



**Provisional edition**

Friday 13 October 2023, morning

## Official report of debates

### Opening of the sitting num 24

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Good morning, dear friends.

The sitting is open.

I invite members to sit in your allocated places to help facilitate the organisation of the debate, please.

The first item of business this morning is the debate on the Report titled “Examining the legitimacy and legality of the ad hominem term-limit waiver for the incumbent President of the Russian Federation” (Doc. 15827) presented by Mr Pieter OMTZIGT on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

In order to finish by 10:55 a.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 10:45 a.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I call Mr Pieter OMTZIGT, rapporteur. You have 7 minutes to present the Report and then you will have 3 minutes to reply to the debate at the end.

### Debate: Examining the legitimacy and legality of the ad hominem term-limit waiver for the incumbent President of the Russian Federation

**Mr Pieter OMTZIGT (Netherlands, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Dear members,

Dear Chairperson,

What is the essence of democracy? The essence of democracy is that every now and then you change your elected official. The most important elected official in a presidential republic is the president. Today, we are discussing two items on that, the particular item on why Mr Putin can be president in Russia for more than 30 years, and thereby flout the Russian Constitution, and more in general, why you would need to, every now and then, change your president.

This report stems from a few years back. The Assembly asked the Venice Commission back in 2021 to assess the abolition for practical purposes of the presidential term-limit in Russia for the incumbent Mr Putin. He is able to govern until 2036, when he will be 83 years of age. Of the presidential term-limits in Russia the full-scale aggression against Ukraine was still a year away. I would like to stress that the motion underlying

---

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.

this report also proceeds the invasion. The writings are on the wall. The loss of any checks and balances caused by the practically indefinite stay in office of President Putin would sooner or later lead to the kind of mistakes and even crimes that checks and balances are meant to prevent.

In the presidential system, the president together with his or her political friends, has a lot of power to nominate allies to high positions in states, be it the highest courts, electoral bodies, the auditor's office, the armed forces, central bank or any other state body you can think of. These state bodies normally keep presidential powers in check. But the checks and balances erode over time. Critical voices fade away as more and more positions are filled with the president's friends and allies.

President Putin clearly no longer received reliable information and advice on the Ukrainian people's will and ability to resist his military machine, let alone the legal, political and moral consequences of starting such a war of aggression. You remember it would have only lasted for three days.

In the draft resolution before you, I summed up the main findings of this report in such a way as to send a strong signal to the international community and to Russian society. They should understand that the waiver of the presidential term-limit in favour of President Putin is not legitimate, not even in accordance with Russia's own constitution. It is also not in line with international standards designed to protect checks and balances, thus preventing a dissent into dictatorship with all these nefarious consequences for Russia and her neighbours. The relevant constitutional changes were adopted in an accelerated procedure which is not foreseen in the Russian constitution. The regular constitutional amendment procedure requires the convention of a constitutional assembly and that there shall specific amending laws for each of the changes proposed.

Rather than a single unblock vote on all the different amendments and there were a lot. Instead, a new ad-hoc procedure was introduced by a single amending law and after an opinion by the Constitution report, which was given within seven days, an ad hoc nationwide vote was held that was not subject to the strict safeguards applicable to proper referendums.

As the Venice Commission says, the procedure used to mend the Constitution, therefore, creates an obvious tension with Article 16 of the Constitution, which safeguards the firm fundamentals of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation. It also violates the principle that changes to presidential term-limits should be subject to thorough public scrutiny. That they should be supported by broad consensus and that any changes should only apply to future officeholders, not to the incumbent.

To be perfectly clear, these findings are not my own findings or those of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. They were the findings of the Venice Commission. the Venice Commission adopted two important opinions, which I have quoted extensively in this explanatory report. It should be noted that Russia was still a member of the Council of Europe, and it still co-operated with the Venice Commission in the preparation of the 2021 opinion. The representatives of the Russian authority tried to convince the Venice Commission that sufficient checks and balances would remain, despite lengthening Mr Putin's time in office by another 12 years, starting in 2024. They pointed to the competitive political system, the independent judiciary and a lively civil society. At the time, the Venice Commission was not convinced. By now, we know for sure that this was a complete mockery. What was left of civil society in 2021, has been completely destroyed in the meantime. The last remaining opposition politicians are either in prison. Please remember Vladimir Kara-Murzi and Alexi Navalny, who are in exile.

Finally, the sham trials against them and many others, such as anti-war protesters, show us the true nature of the Russian judiciary. It's now up to us to send a clear signal to the world at large but also to the people of Russia, that at the latest, after the end of the current mandate, President Putin should no longer be its legitimate leader.

I, therefore, I invite you to adopt the draft resolution before you. I look forward to our discussion, also about what consequences need to be drawn from our findings and those of the Venice Commission.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Mister Mr Pieter OMTZIGT.

Now we come to the speakers on behalf of the political groups.

In the debate I call first Ms Saskia KLUIT, and the following speaker is Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

Please, you have the floor.

**Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much.

Dear President, dear friends,

When it comes to President Putin and the uninvited violence that comes from this aggressive regime, my country has enough hands-on experience since the downing of MH17.

That careless act of violence that costs so many people their lives made very clear the enormous dangers the failing state of Russia proposes to others. Not only to peoples nearby Russia, like the people of Ukraine, Georgia, or Chechnya, who suffered already enormously.

Since MH17, we know that even families in countries far away from Russia, like Malaysia, Australia, Indonesia, and my own country, are not safe. Therefore, also many families now have to mourn their loved ones all because of the acts of Vladimir Putin and his failing regime.

Today I will speak on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC). We are very grateful to rapporteur Mr Pieter OMTZIGT and the Secretariat for the research they did and for the proposed resolution. The resolution clearly states the direct relation between safeguarding the principles for strong democratic governance and the origins of aggressive and undemocratic behaviour by a state.

Only by applying democratic principles, can the important checks and balances for democratic functioning of a state blossom and will a state be able to uphold the international rule of law and the human rights in the country.

The current Russian President, Vladimir Putin, thinks he can stay in power until 2036. There is, however, enough evidence that Vladimir Putin has not only neglected international laws and legal principles when he expanded his personal term for presidency. He also neglected his own laws and constitution while doing so.

Even if we were prepared to neglect these things, which we do not, the new rules should only have applied to new presidents and not to Vladimir Putin himself.

We therefore strongly agree that Putin's term should end on the previous applicable time moment. He should, furthermore, be arrested as soon as possible and held accountable for his actions relating to all events on the territory of Ukraine. By this we mean all events, from February 2014, starting with the illegal annexation of Crimea, the war in the Donbas region, and the downing of flight MH17.

I will wrap up, President, by expressing our continuous strong support for the creation of an ad hoc international criminal tribunal so that, when the time has come, we will be able to keep Vladimir Putin accountable for all the awful actions his regime has put upon the world.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Madam KLUIT.

Our next speaker is Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

**Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues, first of all I want to thank the rapporteur, Mr Pieter OMTZIGT, for the really good report, though I wouldn't say it's a timely report of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as the motion was tabled months before the full scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

Moreover, it refers to 2020, when Russia made changes to its constitution, allowing Putin to remain in office probably practically forever, until 2036.

As a result of this decision, we had bad consequences, dramatic for the future of our nation.

Unfortunately, Ukraine is fully experienced with what it means to have a neighbour country with unlawful increasing presidential time limits. The concentration of power in the hands of Putin led and turned to dictatorship.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine is a bright example of how an autocratic leader who has been in power for 20 years destabilised the entire world, threatened global peace and security. Not willing to enter the fight directly with NATO, Putin, who probably will be elected for the fifth time, is fuelling conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenian, Serbia and Kosovo, and now in the Middle East, and continues its criminal war of attrition against Ukraine.

Putin with his endless terms became terrorist number one in the world. Today, 600 days of brutal exhausting war in Ukraine, where Russian terrorists kill, torture, kidnap, rape civilians, 20 000 children were kidnapped, 542 killed. Like in Israel, the handwriting is the same. Ukrainians feel the pain and anger of the people of Israel as their own.

This is what the peace must lead to. The lesson from Israel must be the one. Just as you can't negotiate with Hamas, you can't negotiate with Putin either.

It's time to finally recognise Putin and his government as illegitimate after the end of his current presidential term, and restrict all contact with him. Not only because it will be his fifth term, not only the term-limit was wavered, violating both the Russian constitutions and all international legal principles, but because this election will be carried out in Ukrainian territories, temporarily occupied Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, the Zaporizhzhia region, and the Kherson region, which Russia invaded.

We need more weapons, because our victory and liberation of our land will also deal a blow to the legitimacy of Putin inside Russia. We all had enough of his presidency. We can't bring back lost lives, but it is our common responsibility to restore justice as much as possible.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

In the debate I call next Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

The speaker after him will be Mr Paul GAVAN.

**Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you.

First of all I would like to thank Mr Pieter OMTZIGT for his great job and for this Report.

I think maybe we even now underestimate the value of this Report. It's not just about Putin, it's not just about the fact that he is a dictator, it's about a much wider picture, why democracy matters.

And on the example of Russia and Putin we see why democracy matters.

When you have a dictator and dictatorship, and it's clearly said here in this Report that Putin is a dictator, no questions about this, and that Russia is a dictatorship. And when you have such a situation in a country, this country will suffer enormously.

Just look at Russia, the richest country in the world from the point of view of natural resources, and the most poor people in Europe.

Putin who lives in all full and huge palaces, who may be the richest person in the world, and Russian people who don't have toilets in their houses in the 21st century. They need to go on the street, to toilet. That's what dictatorship is.

And the most important: hundreds of thousands of people killed, both Russians and other nationalities. First of all Ukrainians, which is so painful for me, but not only. Georgians, you can look at Syria, you can look at what happened in the Czech Republic, in the United Kingdom, in Moldova, in other countries.

Putin is all in blood. So when you lose democracy, then you lose your welfare, and then you lose your lives. And one person became an awful, dangerous, and crazy dictator. Just imagine, Putin has been president from 2000.

So when you don't change your governments, when you don't change your presidents, that is the result, and that is a very serious lesson, which should be taken from the situation in Russia.

And one more thing. Russia is a dictatorship, it's clearly said by this Report, the words matter. They matter, because Putin think that he can outlive this, that then everybody will come to business as usual with him. He just thinks "I need to wait, and they will come back, they are weak."

No. Our strength is not in people, but our strength is in institutions and in the rule of law. And when we say "Putin is a dictator", we will never come back to business as usual with him. That is the most important.

Several days ago, Putin celebrated his birthday. You know, we like cakes on birthdays, and happy people. Putin is not about that. Putin was happy to see Hamas' attack on Israel on his birthday: blood on the streets, thousands of people killed. That was the best present for Putin.

And now we are making our present to Putin, from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which unites 46 countries, we are saying "Putin is a dictator, Russia is a dictatorship, no way to business as usual, dictatorship will need to end as soon as possible".

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Our next speaker is Mr Paul GAVAN.

**Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Madam President.

I want to congratulate Mr Pieter OMTZIGT, who I think has a habit of writing very good reports for this Assembly.

As the report points out, the motion for a resolution originated in January 2022, just before the invasion of Ukraine took place. The legitimacy and legality of the amendments of the Russian constitution enacted in July 2020 must be challenged.

The Venice Commission has clearly criticised the amendments, the procedure, their content and the speed at which they were pushed through. It has long been established that the purpose of presidential term limits is to enhance the balance and checks of power in a democracy.

Exceeding those term limits is a blatant and obvious example of democratic principles being thrown out the window and being replaced with dictatorship. Vladimir Putin has succeeded in cementing his reign of power in the Constitution of the Russian Federation at the expense of real democracy. With this extreme extension of term limits and the processes used to ram them through as a law, these amendments to the Russian Constitution have all the characteristics of a textbook example of abusive constitutionalism. As outlined in the words of David Landau and Rosalind Dixon, in other words, "constitutional processes that are used to promote distinctly anti-democratic ends or to advance the cause of would-be autocrats by removing democratic checks and balances on the exercise of political power".

The new laws which aim to keep Putin in power are frightening, in addition to the fact that any remaining politicians who oppose the regime are imprisoned or forced into exile. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the only other leader across Europe with a similar reign of unbroken rule is President Aliyev of Azerbaijan. You can see no end of similar characteristics in terms of the type of autocratic regime where democratic principles are discarded, where prisoners, political prisoners, are tortured systemically. This is no coincidence.

I really do hope that just as we dealt with Russia, that we will deal with the fundamentally undemocratic regime of Azerbaijan in the next sitting of this Parliament.

As this is my final time to speak, I'll finish by once again calling for freedom for Julian Assange. Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Paul GAVAN.

Is Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS in the room? Not yet.

We go to the speakers list. Our next speaker is Mr Lukas SAVICKAS.

**Mr Lukas SAVICKAS (Lithuania, SOC):** Thank you.

Dear President, dear colleagues,

I invite us to see the facts as they are. Mr Putin has been continuously in power since the year 2000. He has served two consecutive four-year terms between 2008 and will have completed two consecutive six-year terms between 2012 and 2024.

Changes made to the Russian Constitution enacted in July 2020 would allow him to remain in office as president until 2036, an overall period of 36 years. Dear colleagues, 36 years.

We have often, in this Assembly, talked about keeping dialogue open with democratic forces in Russia. How is it possible when their country's perspective is sealed for another decade to come? Any country that extends the presidential term limit beyond the usual two terms of four or five years is taking a large step away from democracy and the rule of law, because institutional checks and balances erode over time as the key positions are progressively occupied by allies of the president and discerning voices disappear for the president's inner circle. Those term limits also serve to keep in check those who might be tempted to use the presidential power to curtail any opposition. The report rightfully endorses the Venice Commission's finding that *ad hominem* term-limit waiver for incumbent president violates both the Russian Constitution and international principles. The concrete facts are well presented in this report.

The overwhelming power of the president resulting from this extreme long-term in office combined with a lack of any checks and balances, such as a strong parliament, an independent judiciary from the media, and a vibrant civil society, has turned Russia from a federation into a *de facto* dictatorship. That means it constitutes a threat to international peace and security.

Dictatorships destroy the fundamental rights and the socio-economical being of their own population as well. It is therefore in the interest, first and foremost, of the people of the Russian Federation but also of Europe and the world, that democracy is restored in the Russian Federation.

I hope that we as an Assembly will send a clear message today. First to the competent Russian constitutional bodies to reverse the labour of the presidential term limit for Mr Putin but also to the international community as a whole to minimise the context of Mr Putin. Therefore, it is an interest of us all. It is in the interest of preserving democracy and the rule of law in the region.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Now I want to call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

You have the floor.

**Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear friends, we are facing an incredible change in the Russian Federation. We cannot say that we never have trust in democracy. I was among the people in the 1990s making negotiations with Russia, with the Soviet Union, and with Boris Yeltsin. Two entities, the Soviet Union and Gorbachev, a so-called reformer, he was responsible for bloodshed in Tbilisi and Vilnius. Mr Yeltsin was trying to restore first steps, uncertain steps, towards democracy.

I remember in Moscow hundreds of thousands of Russians with the inscription "freedom for the Baltic countries". Who are they now? Starovoitova, Politkovskaja, my good friend Boris Nemtsov, killed on the spot.

I was the key investigator, and actually rapporteur, on the assassination of Boris Nemtsov. When we sent letters from this house, Madam Speaker, to the Russian Federation for co-operation in the clarification of how Nemtsov was killed, we received letters, which are still framed in the Committee on Human Rights, letters with an answer. Russian Post is not found the House of the Senate of the Russian Federation. It means that Russian Post officially gives the answer that such a place like the Parliament of Russia doesn't exist.

Of course, it was answered by the authorities. They don't want to be in co-operation with the Council of Europe about how Nemtsov was killed. A hopeless 24 years of diminishing of democracy, hunting democrats, fake elections, terrible fake changes in the Constitution. Russians have the expression "*referendum na pen'kakh*". It's difficult to translate what that means. It means improvised, improvised collected voices, fake voices, fake votes and fake voting.

I would like to congratulate my good friend Mr Pieter OMTZIGT for touching the essence. Democracy in Russia stopped to exist,  $\phi\tau\beta$  elections are fake, not free and fair any more. Our point is that Russia has become dangerous for all of the world, trying to attack our not only democratic values but physically to destroy the democratic world.

The target of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and their allies like Iran, and partly China, is to diminish the space of the democratic world, to undermine our key values, make a mockery and humiliation of our key set of values, the so-called "Orthodox" values of the family.

Our points are that everyone has the right to their sexual orientation.

Everything's fake. It's against the freedom.

I would like to congratulate Mr OMTZIGT and say that it was a great report. We endorse you from all our hearts and from all our soul, saying that it was a key point. Democracy stopped to exist.

Thank you very much.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

Our next speaker is Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA.

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

Colleagues,

I would like to start with statistics. We're now talking about the person who actually influenced each and every person's life in this room, outside of the hall, and in the whole world. The UN calculated that the war of aggression of Russia and Putin himself, because he planned it and executed it since 2014 against Ukraine, in 2008 against Georgia back in the days against Abkhazia and many other countries. It has influenced 1.8 billion people in 94 countries across the globe. It brought under question the security of food distribution.

President Zelenskyy thanked our Assembly yesterday publicly on Twitter (X), and I thank you all for recognising the great famine of the last century against Ukraine by Stalin's Soviet regime, which is called the Holodomor, which brought millions of Ukrainians to starvation. It could also bring millions of people across the globe to starvation, because the regime of Putin, who is a dictator, as the brave rapporteur Mr Pieter OMTZIGT is suggesting us to consider, as well as his dictatorship regime, which is a legitimate Putinist threat not only under the question of security. The security dimension today is very wide. It's extremely important to say that the European Court of Human Rights ruling said the aggression started in 2014, including the illegal attempt to occupy Crimea, the illegal actions that were done as an act of aggression against other territories of Ukraine in Donbas and currently in other parts.

Also, the downing of flight MH17, which brought so many victims, they were in our hall at various sittings of the plenary. Those families can be felt and heard, I think, only by Ukrainians, because we share the same emotions and tragedy. We have been crying out about that since 2015 when it happened and the Assembly was doubting whether actually the Russian forces were to be blamed.

Indeed, colleagues, the very exhaustive report, even though it's very short, targets the core thing: Putin is a dictator, his regime is illegitimate, and we have a beautiful answer and solution to that: only an international tribunal for the crime of aggression, which is widely supported by your governments in the core group. An international investigative group is being placed in The Hague already. The next meeting of the core group is in Berlin in November will be an answer and will be a legitimate answer to the regime of Putin, putting him and around 20 people of his team in the possible court and jail.

We're looking forward for it to be supported widely and for justice to be in place.

Thank you, Madam President.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Madam MEZENTSEVA.

Our next speaker is Ms Oleksandra USTINOVA.

**Ms Oleksandra USTINOVA (Ukraine, ALDE):** Dear colleagues,

I think we should not be even talking about Vladimir Putin as the President of the Russian Federation, because he's a criminal.

The first thing we should discuss is how he should be brought to justice. And a lot of his puppets who started wars, not only in Ukraine, but in a lot of parts of the world.

Second, he's an FSB agent. Just like a lot of Russians outside of the country working for a machine to keep this regime, and not only to keep this regime in Russia, but to spread this regime to other European nations, to other democracies, and to ruin them.

Putin is a bully. He cannot be negotiated. He doesn't understand the words of democracy. He doesn't understand our values. It's not that he is not sharing that, he just doesn't understand that the world can be different. This person understands only one thing: responsibility. And that's why he has to be brought to court and he has to end up facing all the consequences of everything he has done in the world: millions of people being killed, starved, and to be honest I think this is only the beginning.

He's the bully who only understands only weapons and strength. And we should be united now, not only saying that he's not a legitimate president of Russia, because he is not, and this is obvious for everyone. We should be united in stopping this person basically ruining democracies and the Western world.

What is weird is that he is the person who's trying to undermine democracies in the world, he is trying to put his puppets and his fake governments in other countries, he is putting in a lot of money in his propaganda and unfortunately we can see it now here in Europe.

My colleague was telling you yesterday that France 24 was showing Prigozhin and the Wagner Group saying they have PTSD. PTSD people who raped women, who killed people around the world, who are a Russian terrorist group, now they are claiming that they have PTSD and they have difficulties to live.

And this is the Russia propaganda that we have been fed with.

And the second thing that is important: he's trying to undermine democracies putting a lot of money in the extreme rights movements' ideologies trying to ruin the democracies from the inside.

I think this is a very important Report that everyone should support, but I think this Report should be only the beginning in bringing Putin to the court in The Hague and not only him but a lot of people who are sitting next to him, millions of Russians who are in "Yedinaya Rossiya" which is a criminal party that is ruling Russia now.

And those are more than 2 million people. We should be talking about them, as well, because they're the ones who are supporting this regime.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Ms Oleksandra USTINOVA.

Our next speaker is Mr Stéphane BERGERON.

You have the floor [in French].

**Mr Stéphane BERGERON (Canada):** Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The illegitimacy and illegality of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is made a little clearer every time we debate it in this House. Today, it is the very legitimacy and legality of the mandate of the person ultimately responsible for it that finds itself under the microscope of our Assembly.

The Venice Commission unequivocally concluded that the ad hominem derogation to the term limits of the incumbent President violates both the Russian Constitution and international legal principles.

Let's not forget that, after his first two terms, Putin pretended to respect his country's Constitution by temporarily lending the presidency to Dmitri Medvedev. However, the 2012 and 2018 elections won by Putin were, so to speak, sham-free and democratic elections, as was the 2020 referendum on which the constitutional amendments were based. But those have now allowed him to cling to power until 2036, and which the opponent, Alexei Navalny, now imprisoned after a literal attempt on his life, described as a "huge lie".

As the rapporteur, Mr Pieter OMTZIGT, notes, the brutal repression of internal opponents such as Messrs Navalny, Nemtsov and Kara-Murza, and the war of aggression against Ukraine illustrate the growing cost of the absence of checks and balances in Russia.

Moreover, on the subject of Ukraine, not only has Putin violated the Minsk Accords, but also the Budapest Memorandum, under which Russia was to guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arsenal. Could Russia have manoeuvred Ukraine into giving up its nuclear arsenal, so as to be better able to attack it later? The question arises.

A few days before launching his illegal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, President Putin was still claiming that no war was in his plans: how many times he broke his word!

We all know what happened next. The International Criminal Court has already issued arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin, among others, for appalling war crimes, deportations and illegal transfers of people, mainly children, from Ukraine to Russia.

In his Report, Mr. Pieter OMTZIGT rightly points out that the 123 states parties to the Rome Statute on the International Criminal Court, including Canada, have a legal obligation to execute these arrest warrants should Putin be found on their territory.

I should point out in passing that Armenia has recently expressed its intention to join the International Criminal Court, even though Moscow - which has lamentably failed to meet its obligations to Yerevan - is urging it not to go ahead.

The resolution contained in the Report also reaffirms support for the creation of an ad hoc international criminal tribunal for the aggression against Ukraine, a crime that has enabled all the other war crimes and crimes against humanity to be committed.

Let's make sure that this tribunal is set up and that it has the means to carry out its mandate, so that those responsible for these crimes are held to account and we can work together to rebuild Russia and Europe democratically in the post-Putin era, without having to wait until after 2036.

Thank you, Madam President.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Mr Stéphane BERGERON.

Our next speaker is Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO, and our last speaker will be Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV.

**Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, EC/DA):** Thank you.

Dear friends,

Remember the question that was asked when the Kremlin dictator had only just started his bloody and genocidal career? The question was: who is Mr Putin? Now, we all know the answer to this question.

First of all, Putin is a war criminal and the International Criminal Court has already issued an arrest warrant for him.

Second, Putin is a terrorist. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in one of its resolutions, had recognised Russia as a terrorist regime and it logically implies that the head of this terrorist regime is a terrorist himself, and he should be recognised as such.

Thirdly, Putin is a dictator, and again PACE has recognised Russia as a dictatorship, thus, Putin should be treated by all member states of the Council of Europe as a war criminal and as a terrorist.

It means that there should be no diplomatic relations between democratic states and the terrorist regime. War criminal and terrorist Putin should be completely isolated just like the terrorist state, Russia, itself.

At the same time, Putin is only a part of the problem the world now faces. The other part of the problem is Russia itself. We should openly recognise that by its very nature, Russia is a colonial empire. And as such, it should be subjected to decolonisation. Without Russia's decolonisation, European and world security cannot be guaranteed. If Russia remains a colonial empire, the world will continue to be in danger.

Recently, someone in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe decided to create a platform for communication with the so-called Russian democratic opposition and civic society in Russia. I suppose that it's a bad idea, because Russia is a totalitarian state and there is no civic society in Russia. Besides, even the Russian liberal opposition wants to retain Russia as a colonial empire. Instead of this platform, dear friends, I

would like to suggest the creation of another platform – a platform for Russia's decolonisation. In this platform representatives of colonial nations could participate which are struggling for their independence and freedom from the Russian empire.

I hope that you will consider my suggestion.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister MEREZHKO.

Now our last speaker I call is Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV.

**Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD):** Thank you.

I want, of course, to say my big thanks to the rapporteur, Mr Pieter OMTZIGT. I think that he started a very serious theme. It's only the beginning of our discussion, because everybody understands that it's not only about Putin and about Russia. It's a broader theme.

This Report is about checks and balances, and about the future of Europe and the future of the world. The end of the Russian Republic and the start of Putin's dictatorship is only one episode in the European security system. We must understand that our organisation is also responsible for everything that we now have in Russia.

From the first day when Russia became a member of this organisation, we can analyse the reports of the Monitoring Committee and other committees about the situation in Russia. And only after the open invasion of Russia into Ukraine, after this, did we begin to give it a name: "dictator, dictator, dictatorship, dictatorship", and did we begin to analyse everything that we have now in Russia.

The system of checks and balances is not only a problem of Russia. It is a problem of other member states of Europe and of our organisation, because the small events led to a big dictatorship and a big war. When Putin started his political career from killing thousands and thousands of his own citizens. When he started his career, from the wars, from death and blood, we must understand that our organisation was only also one of those who didn't stop him. It is very important to analyse now why this is possible.

When we discussed yesterday the prevention of wars in the world and in Europe especially, we discussed our status and our possibility to prevent the war. And the case of Putin and the case of the end of the republic in Russia, it also shows that when we are closing our eyes to such problems. It started from the small war, but it is not a small war. Each war is a big war because it's a big tragedy for millions of people.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Mister SOBOLIEV.

I must now interrupt the list of speakers. The speeches of members on the speaker list who have been present during the debate, but have not been able to speak, may be given to the Table Office for publication in the Official Report. I remind colleagues that type-written texts can be submitted, electronically if possible, no later than four hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

Now I call Mr Pieter OMTZIGT, rapporteur, to reply. You have 3 minutes.

**Mr Pieter OMTZIGT (Netherlands, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Thank you.

This is not much of a debate, because it seems that we all seem to agree on a few basic tenants. I would like to underline the words of Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV. This is not just about Putin, this is happening in more parts of Europe. There are more parts of Europe where dictatorships do exist and where we as an organisation of democratic nations have looked away for too long.

Mr Paul GAVAN pointed to Mr Aliyev. That dictatorship even seems to run in the family. There we have the same problem that is someone who is there too long, he starts actions and these actions were in Nagorno-Karabakh over the last few weeks.

Once all the checks and balances fall away in your states, you go on the wrong path. That's why I think we should have a follow-up at some point to this report.

We should consider something like an addition to the European Convention on Human Rights or anything that term limits are an essential part of the democracy.

I propose in my report twice 4 or 5 years is the maximum. If it's twice 6 years, it's okay, but somewhere it has to end, especially when you have a presidential republic.

Other speakers, Madam Speaker, turned to the question of what to do with Mr Putin. Bring him to court? He's very welcome in the city where I was born, in The Hague. I really support what Ms Saskia KLUIT said, "Please also take MH17, Crimea, Donbas, and everything starting in 2014 into account". That's also the last sentence of the resolution, and take it from there.

May I tell you something? The reason we're here is because we haven't shown resolve between 2014 and 2022. We've all let this go on happening. We didn't stop when there were two wars in Chechnya. We did not stop when he invaded Georgia and annexed South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We did not stop when he went into Crimea. We did not do much when he entered Donbas. Because we waited so late on the day, we are now paying a high price.

If we, as a community of democratic nations, remain unwilling to pay a price even to ourselves that we have to pay something to defend our human rights, then we're not willing to defend the values. We have to show a lot of resolve, and let's start with really adopting this report.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Mr Pieter OMTZIGT.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Damien COTTIER, wish to speak?

It seems so.

You have the floor.

**Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights):** Thank you, Madam President.

"A thing is not just because it is law, but it must be law because it is just" (Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu).

I wanted to start with this quote, because that's what we're talking about today. The rapporteur put it extremely well. It's about the separation of powers, checks and balances.

Mr Pieter OMTZIGT's report is based on serious work. Firstly, that of the Venice Commission, to which the Committee asked for an opinion, and then within the Committee itself. In particular, we interviewed the President of the Venice Commission and its Secretary General.

The opinion of the Venice Commission, quoted in full, was prepared with the co-operation of the Russian authorities, whose arguments were taken into account by the Venice Commission, but without convincing it.

The motion for a resolution was launched, as has been pointed out, well before the massive Russian invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of last year. The fears expressed in this text have, unfortunately, proved lucid. Dictatorships, unfortunately, end up becoming threats not only to their own people, their freedom and their prosperity, but also to their neighbors. On the other hand, historians have given us the answer to the question posed earlier by Mr Stéphane Bergeron. On the contrary, democracies do not wage war against each other. This is an extremely important observation.

We can see that checks and balances, or the separation of powers to use Montesquieu's words, in a hyper-presidential system such as Russia's but not only, tend to erode over time. The president ends up appointing all those who should control him. In essence, he is surrounded by friends and allies, and will be increasingly separated from the reality of the country. We can see the result in Russia. Democracy and the rule of law have receded to the point where the country has become a dictatorship. Unfortunately, there is no longer any real parliamentary opposition, no independent judiciary, no free media, no active civil society. It is precisely

these checks and balances that the Russian authorities themselves cited before the Venice Commission as justifying the fact that there are sufficient checks and balances even if there is no limit to the length of the presidential term. It's clear that this doesn't work.

The Commission must, therefore, find that there has been a violation of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, of important international principles and that, consequently, the mandate of the current President of the Russian Federation will become illegitimate at the end of his current term.

Madam President,

Allow me to thank the rapporteur for his excellent work, which has the full support of the Committee, and for the time he has devoted to it, while we know that he is also currently busy with a number of other matters.

As this is the last time I will address the Plenary as Chairman of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, let me say that it has been a privilege. I would like to thank the members of the Committee, the many experts who have helped us in our work, and the secretariat for its consistently excellent work.

Thank you all very much.

**Mr Percy DOWNE (Canada):** *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Colleagues:

By now, all of us are familiar with the state of public institutions in Russia where democratic hopes raised by the collapse of communism have been overwhelmed by a quarter century of corruption masquerading as a free market and repression standing in for governance.

We know that Putin has been continuously in power as President or Prime Minister of Russia since 2000 and the amendments brought to the Russian Constitution in 2020 would allow him to remain President until 2036...

He might as well name himself tin pot dictator for life.

I recall that in the second half of the 1980s, there was some hope that Russia would become an open and democratic country.

After Putin became President in 2000, there could have been even a hint of hope that he would establish a fairer regime.

Instead, he nominated family members, former KGB cronies, and friends and allies to high positions, and they all benefited financially from that corrupt government.

I agree with the resolution that "[t]he overwhelming power of the President resulting from the extremely long term in office combined with the lack of any checks and balances such as a strong parliament, an independent court system, free media and a vibrant civil society has turned the Russian Federation into a dictatorship."

I also agree that it is in the interest of the Russian people, but also of Europe and the whole world that democracy be restored in Russia.

That the war of aggression against Ukraine and its political and economic impacts show that dictatorships constitute a threat to international peace and security and to the territorial integrity and political independence of their neighbours and destroy the fundamental rights and the social and economic well-being of their own population.

I would like to commend the work of the Venice Commission, which found that the term-limit waiver for the incumbent President of the Russian Federation violates both Russian constitutional law and well-established international legal principles.

On that basis, I conclude with the Rapporteur's words: "the waiver of the presidential term limit in favour of President Putin is neither legitimate, not even in accordance with Russia's own Constitution, nor in line with international standards designed to protect checks and balances preventing a descent into dictatorship."

Thank you.

## **Vote: Examining the legitimacy and legality of the ad hominem term-limit waiver for the incumbent President of the Russian Federation**

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** "Thank you, Mister Damien COTTIER" [in French].

The debate is closed now.

The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented a draft resolution to which four Amendments have been tabled and two sub-Amendments.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 1 and 2 to the draft resolution, which were unanimously approved by the Committee, should be declared as agreed by the Assembly.

Is that right, Mister Damien COTTIER?

**Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights):** I can confirm.

"I confirm so" [spoken in French].

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Does anyone object?

This is not the case.

As there is no objection,

*I declare that Amendments 1 and 2 to the draft resolution have been agreed.*

I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support Amendment 3.

You have 30 seconds.

**Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA):** Yes, Putin is a dictator, but also Putin is a killer. Putin is a criminal.

That has been said by the International Criminal Court. Here we are talking about the wars which Putin started: the Chechen wars with the genocide of Chechens, Transnistria, Georgia, as illustrative examples.

I think it is very important to call Putin what he is: a dictator, a killer, a criminal.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Does anyone wish to speak against this sub-Amendment?

I had to give the floor to you, Mister OMTZIGT, on behalf of the Committee.

Please.

**Mr Pieter OMTZIGT (Netherlands, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Well, there is a sub-Amendment to Amendment 3. The sub-Amendment is not to "enhance *its* domestic image" but "to enhance the *President's* domestic image".

It is a clarification. That's why we're voting on it.

I would like to support that sub-Amendment, which was approved unanimously by the Committee.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Now I don't see anyone else who wants to say something.

What is the opinion of the mover of the main Amendment, Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO?

**Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA):** I completely support the oral sub-Amendment. Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** The Committee is obviously in favour.

I will and now put the sub-Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed.

*Congratulations. The sub-Amendment is adopted.*

And now we will move to the main Amendment, as sub-amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the main Amendment?

No.

What is the opinion of the Committee?

**Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights):** Madam Speaker, the Committee supported the Amendment as sub-amended unanimously.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I shall now put Amendment 3 to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

And I call for the results to be displayed.

*Yes, Amendment 3 is also adopted.*

Now I call Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA to support Amendment 4. You have 30 seconds.

**Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD):** Yes, thank you, President.

The philosophy of Amendment 4 is to state that the Assembly calls on the member states of the Council of Europe to recognise Vladimir Putin and his government as illegitimate after his current term and to restrict all the further contact except those which touch upon humanitarian issues.

Thank you.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Now I call Mr Pieter OMTZIGT on behalf of the Committee to support the sub-Amendment.

**Mr Pieter OMTZIGT (Netherlands, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Thank you.

The sub-Amendment reads – it changes it on 4 points – so I read it out: "The Assembly calls on the member states of the Council of Europe to recognise Vladimir Putin as illegitimate after the end of *his* current presidential term and to *cease* all contact with *him*, except for humanitarian contact and the pursuit of peace."

So we make a few changes, we should not finish recognising his government: it is Mr Putin who is president, not his government. And we should not restrict the contacts, we should cease them, except for two things: humanitarian contact – what the mover wanted – and the pursuit of peace – so if he'd have to sign a peace deal, then he needs to be able to sign it as the president.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Does anyone wish to speak against the sub-Amendment?

What is the opinion of the mover of the main Amendment, Madam Mariia MEZENTSEVA?

**Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD):** Well, friends, I don't know.

We're not in the peace talks yet. We are aiming for peace, but it's not happening right now.

Peace in the future, yes, in yesterday's Resolution we restated the pursuit of peace. Then let's add "under Ukrainian terms". But, I don't know, it appears a strange reason for me.

Sorry.

I don't know.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I see now the Chair, Mr Damien COTTIER, wants to say something.

**Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights):** Yes, Madam Speaker, just to inform the Assembly that the Committee supported the sub-Amendment unanimously.

It sees it as an improvement and supported the Amendment as sub-amended also unanimously.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Now I will put this sub-Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results.

*The sub-Amendment is adopted.*

Now we will consider the main Amendment.

Does anyone wish to speak against the Amendment?

Not the case.

What is the opinion of the Committee on the Amendment?

**Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights):** As I just mentioned, Madam Chair, the Committee unanimously supported the amendment as sub-amended.

**Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I shall now put Amendment 4 as sub-amended to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

*Amended 4 as sub-amended is also adopted.*

Thank you very much.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft Resolution contained in Document 15827 as amended. A simple majority is required.

Now the vote is open.

The vote is closed.

*The draft Resolution is unanimously approved. Congratulations.*

Thank you very much, dear colleagues.

So, we are going. We will be back in a few minutes.

## **Joint debate: Preventing addictive behaviours in children / Mental health and well-being of children and young adults**

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Good afternoon, everyone.

The next item is a joint debate on the presentation and discussion of two Reports by the Social, Health and Sustainable Development Committee.

First, Mr Simon MOUTQUIN will present Ms Diana STOICA's Report on "Preventing addictive behavior in children" (Doc. 15830).

Then, Mr. Simon MOUTQUIN will present his Report on "Mental health and well-being of children and young adults" (Doc. 15829).

We are due to finish examining these texts, including votes, at 12.05 p.m. We will therefore have to interrupt the list of speakers at around 12.00 p.m., so that we can hear the Committee's reply and proceed with the necessary votes.

Mr. Simon MOUTQUIN has 10 minutes to present the two Reports and 6 minutes to reply to speakers at the end of the general discussion.

You have the floor, Mr Simon MOUTQUIN.

**Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Rapporteur):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you all for staying on a Friday morning at the end of a very busy session.

First of all, I'd like to apologise on behalf of Ms Diana STOICA, who is, unfortunately, ill at the moment. I send her my best wishes for a speedy recovery.

I'm going to start by presenting her report on addictive behavior in children, before turning to mental health and well-being in children and adults.

Ms Diana STOICA's report starts from an important premise. There is real concern today about increasing addictive behavior among children and a whole series of consequences for their mental and physical health and development.

There are new drugs on our continent, in our countries, in the member states. There are new drugs that represent a real danger for children, but there is also the whole question of digital technology, particularly online betting and video games, which also represent addictive behavior for children. Then there was the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit us hard and also showed that addictive behavior had increased among children, and that the measures in place were somewhat ineffective.

As the rapporteur reminds us, every child has the right to a healthy life, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 3.

Addictive behavior in children is not limited to substance use, but also includes, as I said, video games and online gaming, which can lead to financial debt and psychological distress.

What is it that ultimately attracts young people to addictive behavior? Ms Diana STOICA explains it very well. Of course, there's a part of wanting to be like the others, wanting to look cool, but it would really be an intellectual weakness to sum up addictive behavior in this way. In reality, there are many other factors that can lead to young people today being attracted to certain substances or to an addiction to online games. For

example, among these factors, there are certain traumas, there's online harassment, there are issues of abuse, and there are family conflicts. Then there's a factor that's really important, the intergenerational factor, particularly in terms of alcoholism and addiction. I think it's a factor that's quite important.

What are the consequences? They are very significant, as you can imagine, consequences for young people's physical health. We know the links between mental health and physical health, but also problems of school drop-out, problems of neurodevelopmental disorders, very serious consequences, of course, in terms of dependence. That's the principle of addiction, but also of indebtedness and social isolation, which lead to a vicious cycle, since social isolation can lead to even more addictions.

Ms Diana STOICA proposes solutions which, generally speaking, need to be integrated, involving patients, patients and their entourage, setting up individual and family therapies, as well as medical support where necessary.

With regard to so-called "traditional" drugs, there is a whole series of measures that need to be put in place: a holistic approach, as proposed in Ms Diana STOICA's report, international co-operation on statistics and known data, and above all, and I'll talk about this in a few seconds as part of my report, a major focus on prevention. Children need to be directly involved in prevention.

On the subject of digital addiction, we really need to have a dialogue with these digital platforms, with these websites, with the digital industry, to ban, in particular, advertisements for alcohol or drugs. This is sometimes the case, even synthetic drugs on certain websites, and prevention campaigns, of course, on social networks.

This concludes my brief presentation of Diana STOICA's report.

I'd now like to talk about my report on "Taking into account the impact of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of minors and young adults". That was the original title, and I'll explain why we wanted to change it.

I was appointed rapporteur on this title in February 2021, along with 29 other members of the Assembly whom I thank. The aim of this report was to study the links between sanitary measures, containment measures, and a deterioration in the mental health of young people. The report was to call on member states to take proportionate measures to protect young people.

Then, with the Committee, we went on an exciting field trip to Norway, where we came to realise, not least through this field trip, but also by listening to young people, that the mental situation of young people was much more serious and not just limited to Covid-19.

I'd like to start by giving you a definition of mental health. According to the UN, mental health is "a state of mental well-being that enables us to cope with the stresses of life, realise our potential, learn and work well, and contribute to community life". This is a very important definition.

There have been major developments in recent years, linking mental and physical health. I think we should thank all the researchers who have been able to show the importance of mental health and put it on the same level as physical health.

It's a right recognised by our European Social Charter, for example. It's a right recognised by the United Nations, by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Children in particular, and by countless international texts.

As you know, youth is a period of life when you're building yourself up: physically, first and foremost, but also in terms of social networks and friendships, and in terms of love. It's a period when mental health problems can have a major impact.

I'd like to come back to the question of the health crisis. As we know, periods of confinement, since this was initially the subject of my report, have a direct impact on mental health. Isolation, disruption of habits, grief, and uncertainty have had a devastating impact on many young people. In fact, the WHO reports a 25% increase in anxiety in youth and young adults during Covid-19.

Then, we have to realise that this issue of confinement also had an impact on young people who already had mental health problems, who in fact saw their problems worsen. Sometimes access to treatment was made difficult by the confinement measures.

Let's take a look at today's findings outside Covid-19.

Today, young people's mental health is deteriorating for a whole range of reasons. Let's take a look at our society: financial crisis, energy crisis, conflicts around the world. I think this week has shown us that these conflicts are important. The triple climate crisis with an increase in what we call eco-anxiety; also undoubtedly a meritocratic society, a society that puts pressure on young people; a society where there is a loss of meaning in work. All these measures, all these reasons, all these factors mean that today's young people are really suffering.

I'd like to remind you that suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people today, that depression and anxiety are the two main causes of illness among young people, and are often reported, not least because of the stigma attached to mental health problems.

Today, 13% of 10- to 19-year-olds suffer from mental health problems.

What are the consequences? As you can imagine, there's an explosion of social exclusion. There's discrimination. There's stigmatisation. There's physical health, which is also impacted by mental health. We think it's often one way, but in reality, it's both ways. Then of course, quite simply, there's a violation of human rights.

As I said, I was able to visit Norway. As you know, Norway is often cited as one of the most exemplary member states in terms of access to healthcare, but also to mental healthcare. Indeed, in Norway, we've seen that access to a whole range of centres is covered, even from, and so much the better, disadvantaged neighborhoods, right through to schools. There is a real possibility of access to a psychologist, which is really important. There is a whole series of things in place. There is learning in schools about the subjects, the data around mental health from the earliest age. There are telephone lines that have been set up, in particular, to be able to confide things. There are also limits. We've seen, for example, that some telephone lines, particularly for LGBT people, have had their budgets cut back a little. I think that one of the recommendations of my report is precisely to avoid reducing these offers and, on the contrary, to increase them.

In any case, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Norwegian delegation and the two Assembly colleagues I met in Oslo.

One of the conclusions of this mission to Norway, both in the field and in the report, is that the pandemic has not only exacerbated mental health problems. It has highlighted the fragility of care systems and shown that these challenges disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged communities.

With the 40 seconds I have left, I'm going to give you a few examples of the recommendations my report makes. It makes recommendations on three levels. Recommendations on the mental health system, how to make it more robust, in particular by setting up opportunities for consultation, for concerted action by psychologists in a decentralised way. There's a whole series of measures that concern, finally, the society that I spoke to you about, which is not one that many young people are dreaming of at the moment, how to make this society less unequal and more accessible. Finally, there are measures to be taken in the event of new confinements, which I don't wish on us collectively. There are measures to be put in place, precautions to be taken for the young and indeed the not so young, which absolutely must be stated in this report and which are noted in this report.

That's it, I'll leave you with some, perhaps, more personal conclusions after your contributions.

Thank you all very much.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mr rapporteur. Thank you, Mr MOUTQUIN.

In the general discussion, we move on to the speakers on behalf of the political groups.

Ms Maria SYRENGELA, from Greece, will be speaking on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

**Ms Maria SYRENGELA (Greece, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much.

Dear colleagues, as a new member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it is a great honour not only to stand in front of you, but also to represent the Group of the European People's Party today.

Mental health, especially of children and young people, must be at the top of our agenda in the recent years.

The Covid-19 pandemic, along with its lockdowns, brought a new area to our societies. Mental health and social relationship became fragile from for both younger and older people.

The consequences of the lockdowns combined with the easier access to various substances, the uncontrolled freedom of the internet, and socioeconomic difficulties created unprecedented challenges to the development of our children.

Mental health issues existed prior to the pandemic of course. As it is explained into the report, financial crisis, peer pressure, and climate crisis also affect the mental state of children and teens who present high-anxiety.

As a result, in Europe suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people, a statistic which not only frightens us, but also mobilises us to act immediately.

Mental health is strongly connected with addictive behaviours in children, an issue which does not recognise borders and impacts on the very fabric of our societies.

All Council of Europe member states are parties of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which guarantees that every child has the right to a healthy life. It is our duty, not only as politicians but as mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles, to ensure a healthier and more prosperous future for our children.

The danger is here. From substance and tobacco addiction to online gaming or screen addiction, they all share a common target: children and adolescents. As Ms Diana STOICA reported, it is urgent for the Council of Europe member states to set up tools that will help prevent the use by children of the main substances, to develop comprehensive protective measures geared to various addictive behaviours, and to identify long-term responses to new trends in addictive behaviours in keeping with the child's best interest.

At the same time Mr Simon MOUTQUIN reports that we need to enhance promotion, prevention, and early strategies to ensure that mental health care services are free and accessible to everyone, to encourage youth participation in democratic procedures, to make the voice of young people heard and make them feel valued and understood.

Last but not least, tackling child poverty should be high in our agendas in order to holistically cover this issue.

Dear colleagues, the challenges we face in preventing addictive behaviours cannot be limited by national borders. It is imperative to unite our powers to collaborate at the European and international levels to share good practice and develop effective strategies.

Thank you very much.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

You have the floor.

**Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

Dear rapporteurs,

Assembly,

First of all, thank you very much for your really excellent work to our rapporteur. It is really brilliant work.

So mental health and mental well-being of children and young people is one of the vital and even core topics for the future of Europe.

The pandemic brought a shift in how mental well-being is being handled and treated in our societies and globally. And a human rights-based approach is the core of the public debate and policies.

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, I want to stress a few issues.

First, international and national statistics reveal a troubling increase in mental health issues among children and youth, including depression and anxiety, other psychological disorders and even suicidal thoughts and attempts. Comprehensive, accessible and free or affordable mental health services and support should be ensured across Europe. Relevant policies and changes in the healthcare and education systems should be immediately implemented.

Second, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has already shown common efforts by signing and acknowledging significance of safeguarding the mental health of children and young adults, also stressing the needs to create environments conducive to psychological well-being and to ensure access to high-quality mental health services.

The 15 concrete recommendations formulated in the Report will definitely help to improve the situation and care more effectively about the mental well-being of future generations.

Third, the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and economic hardship have placed additional burdens on the mental health of Ukrainian children and youth, also those who became refugees in Europe and beyond. Exposure to violent displacement and the loss of loved ones have contributed to higher rates of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among Ukrainian children.

So to address these present issues, we must commit to expanding access to healthcare services, particularly to vulnerable populations and prioritise the training of mental health professionals. We should also promote mental health education and awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

So, colleagues, this topic is not only a concern for individual states but a collective responsibility of all of us.

As we gather here today, let us reform our commitment to working together across borders to ensure that every child and young adults regardless of their nationality can grow up in an environment that nurtures their mental health and well-being.

Thank you for your attention and dedication to these vital issues.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Julia.

I now give the floor to Mrs Nigar ARPADARAI, on behalf of the European Conservatives and Democratic Alliance Group.

You have the floor.

**Ms Nigar ARPADARAI (Azerbaijan, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much.

I would like to thank our rapporteurs for this amazing work that they are doing. The subject is extremely important.

Dear colleagues,

Studies say that worldwide 10% of children and adolescents have mental disorders. Suicide now is the fourth leading cause of death among 15–19-year-olds. There are many apparent reasons for that: the future is not certain and the present is stressful. But when it comes to our children's mental health and prosperity, the question that we need to ask is: do we adults do things right in this changing and challenging today? Is our schooling system adequate to the needs and realities of today? Is it protecting our children from mental health issues? Is there a chance that often contributes to their multiplication instead of protecting them?

The core design of the schooling system assumes that whatever is said by a teacher or taught in a textbook is true. And if the status of impeccable moral authorities abused by some ideologically charged networks to promote purely political ideology, it is a crime and a failure of the schooling system.

The decriminalisation of drugs in the legal domain is apparent, but what is worse is the direct and indirect propaganda of drugs on TV and in the media. A lot of this propaganda is aimed at children and teenagers. Drugs are evil and they should remain this way because they kill. Schools in this aspect must be a safe place. But to the contrary, there is a tendency for the schooling system to turn into a place where antidepressants and very dubious psychotherapeutic practices are putting our children at increased risk. We need to think about that. Schools must never become a lab for big pharma.

Covid-19 brought its own impact. Schools largely failed this exam during the Covid-19 pandemic by introducing quarantines and forcing vaccines on children who did not need them. If the risk for a child with Covid-19 is negligible, if the vaccine is not stopping the spread of disease and only affects the severity of it, if natural immunity works better than the vaccine, then why did we force this experimental practice on so many children? I am still not aware of any meaningful investigation or any instances of accountability in this regard.

I commend the Report, however, for stressing the damage children suffered as a result of lengthy closures of schools during Covid-19 and call to avoid it when possible. The effect that online reality has on our children's mental health is another endless topic. Our children already live online and frankly, the adults have very little idea about this world of theirs and we are going to know even less about it in the years to come. The internet gap between adults and children is growing at an amazing speed. And this huge disruption means a lot of risks for children's mental health. Do we have any meaningful plan to deal with it? I seriously doubt it.

The most obvious and established social tool for protecting our children's mental health is family. Paraphrasing Churchill, one of the founding fathers of this esteemed Assembly, I would like to remind you that family as a social construct and the tool to protect our children is not perfect. Families and parents fail children too, but it is the best system we have got so far. If we want to support children's mental health, one of the best ways to do it is to enforce family and its values, and this should also be stressed in the Report.

Thank you very much for the Report.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Madame.

I now give the floor to Ms Nataša SUKIČ, on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

You have the floor.

**Ms Nataša SUKIČ (Slovenia, UEL, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Today's debate addresses an extremely pressing issue of our time. We are talking about children, but it is a problem that affects all levels of modern societies in particular. In the age of the Internet, the enormous flow of information, the proliferation of social networks that bombard us daily with images of perfection in an otherwise world of growing crises, conflicts, and uncertainty about the future, young people are a particularly vulnerable group.

There is a wide range of theories on the causes of addiction in young people, but no clear consensus. The fact is that young people's resort to substances, whether out of a desire for perfection, despair, and anxiety, or simply a desire to experiment and be "in", is a dangerous phenomenon in an age of time-scarcity and increasing disorientation, the true extent of which will probably only be known in time.

But that is what addiction is all about - the causes. Without properly addressing them, we can forever just thread until the problem is too big for there to be an effective amount of cure.

We are talking about a problem that requires an interdisciplinary approach. The first and most important level is, of course, the family environment, but unfortunately this is also far too often reason for children's use of illicit substances and for the addictive behaviour of children and adolescents. It is therefore essential to involve all levels of society and the profession - health and education professionals, the media, civil society, business and politics, to name but a few segments.

However, tackling this problem requires, first and foremost, the involvement of young people. Which is why the call, also enshrined in the resolutions and the recommendation for the need to empower children and adolescents to involve them in the process of finding solutions, is to be firmly supported.

It is extremely important to start the conversation with them at an early age, to help them acquire the tools to build healthy relationships, first with themselves and then with their environment, to maintain mental health and balance. As a society, we need to learn how to actively listen to children, resisting the urge to lecture, but actively engaging them in the search for shared answers.

I agree with the rapporteur Mr Simon MOUTQUIN that mental health and well-being are fundamental components of a child's healthy development and future. And since children are our future, we are talking about the mental health of our societies as a whole.

Thank you

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Ms Heike ENGELHARDT, from Germany, on behalf of the Socialist Group.

You have the floor.

**Ms Heike ENGELHARDT (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

Thinking holistically in terms of health and focusing on the mental well-being of children and adolescents; that is our theme today.

I thank the two colleagues, Ms Diana STOICA and Mr Simon MOUTQUIN, for their important contributions. They clearly show that crises such as the Corona pandemic, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the current terrorist attacks in Israel, or the climate crisis are putting a great deal of psychological strain on many young people. We have to take this seriously and respond accordingly.

So what can we do? We need to work through the health consequences of the pandemic on the children and young people in our member states, and we need to implement measures to help them cope. For future crises, we need to be prepared to address the special needs of children and adolescents even better.

At the same time, we need more preventive work in daycare centers and schools, in child and youth welfare and family assistance, or in health care facilities. At the same time, help must be tailored as closely as possible to the various backgrounds of those affected. People in urgent need of help should not have to wait months or years for a free therapy place. Unfortunately, this is still often the case. Additional alternative and low-threshold offers of help must be created. In addition, the topic of mental health must be taken out of the taboo zone.

Dear children and adolescents, it is not a sign of weakness if you ask caregivers, parents or doctors for help. It shows much more courage to stand up for yourself and your wellbeing. Children and adolescents increasingly take refuge in addictions to escape loneliness and perceived powerlessness. Let us all please remember: when children and young people are left alone with a sense of disorientation and hopelessness, this will have an impact on the future of our democratic societies. Because democracy thrives precisely on young people who get involved because they believe in their self-efficacy. In times of multiple crises, we must ensure that young people retain the feeling that they can play a political role in determining their future. And for that, they need the necessary mental capacities.

Thank you.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

After the speakers on behalf of the political groups, we'll move on to the list of speakers.

Mr Pedro CEGONHO, from Portugal, has the floor.

You have the floor.

**Mr Pedro CEGONHO (Portugal, SOC):** Thank you, Madam President, for the floor.

First, I want to congratulate the rapporteurs for this work and for the draft resolutions and recommendations presented.

Let me propose to look for a different perspective: how local authorities can also promote healthy lifestyles and prevent addictive behaviours in children through education, awareness, and community action.

To illustrate the role of local and regional authorities in prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, which are often linked to addictive behaviours such as smoking, drinking, and unhealthy eating, we can also discuss the challenges and barriers that local authorities face in implementing effective policies and interventions, such as lack of resources, co-ordination, and co-operation with other sectors and levels of government.

The role of local authorities can also reduce the harm and crime associated with drug addiction in children with prevention, treatment, and recovery services.

We can see local authorities working with national and international partners to cut off the supply of drugs, support people with drug addiction to access treatment and recovery, and address the root causes and consequences of drug addiction.

We can also analyse the impact and the effectiveness of a plan on reducing drug-related harm and crime in local communities.

On the other side, local authorities can also regulate the availability and the marketing of alcohol and other addictive substances to children through pricing policies, licensing schemes, and enforcement measures.

In that example, we can demonstrate how local authorities can work with stakeholders from health, social care, justice, education, and community sectors to reduce the availability and demand of alcohol and drugs, especially among young people.

We must always evaluate the outcomes and benefits of the partnership actions on improving health and well-being, reducing inequalities and enhancing safety in the cities.

Thank you, Madam President.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Pedro.

I now give the floor to Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN, from Norway.

You have the floor.

**Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN (Norway, SOC):** Madam President, dear colleagues,

First, thank you to the rapporteur for focusing on mental health among young people and for pointing out necessary improvements to healthcare systems.

I'm pleased to see Norway mentioned as an example of good practice. Still, we have a lot to do.

In Norway every year approximately 650 people commit suicide. This is about six times as many as traffic deaths. Suicide numbers are higher than in the 1950s and 60s. The median age of suicide is 47. Two out of three are male. Of young people under the age of 20, 30 to 40 die from suicide or because of intentional self-harm.

Sadly, we see an increase in mental health problems among children. More than ever, young people are asking for mental health help, especially during and after the pandemic. The average life expectancy of people struggling with mental problems is 15 to 20 years shorter than others. Their quality of life is worse, many eat and sleep badly, are less physically active, isolate themselves, and feel lonely.

Anxiety, depression, psychosis, and eating disorders increase the risk of non-infectious physical illness, like cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, COPD, and cancer. Even if their health is poorer, it's a fact that mentally ill persons do not have the same access to physical treatment as others.

Healthcare really needs to be more holistic and encompass both mental and physical health, as the rapporteur so correctly underlines.

Our government is currently working on a new plan for mental health on all levels. They will strengthen prevention through a comprehensive public health perspective, extend low threshold municipal services as well as specialised treatment, improve interaction across different levels and professions, and simplify and improve reception and medical examination.

Indeed, enforce prevention and low threshold provisions at an early stage with a focus on children and young people will help to reduce mental health problems and suffering.

Mental healthcare is not primarily about expensive medical equipment, it is just as much about access to and availability of professional expertise.

New projections show a need to strengthen the number of employees by 15% until 2040, and that's another serious challenge we need to solve the sooner the better.

Thank you.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Mr Georgios STAMATIS, from Greece.

You have the floor.

**Mr Georgios STAMATIS (Greece, EPP/CD)\*:** Thank you, Madam President.

I am delighted to take the floor for the very first time in the Parliamentary Assembly and to talk to you about mental health and addictive behaviours.

I'd like first of all to state that I really feel for the young people in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Ukraine. I express my full solidarity with them. I think we should really think about their mental health and well-being.

We should no longer stigmatise mental issues.

We need to find policies and services that members of the Council of Europe can provide to help young people who are finding themselves in the midst of a war that they didn't desire or choose.

These are young people who will have an important role to play now and tomorrow, in countries that will no longer be at war. These are young people that are operating in societies. We need to work on developing services that deal with mental health so that we can ensure these young people are fully included, both young people and children, in a healthy democratic society.

Now, of course, addictive behaviour and mental health are two factors that are intertwined. We should also look at the role played by parents, educators and everyone that deals with and comes in contact with young people. All experts can and should develop policies which are designed to include young people.

Let's stop stigmatising people who are suffering from mental health issues.

We're lucky enough to be living in a region of our planet which is the most democratic region, which has a high level of well-being.

We really need to help young people living in countries who are suffering to feel fully included, because this enables us to support democracy.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

I'd like to give the floor to Ms Larysa BILOZIR, from Ukraine. Is she not here?

I'd like to give the floor to Mrs Sevinj FATALIYEVA, from Azerbaijan.

**Ms Sevinj FATALIYEVA (Azerbaijan, EC/DA):** Madam Chair,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by congratulating the rapporteurs for the excellent report they were preparing and for raising such an important issue in the discussion in this Assembly.

The modern world, which changes every day, offers young people various opportunities and confronts them with a huge choice. How to take advantage of these opportunities and how to make the right choice depends on the environment the children find themselves in.

The tendency of teenagers to quickly absorb everything new and interesting plays a crucial role in their formation. In all this variety of choices children can simply get lost if there is a lack of communication with peers and significant people for teenagers, a lack of attention from parents, a lack of confidence in yourself and your strengths, shyness, the desire of a teenager to be like everyone else, of his peers to follow their hobbies and to keep up.

In such situations, certain addictions may arise. It's important to know that not all those who engage in addictive behaviours will develop an addiction. However, if left unaddressed or untreated, these behaviours may escalate and have a significant impact on the child's well-being and functioning.

With rapidly spreading digitalisation worldwide, more and more people, and particularly increasingly young children, are spending an increasing number of hours per day online reading on screens of devices. This growing habit is likely to engender multiple health risks, such as blindness, obesity, sleep disorders, anxiety and depression, leading to impaired performance at school and behaviour problems.

Also inappropriate or misleading content can influence their beliefs and behaviours. The potential impact of this risk on children's future lives and the well-being of future societies as a whole could be dramatic. Public awareness of this problem needs to be fostered in communities as well as on a worldwide scale.

That's why it's necessary to present facts about the danger of interaction with objects or actions that cause addictive behaviour, help children to develop skills in recognising and expressing emotions, increasing self-esteem, identifying values that are significant for an individual, and develop communication and decision-making skills, and also develop healthy habits which can become a barrier to the formation of addictive behaviour.

Legislation can play a crucial role in preventing addictive behaviours in children by creating a framework for regulation and restrictions. Laws can set age limits for the purchase and consumption of addictive substances, such as alcohol, tobacco, and certain drugs, restricting the marketing and advertising of addictive products, especially in ways that appeal to children.

It's essential that legislation keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital landscape to effectively protect children. Collaboration between governments, tech companies, child advocacy organisations, and parents is vital in achieving this goal. While legislation is an important tool in addiction prevention, it should be part of a comprehensive strategy that includes education, parenting, and community involvement. Also, prevention of addiction is a rather difficult process in psychological, legal and organisational terms. All preventive work with children must be carefully thought out and requires a responsible, thoughtful and professional approach from adults, the presence of certain knowledge, and constant expansion.

Only through systematic work and maintaining the unity of all participants in this educational relations will sustainable results be effective.

Thank you.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Madame.

Ms Carmen LEYTE, from Spain, has the floor.

**Ms Carmen LEYTE (Spain, EPP/CD)\*:** Thank you very much indeed, madam President. I would like to congratulate the authors of both reports but I am going to be speaking particularly about mental health. But these are two excellent reports.

Now, young people need people around them to provide them with security and a sense of self esteem. And their mental wellbeing can be harmed by the chronic circumstances in which they live.

Violence in their schools, in their communities, the ready availability of illicit substances, as well as the abuse of internet and a lack of opportunities for self development.

All of these have an adverse effect on their mental well being.

One of the best assets we have in Spain is a universal health care system.

But this is nevertheless a matter of some concern because one in five young people between 10 and 19 years of age is suffering from some kind of a diagnosed mental health condition. And this is extremely worrying, as is the rise in suicide.

People aged between 15 and 19 have as their second highest cause of death suicide.

They are really living through very hard times and resources are simply insufficient. And that is why this Report is so very welcome.

What we need is a mental health plan which gives priority to actions targeted at the very youngest as well as cross-disciplinary co-operation between the health and education sectors as well as families.

Schools, particularly primary schools, are very important in detecting and preventing mental health disorders.

And that is why there needs to be more cross disciplinary co-operation particularly with families.

We also need training courses for doctors as well as more intervention at primary level.

In this regard, it is absolutely crucial...

After all, we are talking about these matters here in the Council of Europe the place in which we defend our citizens' rights.

And that is why I very much congratulate both rapporteurs and fully support Mr Simon MOUTQUIN's conclusions.

Thank you.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Ms LEYTE.

Ms Pelin YILIK, from Türkiye.

**Ms Pelin YILIK (Türkiye, NR):** Thank you, Madam Chair,

Thank you very much for this Report drafted by Ms Diana STOICA and Mr Simon MOUTQUIN.

Drug addiction is a global public health problem. Its consequences affect not only individuals, but also families and even societies as a whole.

Although addiction occurs in people of almost all ages, addiction in children is more dangerous in terms of its consequences.

Protecting children from drug addiction is possible through individual, family, and societal efforts.

Changing technological conditions are affecting people's lives. As a result of technological developments, young people are affected by the use of these technologies differently and more intensely than adults. This effect has many positive and negative impacts on children's lives.

By identifying the effects of digital addiction on children, a perspective on how to be more aware of technology can be provided. The negative effects of increased screen time are supported by numerous studies showing that factors such as physical inactivity, psychosocial problems, sleep disturbances, dietary disruptions, exposure to advertising, and increases in the consumption of unhealthy foods pose a risk for obesity.

To combat obesity, it is also recommended to promote physical activity. Addiction to digital games, which threatens children, can also affect their development.

Digital games pose psychosocial risks for children, such as spending too much time playing games, disrupting lessons, associating with game characters, and overreacting when disturbed while playing.

On the other hand, computer games can also have a negative impact, because children have not yet developed judgments such as distinguishing between good and bad, right and wrong. A game with violent content represents a negative disturbance for a child or adolescent who cannot distinguish between right and wrong.

When children spend their entire lives in front of screens, it also means they have less time for social interactions and peer relationships, which are important for children's social and psychological development.

Thank you.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Ms Naomi CACHIA, from Malta. Isn't she here?

Then I give the floor to Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK, from Ukraine.

Please, sir.

**Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK (Ukraine, EPP/CD):** Thank you, Madam Chairman, thank you colleagues,

Unfortunately, we remember or negotiate our problems, when they get too big.

But sometimes we need to focus on small problems when they are born.

Now, dependence or mental dependence is not only about drugs.

It's also based on social media and online games. It is very deep inside, because now it hurts our children.

Who is responsible for this?

Of course we are responsible for this.

Why has it happened?

Maybe because we are working too much or maybe we are not focusing on proper things.

Maybe we are focusing on our own problems and forget about people who we are responsible for.

But in this time there are people who are building businesses, and there's problems.

They are criminals. Why? Because sometimes it's a classical scheme, they just organise some online games or are just selling drugs, but sometimes it's hidden schemes.

It's a classical scheme of non-fair business; it's making a problem to solve a problem with money.

So, if we look at the other side of this problem, which sometimes helps to prevent mental issues... it's taking special drugs for mental health, so maybe we don't need to produce those drugs if we will focus on those problems in the beginning.

Sometimes those problems will not occur if we change our focus on those people who are close to us. The closest are our children. The children are our future.

If we change the focus to our future, to our children, we can change this problem. And we will not have the mental disabilities in the future.

Thank you.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Mr Peter FRICK, from Liechtenstein.

**Mr Peter FRICK (Liechtenstein, ALDE):** Dear Madam President, dear colleagues,

I would like to begin by thanking the two rapporteurs for their important work.

In my statement, I would like to focus on the Report "Prevention of Addictive Behaviours in Children".

I think we all agree that children must be given a special status in our society because of their particular vulnerability and needs.

The pandemic and the current difficult geopolitical situation have confirmed this need once again.

The increased emergence of addictive behaviour among children as a coping strategy in this uncertain situation is therefore alarming.

I would like to emphasise the potential of schools and sports clubs in this area.

Child-oriented education about addiction and its potential dangers play a central role in preventing addictive behaviour in children.

As places where children from all walks of life come together, schools and sports clubs can serve as safe spaces where healthy coping strategies can be effectively taught.

Nevertheless, we must be aware that the internet brings with it entirely new dangers with regard to addiction in children.

Cross-border regulations in this area that allow for the effective protection of children, without at the same time disproportionately interfering with their privacy, are urgently needed.

I would very much welcome a leading role of the Council of Europe in this area, as suggested in the Report by the Pompidou Group.

Thank you very much.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Ms Olimpia Tamara GIRÓN HERNÁNDEZ, from Mexico.

**Ms Olimpia Tamara GIRÓN HERNÁNDEZ (Mexico)\*:** Thank you very much.

What a pleasure, Madam President. Thank you so much.

Prevention of addictions is a matter of national security. Preventing addictions is in fact one of the three fundamental pillars of the national education agreement, which consists of the adoption of a culture of peace, the fight against drug use, and respect for the rule of law.

For the President of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the recovery of humanist values requires a struggle against the narco-state, a narco-state that he inherited, which he wants to turn into a state of law.

In this framework of transformation, it has been decided to place the urgency of comprehensively guaranteeing the development of a healthy life for children and adolescents. In this context, the Government of Mexico has invested in making the fight against addictions a national security issue in Mexico, focusing on prevention, as the most effective public policy to guarantee the rights of children and adolescents, their right to healthy psycho-social development.

Co-ordinated by a multisectoral cabinet, it has proposed, as an interdisciplinary theme, the drug prevention actions adopted at the New Mexico School, whose objective is to induce scientific knowledge of the damage caused by different drugs, to analyse and rationally deconstruct the myths generated around the use of these drugs, and thereby, to reduce low school performance, the development of violence as a form of interaction between the school community, and above all, to prevent school dropouts.

As part of this policy, the Government of Mexico has created the Benito Juárez Basic Education Scholarship for social assistance with a budget of €15 billion. That is 3.4% of the Federation's budget in order to guarantee the right to education.

The programme entitled "If you take drugs, you hurt yourself" is an inter-institutional strategy, in which the Ministry of Public Education participates and whose objective is to implement actions in the classrooms and a powerful dissemination campaign that contributes to the prevention of drug consumption amongst secondary school students and high-school students. We do this through spaces for reflection and messages of assertive communication. The programme has a guide for teachers, another guide for parents, a virtual space for teachers, parents and students, as well as the support of specialists. If addictions are detected, then the school community will receive support from the health authorities to deal with the case. This is done under the co-ordination of the National Council for the Provision of Services for the Care and Integral Development of Children, called COPSADII, which is made up of 70 institutions dedicated to the care of children and adolescents. The multidisciplinary group has created a follow-up sub-group in order to strengthen schools with early warning signs of severe cases.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

Dear colleagues,

We must now interrupt the hearing of speakers.

Registered speakers who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may submit their typed statements within 4 hours to the Session Office for publication in the minutes. This text must not exceed 400 words and must be transmitted electronically.

I now call on the Committee to reply.

Mr MOUTQUIN, you have the floor for 4 minutes, please.

**Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Rapporteur):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's going to be very complicated to respond to your many interventions in 4 minutes, but first I'd like to warmly thank you for your support for this report and, above all, for your support for its recommendations.

I'm going to start by commenting on the report by my Committee colleague, Ms Diana STOICA, saying perhaps two small things. This is a personal opinion, so don't take it into account in your vote in a few minutes, as Ms STOICA isn't here. In any case I'll pass on the various remarks to her.

On the question of drugs, Ms STOICA's report insists on prevention, prevention, and more prevention. It really is the main tool. I fully agree with you on the security measures that need to be taken against the distribution of drugs among young people. Having said that, I'd like to add on a personal note that Europe, the West, has been fighting against drugs for decades on a purely security basis. I think that if the issue of drugs doesn't become a health issue, we won't succeed whether for the young or the not-so-young.

In this respect, I'd like to pay tribute to the work done in Portugal, I know the President is from Portugal, which has done an enormous amount of work to adopt a different approach to the fight against drugs, and which has worked and is working. Some 112 people died a few years ago, per year, from hard drugs in Portugal, 12 people last year alone. This is proof that there are other approaches that can be combined with the security approach and that need to be addressed.

On the question of video games, I agree with you. Video games and the internet in general are, indeed, a real danger for many young people. Let's ask ourselves some questions. We need to collectively ask ourselves why young people today prefer to dream behind a screen rather than with their friends, their family, or their future? I think it says something about our society if, today, young people, and not just young people, by the way, but older people too, want to spend time behind a screen.

On the subject of my report, first I'd like to respond to my Greek colleague and thank you for raising the issue of poverty. I think I forgot to say that the first victims of mental health disorders are vulnerable people, people living in precarious conditions, single mothers living alone, LGBTQIA+ people, migrants who sometimes don't have access to all our health and mental health services.

To my Ukrainian colleagues, but also to Mr Georgios STAMATIS, from Greece, I would like first of all to reiterate my full support for young people, in particular Ukrainians. You know that an event is going to be organised in Paris on 15 December, which was validated by the Board this morning, an event that will deal with the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, but also children injured as a result of Russian aggression. You have my full support.

Our Greek colleague spoke to us about Nagorno-Karabakh. I would also like to offer my support to the young people who are going to suffer consequences for their mental health, who are being displaced today. Incidentally, my German colleague also mentioned Israeli youth. I can't help but think of them who are suffering from terrorist acts.

We've been to Norway. I can't help thinking of all those young people from a political party who died a few years ago because of the extreme right, too, and the catastrophic consequences for their mental health.

Yes, mental health. Conflicts, geopolitics impact mental health. I think a specific report on this would be good.

I'm sorry if some of you will disagree with me, but I don't want to keep quiet about this. This morning, the Israeli army ordered the evacuation of 1.1 million people; 1.1 million people! António Guterres of the United Nations tells us that it's impossible to evacuate 1.1 million people.

I remember a figure given by the WHO a few years ago. In Gaza, 30% of young children have no desire to live, 30%. I think this should also make us question ourselves. We are the house of human rights. Human rights have no borders. Human rights have no camps. We are the human rights camp. Today, we must be alert and alarmed by the consequences, I think, of these future bombings, which have already taken place.

I'd like to finish by saying two things very quickly. Excuse me for going a little over my allotted time.

The first is that it's important to integrate young people into the whole decision-making process that we, as politicians, are putting in place to restore their confidence in the state.

The last thing I'd like to say to the youth of Europe is don't be ashamed. Don't be ashamed of going through times of suffering. I myself, who took a long time to accept who I was, to accept my sexuality, also went through moments of suffering. Don't be ashamed. There's always a light at the end of the tunnel. Politics and society have to be there to help you, to support you. That's the most important thing. You come out of these moments of suffering, but they're temporary. You have to be able to talk about it. It's also important for us, as politicians, to be able to talk about our emotions from time to time.

I'd like to extend my warmest thanks to all the young people I met for this report, to Anita GHOLAMI from the Secretariat and to the Secretariat in general, who do an excellent job on our reports, and to all of you for your contributions.

Thank you all very much.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mr rapporteur. Thank you very much, Mr MOUTQUIN.

Ms KHOMENKO, Vice-Chairwoman of the Committee, would you also like to respond?

You have the floor.

**Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development):** Thank you Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, I would like to warmly congratulate the two rapporteurs, Mr Simon MOUTQUIN and Ms Diana STOICA on their excellent reports.

As Mr Simon MOUTQUIN accurately points out in his report, young people's mental health and well-being are impacted by a world faced with multiple crises and much uncertainty: a pandemic, wars and natural disasters, displacement, cost of living and the triple planetary crisis, feelings of uncertainty about what is to come.

The more risk factors young people are exposed to, the greater potential impact on their mental health. We know that mental health problems and addictive behaviours in children and young adults are closely linked. The prevention of addictive behaviours in children must be an urgent priority in our member states, as it can create disastrous effects on their mental and physical health and on their development.

Unfortunately, we know that young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds with disabilities, LGBTQI+ minorities, refugees, and undocumented migrants undoubtedly suffer the most. We should also put a specific focus on children abducted by the Russian Federation and injured during the aggressor's attacks.

Both reports provide good policy recommendations and best practice examples to member states, which I hope they will take into account.

The prevention of mental health problems and addictive behaviour must come as early as possible, be holistic, non-stigmatising, and treat the person as a whole. This includes both mental and physical symptoms as well as addressing socio-economic and environmental factors that impact the mental health and well-being of children and young adults.

Madam President,

Lastly, I would like to highlight the recommendation to the Committee of Ministers.

It is of utmost importance that we remind ourselves of the firm position of the Assembly, our Commissioner on Human Rights, relevant United Nations agencies, mechanisms and independent experts, and persons with lived experience against the use of coercion in mental health.

Mental health care must be provided on a voluntary basis and must always respect the autonomy of the person receiving care.

Any decisions of the Committee of Ministers should reflect this human rights imperative and be taken in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as interpreted by the CRPD Committee.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

**Ms Lucie MONCION (Canada):** *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

**Ms Naomi CACHIA (Malta, SOC):** *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

As Council of Europe Member States we have an unyielding responsibility towards our younger generations. We must not only work tirelessly to make the world better, kinder and more livable, but we must also ensure that our children and young adults have all the necessary tools at their disposal to navigate their way through whatever life throws at them. Not only the uncertainties and anxieties that naturally are a universal experience of our teenage years, but other factors such as one's economic status, sexual identity, orientation, and expression, and disability.

We already are living in a society that is isolating by default. Technology can keep us connected but it is also inherently isolating.

The pandemic was then, the icing on the cake.

It is up to us now to realise that we can no longer afford to not have mental health as our absolute priority. Our young adults and kids have already lost so much precious time from the most formative years of their life. This places a much heavier burden on us than ever before.

Firstly, we must not only ensure that our mental health services are accessible, efficient, and well-resourced, but we must also insist on the integration of mental health services into our community based health services. This is absolutely crucial in order to reduce the stigma that unfortunately still prevails.

We must keep promoting mental health as inalienable from our physical health; prevention is always better than cure and the more we normalise the use of counselling and therapy, the better our societies will be.

But this is not enough. We, as policymakers, must be the architects of a world that is kinder and more just to our younger generations. I am extremely pleased to see the resolution on mental health make reference to the climate crisis. Climate change is a major source of extreme uncertainty and our extremely slow and inefficient response to it is not only infuriating, it is a cause of fear and anxiety to our younger ones who care deeply about the world that they are inheriting, and the one we're leaving behind.

Finally, we must work tirelessly to ensure that the world is full of opportunities for them to reach their full potential. Equitable access to education is an important precursor to the end goal we are discussing here.

Thank you.

**Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC):** *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

It has certainly been three years since we began to suffer the first after-effects on the mental health of our society due to the harsh confinement and devastating effects that the pandemic had on our lives.

The fear, the loss of loved ones in our family and friendships; the loneliness that many young people had to face in such an important stage of socialization in their lives; the need to resort to social networks as a vehicle to relate to other people and young people; the abuse of exposure to video games, social networks, Internet; the development of certain habits at such an important moment of personality development, are some of the reasons why today, and to date, we find an increasingly significant increase of minors with emotional imbalance problems, and mental health problems.

Parents, teachers and school management teams feel helpless, not knowing how to act in the face of problems that require enormous sensitivity and training in order to be able to guide them adequately.

In different countries, educational centers are increasing their staffs with specialized psychologists to detect and accompany young people and teachers also from the educational system.

But this is not enough. I consider it essential to introduce Emotional Education as a compulsory subject in the educational systems, to help our children and young people to manage their own emotions and understand what happens to them. It is a fundamental tool to prevent emotional and mental problems in adolescence.

It is also necessary to make the media aware of the preventive and formative work on the news they broadcast and not in a sensationalist and irresponsible way.

It is also necessary to make available through all media: youth channels, social networks, government institutions of all kinds, information, helplines, help points that are effective and within the reach of our youth.

And we have to promote greater sensitivity to this type of problem in all areas, so that young people do not look the other way when they detect that a friend or friend is being abused.

Much remains to be done, to make our society aware that this is a health problem that has to be approached with the seriousness that other diseases are approached.

We must eradicate the taboo that exists in relation to mental health.

This is already a social problem in which we must all get involved.

**Ms Iryna KONSTANKEVYCH (Ukraine, EC/DA):** *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Colleagues, Mr. President,

It's been almost 600 days as Ukrainians have been living with a constant feeling of fear. Air raids, explosions and shelling have become the reality in the 21st century for a European country. The war of Russia in Ukraine has changed the whole generation of our children for 8 years. Stress, injuries, loss of loved ones have already affected the psyche of children and will have an accumulative and prolonged effect the extent of which cannot be anticipated by scientists or doctors.

Mental health of how many children are we talking about? 1.8 million children who live in different countries as refugees who lost their homes, plus 19 thousand children who were forcibly deported to the territory of the aggressor country, plus millions of children in Ukraine who live with everyday air raid alerts and hiding in shelters. These numbers are impressive.

The need for psychological support for children and young adults is growing with every passing day. Post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety disorders are increasingly common among young people. 75% of parents say that their children show certain symptoms of mental trauma.

An important marker of psychological stability of children in wartime is protection of education. All facilities where children are educated, namely, children development centers, kindergartens, schools, colleges, universities must be safe. Unfortunately, 40% of Ukrainian school children studied online during the pandemic and 2 academic years in wartime because of lack of shelters. For almost 3 years, Ukrainian children have not had proper studying.

The mental health of children and young adults in wartime in Ukraine is our shared responsibility. A lot has already been done. In particular, mental health state program "How Are You" has been initiated. Psychologists work in schools. Family physicians received the opportunity for additional psychological training. The way to ensure the mental well-being of children and young adults requires combined efforts of the government, public organizations, teachers, parents and the whole society.

We call on our colleagues to look more widely at the problem of mental health of children and adolescents, and develop a separate broader program of measures which are meant to deal with traumatic psychological and mental effects of the war on mental health of children, in particular Ukrainian children who are traumatized by the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine.

Your attention is appreciated.

## **Vote: Preventing addictive behaviours in children / Mental health and well-being of children and young adults**

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Madame.

The general discussion is closed.

We will now examine the draft resolutions and recommendations, starting with the first report: "Preventing addictive behavior in children" (Doc. 15830).

On this first report, the Social, Health and Sustainable Development Committee has submitted a draft resolution and a draft recommendation, to which no amendments have been tabled.

In the absence of any amendments, we shall proceed directly to the vote on the draft resolution, and then on the draft recommendation.

We will first vote on the draft resolution contained in Doc. 15830. A simple majority is required.

*The draft resolution contained in Doc. 15830 is adopted unanimously.*

Congratulations on your vote.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Doc. 15830.

I remind you that the required majority is two-thirds of the votes cast.

*The draft recommendation contained in Doc. 15830 is adopted unanimously.*

Congratulations on your vote.

We now move on to the second report on "Mental health and well-being of children and young adults" (Doc. 15829).

On this second report, the Social, Health and Sustainable Development Committee has submitted a draft resolution and a draft recommendation, to which no amendments have been tabled.

In the absence of any amendments, we shall proceed directly to the vote on the draft resolution, and then on the draft recommendation.

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Doc. 15829. A simple majority is required.

*The draft resolution contained in Doc. 15829 is adopted unanimously.*

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Doc. 15829.

I remind you that the majority required is two-thirds of the votes cast.

*The draft recommendation contained in Doc. 15829 is adopted unanimously.*

Many thanks and congratulations.

The next item is the presentation and discussion of the report by Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON, on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, on "The emerging humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and Afghan refugees" (Doc. 15831).

I would remind you that we are due to finish examining this text, including the vote, at around 12:55p.m. We will therefore have to interrupt the list of speakers at around 12:45 p.m., so that we can hear the Committee's reply and proceed with the necessary votes.

Mister Rapporteur, you have 7 minutes to present your report and 3 minutes to reply to speakers at the end of the general discussion.

Mister Rapporteur, you have the floor.

## **Debate: The humanitarian crisis emerging for Afghanistan and Afghan refugees**

**Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON (Iceland, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Madam President,

In September 2021, the Parliamentary Assembly called on member states to help neighbouring countries and in a resolution adopted support Afghans fleeing Afghanistan.

Two years later, we are seeing a human rights and humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale: severe drought, conflict, Taliban takeover, attacks on women and girls, and earthquakes. Despite all this, Afghanistan has turned into a forgotten crisis. European solidarity has clearly been poor and the number of outcomes already settled in the EU is very low.

In March 2023, 6 million people were on the brink of famine in Afghanistan. The freezing of assets in the Central Bank and the political isolation of the country are making the situation worse.

The 2004 constitution has been suspended, judges have been removed from office, and religious and ethnic minorities are facing persecution. The systematic banning of women and girls from public life is such that some experts consider this as a war on women.

In the meantime, *refoulements* keep being reported across Europe. This is happening despite this Assembly denouncing them for many years, the last time, one year ago, and voting in favour of preventing and sanctioning such practices.

This is happening even though UNHCR has advised against return to Afghanistan as well as Iran and Pakistan since August 2021. Deportations to Afghanistan are not acceptable, particularly when it comes to women and girls. I believe that forced removals should be stopped and that voluntary returns should be monitored in co-ordination with UNHCR.

I had the opportunity to visit Türkiye when preparing this report, which I am grateful for. I also expressed my concerns regarding returns conducted to Kabul, as well as lack of registration of Afghans in Türkiye.

Dear colleagues, the current humanitarian and human rights crisis in Afghanistan is affecting over three million Afghans internally displaced by conflict, 1 million IDPs who have returned to their place of origin, and almost 10 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran.

The number of Afghans in Europe differs sharply with the exception of Türkiye, which is hosting around 600 000 Afghans. In 2022, the number of Afghans resettled in the EU decreased by 72%. This is very uneven distribution between Asia and Europe and between European states.

We must acknowledge that the protracted crisis of Afghan refugees will not stop overnight. Pakistan and Iran have sheltered more than 95% of Afghan refugees for over three generations and are reaching the limit of what they can provide. The tiredness of the reception is clear and has a negative impact on the refugees. A few days ago Pakistan announced that they would return Afghan nationals.

What should we do, dear colleagues? We cannot expect frontline countries like Türkiye to provide support and shelter to the vast majority of Afghan refugees present in Europe.

This crisis is not going to stop tomorrow. Europe must do more.

Refugees from Afghanistan have the second highest resettlement needs in the world. Failing on solidarity will result in restricted access to protection for those in need and increasing bitterness against the presence of refugees, which is at odds with the values and norms of the Council of Europe.

The draft resolution provides concrete ways and recommendations to raise this solidarity, namely through increased resettlement, especially for women and girls. The draft resolution calls for increased resettlement quotas. Let us not forget that the vast number of people dying on the road to Europe or stranded in hotspots are Afghans.

The draft resolution makes some concrete suggestions to ease and fasten resettlement and visa processing.

Dear colleagues, systematic prosecution against Afghan woman is a shame. We must do our utmost to protect women and girls away from what is a war on women. I do support the commitment by the Committee of Ministers to fund specific assistance and humanitarian settlement programs for women and girls who are victims of risk of violence against women or trafficking in human beings.

Another important point of my report is the situation of Afghan children. Many unaccompanied children in Europe are Afghan. Registering Afghan unaccompanied children as international protection seekers is very important.

The report aims to provide concrete recommendation in support to Afghans in need of protection in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries.

Most of the Western embassies are closed in Kabul. Accessing protection for Afghans usually involves travelling to Pakistan and Iran. However, it is difficult to leave Afghanistan and the journey is extremely dangerous for women and children.

That's why I'm in favour of resuming member states consular services in Kabul in co-ordination with the UNHCR and with the EU Asylum Agency. Procedures may explore across member states how to tackle this issue.

This report argues in favour of engaging with all political stakeholders in Afghanistan, included the *de facto* authorities.

I am strongly convinced that international isolation will only hurt the people of Afghanistan, and I'm not the only one. Two weeks ago the UN stated that the international community must continue to engage with Taliban leaders despite deep disagreement with their approach to women rights.

Let's give diplomacy a chance. Engaging in does not mean recognising.

The European Parliament adopted last week a resolution in this very room on the human rights situation in Afghanistan. It is highly symbolic that two weeks in a row, in the same building, two parliamentary assemblies in Europe have taken a position on the issue. It demonstrates the importance of this issue.

We must be serious in supporting the Afghan people. Co-ordination across member states is essential. I'm sorry to say that political leadership in Afghanistan is lacking.

I very much hope that the Assembly will support this report and its draft resolution.

I'm calling on you all today to communicate this message in your national parliaments and across parliaments.

Thank you.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON, for this explanation.

Now in this debate I call Mr Mehmet AKALIN for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

You have 3 minutes.

**Mr Mehmet AKALIN (Türkiye, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

I would first like to start by expressing the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe's condolences for the victims of the earthquakes that hit Afghanistan this week. This disaster has created an even more urgent need for help and assistance.

I would like to thank the rapporteur for the extensive work undertaken in the making of this report, which brings the tremendously concerning humanitarian situation in Afghanistan to our attention. It presents the challenges faced by the Afghan refugees who have been forced to flee their country and recommend solutions for the reception of these people across Europe.

The rapporteur is right to underline the dire situation of women and girls whose rights have been drastically limited by the *de facto* authorities. They face forced marriages, segregation, physical and sexual violence.

Since January 2021 more than 500 000 people have fled Afghanistan with Iran and Pakistan hosting more than 95% of these refugees, with the remaining fleeing to other parts of the globe, including Europe and all our member states.

Türkiye is hosting 600 000 Afghan refugees, with 140 000 registered and nearly four million Syrians.

There is clearly no doubt that the situation requires urgent international attention and that no country alone can meet the current flow of refugees from Afghanistan.

The *de facto* authorities have had a major impact on the suffering and oppression of the Afghan people.

Ethnic and minority groups such as the Hazaras, Tajiks, Christians, and other underrepresented groups are being exposed to targeted violence and discrimination.

We call for the reopening of an international support system for the victims and the removal of any restrictions and obstacles in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring the allowance of proper access for the organisations providing this assistance. We urge member states to co-ordinate their humanitarian support with UN agencies and NGOs.

Engagement with the *de facto* authorities should be on the condition that Afghanistan will not serve as a base for terrorism and will respect human rights.

Migration is a complex matter and most probably will intensify in the future.

There are no simple solutions. I hope that this discussion will contribute to the setting of clear, just and human-rights-oriented policies.

By working together, a concerted migration policy based on a fair, shared responsibility of all member states can be developed.

Thank you.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

Now I call Ms Nicole HÖCHST for the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

**Ms Nicole HÖCHST (Germany, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group):** Dear Mr President,

Dear colleagues,

The present Report is honorable and expresses our irreplaceable will to work tirelessly as the Human Rights Council to ensure that human rights are universal and applied everywhere on earth. Unfortunately, several important aspects are not mentioned in this Report.

From the protracted Afghanistan mission of the last decades we have to draw the painful realization that it is not possible to establish democracy and human rights in places it is absolutely not wanted, where the majority of the population can do nothing with it and openly despises our way of life and consider our values as weakness. The, from our point of view, stone-age patriarchal Afghan society itself must want men and women to have equal rights; must understand that it is necessary to protect other religions and minorities, that education is the sharpest sword, to name just a few points. They must understand and want the rule of law.

All this the West wanted to bring - with force of arms, with NGOs, with lots of money. That approach has been a total failure with bloody consequences. Of course, our mission is to find solutions to the difficult challenges Afghanistan poses to the global community. Migration and refugees are only a small part of the whole equation. We need to understand that welcoming millions of young men from Afghanistan into Europe, who are socialized in a paleo-patriarchy and deeply despise our values and our way of life, is not a solution. To use the words of Peter Scholl-Latour; if you take on half of Calcutta, you won't be saving Calcutta, you will yourself become Calcutta.

As a mother of four children who has no interest in Europe becoming an enclave of Calcutta, Palestine, or Afghanistan and so on and the conflicts imported with them, I say, stop. Stop the hubris. Let us not delude ourselves. We in Europe can't actually just absorb these conflicts into our Western societies. On the contrary, we must do everything we can to preserve human rights, democracy and the rule of law for our descendants here in Europe and successfully defend them against the contempt, disdain and disparagement of immigrant cultures.

Europe's self-preservation is also our duty, ladies and gentlemen, we are not helping anyone if we transfer the war against women and our society and values to Europe.

Thank you very much.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

Now I call Ms Nataša SUKIČ from the Group of the Unified European Left.

**Ms Nataša SUKIČ (Slovenia, UEL, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you, Chair.

There are now more than four million Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

More than 600 000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan since the return of the Taliban to Kabul.

Many rightly fear retaliation from the Taliban regime on their return home.

What makes this week's news and new circumstances which deepen the Afghan refugee crisis all the more frightening is that on Tuesday, Pakistan's interim government decided to deport 1.7 million Afghans who do not have regular documents within 28 days. In a given situation it is, of course, impossible for the refugees to obtain those documents in a home country.

Pakistani interim authorities are building their extremely hostile election campaign with the support of the media. Officially, Islamabad labels Afghans as criminals, mafia, drug traffickers, terrorists, job-stealers, murderers, and Islamic extremists.

The situation in Afghanistan has led to one of the largest protracted refugee situations for decades. For the third year in a row, Afghans constitute the second largest displaced population in the world. We face an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. We are facing widespread human rights violations: the war on women, girls have been banned from attending universities; serious restrictions have been imposed in secondary schools; and a massive persecution of free-thinking people continues.

The consequences of the combination of incompetent Taliban rule and international sanctions are devastating. The consequences of climate change have added their own, first with floods, then with drought. The country is ranking fifth among the countries most at risk due to climate change worldwide. In addition, Afghanistan has recently been hit by two devastating earthquakes.

Afghanistan is experiencing the worst humanitarian disaster in the world. Eighteen million Afghans, almost half of the Afghan population, are currently facing "acute famine", according to the UN. Thirty million people depend on humanitarian aid, but the UN relief fund for Afghanistan is almost empty: only \$800 million has been raised, less than a quarter of expected funding.

Europe has to take responsibility for Afghan refugees and must not turn into a fortress. All deportations of Afghan citizens have to be stopped. Procedures for granting international protection status to the Afghan people must strictly take into account the fact that Afghanistan is not a safe country.

In view of the alarming and catastrophic situation, the adoption of the resolution we are considering today is more than urgent. The proposed resolution offers many concrete responses to tackling the issue of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. It should, therefore, be given our full support.

Though we must not forget, dear colleagues, that the only real and long-term solution to stopping refugee flows is to tackle the crisis hotspots from which people are fleeing war and poverty.

Thank you very much.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKES (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

Now, I call Ms Derya TÜRK-NACHBAUR for the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

**Ms Derya TÜRK-NACHBAUR (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group):** Yes, thank you, Mister President, colleagues,

As this Report clearly shows, since the Taliban came to power, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated dramatically, especially for women and girls, who are now largely excluded from public life.

Three days ago was International Day of the Girl. While many buildings around the world were illuminated in pink on that day, the world for girls in Afghanistan is and remains in the dark.

The lack of prospects in this battered country has reached unimaginable proportions.

The numbers speak for themselves. Around 30 million people - that's more than half of the Afghan population - are dependent on humanitarian aid.

Among them, 4.7 million people suffer from malnutrition, including almost 4 million children.

130,000 of them are at risk of starvation.

The United Nations World Food Programme - as we have heard - warns of a famine in Afghanistan.

The approaching harsh winter in Afghanistan makes the situation particularly critical.

Now that the Taliban have taken power again, international aid to Afghanistan has been cut back significantly.

For many desperate families, the way out of the spiral of hunger is to sell their children - yes, you heard it right; to sell their daughters. The dowries that they can get for their daughters aged 10, 11 or 12 feeds the families for a little while. The number of child brides and forced marriages, we have also heard; has increased dramatically. It's all just a terrible tragedy.

Behind these figures are not just abstract numbers, but the fate of innocent people; of children who should have their future ahead of them - but which they have been deprived of.

And as if the catastrophic living conditions were not bad enough, the northwest of the country has been hit by severe earthquakes; 2 500 people have died under the rubble.

The local hospitals are so busy with the several thousands injured that they can no longer provide their assistance. There is a shortage of medicines, beds and equipment - in short, humanitarian aid is urgently needed.

Afghanistan cannot expect any help from its immediate neighbourhood.

And in such fragile contexts, extremists find it easy to spread. The IS is taking advantage of the absence of international forces and is in the process of extending its influence into some provinces.

Stabilising the region should be a major concern for all of us.

And that requires a certain presence in Afghanistan, from substantial engagement in the context of non-governmental basic services to consular services on the ground - precisely to ensure effective support for aid organisations in their work on the ground.

Even if the current situation presents us with major challenges, the greatest contribution to the protection of human rights, and especially women's and girls' rights, can only be made on the ground.

Thank you.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKES (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

The last speaker for the political groups is Ms Maria SYRENGELA from European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

**Ms Maria SYRENGELA (Greece, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much, Mister President,

Of course, I would like to say thanks to Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON for this excellent Report.

It is for sure that the 2021 events in Afghanistan have been sealed into our collective consciousness. Families leaving their homes, and numerous refugees seeking safe land. Women and girls losing some of their fundamental human rights. For sure, it is, as the rapporteur said, a war against the women and girls in this country.

The Council of Europe has a long-lasting commitment to safeguarding human rights, democracy and the rule of law. At this moment, our duty is clear, we cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening in Afghanistan.

In 2021, when the crisis began, our reaction in my country was immediate. Many ministries, along with civil society organisations and the US authorities, managed to bring safely to Greece more than 150 women, all in high-level positions with their families, such as members of the parliament of Afghanistan, judges, and activists. All of them were on the death list of the Taliban regime. We managed to orchestrate a silent, complex and risky mission to bring these women as refugees to Greece. We also secured them shelter, medical care and the ability to move to other countries. And some of them did. Of course, following all the legitimate procedures.

Unfortunately, two years later, the situation keeps worsening. It proves that we need co-ordinated efforts with international partners, with neighbouring countries and humanitarian organisations. Only this way, we can truly help those in need.

Moreover, we must also promote stability and security in Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan have dreams, talents, a great potential to make their country as it was in the past, and especially as we have already said, women and girls in Afghanistan. We need to provide them with the opportunity to rebuild their country, rebuild their lives and contribute to the global community as well.

Dear colleagues, the Council of Europe is guided by the principles of justice, human rights and solidarity. The Afghan crisis along with Ukraine and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis are a test of our humanity. We cannot fail it.

Let us act bravely to help those suffering. Together, we have the capacity to restore hope to build a better world leaving no one behind.

Thank you.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKES (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

The final speaker is Ms Petra BAYR.

**Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC):** Thank you very much, Mr President,

For more than two years, when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, women have been almost completely banished and disappeared from the public sphere.

They are excluded from the labour market, they have no right to education, and in some areas of Afghanistan the education of girls over the age of ten is completely forbidden.

This also leads to the fact that girls hardly have any perspectives, that the existence of girls and women has become extremely difficult, that the doubts of the meaningfulness of existence are very great among them. We also see that there are more and more suicides among women and young girls because they no longer know how to live their lives.

The Taliban persecute women and girls not only severely, but also systematically, simply because of their gender - simply because they are women and girls, and for no other reason.

This gender-based persecution has now reached a level that is classified as a crime against humanity by the the International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International.

From this classification, from this political categorisation, we should also draw our political consequences. Some countries have already done that, for example Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, which now consider women from Afghanistan as refugees in principle, because they are persecuted as a social group as such, and therefore grant them easier access to asylum procedures, to humanitarian protection as refugees.

I think that should be something that we should all consider. Also, how to we address the issue of women and girls who are fleeing Afghanistan; how can we protect them and save their lives?

I am in the process of drafting a report for the Parliamentary Assembly on the issue of the situation of women's rights defenders.

Apart from looking at the situation of women's rights defenders in Europe, I would also like to put a very special focus on the situation of women's rights activists in Afghanistan for instance, those who had to flee that country to one of the member states of the Council of Europe.

What is their situation and how do we deal with them here, how do we receive them, how do we support them.

This is also important for the women and girls who are left behind and who have a really difficult life. We should be here to support them.

Thank you very much.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKES (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you.

I must now interrupt the list of speakers. The speeches of members on the speakers list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may be given to the Table Office for publication in the Official Report. I remind colleagues that typewritten texts can be submitted, electronically if possible, no later than four hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

Now I call Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON to reply.

You have 3 mintutes, sir.

**Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON (Iceland, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Thank you, Mister President.

Afghans have suffered more than 40 years of conflict, natural disasters, chronic poverty, food insecurity, and most recently the Taliban takeover, which has caused even more human suffering, displacement, and human rights violations against women and girls.

I call on the Assembly, I call on all member states not to forget about the Afghan refugees. I hope that the recommendation demonstrated in this report will help member states, help Afghans in need. I strongly believe that the recommendation will help Afghan refugees and will help Afghan women and children in Afghanistan.

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan should be of concern to all Council of Europe member states. Solidarity is needed in responding to the Afghan crisis.

In a new era of conflict and violence in the world, we must not forget the people of Afghanistan, and we must speak up for them. We must use the tools of the Council of Europe: the European Development Bank and the European Qualification Passport for Refugees programs.

In this report, you will find the recommendation on how member states should protect Afghans in Europe.

We need to increase resettlement quotas, stop forced removals, monitor voluntary return, establish a pan-European response, and ease Visa processing.

The report also has a road map on Afghanistan outside of Europe for member states. The roadmap includes resuming consular services in Kabul, supporting local civil society and monitoring human rights, stopping international isolation of Afghanistan, giving diplomacy a chance, engaging with the *de facto* authorities and Afghanistan, bringing pressure to influence policy change, especially towards the full respect of the rights of woman and girls, increased funding, and resuming development assistance.

Mister President, I want to thank the Secretariat for the excellent work on this important issue and their openness to work on my ideas.

Thank you all for expressing your views here today. Thank you for being concerned about the humanitarian crisis and Afghanistan.

Thank you all for being concerned about Afghan refugees.

Thank you.

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKES (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** [Light applause]

Thank you.

Does the chairperson of the committee Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS wish to speak?

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons):** Yes, Mister President, thank you very much.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank my esteemed colleague and my good friend Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON and, of course, the Secretariat for an excellent job as always.

This honourable Assembly adopted the resolution on Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban taking power by force in August 2021. Since then, the human rights situation has gone, as expected, from bad to worse, not least for women and girls, and so has the humanitarian situation.

The situation in Afghanistan should, of course, be of great concern to all of us as members of the international community and as Europeans who have seen Afghan refugees forced into exile for more than 40 years, including in our respective countries.

No later than last week, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations adopted yet another resolution on the human rights situation in Afghanistan. A few days before, as was already mentioned, two major earthquakes hit the country, adding to an already desperate humanitarian crisis.

Dear colleagues,

Speaking of a bleak picture is an understatement here.

We may wonder, dear colleagues, what our Assembly may do beyond acknowledging such a tragic situation and expressing our solidarity with the people of Afghanistan. That's exactly what this committee, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, has been working on.

I commend Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON's work to explore concrete avenues for the Council of Europe and for its member states in and outside of Europe, not only to address the protection needs of Afghan refugees, but also to envisage a way to engage beyond humanitarian action, to the extent that is possible.

Dear colleagues,

Afghan refugees are the second refugee population in need of resettlement in the world. This has been the third largest refugee population for years.

We all in Europe know that the situation of Afghan refugees is not new, including in Europe. The situation in Afghanistan has worsened to an extent which, sadly, means that the grounds for forced displacement will certainly not cease overnight, nor will the responsibility for host countries, on the road to exile, to provide adequate and dignified reception and protection for this population, including in Europe. This may be considered as a dire force.

We have discussed at length in the Committee to hear from the concrete experience of Afghans in exile, as well as from those among civil society, refugee rights, defence, UN agencies and national authorities who know the situation and the needs. We have asked ourselves how members of the Parliamentary Assembly may contribute useful input into this immensely complex and long-lasting situation in exile.

Dear colleagues,

Refugees from Afghanistan are not of less importance than refugees from Ukraine or Nagorno-Karabakh. They all deserve equal attention and help from this Assembly.

We cannot but congratulate Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON for his efforts to bring as many concrete elements as possible for a form of European engagement inside and outside Europe.

I call on all you, dear colleagues, to support the resolution.

Thank you Mister President.

[Light applause]

**Mr Francesco SORBARA (Canada):** *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Canada is home to over 100,000 Afghan Canadians, many of which live in my riding of Vaughan – Woodbridge; they make a great contribution to our country.

The images of chaos and despair at Kabul's airport in August 2021 are seared in the mind of the international community. Compelled to act, Canada created new refugee programs to provide accelerated assistance, and Parliament set up a special committee on Afghanistan that heard from many witnesses forecasting the humanitarian crisis.

Although Canada's military had left Afghanistan almost ten years earlier, the bonds forged on the battlefields of Kandahar led Afghans to reach out to former Canadian soldiers for help.

The Veteran Transition Network assisted those targeted by the Taliban by providing shelter and options to leave for Pakistan. In the absence of biometrics, individuals were vetted with biographical data before embarking on this perilous journey.

The Government of Canada established direct immigration programs for individuals seeking protection that had an enduring relationship with Canada.

The humanitarian program used alternate referral agencies such as Front Line Defenders to recommend human rights advocates for resettlement.

Canada also recognized that Afghan families include those who are dependent due to financial or emotional needs, not limiting applications to the immediate, nuclear family. Today, Canada is on track to welcome 40,000 Afghans by the year's end.

And yet Afghanistan was facing a humanitarian crisis even before the return of the Taliban: the vulnerabilities arose from years of poverty, conflict, and displacement, and most recently challenges brought on by severe drought and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Canada historically had programs and non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance and development aid in Afghanistan, with the rise of the Taliban leadership, Canada's legislative framework had to be changed to ensure that terrorist financing provisions did not prevent these groups from operating.

So far this year, Canada has donated US\$27.9 million dollars for Afghanistan, with the lion's share going to the World Food Programme to deal with food security. Canada also funded nutrition through the United Nations Children's Fund.

The Government of Canada, like the rest of the international community, is appalled by the Taliban's treatment of women and girls, attacking their human rights, banning them from the public sphere and education. Their inability to travel alone or work with United Nations agencies mean many women's needs are left unmet.

I recognize the situation in Afghanistan is complex and requires more work.

## **Vote: The humanitarian crisis emerging for Afghanistan and Afghan refugees**

**Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ (Türkiye, NR, President of the Assembly):** Thank you Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS.

Now the debate is closed.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft Resolution contained in Document 15831.

A simple majority is required.

The vote is now open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

*The draft Resolution in Document 15831 is adopted.*

## **Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee (continued)**

**Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, dear Vice-President Mister Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ, for presiding.

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in Document Commissions (2023) 07 and Addendum 3.

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

I do not see any objections.

The next item on today's agenda is the continuation of the debate on the Progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee (Doc. 15834, Addendum 3).

At its meeting this morning the Bureau has proposed several references to Committees. They are set out in Document 15834, Addendum 3.

These references must be submitted for ratification by the Assembly in accordance with Rule 26.3.

Are there any objections to these references? I do not see any, so they are approved.

I now propose that the other decisions in the Progress Report (Doc. 15834 Addendum 3) be ratified. Are there any objections?

I do not see any. The progress report is approved.

We have now, dear colleagues, come to the end of our business. Our business was a long, hectic and challenging week, both in the hemicycle and in our Commissions. I would sincerely like to thank all the members of the Assembly, particularly the rapporteurs for their hard work during this part session. I refer to Mr Yilmaz ALPASLAN, Ms Edite ESTRELA, Mr John HOWELL, Mr Darko KAEVSKI, Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Ms Olena KHOMENKO, Ms Ingjerd SCHOU, and Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ.

I would also like to thank the staff and the interpreters, both permanent and temporary, who have worked so hard to make this part session a success.

The first part-session of the 2024 Session will be held from 22 to 26 January 2024.

Allow me to make one last remark. This morning, the Bureau decided that the next progress report of the Assembly and the Standing Committee will be delivered by the outgoing president. I was nominated for that job because it is an honourful job, but it also means that it is now official, that I will be the outgoing president from January. Still, I warn you colleagues, there are still four months to go of my presidency, and again, there will never be a dull moment. I warn you and I warn the staff that in four months we will still have a full-fledged, full agenda to deal with all the issues that are still before us.

We will have the Standing Committee, we will have the meeting of the Bureau, we will have a lot of other visits on behalf of the presidency. Nevertheless, under normal circumstances, and you never know in these challenging, adventurous, difficult, and dangerous times, this will be the last time that I have the immense honour to sit on this chair to chair your Assembly. I would like to thank you for giving me the honour to do that from this place. I think, overall, we were successful.

I declare the fourth part-session of the 2023 Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe closed.

I would like to remind members to return their voting cards to the dedicated box at the entrance to the Chamber before leaving the Palais.

The sitting is closed.