes the ceremony.

Thank you.