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Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting num 5

Debate under urgent procedure: Situation of the children of Ukraine

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues,

Good morning.

The sitting is open.

The first item on the agenda is the urgent debate on the Report titled "Situation of the children of Ukraine" (Document 15901) presented by Ms Olena KHOMENKO on behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, with an opinion (Document 15902) presented by Ms Sandra ZAMPA on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons Committee.

After the rapporteurs, there will be a statement from Ms Olena Volodymyrivna ZELENSKA, First Lady of Ukraine, who will be joining us online. In order to finish by 11:30 a.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 11:15 a.m. to allow time for the reply and vote on the draft resolution.

I now call Ms Olena KHOMENKO, rapporteur for the Committee. Dear, Olena, you have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes for your reply at the end of the debate.

You have the floor.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Fellow colleagues,

As we gather today, I'm compelled to address a matter that lies heavy on our hearts. The dire situation of the children of Ukraine amidst the brutal war of aggression.

Our discussion revolves around a resolution aimed at safeguarding these young vulnerable lives who have witnessed unspeakable horrors.

No child in Ukraine has been spared by this war. Many have lost their parents and relatives, suffered injuries and endured traumas that no child should ever experience.

Displacement, both internal and external, has disrupted their lives, severing the bonds of friendship and community.

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.

The resolution we are discussing today is a critical step in responding to the numerous challenges these children face.

Last April, the Assembly adopted a resolution recognising the deportation of Ukrainian children as a genocidal act by Russian authorities. It was a clear condemnation of these atrocities and a call for the safe return of these children.

Since then, we have seen meaningful progress. The 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik echoed our commitment to justice for these children. Our current resolution would not rest on this issue. The perpetrators of crimes against Ukrainian children should face charges and consequences.

The international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children, formed last December, further bolsters our efforts.

We also established an ad hoc committee of the Bureau in December 2023, to discuss the situation of Ukrainian children, particularly addressing the issue of deported and forcefully transferred children. The discussions were extremely informative and conclusive, and they formed the basis for many points we suggest in the resolution and recommendation.

I deem this forum will remain important to push forward the mission of returning the children and their homes.

However, challenges abound in the process of returning these children. The passage of time, bureaucratic hurdles, and the absence of a unified legal mechanism, all pose significant barriers. We must address these issues with urgency and precision.

The plight of orphans and children without adequate legal representation is particularly distressing. They represent a unique challenge, as family reunification is not an option. Here, the principle of the child's best interest must be our guiding light, ensuring their right to identity and physical, emotional, and legal safety.

We have seen promising strides in locating and documenting these children, but much remains unknown. The task of understanding each child's story behind the statistics is daunting, yet essential. It enables us to create individualised plans for their return, respecting their best interest.

The principle of the child's best interest is multifaceted. It is not just about physical return, but ensuring the holistic well-being of each child. It's about creating a future where these children can thrive, not just survive.

In this context, it has become crucial for us to deliver and endure this best interest.

The Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine, encompassing the years 2023 to 2026, stands as a pivotal framework within which various support measures can be implemented.

Central to this initiative is the imperative to address the multifaceted needs of Ukrainian children who have been profoundly affected by the war. One of the most pressing issues is the need for housing reconstruction.

Many Ukrainian children, including orphans and those in foster care, have lost their homes due to the conflict. Rebuilding these homes is not just about providing shelter, it's about restoring a sense of security and normality.

This calls for substantial contributions and coordinated efforts, potentially facilitated through the Council of Europe Development Bank, to ensure that these children have a safe place to call home.

Moreover, the physical and psychological rehabilitation of the children, who are most affected by the war, is critical. Many countries across Europe can play a significant role by welcoming these children and providing them with the necessary medical and psychological care. This includes specialised rehabilitation programmes that cater to the unique needs, stemming from the trauma of war.

The mental health of these children is another area that requires immediate reaction and attention. The war has left indelible marks on young minds, necessitating a rapid response in terms of mental health support. This includes training child psychiatrists, implementing modern therapeutic techniques, and ensuring that Ukrainian children, whether in Ukraine or abroad, have access to the necessary mental health services.

Healthcare collaboration forms another vital aspect of this support. Initiatives like the International Medical Partnership Program, led by Olena Zelenska, pave the way for effective collaboration between Ukrainian healthcare institutions and their international counterparts. This not only facilitates the exchange of expertise, but also ensures that Ukrainian children receive the best possible medical care.

The educational needs of Ukrainian children are equally important. With thousands of educational institutions, including kindergartens, destroyed, there is a dire need for reconstruction, along with the construction of bomb shelters to safeguard against future conflicts.

This effort requires significant financial resources which can be pooled from various donors and local authorities.

Additionally, the provision of school buses and the enhancement of digital solutions to allow distance learning are crucial to ensure an uninterrupted educational process.

Integrating Ukrainian children into new environments is another challenge. Language barriers, cultural differences, and the trauma of displacement can impede their integration.

Addressing this involves not only language courses, but also the inclusion of Ukrainian studies in school curricula, the establishment of Ukrainian weekend schools, and efforts to make the host countries' education systems more inclusive and aware of the Ukrainian context.

Lastly, the recognition of the Ukrainian educational programme abroad is vital, just as Ukraine recognises foreign education components, other countries should reciprocate by recognising Ukrainian subjects studied online.

This mutual recognition is essential for the educational community of Ukrainian children displaced by the war.

In conclusion, the combined efforts in this area of housing, rehabilitation, mental health, healthcare collaboration, education, integration, and mutual recognition of educational programmes form a comprehensive approach to support the children of Ukraine.

This approach not only addresses the immediate needs, but also lays the groundwork for their long-term well-being and development.

To this end, the resolution will call for the full reparation for all violence committed against children and for justice to be delivered.

In closing, I implore each one of us here to consider the gravity of our responsibility. These children are not mere statistics, they are the future of Ukraine, a future that currently faces unprecedented challenges.

Our actions, decisions, and resolutions today, will shape their tomorrow.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam KHOMENKO.

I call now Ms Sandra ZAMPA, rapporteur for the opinion.

Dear Sandra, you have 3 minutes.

Ms Sandra ZAMPA (Italy, SOC, Rapporteur for opinion): Thank you,

Thank you, Mister President.

Ukraine's girls and boys, forced to live in situations of war and conflict, are twice victims. Victims because they suffer the violence that war brings, and victims because their age makes them extremely vulnerable.

Among the most severe sufferings a person can undergo is the condition of being displaced, which entails the loss of points of reference, essential for every child's growth and development, and the loss of his or her rights: the right to housing, education, sociability, affection, and health care.

Fundamental rights that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child demands of countries that have signed it. All European countries among others are signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to respect and promote.

As we mourn the sad and tragic number of children who have died in Ukraine over 500 and injured children, estimates say 1 195 we are obliged to ensure those who have instead escaped death and are internally displaced, the urgent and sufficient humanitarian support they need.

This additional humanitarian support, made all the more urgent by the rigors of winter, is what the Amendments approved yesterday in the Commission after a discussion in which we were all unanimous envision as an enrichment of the report that the Committee on Social Affairs and Health has put together.

These Amendments ask Council of Europe member states to do their best to help provide the necessary support.

According to UN data, the humanitarian response plan is only 53 percent funded so far. We need to support the effort of humanitarian workers who have already reached 11 million people in Ukraine, but where an estimated 1.5 million girls and 1.4 million boys still need our support and the support of the world.

Let us raise our voices in this Assembly to ensure safety and security for the displaced children of Ukraine.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam ZAMPA.

Dear colleagues,

As we will have our debate on the urgent procedure this morning on the situation of the children of Ukraine, we are honoured to have with us via video link the First Lady of Ukraine, Ms Olena Volodymyrivna ZELENSKA.

Ms Olena Volodymyrivna ZELENSKA (First Lady of Ukraine)*: The last time we met almost a year ago, we spoke about the deportation of Ukrainian children.

What I would most like to say now, a year later, is that everything is over; that everyone is finally home.

This is not the case.

Other rescue operations to free our children from Russian captivity have lasted throughout the year.

My home country rooted for each of them.

There was the 17-year-old Bohdan Yermokhin: his story speaks of all of the pain of the Russian invasion. The orphaned boy lived in Mariupol, together with other children from his orphanage. He saw the destruction of his city, and of its residents. Then he was deported to Russia. He turned 18 there, in that foreign land. He was to be drafted into the Russian army. What can be more cynical? They kidnap a child, they destroy his city, and then they drive him to war against his homeland with hordes of invaders. Bohdan is an extremely strong person. He ran away; they caught him. He found a way to record and send home a plea for help. As a result of very complicated operations engaging several countries and dozens of caring people around the world, he returned home. He was released not only from captivity but also from forced service in the aggressor's army. That's why I say his story shows how many trials and tribulations our children are experiencing in Russian captivity. They are subjected to psychological, and increasingly more often, physical violence.

Like Serhii from Kupyansk, another abducted teenager. In captivity he learnt what "the pit" meant. This is when the occupiers forced the victim to dig a full-sized hole and then crouch in it under the gunfire of Russian machine guns, sometimes for several days. Serhii is one of those who we fortunately managed to bring back home this year; but his story corroborates another problem we face when rescuing deported children. It is easier to save older children, who can send information, who remember their friends or relatives in Ukraine.

Younger children, who are helpless or more intimidated, are more difficult to find and rescue. A grandmother fought for the return of 10-year-old Jure and 3-year-old Maxim from Donetsk region. They are the children of her twin daughters. And we still don't know what happened to their mothers during the Russian occupation. Russia didn't want to give them away either. They didn't want them to talk about it.

Perhaps the hardest stories are those where the child has been released, but the mother was not. That's the case of 11-year-old Mitrom, who now lives with his aunt in Kyiv. He asks when his mother - who is in Russian captivity - will return. The Ukrainian side has no information about her.

These are just a few stories about the 388 children returned to Ukraine. In total there are around 19,000 children in Russian captivity. At this rate, it will take us 50 years to bring them back.

You remember that Moses led his people through the desert for 40 years. He did it so that people would forget slavery, and feel free. But in our case, 40 or 50 years yields the opposite result. One can forget oneself even faster. We see this, even with the returned children. They have been told that they are not welcome at home; that no-one needs them. We try to restore their sense of home and country, their faith in people in general.

To do this, Ukraine has a whole reintegration programme called Bring Kids Back UA, aimed at implementing president Volodymyr Zelenskyy's peace formula, for the release of all prisoners and deportees. We try to support these children in all of the ways possible - from psychological assistance, education, new opportunities, to new families, so they do not feel orphaned and are surrounded by love and care.

Incidentally, if you in the international community have ideas on how to help the children who have been returned, we're happy to listen. We're happy to do anything that will help our children get over the pits, beatings and threats they endured in Russia.

Dear participants,

A lot has happened this year.

From your previous resolution, to the Declaration on Ukrainian children, adopted at the Summit of Heads of State and Government held by the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU) has started this work. The International Coalition of Countries for the Return of Ukrainian Children has had its first meeting. We are grateful to every country and every person who cares.

But time is against us.

Recently the Russian dictator ordered to grant Russian citizenship to the abducted Ukrainian children. His henchmen, such as the leader of one of Russia's pro-government parties, Mr Sergey Mironov, publicly appropriated a girl abducted from Kherson. We know her name is Margarita, she was a little over a year old. She is one of the 48 kids who was taken from the Kherson Regional Children's Home when the city was occupied.

We need to act faster.

We don't have 50 years to save children. Even a year is too long for an abducted child.

You may remember from history that the Nazis had a programme whereby they took children from the occupied territories to be adopted into Aryan families. There were hundreds of thousands of such children in Eastern Europe, and only some of them could return to their homelands, to Poland or the Baltic states, after liberation - because they no longer remembered. They had been forbidden to speak their native language at once. But even now, one can read heartfelt reports about how very elderly people are looking for their real families and their origins, because this has haunted them for all of their lives.

Do we want this to happen again? Are there not enough crippled lives in Europe and the world? Can we allow our world to be do terrible, where molestation is rampant, and can encroach upon everyone, any child?

This is why I urge everyone to act faster and to be more united.

I ask the national parliaments to join me. We must force Russia to comply with the Geneva Conventions, and immediately provide comprehensive lists with the names and whereabouts of all the Ukrainian children who have been illegally deported, because it degrades the very idea of international law, if it is so cynically ignored and abused.

At the beginning, I said that every rescued child is a special operation involving many countries and dozens of people who care. That's how we can succeed. And there are dozens of caring countries and millions of caring people in the world. At least, I believe in this. I believe that all of the children of the world are our common children, because they are the future of the world.

Meanwhile, we, the adults, are their present world.

Together we can do it - but only together.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Olena Volodymyrivna ZELENSKA, thank you for the honour you made to us and the time you took to address the Assembly for the second time.

As our rapporteur, Ms Olena KHOMENKO, just a few minutes earlier mentioned, the children missing are not mere numbers or statistics, but the future of Ukraine.

Madam ZELENSKA, I want to inform you that the exhibition of the children of Ukraine, which I had the honour to open two days ago, has contributed to raising visibility. All VIPs, presidents, and prime ministers who visited these days the Assembly had the opportunity to visit the exhibition and witness first-hand what the citizens of Ukraine had written.

Once again, I want to thank you for being with us today, and I want to reassure you that we will stand by you to find a solution to this nightmare.

Thank you so much.

Dear colleagues, following the debate, I call first for the 3 minutes that Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON has to give his speech on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Dear Birgir, you have the floor.

Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON (Iceland, EPP/CD): Mister President,

We parliamentarians have hopes and dreams for our children, and so do Ukrainians.

Russia has stolen the hopes and dreams of thousands of Ukrainian children, boys, and girls, and some of them just babies. They have taken them from their families, taken them from their homes, and stolen their identities.

From the start of the invasion, the Russian authorities steadfastly removed children from Ukraine, aiming to turn them against their homeland. Kidnapping children is a devastating crime. Families are searching for them, desperate to find them and bring them back home before their names are changed, and they become untraceable.

Russia demands the release of hostages in Gaza, at the same time they are kidnappers themselves who have been incriminated by the International Criminal Court for stealing children, incriminated for war crimes.

We demand the release of the Ukrainian hostages, the Ukrainian children in Russia, occupied territories, and Belarus.

We are the voice of 46 European states. We have a strong voice when we are united, and we are united with Ukraine.

The abduction of another nation's children is a form of genocide.

International mediation plays a vital role in bringing the children back home, and Ukraine has expressed openness to international mediation. Qatar successfully mediated the return of four children in October 2023 by facilitating direct talks between Russian and Ukrainian authorities. Every child that comes back home brings us hope.

I believe that communications between Ukrainian and Russian officials is vital, in order to bring the children home.

I encourage member states to do whatever they can to broker communication between Ukrainian and Russian officials, for the sake of the Ukrainian children.

Targeted communication plans are also important. Community engagement programmes, social media campaigns, and educational initiatives to enhance public involvement in identifying missing children increase the chances of successful returns.

At the ad hoc Committee Meeting in Paris in December, discussions centred on refining international legal mechanisms for child returns, with an emphasis on extradition treaties. The focus was also on streamlining co-operation channels and proposing a joint liaison office to facilitate real-time information exchange between countries.

Mister President,

As time passes the situation for every single child becomes increasingly complex.

We must never forget the stolen Ukrainian children in Russia, in the occupied territories, and in Belarus.

We must never give up.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Now the floor goes to Lord David BLENCATHRA.

The floor is yours.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

I congratulate the authors of these reports for the work they've done in drawing this terrible situation to our attention.

It's difficult to understand the depth of suffering these children are enduring, and also the relatives of children who have been taken by the Russian regime.

Let's just quickly look at the statistics to get an appreciation of the horror. Some 20 000 children forcibly deported to Russia and forced to become Russian. The Russian Children's Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova says Russia has taken 700 000 people. The U.S. State Department says 900 000 Ukrainians have been deported to Russia. In Ukraine, 3 800 schools and educational establishments have been destroyed. There's 1.3 million Ukrainian children in other EU countries, but they have no legal rights there. And there's 4 million children still in Ukraine who need urgent humanitarian assistance.

I find it difficult get my head round such terrible statistics. However, today we are looking here how we can help the children still in Ukraine. From December to March the average temperature in Ukraine is minus 5 °C. That can drop as low as minus 20 °C.

Well, last week I was in Finland at the Council of Europe conference on Belarus, and I experienced in the far north minus 34 °C. I wore layer upon layer of specialist thermal clothing, and I was still cold. These children in Ukraine are sheltering in broken buildings with no heat, nor have they adequate food. They are therefore lacking the two essentials for survival: heat and calories.

These are their basic survival needs. Of course, they can't go to school. They can't play outside. They can't have all the normal interactions children have with each other, their parents, grandparents, and relatives, and goodness knows how their mental health will suffer now and in the future.

Getting aid to them is very difficult, since they're dispersed throughout Ukraine. We need to support the Amendments here today, calling on governments and volunteer humanitarian organisations to try and step up that existing activity in order to help them.

I also like Amendment E; it's very good. There must be many experts amongst the parliamentarians from our 47 countries who can advise on how we can help the children still in Ukraine or elsewhere in Europe, or those deported to Russia.

Russia's war of aggression is utterly evil. It has daily deliberately targeted the killing of civilians to destroy the civilian infrastructure and break the morale of the people. It's laid millions of landmines, which will continue killing for generations after the war is over. It's laid waste in the environment destroying wildlife and buildings, which will require billions of tons of concrete to rebuild. It is committing the ultimate war crime of kidnapping children in order to "Putinise" them.

Colleagues, we can do nothing about those things at the moment, but we can act now to help the starving and destitute children still in Ukraine.

And I support the resolution and the amendments.

Thank you.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord David BLENCATHRA.

Now, the floor goes to Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK. The floor is yours.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Chair, thank you, colleagues,

I am honoured to speak on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the ALDE group will support the resolution.

And yesterday, I was preparing and I was thinking what new words can I find to address this very tough topic and I think the worst thing that could happen – and is already happening I think – is that all these atrocities are becoming a normality and normal news.

Two days ago, another 8 year-old-girl in Kharkiv died in her bed because of the Russian rockets hitting her home. Seventeen kids with diseases from Donetsk, two days ago, were moved to Moscow for treatment. And we can add them to the long list of abducted kids.

Yesterday, we marked 700 days of full-scale invasion. And soon we will mark 10 years of the aggression itself. Do you know what? That is the age of my daughter. And we have a whole generation of kids that never had a peaceful day in their lives.

But coming back to this very important text – very important resolution and recommendation – we address a lot of issues here, not just about the abduction of kids, which are war crimes and possibly genocide, but also how we can help those kids who are in Ukraine and how we can better help those who seek shelter in your countries.

Regarding the deportations, remember the name of the programme Bring Kids Back UA – Google it, make sure that your government is in the programme and can contribute, and remember this horrible number that the First Lady said – 50 years – 50 years that is how long it would take if we would be returning just one child per day.

About what we can do as adults inside of your countries, of course, humanitarian projects for those kids who are in Ukraine: better education access, better access to medicine, prostheses is a huge problem because kids who lost their arms or legs are growing and prostheses have to be changed with them.

Of course, in your countries, you welcome those who are temporarily seeking shelter. Make sure they do not lose their identity, make sure they have access to Ukrainian culture, to the Ukrainian language, and of course, they are socialised at the same time.

And I would like to especially thank the rapporteurs who did the report, both, and the report for opinion, and Ms Olena KHOMENKO, she did a tremendous job on this.

And, last but not least, we have to establish – again – the ad hoc committee on Ukrainian children, so all of the members of the Assembly can contribute to this very important work.

Thank you so much.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Madam Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

Now the floor goes to Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

The floor is yours.

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has claimed more than 10 000 civilian victims over the past two years. The terrible violence of this aggression, which has continued unabated for almost two years, has led to Russia's exclusion from our institution, which has trampled on all its principles.

In addition to the horrific loss of human life, millions of civilians have fled Ukraine, and tens of thousands have been forcibly displaced within Ukraine's borders, or to Russia or Belarus.

The report presented to us today continues the previous work of our Assembly, foremost among which are Resolution 2495 and Recommendation 2253 adopted in April 2023, resulting from the work of rapporteur Mr Paulo PISCO on the deportation and forcible transfer of children and other Ukrainian civilians to the Russian Federation or temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories.

Today, this report continues to alert us: the children of Ukraine are all, without exception, victims of war, and their particular vulnerability requires our commitment and the utmost attention from our member states.

But I must also emphasise today that, of course, there are many other areas of conflict in the world today, and in Gaza in particular, thousands of children have perished; thousands of children are still under the bombs. I believe that the Group of the Unified European Left would also like to be able to say today that all children must be protected in all areas of conflict. The best interests of the child must come first.

In Ukraine, there is a dramatic accumulation of practices that are totally contrary to international law, including the Geneva Convention, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and we condemn these atrocities.

We call for every effort to be made towards the realisation of the Reykjavik Declaration calling on the Russian Federation to immediately release all civilians forcibly transferred or illegally deported to the territory of the Russian Federation or to areas temporarily controlled or occupied by the Russian Federation and thus, in particular, children.

But beyond our ongoing work, which is important and essential, we have to find ways; we have to create the conditions to bring the conflict to an end, to find ways for the Russian aggressor to cease their aggression. Over and above the texts produced here by our Assembly, we must find and create the conditions within our member states to put an end to conflicts throughout the world that are endangering the lives of thousands of children.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

Now, the floor goes to Ms Camilla FABRICIUS.

The floor is yours.

Ms Camilla FABRICIUS (Denmark, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, for the floor, Mister President.

Thank you for a very significant report for the responsibility for the situation for Ukraine children prompted by Russia's aggressive warfare.

Children are always losers in war. With this report we would like to acknowledge the significant work that Ms Olena KHOMENKO has done.

Children have the right in themselves. The lives of Ukrainian children are threatened every day by the aggression of Russia.

It is unacceptable that Ukrainian children are taken hostage in a war in which they have no stock. Ukrainian children are the losers.

If I should point out a couple of essential things that are important for us, there's section 14.3, which highlights collaboration with organisations such as the Red Cross and UNICEF. This co-operation should happen unhindered and have secure exits for the children.

It is also important for us that often children, to the greatest intention possible, should be ensured that they have their siblings. Being in contact with your brother or sister is something that child organisations consider as vital for child upbringing.

In a world where everything is uncertain, where some have lost both their home, their parents, their country, their nationality, it is crucial to have one's siblings and have the opportunity to know them.

Thank you for listening and making room for this, Madam rapporteur.

Once more, thanks for the great job. It has been a hard job.

As Ms Olena Volodymyrivna Zelenska said, "Children are the future".

Thank you for the floor.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now the first on the speaker list and not speaking on behalf of the political groups is Ms Tuula HAATAINEN.

The floor is yours.

Ms Tuula HAATAINEN (Finland, SOC): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Dear colleagues,

A concrete and sad picture of how Russia's brutal war has destroyed the normal lives of Ukrainian children has been drawn before us. One child lost is one too many. Because of this war, too many children have sustained permanent injury or lost their loved ones. Too many families have fallen apart and people have had to leave their homes.

The educational path of millions of children and young people has been endangered. As a former Minister for Education of Finland, I want to emphasise the importance of a safe school and early education on the well-being of children. The right to education also applies to children living amid war and conflict. Therefore, we must ensure education for all children of Ukraine.

Dear colleagues,

I am shocked by Russia's forcible removals and the russification of Ukrainian children. Forced removals, reluctance to restore family links, and using children as instruments of propaganda are completely unacceptable. It only strengthens our picture of Russia's cowardice and blatant disregard for the rules and human values.

I strongly condemn the weaponisation of children by Russia. Children are subjects of special protection in humanitarian law as is stated in the Geneva Conventions as well as in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its additional protocol. The children of Ukraine must be immediately returned in respect of international law and basic human rights.

Dear colleagues,

Millions of Ukrainians have fled internally and externally. Finland has received tens of thousands of Ukrainian mothers and children. For us, it is essential that children be quickly enrolled in school and early education and offer psychosocial support. The sense of security of children consists of routines and daily structures.

We must never forget the children of Ukraine. We all have a joint responsibility to offer them care and safety. This can only be done by concrete action.

Thank you, Chair.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now, the floor goes to Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO.

The floor is yours.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

It's so hard to talk about this topic. It's so hard to listen and to know the numbers, but they are all human lives.

It's so hard to think about what I want to say to you today, also in being a mother myself, how hard it is to look in the children's eyes every time Ukraine is bombed.

Today we talk about the biggest tragedies. But there are tragedies that may be called in a different way, but they are also tragedies.

Many children of Ukraine are currently away from their parents, or from one of their parents. Many lose their relatives, not by being deported, just because of the war.

It's so hard to know that, unfortunately, as our First Lady said today, that we have around only 400 cases that are successful cases when children were returned. What about almost 20 000? What about the mechanisms? What about the future?

If you ask me what you can do, please try to engage your governments to help us really with negotiations.

Yes, unfortunately, it may take up to 50 years or even more to solve that. Meantime, Russia is taking these children, and many of them are not only being sent to the frontline, they're being recruited to their secret services. They are being recruited against all the humanity, all the humanitarian values that we are fighting for here.

What can you do? You can sponsor any of the recovery projects for children, but please, sponsor them and help them long-term. You can also train specialists.

One fact. In our delegation, four of us became mothers or gave birth to children already when the war had started. So, you can imagine how it is for us.

For us, it's incredibly personal, political, and humanitarian, to make possible that we have some political solutions.

Let's leave it not only in the text, but please, try to sponsor and help more projects for Ukrainian children.

Prosthetics were mentioned. Children need to have hands and legs. It's not that hard to arrange that. If you help only one child, you'll bring much more joy, and light, and love, which is so much needed, and that is very often forgotten somehow. Please do it.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO.

Now, next on the list is Mr Pavlo SUSHKO.

The floor is yours.

Mr Pavlo SUSHKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Today I would like to bring to your attention the incredible resilience of the children and families of Ukraine during the war.

Despite intense battles, missile strikes, and drone attacks for over 20 months, 94% of them continue to attend classes either in person, online or mixed learning. It is not easy to visit schools for them. Because of air alarms, children and staff have to organise lessons in school shelters. Still, parents generally praise the success and quality of education, the dedication of teachers, and the strengths of education system.

The strengths of the Ukrainian people in difficult times is truly impressive. In Kharkiv, the city close to the border with Russia, the first underground school for 900 kids has been built. Also, special education facilities make sure that children continuing to study, even during shelling in the city, matters.

However, there are psychological challenges in kids' behaviour, as parents report children's fears and signs of distress. Many children are afraid of loud sounds, show irritability. They don't show full signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, but the impact of the war affects them in different ways.

The survey reveals long-term effects of psychological trauma and grief, especially among teenagers who have fears about the future. Anyway, despite all the challenges of the war, resilience has become a trend among teenagers who show strength, confidence, and the ability to stay calm in adversity. Some 86% of teenagers see their future only in Ukraine and all of them believe in the victory of Ukraine.

In conclusion, let us support the resilient children of Ukraine. Together we must act to ensure they have proper education, medical, social, and psychological support, and a safe future. Let's stand together in solidarity with the children of Ukraine.

Thank you, colleagues.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Next on the list is Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN. The floor is yours, Ms MIKKONEN.

Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN (Finland, SOC): Your excellency, Ms ZELENSKA, dear Mister President, dear colleagues,

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine has caused a fundamental change in the security environment of Europe. It has also endangered the lives of millions of children in Ukraine.

The biggest price of war is always paid by the persons in vulnerable situations, especially children. The forced transfer of civilians, including children, from Ukraine and their illegal adoptions in Russia are particularly shocking. The amounts of children deported and/or forcibly displaced persons is now 19 546. The amount is incomprehensible.

The deportations are grave violations of the rights of the child and international law and should be pursued as war crimes.

Russia must be held accountable for its violations of international law, including reparations for damage caused by its wrongful acts.

Mister President,

Ukraine is Finland's largest development co-operation partner and recipient of Finnish humanitarian aid. Children who had to leave their homes in Ukraine are now going to school in Finland. The essential need for these children is to receive education and healthcare, including mental health support, tailored to their specific situation, to maintain their connections with their language and culture, which will facilitate their future return to Ukraine, taking into account the best interests of the child.

I greatly appreciate the efforts of her excellency Ms ZELENSKA in protecting the rights and lives of children in Ukraine.

Finland will stand with Ukraine and continue to support it and its children for as long as is needed. *Slava Ukraini.*

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now the floor goes to Ms Marijana BALIĆ.

Maybe she's not in the Chamber.

So the next on the list is Ms Liisa-Ly PAKOSTA from Estonia.

Is Ms Liisa-Ly PAKOSTA here?

The floor is yours.

Ms Liisa-Ly PAKOSTA (Estonia, NR): Thank you.

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

Today we stand here together with an urgent appeal deeply rooted in the values of the Council of Europe: the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Currently we are facing a very grave situation that demands our immediate and unified action.

In recent times we have witnessed the harrowing plight of the Ukrainian children falsely deported from their homeland to Russia and Belarus. We cannot forget that these innocent children have been deeply traumatised and have had to experience violence, trauma, destruction, and displacement for a very long time. The tragedy is so vast that we do not even know the exact number of deported children. The aim of this criminal Russian policy is to forcibly change the children's identity and assimilate them in order to make them to forget about their homeland, Ukraine, and not to be able to return to their loved ones.

The Parliament of Estonia, the Riigikogu, like the Latvian Saeima, takes a firm stand against these atrocities. We are condemning the systematic deliberate actions of Russia and Belarus in this unlawful deportation, as well as the Russian's decision to grant citizenship to Ukrainian children under a simplified procedure. We recognise the urgent need to restore these children to their rightful homes, to reunite them with their families and to rekindle their hope for a peaceful future.

This is a call to action for all European parliaments to join hands in a unified response. We must stand together to condemn these acts, to demand the immediate release and safe return of these innocent children to Ukraine.

Therefore, we all must acknowledge and support the International Criminal Court's efforts to bring those responsible to justice, in particular the arrest warrants issued on 17 March last year for Mr Vladimir Putin and his Commissioner for Children's Rights, Ms Maria Lvova-Belova. Let us not forget that impunity only breeds more injustice.

It's in our duty, in the spirit of the values that bind us as members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, to ensure that such atrocities do not go unpunished.

I urge you as fellow guardians of democracy and human rights to take similar actions in your own parliaments.

Let us adopt resolutions that echo the Parliament of Estonia and the Saeima of Latvia.

Let us call for the cessation of these heinous acts and for the restoration of peace and order.

Let us support the 10-point peace plan proposed by the President of Ukraine, Mr Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which includes the return of children deported to Russia and Belarus and serves as a beacon of hope in these dark times.

Together we have the power to make a difference.

Together we can stand as a formidable force against the violation of human rights.

Thank you and let's act from our side as Ms Olena Volodymyrivna Zelenska asked us to do: act together.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now the floor goes to Ms Ester MIELI. The floor is yours.

Ms Ester MIELI (Italy, EC/DA): Here we go.

Thank you, President,

Kind colleagues,

I listened with interest to the previous speeches and appreciated the words, so sensible.

Yesterday in Italy in the Senate, we voted on the extension of the authorisation for the transfer of material means and military equipment in favour of the government authority of Ukraine.

Italy stands with Ukraine. Italy stands with Ukraine. Italy wants a just peace. The exhibition opened Tuesday made of drawings, diaries, personal items of Ukrainian children are the testimony, a true testimony.

The 14 stories of those children who witnessed the war, who witnessed the horror, the bombings, the deportations, the threats to their lives, the loss of their loved ones. They saw the horror, and that is not acceptable.

Italy has chosen sides. It has done so in the sense of justice. It has done so because it is aware of how difficult it would be to govern a world in which those who bomb civilian infrastructure hoping to bend a people have had their way.

Italy is with Ukraine without ifs and buts and will also do so in reconstruction by organising the Ukrainian Recovery Conference in Italy in 2025, thus giving a future of opportunity to the Ukrainian people and contributing to their economic and social rebirth.

Let me express satisfaction with the report and the Amendments that we will vote for with satisfaction.

I also thank those who worked on all the documentation.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms MIELI.

Now the floor goes to Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK from Ukraine.

The floor is yours.

He is not here.

So, next on the list is Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON.

The floor is yours.

Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON (Iceland, ALDE): Mr President,

It is of uttermost importance to facilitate and take effective action to help locate and secure the safe return of deported and forcibly transferred Ukrainian children to their families. Furthermore, we also need to put focus on the well-being of Ukrainian children hosted in our member states and provide them with necessary assistance, such as access to good healthcare and education, including within Ukraine itself.

There is an urgent need to facilitate the co-ordination between Ukrainian authorities, relevant international organisations, civil society, and other stakeholders.

It has been estimated that since the start of the aggression of the Russian regime against Ukraine, over 3.8 million children have been forced to flee Ukraine, with most of them residing in Council of Europe member States.

In a historic unanimous vote, on 5 June last year, the Icelandic Parliament, the Althingi, passed a resolution condemning the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children.

It is the determined position of the Althingi that Russian authorities should immediately cease the deportation of children, as it violates international humanitarian law and constitutes a war crime, as has recently been reiterated in the declaration of the Reykjavík Summit.

At the same time, it must be ensured by all available means that children who have been transferred to Russia or Belarus or within the occupied areas of Ukraine be immediately returned to their parents or other guardians under the supervision of the international community and that Russian authorities and other perpetrators be held accountable.

With the passage of this parliamentary resolution, the members of the Althingi responded to the appeal of Ukraine that the Althingi condemn the illegal and systematic deportation of Ukrainian children and thereby reiterate its solidarity and support for the Ukrainian people.

We were the first of the member states to produce such a statement and now the Latvian Parliament, the Saeima, has done the same, last December. I want to encourage others to follow our example.

I want to use the opportunity to thank Ms Olena KHOMENKO, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA and Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK for their valuable help and encouragement for me drafting that important resolution for the Althingi.

We must find out about the whereabouts of these Ukrainian children, even though the Russian regime will not co-operate. We must do our utmost to get the abducted Ukrainian children reunited with their families and relatives.

It is unacceptable that these children are being torn from their families and stripped of their identity and future. We must do everything in our power to take back the lives of these children and their families and to make the Russian regime answer to these cruel acts of war crime.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now the floor goes to Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA.

Sorry, if I mispronounce this.

The floor is yours.

Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA (Ukraine, ALDE): You Excellency Madam ZELENSKA,

Dear Mister President,

Dear ladies and gentleman,

First of all, thank you very much, Madam rapporteur, for your excellent job and excellent report.

Since ancient times, it has been so that an invader wanting to destroy his opponent, starts with his children. The kidnapping and deportation of children were practices during all wars. The enemy is clearly aware that children are the future, the other nation's gene pool.

Erasing children's national identity means destroying the nation. This is exactly what Russia is doing now. Forcibly deporting our children, separating them from their parents, from their families, without leaving them any choice.

When children are taken forcibly to Russia, the Ukrainian names are replaced by Russian ones. They are taught Russian songs, Russian history, and racist anti-Ukrainian ideology.

Two Minutes Hate, that is the style of the upbringing and education in Russia.

According to the National Information Bureau, more than 19 000 children were deported or forcibly relocated. On its resources, Russia calls this number 744 000.

Let me remind you about the children who remain in occupied territory, in Donetsk and Luhansk, Crimea. They are another 1 million children whose identity Russian propaganda is trying to erase.

Moreover, some of these children have already become young men. Now, being raised in Russia propaganda, they have joined the enemy.

Can you imagine the whole tragedy of the situation? Children who fight against the state, against the nation, against their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. Orwell's classic: propaganda works.

The illegal deportation of Ukrainian children is a direct violation of the Geneva Convention, a war crime.

The return of the children of Ukraine is point 4 of the Peace Formula of the President of Ukraine, Mr Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Ukraine has already managed to return 572 children. This small victory would be impossible without our partners, without their support and mediation for which we're infinitely grateful.

Currently, active work in this area is only intensifying the international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children. The Bring Kids Back UA international task force was created on the initiative of our President.

Let it just sink in. If we return every day, as our First Lady said, we would need 55 years not only to return physically, but also mentally.

We have to put all our efforts, international efforts, into curing them from the love of evil. Only global community efforts may accelerate the enormously difficult process. We will never stop until every Ukrainian who was unlawfully deported to Russia is returned home as quickly as possible and all war criminals receive severe punishment.

Thank you very much.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now, the next and the last –I'm sorry, we'll have to cut the list, to interrupt.

The next is Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

The floor is yours.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you very much, Mr Chair,

Thank you to the rapporteur for their great work.

And, you know, I want to speak about culture. I think you will be surprised – we are speaking about children now – but I want to speak about culture because sometimes from you and in Europe, I hear, "Oh, we know great Russian culture, and unfortunately, we do not know much about Ukrainian culture".

I just want to explain some things. I respect the cultures of all nations. I want to explain something. Do you know the names Gogol and Malevich? The world-known writer – Nikolai Gogol – and the world-known painter – Kazimir Malevich. But many of you think they are Russians. They are not. They are Ukrainians, but Russians did everything they could to make from these Ukrainians Russians, like from millions in generations and generations. And from those whom they cannot make Russians, they just kill them. They just kill them. From these hundreds and hundreds of Ukrainian children, who were killed, there were poets, composers and painters, who will never become such.

And that is why you know not much about Ukrainian great culture, because our painters are killed, because our poets are killed because our writers are killed by Russia. That is something you should know.

And from other children, from other Ukrainians, they just try to make Russians. And that is a genocide. And we need to call it genocide as it is. But what are we doing? We are making resolutions. I thank you for this resolution. This is important, but at the same time when we are saying here that Putin is a war criminal and there is a warrant issued against him because of the crime of genocide, I see the photo of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr António Guterres, hugging Mr Sergey Lavrov yesterday at the United Nations. We are saying here Russia is killing you, and at the same time, the Slovakian Prime Minister Mr Robert Fico is saying there is no war in Kyiv. Mr Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister, is coming to Mr Vladimir Putin.

There is no war in Kyiv in Ukraine? My five-year-old son spent last night with his mother, my wife, in the shelter. Four hundred metres from my home, there was a drone attack, there are people wounded again and again and again.

I just want to ask you one thing, when you go back to your national parliaments, at least make a resolution condemning the Russian genocide against Ukraine. Just remember one thing, the body of an eight-year-old girl, who was killed in Kharkiv two days ago, who was taken from the rubble of her house. She could have been a great painter, a great writer, a great poet, but she could never be any more.

Thank you.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Thank you, Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

As I said, 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 text must be submitted electronically no later than four hours after the last speaker is interrupted.

I called Ms Olena KHOMENKO, the rapporteur, to reply to the debate.

You have 3 minutes.

Mr Gergely ARATÓ (Hungary, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

One of the saddest chapters of the terrible and repulsive aggression against Ukraine is the fate of Ukrainian children.

The destruction, the war, the danger to life, the injuries, the concern for relatives, the tearing apart of families, the loss of fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, the dispersal of childhood are in themselves a terrible price for this horrible attack. What makes this even more horrific is the practice of Russian authorities abducting Ukrainian children from the occupied territories in order to Russify them. Let's say it openly, this is a disgrace, a continuation of the terrible Stalinist and Hitlerian practice.

But it is not enough to condemn the horrors. We must do everything we can ourselves.

We must make it clear that no democratic state, no government will accept the abduction of Ukrainian children, never under any circumstances. All children must be returned and those responsible must be punished - whatever time and effort it takes.

We need to make sure that Ukrainian children and families who have fled to our countries receive as much support as possible not only to meet their physical needs, but also to process trauma, to learn and to preserve their identity. I myself am proud of how much Hungarian society, state and civil organizations, municipalities, and churches are doing to support the care of Ukrainian refugees, including the creation of schools, education and cultural possibilities. But we must ensure that this support does not diminish over time, but is sustained until safe return home is ensured.

In addition, we must provide all possible support to Ukraine to ensure the needs and development of Ukrainian children during the war and after the victory. The future of Ukraine is the Ukrainian children and I am sure that this future will be bright.

Ms Zdravka BUŠIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

This week near the Hemicycle of our Palace we had the opportunity to see the exhibition under the title: "War Diaries: the unheard voices of Ukrainian children".

I hope that every member of our Assembly took the time to visit this exhibition and to read heartbreaking stories Ukrainian children wrote. No one can remain indifferent after reading the touching stories of frightened and horrified children.

The exhibition definitely achieved its main objective, that is, to draw our attention and to remind the Assembly to step up efforts in protecting the rights on deported Ukrainian children.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, evidence has been collected about crimes committed against Ukrainian children. According to the figures of the Ukrainian authorities, more than 19.500 Ukrainian children have been abducted and forcibly deported to Russia since the beginning of the war. However, the actual figure could be even higher.

Numerous reports highlight systematic and forcible deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, including the reports of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism. Their report concludes that once children have been forcefully deported to Russia, the government invents many obstacles to their return such as deletion of Ukrainian origin from databases, express granting of Russian citizenship and preventing contact with the family.

Available evidences indicate that Russian efforts to indoctrinate abducted Ukrainian children are both systematic and extensive.

Some sources claim that the deportations were designed to "erase Ukrainian cultural and national identity" through the relocation of Ukrainian children to a network of re-education camps. Many have provided first-hand accounts of indoctrination efforts including daily recitals of the Russian national anthem and punishments for expressions of Ukrainian patriotism.

At the same time, Moscow refuses to give the list of deported children to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Multiple reports consider Russia to be in breach of the obligations set in several international treaties and instruments which Russia is party to, as well as of customary international law.

All this has been widely documented by different international organizations and bodies, such as the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism Report or the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Recently, a US Congressman who chairs the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, told a hearing dedicated to the abducted Ukrainian children that Russia's mass abductions qualify as an act of genocide.

International awareness is growing which will force Russia to face the charges.

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

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Olena Chomenko for a highly valuable report that presents a sensible strategy to cope with unprecedented violation of the rights of the Ukrainian children by Russian aggressor and abduction of Ukrainian children by Russia.

The depth of the human tragedy that has unfolded in Ukraine beyond comprehension. Ukrainian children study the war period of history not from books, but from their own lives.

Ad hoc Committee on the Protection of Ukrainian was created and held meeting in December 2023 recently and it has to continue its work.

A lot of issues discussed during the meeting are in this resolution.

We tried to cover all the problems of Ukrainian children, because Russia brutally destroyed the childhood of all 7 million of our Ukrainian children, who were traumatized by the war to one degree or another. During the month of the war, 4.3 million Ukrainian children were forced to leave their homes.

Russia violates the fundamental rights of Ukrainian children on a daily basis: the right to life, safety, education, family upbringing, a safe environment and medical care.

Children are dying in their beds while sleeping, in maternity hospitals, on playgrounds, in cars during evacuation, in hospitals from injuries. Both at home and on the street. They die even in places where it would seem to be safe. Children are killed by rockets in my homeland Vinnytsia and Odesa, in Kharkiv and Kyiv.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, 513 children have been killed and 1165 injured by Russia shelling.

Putin wants to deprive Ukraine of its future. Taking away Ukrainian children. Russia's policy towards Ukrainian children is part of the genocide of our nation and violates international humanitarian law, namely the Geneva Convention and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Russian Federation neglects all of the above norms. 19,546 children were deported, and these are only those who have been verified. We don't have time. Every child has the right to be free and protected. We run against the clock. Every day every abducted child is a lost case. It is essential that the world further stands in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and offering support. And I urge PACE to further keep the Ukrainian dimension and Ukrainian children on Assembly's agenda.

Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER (Switzerland, EPP/CD)

Transcription in progress

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

Last April, I had the honor of participating in a debate in these walls on the deportation and forced displacement of Ukrainian children and other civilians to the Russian Federation or the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. Today, as then, the issue of the ill-treatment of Ukrainian children deported to the Russian Federation is on the Assembly's agenda. We are grateful for your concern!

Since February 24, 2022, Russia has taken more than 19,000 children from Ukraine. These are only the cases that have been officially recorded. So far, only 388 children have been returned to Ukraine. These children told about their ill-treatment in the Russian Federation - they experienced or witnessed psychological or physical violence by Russians.

Russians are forcing Ukrainian children to learn Russian language, culture, history, love Putin and thank him for their rescue. In the camps, children are forced to sing the Russian national anthem, and if they do not, they are locked in a room. No one is tolerant of the pro-Ukrainian position of our children and their desire to return home, and they are trying to oppress them as much as possible.

In her speech, the First Lady Olena Zelenska recalled the story of Bohdan Yermokhin. This is one of many thousands of such stories. There are cases when Ukrainian children were taken away from their parents and placed in Russian families during their stay in Russian filtration camps, and a Ukrainian boy, Ilya, who was hospitalized in Russia, underwent surgery without anesthesia.

When the Russians left the village of Novopetrivka in Mykolaiv region, they left behind the bodies of tortured residents. They looted houses and shops. They also took children. The Russian military took 15 schoolchildren.

Vlada Pavliuk was deported to the temporarily occupied Crimea. She spent seven months in the Luchisty camp. She was subjected to psychological pressure. Her grandmother, a guardian, followed her, but died after interrogation by the FSB. One of her relatives took legal custody, but the girl was taken to an unknown destination and was not allowed to communicate with her.

Another young Ukrainian, 17-year-old Vladyslav Rudenko, was deported to Russia by the Russians and forcibly sent to study at the Naval Academy, where Vlad was repeatedly subjected to severe pressure and bullying because of his pro-Ukrainian position. The boy had to experience humiliating interrogations by the Federal Security Service with lie detectors and psychological torture. The charity organization Save Ukraine helped him return home.

The stories of these children are yet another confirmation of Russia's war crimes against Ukrainian children and the future of the Ukrainian nation. We want you to remember that Ukrainian children need international support and assistance. I ask my colleagues to support the resolution and help Ukraine return every child!

Vote: Situation of the children of Ukraine

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Dear colleagues,

I will be short.

I'm grateful for all your support, all your words that you said today.

I'm grateful to each of you for what your countries' parliaments and governments have already done for Ukrainian children.

Our children have found refuge and safety in the member states of the Council of Europe, and are receiving comprehensive support from your countries. Thank you for that.

I hope that this support will not fade away, but rather increase, because every Ukrainian child has been affected by the war and continues to face hardships every day.

The resolution we're voting on today concerns every Ukrainian child regardless of whether they are in Ukraine or have found refuge in your countries.

We have covered every problem of the Ukrainian child and proposed concrete steps on how you, how we all together, can help them, can help Ukrainian children, can help our children.

Adopt resolutions to condemn Russia for war crimes, including for the crime of genocide. Please put pressure on Russia to return our children through all possible instruments, and support us in other international fora. Demand justice for perpetrators. Apply sanctions against everyone engaged in the deportation of Ukrainian children. Support Ukrainian children by all means ensuring their access to healthcare and education. Help Ukraine win.

I urge everyone to support the resolution and follow the concrete steps to make a difference. We must act together and act fast, because time is running out.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Olena KHOMENKO.

Mister Simon MOUTQUIN, do you wish to speak as Chair of the Committee?

You have 3 minutes.

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): Mister Chairman,

On behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs, Sustainable Development and Health, I'd like to say a few words about what we're talking about today.

We're talking about the worst thing about war, in this case a war of Russian aggression. We're talking about children's lives. We're talking about wounded children. We're talking about deported children. I'll come back to that word, "deported". We're talking about children who will be traumatised for years, decades. Even if, as has been said, we know the Ukrainian people's capacity for resistance and resilience, we cannot and must not normalise this appalling situation.

First of all, I'd like to thank Ms Sandra ZAMPA, who put her finger on the importance of co-ordinating and continuing to support these millions of displaced Ukrainians, both inside and outside Ukraine. Then I must thank Ms Olena KHOMENKO for her immense investment in this work over the last few months, for the energy she has put into it, for the links she has made, for the fact that her indignation, and rightly so, never dies down and wakes us up to this horrifying reality.

I'd like to come back to this word. It's 2024, and we're talking about a word, "deportation". The word "deportation" harks back to the darkest hours of our continent's history, and it should alert us to the reality of what Ukrainians are going through today, particularly through forced transfers.

In Paris, on 15 December, we organised this ad hoc commission with impressive Ukrainian NGO players, as well as journalists who have done an incredible job of referencing these horrors. Two journalists reported on the systemic nature of these forced transfers of children.

Today, I'd like to remind you that there are two objectives or two realities. The first is urgency. The Ukrainian First Lady explained to us just how urgent it is, urgent because these children are in unbelievable psychological distress, but also because Putin and his regime are russifying these children, brainwashing them. We urgently need to find solutions.

Then, the other element is that we need to think about how to bring these children back. To do this, I think that the work of Ms Olena KHOMENKO and the people we met in Paris have given us some ideas. This list of children needs to be much clearer, and international bodies and organisations need to help the Ukrainians draw up a very clear list. I think this is a matter of the utmost urgency.

Finally, in conclusion, I would say that our Assembly cannot stop there. Our Assembly has begun work that must continue. This is just the beginning of a long struggle for the Ukrainian people.

I'd also like to say that we're not just talking about Ukrainian children, as I said to Ms Olena KHOMENKO. We're talking about the children of the Council of Europe. We're talking about the children of our values. We're talking about the children who are building the future of this continent, a future that is equal, democratic and free. I'd like to reiterate that.

Lastly, I'd like to say that I'm worried that today we're normalising the situation the Ukrainian people are living through. Forty dead a few days ago in a market. Forty dead people. We must maintain the indignation we had from the first day of the invasion of Crimea. We must maintain our indignation and support the Ukrainian people, whether they are children or all the Ukrainian people.

Thank you.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister MOUTQUIN.

The debate is closed.

The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development has presented a Draft Resolution (Document 15901), to which 12 Amendments have been tabled, and a Draft Recommendation (Document 15901), to which no amendments have been tabled.

There is a point of order.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA): In the spirit of trying to be helpful, in view of the time scale, would it be possible to take many of these amendments en bloc, provided the rapporteur and the chairman are in agreement.

If there's any amendments they disagree with, we can vote on them, but if everyone is in agreement - the rapporteur and the chairman of the committee in particular - and no member objects could we possibly take them on bloc.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): That is what is happening.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA): I apologise.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 4 and 3 to the Draft Resolution, Document 15901, which were unanimously approved by the Committee should be declared as agreed by the Assembly.

Is that so, Mister Simon MOUTQUIN?

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): Exactly.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): *Perfetto.*

Does anyone object?

If so, please ask for the floor by raising your hand.

There's no objection, so I declare Amendments 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 4 and 3 to the draft resolution agreed.

We will now consider, sorry. We will now consider the remaining amendments individually.

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

I remind you that speeches on the amendments are limited to 30 seconds.

Ms Sandra ZAMPA (Italy, SOC, Rapporteur for opinion): Thank you, Chairman.

In this Amendment we are asking the member state parliaments to strengthen political support and to implement that humanitarian response plan that I have already mentioned in my speech.

It is estimated that \$4.2 billion is needed to get the plan going, so we are really asking the member states in this way to do their part and to do it urgently.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): *Grazie.*

I've been informed that Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ wishes to propose an oral sub-Amendment as follows: replace the words "around USD 4.2 billion" with the words "between USD 4 billion and USD 5 billion".

In my opinion, this oral sub-Amendment is in order under our rules.

However, do 10 or more members object to the oral sub-Amendment being debated?

No.

Fewer than 10 members object to the oral sub-Amendment being debated.

Therefore, I call Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ to support his oral sub-Amendment.

You have 30 seconds.

The floor is yours.

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

So in French. The aim is to strengthen the Amendment a little because, in fact, quoting a figure of 4.2 billion is a little too precise. That's why I propose: "Estimates indicate that a total amount 'of the order of 4 to 5 billion' is required". In a way, this leaves a little more room for manoeuvre in the face of a situation that will require a lot of money - and we don't know exactly how much.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the sub-Amendment.

I see nobody.

What is the opinion of Ms ZAMPA?

Ms Sandra ZAMPA (Italy, SOC, Rapporteur for opinion): I support this sub-Amendment.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): What is the opinion of the Committee?

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): The Committee approved the sub-Amendment by a large majority.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Very well.

I shall now put the sub-Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

I call the for the result to be displayed.

OK, the sub-Amendment is agreed.

Now we come to the main Amendment 6, as amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the Amendment?

No.

What is the view of the Committee?

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): The Committee approved the Amendment as modified.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I shall now put the Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed:

Amendment 6 is agreed.

I call Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA to support Amendment 1, if she is here.

Please, madam.

Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD): We would like to put it to the vote and to support it.

Ukrainian children have left Ukraine to get temporary protection. They're not refugees, so they are not under the subject of Article 6 of the Convention, because it says that countries getting refugee status, are logically united by a common reason that is the threat coming from the country of habitual residence, here it is not a threat from the Ukraine, but by Russia.

So we instead ask Article 6 of the Convention should not apply to the Ukrainian children, and Article 5 of the Convention to be applied for the above-mentioned.

So I ask to support this amendment.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): Does anyone else wish to support this Amendment?

No.

Does anyone wish to speak against the Amendment?

No.

What is the opinion on the Committee?

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): The Amendment was rejected by more than two-thirds.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I shall now put the Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call the result to be displayed.

The Amendment is adopted.

For Amendment 2, I call Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA to support Amendment 2.

You have 30 seconds.

Sorry, I was thinking you were, I am sorry.

Does anyone else wish to support this Amendment?

Nobody.

The Amendment falls.

Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD): It is to ensure that member states do not...

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I'm sorry, the Amendment has already fallen.

We passed to the oral Amendment.

I have received an oral Amendment from Ms Olena KHOMENKO, which reads as follows:

In paragraph 18 of the Draft Resolution, delete the word "ICRC", and insert the words:

"United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and other competent UN agencies, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)".

The President may accept an oral amendment on the grounds of promoting clarity, accuracy, or conciliation and if there is not opposition from 10 or more members to it being debated.

In my opinion the oral Amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7.a. Is there any opposition to the Amendment being debated?

There is not.

I therefore call Ms Olena KHOMENKO to support the oral Amendment.

You have 30 seconds.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Dear colleagues,

I would like to support my oral sub-Amendment.

We need, we are open, Ukraine and this organisation, to co-operate with any international organisation whose mandate is supposed to be helping children.

We suggest to expand this paragraph with other international organisations and harmonise the resolutions in accordance with Paragraph 14.3. There are organisations listed that can deal with immediate and safe access to the children.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

I would like to also support, Mister President, my colleague. She is the co-author of Amendment 2. This amendment is about...

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I am sorry, that Amendment passed. So we got to talk about this. I'm sorry.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Rapporteur): She was about to support the Amendment.

She was about to support the Amendment.

It's about official representatives that your countries, your official representatives should not participate...

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): [speaking over Ms Olga KHOMENKO]

The organisation told me we can't go on.

I'm sorry.

A point of order.

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): I'm sorry, Mr Chairman.

With all due respect, I think we're in an emergency debate and our Committee met this morning, so I think our colleagues who wanted to defend these amendments had very little time. I understand the timing, but I think that out of respect for the subject, we should be able to vote again on Amendment 2. Thank you very much.

And I've finished my point of order, so if you give me the floor again, I'll give the Committee's opinion on the Amendment.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I'm sorry, it passed. It fell.

Does anyone wish to speak against the oral Amendment?

Nobody?

The Committee is obviously in favour.

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): The Committee was unanimously in favor.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): *Parfait.*

I shall now put the oral amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

[Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON asks for a point of order off mic]

You can't have a point of order during the vote.

Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON (Iceland, ALDE): I asked you for the time of the voting. This is just a run for the vote.

Mr Marco NICOLINI (San Marino, UEL, President of the Assembly): I am sorry. Everyone voted, so there was plenty of time.

The Amendment is agreed. The oral Amendment is agreed.

We will now proceed to vote on the Draft Resolution contained in Document 15901 as amended. 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 15901 as amended is adopted.

We will now proceed to vote on the Draft Recommendation contained in Document 15901. A two-thirds majority is required, two-thirds.

The vote is now open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The Draft Recommendation in Document 15901 is adopted.

Address: Communication from the Committee of Ministers

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Now it is a pleasure for me to welcome among us Ms Dominique HASLER, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein, and President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe for a communication about the activities and priorities of the Liechtenstein presidency of the Committee of Ministers.

The presentation will be followed by an exchange of views with parliamentarians.

Madam President, from the outset let me underline how much we, at the Parliamentary Assembly in general, and I in particular, appreciate and value the institutional cooperation with the Committee of Ministers.

Drawing from the example of my predecessor Mr Tiny KOX, I intend to continue and further expand this cooperation bearing also in mind the spirit and recommendations of the 4th Summit declaration.

The year ahead of us will be important for the whole organisation. The year 2024 will mark the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe and the first anniversary of the Reykjavík Summit, where historic decisions were taken by our heads of states and government.

A time to draw lessons, a time to look forward to the future.

Your country will be more than ever the centre of Europe, not only geographical speaking but above all symbolically.

As you recently declared, being geographically a small state, membership of the Council of Europe has "helped to further secure Liechtenstein's sovereignty and to extend its international recognition as an independent state. It has also contributed both to the development of new European standards and to the protection of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in all Europe. You can be certain that Liechtenstein will continue to contribute to this important effort as an active member of the Council of Europe."

I would like to wish you every success in fulfilling the important task ahead, and you can rest assured that our Parliamentary Assembly will continue to do its utmost to work in synergy with the Committee of Ministers, as we did with the previous presidency.

Minister HASLER, Madam President, it is my pleasure to give you the floor.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Dear President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Dear Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Dear Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellencies,

Dear colleagues,

Before I start my remarks, I would like to extend my congratulations to Mr O'Flaherty on his appointment as the new Commissioner for Human Rights. I wish Mr O'Flaherty success in carrying out the important mission of the Commissioner in the coming six years.

Let me also express my gratitude to Ms Dunia Mijatović for making the best use of her platform to advocate for the rights of victims of human rights violations and other vulnerable groups.

I also want to thank Mr Tiny KOX for the remarkable work he has done over the past two years as President of the Parliamentary Assembly and congratulate the newly elected President, Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS.

I am sure that under his leadership, the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers will continue their fruitful co-operation in making the Council of Europe's voice heard and in ensuring compliance with our democratic principles and human rights.

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

It is my honour to address the Parliamentary Assembly in this week's part-session, in my capacity as the President of the Committee of Ministers.

In November, I already had the pleasure of addressing the members of your Standing Committee in our capital, Vaduz. In my speech today, I would like to give you an overview of our priorities and current developments.

Liechtenstein took over the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers in November, for the third time since we joined the Council of Europe more than 45 years ago. It is an immense privilege and, at the same time, a challenge to hold the Presidency right now.

Over the last year, we have often heard that we currently find ourselves at a crossroads. The values of the Council of Europe – human rights, democracy and the rule of law – face multiple threats. The present seems to be characterised by aggressive power politics, anti-democratic tendencies, growing nationalism and disregard for the rule of law and the rules-based international order. History teaches us that all of these developments have the potential to lead to immeasurable human suffering – suffering that can be avoided.

Particularly in times like these, the Council of Europe and its core principles prove not only important, but urgently necessary. Liechtenstein is actively committed to continuing its work for the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law during its presidency.

With our common recommitment to the Council of Europe and to its core principles, our heads of state and government at the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe sent an important signal in Reykjavík in May last year.

Liechtenstein will continue the work undertaken by the Latvian Presidency to ensure that Reykjavík was not an end in itself, but the beginning of a process of renewal and strengthening for our organisation.

The 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe that we are celebrating this year is taking place under the same motto that brought our leaders together in Reykjavík: "United around our values."

The Committee of Ministers translated these words into concrete terms when it adopted a strong and even historic budget for 2024-2027 in the first meeting of the Ministers' Deputies under the Liechtenstein Presidency by consensus.

The budget reflects the priorities and direction given by the Summit and provides significant additional means for their implementation. It is the first budget in seventeen years with a real increase in financing over and above inflation.

The pledge to continue to strengthen the co-operation and political dialogue with the Parliamentary Assembly has been given effect, in particular through the allocation of additional funding to the Assembly. In this context, the Committee of Ministers welcomes the Assembly's contribution to the budget process and notably its intention to mainstream the Reykjavík Agenda into Assembly activities.

In line with the commitment of our heads of state and government, a real increase in resources was also decided for the European Court of Human Rights.

The Court acts as the principle safeguard to protect our values and to guarantee that Europe remains a continent of democratic societies, guided by the rule of law. As member states, it is our obligation to ensure the full, effective and prompt execution of all judgements of the Court and to respect its case law.

In this context, let me also refer to the Human Rights meeting of the Committee of Ministers that took place last December and was devoted to the supervision of the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

At that meeting, the Committee examined a large number of cases covering many issues in various member States.

In the case of *Kavala v Türkiye*, the applicant remains detained despite the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights and repeated calls for his immediate release.

The case is under the Committee's close scrutiny. At its regular meeting on 17 January, the Committee adopted a new decision which should allow for high-level technical contacts to take place in the first part of February this year.

Following our constructive and results-oriented dialogue, I trust that the Turkish authorities will be committed to delivering results.

For the credibility of the convention system – and the Organisation as a whole – it is imperative that all member states fulfil their obligation to implement the judgments of the Court.

Reykjavík was also the opportunity for our leaders to express their full support to Ukraine and to firmly condemn the illegal war of aggression launched by the Russian Federation.

In the face of the many crimes committed and the countless difficulties imposed on them by Russia, the Ukrainian authorities and people continue to demonstrate a courage and determination that commands respect.

From the outset of the aggression, the Council of Europe wanted to provide as much assistance as possible.

This, with a series of initiatives aiming to support Ukraine in its fight for freedom and justice, and to hold the Russian Federation to account.

The establishment of the Register of Damage for Ukraine in Reykjavik last year was a critical first step to this end. The Register will serve as a record of evidence and claims information on all the damages caused by the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

As such, the Register is a strong first step towards an international compensation mechanism for victims of the Russian aggression.

I commend the extensive preparatory work that has been undertaken in the last few months to make the Register fully operational. The newly-elected Board of the Register held its inaugural meeting in December, and it is expected that claims will begin to be submitted in the spring.

To date, 43 States and the European Union have joined the Register. Among those joining we have Canada, Japan and the United States.

The Liechtenstein Presidency will continue to advocate for broader membership in the Register. In this context, we have already commenced outreach activities, with which we hope to encourage states outside the Council of Europe to join our important efforts to ensuring justice.

Alongside this, the Council of Europe is pursuing the implementation of the most ambitious Ukraine Action Plan entitled "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction". The activities are carried out in a wide range of fields such as constitutional justice, anti-corruption, democratic governance and media freedom.

The situation of children in Ukraine remains particularly worrying. In the light of the grave circumstances they face, the Declaration on the situation of children of Ukraine was adopted by the Heads of State and Government in Reykjavík.

As a follow-up to the Declaration and with the funds provided by the Action Plan on Ukraine, the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine has been set up to serve as a multilateral platform to exchange information and to foster discussions about policies affecting Ukrainian children residing in other Council of Europe member states.

During its first meeting here in Strasbourg last month, the Consultation Group on Children of Ukraine brought together over 85 participants to discuss ways to effectively protect the rights of the millions of children who have been forced to flee Ukraine and are now residing in other Council of Europe member states.

While the mandate of the Consultation Group does not cover the unlawful transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation, to Belarus, or to the areas temporarily controlled or occupied by Russia, the Council of Europe, together with its member states and the newly established international coalition, remains committed to finding solutions that enable the immediate and safe return of these children.

With regard to the Russian Federation, the Committee of Ministers is actively working with the UN bodies to remind Russia of its unconditional legal obligation to implement the judgments of the Strasbourg Court. In that context the Committee held an exchange of views in December 2023 with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Russia.

Ukraine is unfortunately not the only country in our organisation to see its right to territorial integrity violated by the Russian Federation; the same is true of Georgia.

On 31 October, in the context of the continuing deterioration of the human rights situation in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the ministers' deputies took a series of decisions and recalled once again that the measures taken by the de facto authorities, supported by the Russian Federation in these areas, violate Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The ministers' deputies also approved an Action Plan for Georgia for 2024-2027, the aim of which is to better harmonise Georgia's legislation, institutions and practice with European standards in the fields of human rights, the rule of law and democracy.

At the 4th Summit, our heads of state and government committed to ensuring a leading role for the Council of Europe in developing standards in the digital era to safeguard human rights online and offline, including by finalising, as a priority, the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence.

This work is progressing well, and the Committee of Ministers is expecting to adopt the new Convention during our presidency. We count on the Parliamentary Assembly's assistance in achieving this goal.

At the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government, and in the Reykjavik Declaration, our leaders also underlined the pioneering role of the Council of Europe in the fight against violence against women and domestic violence.

Although we have achieved a lot together – and in this context, let me draw your attention to an event on women and multilateralism taking place later today – there is still much more to do to achieve full and effective gender equality. The dangerous increase of gender-based violence during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as in conflict situations, serves as a sad reminder of this.

With the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe has provided us with an international gold standard – and more importantly – the key instrument to effectively and inclusively combat these phenomena.

Liechtenstein is proud to have ratified the Convention two years ago, and to promote it as one of our priorities for our presidency.

Following the recent ratification by Latvia, people in 39 states and the EU profit from the standards of this important instrument.

I recall the importance of the Istanbul Convention and strongly encourage member states which have not yet done so to sign and ratify the Convention.

Dear friends and colleagues,

The 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe, we already heard it from the President, provides an important opportunity to demonstrate our common commitment to multilateralism and the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

And as member states, it is our obligation to do our utmost to safeguard these principles, even though the circumstances are difficult.

Let us, together, remember that the Council of Europe – as the guarantor for these values – has proved its capabilities in securing stability and promoting progress in its member states time and time again, ever since it was founded.

Through a range of activities and events in Strasbourg and all across Europe, this 75th anniversary will showcase what the Council of Europe means in practical terms for the 700 million Europeans who live in our 46 member states.

In order to encourage youth participation in the work of the Council of Europe, because they are our future, the Liechtenstein presidency will, moreover, organise a youth event to enable interested youth from across Europe to add their voice to the work of this organisation.

Also speaking as Minister for Education, this priority is close to my heart. The event will take place back to back with the Ministerial Session and the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe in May.

Dear Members of this Assembly,

Let me conclude by going back to the beginning of my speech.

At the beginning of my remarks, I stated that we currently find ourselves at a crossroads – the values of the Council of Europe are under threat. The good news is, however, – and in this context let me also refer to yesterday's address of the Prime Minister of Liechtenstein –, that it is in our own hands to change this situation.

At this crucial crossroads, let us remember that the Council of Europe – as the guarantor of human rights, democracy and the rule of law – has proved its capabilities in securing stability and promoting progress in its Member States time and time again, ever since it was founded.

Multilateralism makes us stronger. Our common values make us stronger. We need more multilateralism, not less. We must safeguard our common values. We can only tackle the current challenges if we work together. It is upon us to decide on the path we want to go down, so let us choose the right one.

For this, we count on all of your support.

Thank you very much for your attention.

I'm now looking forward to receiving your relevant questions, and I will do my best to answer the questions specifically.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Dominique HASLER.

We will now proceed to the questions. We will first hear questions from the speakers on behalf of the political groups and then hear a response from Ms Dominique HASLER to those questions.

I want to remind the speakers that there is a limit of 30 seconds and I would just remind my colleagues that they must ask only single questions and not make speeches.

On behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President,

Madam Foreign Minister, may I first of all congratulate you warmly on your small but extremely efficient parliamentary team, which organised such a perfect Standing Committee for us, which was extraordinary. We all felt extremely comfortable in Vaduz.

Secondly, one question, you rightly demanded compliance with the judgments of the Human Rights Court. What are the next steps that the Council of Ministers is considering with regard to the Kavala case, because the immediate release has not taken place, only a transfer, which is somewhat questionable.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, you have the floor.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Mister Stefan SCHENNACH, first of all, I want to thank you for your question.

Let me just make a short remark in German.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Once again, I would like to thank all members of the Joint Committee for accepting our invitation to Liechtenstein. It was a very valuable meeting and, of course, I would also like to thank our delegation for making this meeting in Liechtenstein possible.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much for the co-operation.

I am coming back now to your questions related to the Kavala case.

As I already indicated in my speech, Mr Osman Kavala remains detained despite the repeated calls for his immediate release, and the finding of a violation of Article 46 by the European Court.

Of course the case is under the committee's close scrutiny - I already mentioned that in my speech.

In this context I would like to refer to the human rights meeting of the Committee of Ministers that took place last December.

I was devoted to the CM supervision of the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

At that meeting the Committee examined a large number of cases covering many issues in various member states.

In the case of *Kavala vs Türkiye* the applicant remains detained despite repeated calls for his immediate release and the finding of a violation of Article 46 by the European Court.

Again, we have this case under the Committee's close scrutiny.

At its regular meeting on 17 January - I also mentioned that in my speech - the Committee adopted a new decision which should allow for high-level technical contexts to take place in the first part of February.

We do believe, following our constructive and results-oriented dialogues, that we trust that the Turkish authorities will be committed to delivering results.

As many of you recall, support for a stronger European Court of Human Rights and more effective execution of its judgments was also one of the key deliverables of the Reykjavík summit.

It is also a long term priority for Liechtenstein and for the credibility of the convention system and the organisation as a whole. I already mentioned that also before.

It is imperative that all member states fulfil their obligations to implement the judgments of the Court.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I call now Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party to raise his question.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Madam Minister,

Being a small country in the heart of Europe, what is Liechtenstein's vision of finding the balance between the full respect of our core values and keeping national state tradition and identity?

And how, in these alarming wars, can small countries confront external challenges and international threats undermining their security and serenity?

In this respect, Madam Minister, I am a little bit surprised, but in your speech you didn't even mention what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh.

What Azerbaijan did led to the exodus of population which is twice bigger than the population of your own country.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mister Minister, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much, Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN for your question.

You already raised a question about small states in Vaduz. I can remember that. So thank you very much for coming back to this important topic.

And let me just first answer this question in my national capacity, and I would like to also revert to what our Prime Minister said yesterday. "Liechtenstein can be considered a small place but a great one at the same time" and I already mentioned in Vaduz that we do believe, as a small state, that we have to live by the principle of "one nation, one vote". I am always saying our future should be shaped by the best ideas and not the loudest voices. Perhaps we can also transfer that to being small or big, every decision is important and everybody has to bring in their expertise wherever they can. It needs everybody at the moment. So I can just underline also, once again, the importance of all member states within the Council of Europe taking over the responsibility and working very closely together.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the European Conservatives, Sir Christopher CHOPE.

Sir Christopher CHOPE (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Can you tell me what would happen if you defy the ruling of the Committee of Ministers following your high level contacts at the beginning of February?

Please, can you answer that question specifically? A failure to answer that question suggests that many of your words today, your worthy words, will ring hollow, because, meanwhile, Mr Osman Kavala continues to suffer a most horrendous misjustice.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much also to Sir Christopher CHOPE for his questions.

I think I've already outlined the framework and where we do stand in this process at the moment.

I am aware that on 13 January 2023 our rapporteurs for the monitoring of Türkiye met with various interlocutors in Ankara and with Mr Osman Kavala himself at Silivri prison.

I welcome this initiative. I can only repeat the call for Mr Osman Kavala's immediate release. The ongoing dialogue must achieve results.

There is no step more important for Mr Osman Kavala and for the convention system.

As I said before, if you ask me to answer the question specifically, I think we do now accept this process.

We will have a view as minister of committees on this process.

Of course, we will reflect the outcome of also the further plans with it and then look forward together in a dialogue to find solutions.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON.

Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON (Iceland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Madam President,

Madam Foreign Minister,

No nations have more at stake in international organisations functioning successfully than their smaller members, and that was wisely said by the Icelandic Prime Minister in the spring of 1950, when Iceland became a member of the Council of Europe.

Since then, we have further learned that smaller nations are often more successful in providing true leadership in challenging and trying times, gaining trust and unifying nations, small and large, behind our values.

Liechtenstein has indeed proved this during their presidency of the Council of Europe.

Liechtenstein, focusing on “United by our values” labelled five main priorities as the focus for your presidency.

What is your assessment of their progress?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much, Mister JÓNSSON, for your question.

As I said before, the implementation of all the aims we said together at the Reykjavík Summit is one of the main priorities during the Liechtenstein Presidency. Let me just mention once again, also for me personally, it was really a milestone and a huge importance that we could adopt together such a strong budget by consensus, because without the budget there is no capacity to implement all those various aims.

I think we do all agree that we need the framework, a good framework that, in our different capacities, we are able to implement the aims of.

The subgroups of the Committee of Ministers are currently working on the follow-up of the Summit, and saying that it's really a pragmatism process. We do really set clear goals and also clear timelines, so that we can also reflect on what we achieved.

We expect to draft a first comprehensive report on the implementation this spring, so there is already a first review. We do really believe it also builds a basis that we critically look at where we stand and learn from the process, and give even more energy to go further.

You can be assured that this, as mentioned, is a priority of our Presidency.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Ms Sevilay ÇELENK ÖZEN.

Ms Sevilay ÇELENK ÖZEN (Türkiye, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

In December 2020, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the rights and freedoms of Selahattin Demirtaş, the former Co-Chair of the HDP had been violated, and ordered his immediate release.

Despite the verdict of the Grand Chamber, three years ago, Demirtaş is still in prison without a conviction. Given the importance of the Article 18 in this judgment, why is the Committee of Ministers not initiating infringement proceedings in the Demirtaş case?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Dominique HASLER would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much, Madam Sevilay ÇELENK ÖZEN.

I just want to reply that the Committee has expressed profound concern about the situation of Mr Selahattin Demirtaş, an opposition politician in Türkiye at the time.

On 22 December 2020, the Grand Chamber of the European Court gave a judgment in a case brought by Mr Selahattin Demirtaş.

It found a number of violations of the Convention relating to rights, to liberty and freedom of expression, you mentioned it too.

It established that the applicant's pre-trial detention had pursued the ulterior purpose of stifling pluralism and limiting freedom of political debate, which was at the very, very core of the concept of a democratic society.

Under Article 46, the Court indicated that the response state was to take all necessary measures to secure the applicant's immediate release.

In April 2023 last year, the European Court also found that the detention of the opposition politician and co-leader of the opposition party with Mr Selahattin Demirtaş, but also with Ms Figen Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu in violation of the convention, on similar grounds to those in the Demirtaş case.

Coming back to the Committee of Ministers, we have been regularly examining the cases at its human rights meetings. We do that regularly and the Turkish authorities have indicated that there is new evidence in the case of Mr Selahattin Demirtaş which would justify his detention. He has challenged this before the Constitutional Court.

Perhaps you will just allow me to add two further points.

At its last human rights meeting in December 2023, the Committee once again strongly urged the authorities to ensure the applicant's immediate release, for example by exploring alternative measures to detention, pending the completion of the proceeding he initiated before the Constitutional Court.

It reiterated its invitation to member states bodies and observer states to raise the issues of the applicant's continuing detention in their context with the Turkish authorities, and call again for an immediate action to bring it to an end.

I can only echo in my role, the Committee is calling for release. The Committee will next examine the cases at its upcoming Committee of Ministers meeting in March.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms HASLER.

I now give the floor to other speakers, and we'll take them in groups of three, asking my esteemed colleagues that their interventions to be up to 30 seconds.

First is Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL.

Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL (Switzerland, ALDE): Dear Minister,

As a quasi-neighbour, living only a few kilometers away from Liechtenstein, I dare to speak in German. The dialect is a bit difficult. It's similar, but nobody would understand it.

My two questions. The first one: how was the decision yesterday on the resolution on Azerbaijan received in the Committee of Ministers, i.e. this general question about the Committee?

Then a second question. You said very well that multilateralism makes us all stronger, and you also said very well that it is very important, the principle of "One Nation, One Vote". Now it is not easy for a small state to live this, to live multilateralism, to do all the work. Is that even possible for a state with 40 000 inhabitants? Do you have to set priorities? How do you do that, especially with the Presidency?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The second in the group of the three colleagues is Mr Thomas HASLER.

As you see, Madam Minister, we have more Haslers today in this room.

Mister HASLER?

Mr Thomas HASLER (Liechtenstein, ALDE): Dear Chairman

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Liechtenstein delegation, I would like to thank the Foreign Minister, Ms Dominique HASLER, for her remarks.

In these challenging times, the Council of Europe is also celebrating its 75th anniversary, and I wanted to ask what the Presidency has planned or what the plans are in this context.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I now give the floor to Mr Gábor BÁNYAI.

Mr Gábor BÁNYAI (Hungary, EC/DA): Madam Minister,

What is your position on linguistic diversity and the protection of national minorities with regard to the provision of mother tongue education?

Thank you for your answer.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Mister President, thank you very much for giving me the floor. Thank you very much for those also very important questions.

I start with answering the question of Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL, and just allow me to switch swiftly to German.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): We have heard. We are neighbours and I would like to thank you very much for your question and perhaps start and answer this question in German before I switch back to English.

I will start with the question of the role of smaller states in multilateralism. I think it is also worth referring to the speech that our head of government gave yesterday. I said it before. In the times we live in, small states cannot simply withdraw and say we cannot make a contribution, because I believe that more than ever we need everyone's contribution.

We know that we really are living in difficult geopolitical times and how we live this as a small state is. Yes, we cannot have answers to all questions with a small administration. What is important to me as Foreign Minister, together with my diplomatic corps, is that we have built up expertise in subject areas over decades.

Unfortunately, this expertise, particularly in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, especially Council of Europe issues, is now more relevant than ever due to the many crises. We are really trying to contribute our expertise in niche issues and actively make our contribution as a reliable partner. But we couldn't do that if we got bogged down. That would not be possible. That is why, here too, during our Presidency, we are doing our best to set priorities.

I believe that what we also live by in Liechtenstein, the Head of Government emphasised this as pragmatic, is that we always keep an eye on the goals we set ourselves and also want to achieve them. This is where the sports minister in me speaks a little. I think it's also important to set smart goals and achieve them together, and of course also thanks to good co-operation between the various institutions, especially at the moment in many, many dossiers together with Parliament, for which I am very grateful.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Then, just let me shift to the second question, which you raised concerning the situation in Azerbaijan. There, I just want to answer in English.

Of course, yes, we are aware of the decision taken yesterday by your Assembly not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation. I just want to mention that, of course, this matter has not been yet discussed by the Committee of Ministers. So, for me, it is impossible to tell you the views of the Committee. I would only like to recall that the role of the Committee of Ministers is there in accordance with the Statute of the Council of Europe and in close co-operation with your Assembly and the Secretary General to foster our unity in order to safeguard and promote the ideas we share together.

Let me also just look back a little bit. For 75 years, we mentioned the last few days a lot our anniversary, the Council of Europe has been working to strengthen the unity of European states. It offers a unique platform for multilateral co-operation between the governments and parliaments of its 46 member states to strengthen respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. Since becoming a member state in 2001, Azerbaijan has benefited from the Council of Europe's support in its democratic transition. Conversely, the Council of Europe, we benefited from the contribution of Azerbaijan for promoting its values and increasing its outreach. It is a mutually beneficial co-operation, which is open-ended and, of course, serious improvements and reforms are certainly necessary. But we need each other. I hope that the Azerbaijan delegation will soon be back in the Parliamentary Assembly, which, as I understand, you also stated in your debate, and resolution yesterday, so that the co-operation and dialogue can continue in the interests of the values that unite us.

As President of the Committee of Ministers, I am at the disposal of all the parties concerned with the view to encouraging the most acceptable solutions for all so as to enable our organisation to continue the tremendous work it has been doing over the last 75 years.

Then I am coming back to Mr Thomas HASLER's question. "Hasler" seems to be quite a famous name in Liechtenstein. He asked about the main topics which we are going to set within the 75th anniversary. First of all, I want to thank you. The anniversary is organised by the Secretariat. The Committee of Ministers contributes to the organisation in many events. The official ceremony will take place on the 16 May back to back with the next ministerial session. I am very thankful that we will be able to combine that.

On this occasion, the Liechtenstein Presidency, I already mentioned it, is also planning a youth event with the clear aim that, of course, we are well aware of the importance of a well-functioning Council of Europe today. We also need youth which is interested in the Council of Europe, which knows the importance of the Council of Europe. We do believe an anniversary is the perfect moment to integrate them, but also to listen to their voices where they see the Council of Europe, perhaps during the next 75 years, because then they will be in charge and celebrating the anniversary of this very important organisation.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I think that if the next three colleagues will be brief as my colleague from Hungary was...

Sorry.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Sorry for that. I was so much into celebrating I forgot questions.

Sorry for that. I'm coming back to your question, I apologise once again, because it's a very important question about minority languages.

The important role of the Council of Europe in promoting and protecting national minorities was again stressed in the Reykjavík Declaration. The Council of Europe has developed two unique treaties with no equivalent worldwide.

First, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The level of implementation of the monitoring bodies recommendations is, however, insufficient in many states' parties and needs to be strengthened, and you mentioned that in your question, too.

Co-operation activities could be reinforced in that respect and the use of minority languages included in the Council of Europe action plans.

In addition, the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages could be further promoted, including by your Assembly itself, whose members have the possibility to boost the ratification processes in their respective parliaments.

Speaking one's own language is a crucial part of identity, and promoting the use of regional and minority languages is promoting the cultural diversity of Europe. I think in this sense we should further shape this process together.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Minister.

Dear colleagues, I only want to remind you that we have 5 minutes.

So, I kindly ask my colleagues to ask the questions within the limit of 30 seconds.

Now is Ms Ariana MUSLIU-SHOSHI.

You have the floor.

Ms Ariana MUSLIU-SHOSHI (Assembly of Kosovo*): Mister President, thank you.

Madam President,

It is a pleasure to have you here.

As has been noted by democratic countries, Kosovo's commitment for the last 20 years has been in line with the values of this institution and with the values of the European Union countries.

My question to you is:

When do you foresee the decision of the Committee of Ministers on Kosovo's application for full membership? What's your stance on this?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ariana.

The next question is by Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN.

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Chair.

Madam Minister,

After all the devastating developments in our region, including the ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan continues to threaten its neighbour Armenia with renewed use of force, making new claims and demands.

In this alarming situation the international community should be very vigilant.

Any reluctance on the part of the international community to take decisive steps will only encourage Azerbaijan to launch new aggressions.

I would like to ask you about the actions of your Presidency.

What has been done so far and what is planned to deter Azerbaijan from further escalating the situation in the region?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The third question from Ms Khatia TSILOSANI.

Ms Khatia TSILOSANI (Georgia, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

Madam Minister,

Thanks a lot for your really great address regarding Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty and for your really good support and strong voice to mention Russia's aggressive steps towards Georgia and Georgia's occupation.

Thank you also for your strong language about declaring the role of peaceful conflict resolution and non-recognition policy.

I wanted to know what your view is regarding the efforts and efficiency to utilise existing tools within the Council of Europe to address the challenges and concerns related to the security architecture and human rights violations resulting from Russia's occupation.

In addition, how do you see that we can ensure Russia's role to meet the commitments that were mandated by the European Union on the ceasefire agreement in 2008?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much, Mister President, for giving me the floor again.

I will start with answering the question from Ms Ariana MUSLIU-SHOSHI, again coming back to the topic of Kosovo. I could just underline what I have already said.

The official procedure for membership to the Council of Europe was launched in May 2022. The procedure is now in the parliamentary phase, as you are well aware. Of course, once the Committee has received the opinion of your Assembly, it will decide in accordance with the states of the Council of Europe and relevant rules, better to adapt the resolution, inviting Kosovo to become a member. We are well aware of the sensitive nature of the issue. In my role as the President of the Committee of the Ministers, I will work with all member states together to ensure a sound and fair process in line with our rules.

I want to come back to Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN's question relating to the situation in Armenia.

Peace and stability in the Caucasus region are of key importance, not only for the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan, but for the Council of Europe as a whole.

The role of the Council of Europe is to provide the necessary assistance to states that so wish to strengthen respect for human rights and good governance.

Democratic security is, in our view, the best guarantee of greater security for all.

Hence the action plans, I mentioned them before, regularly adopted by the Committee of Ministers. They build the basis to help member states in fulfilling their commitments. The Council of Europe can also help actively to establish conditions conducive to a peace agreement by encouraging confidence building measures.

In this context, I very much welcome the recent initiative launched by the Secretary General as well as the recent report by the Commissioner for Human Rights following her visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan. I think they also give a roadmap for the further steps we should do together.

I got a third question from Ms Khatia TSILOSANI. Thank you very much for your question about Georgia. Here I just want to underline that the Committee of Ministers has on numerous occasions expressed its full support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within the internationally recognised borders.

I think we have to recall the Reykjavík Summit Declaration. It calls also on the Russian Federation to immediately withdraw its forces from Georgia. You can be assured that this will be also a topic which will continue to be a very important one in the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Thank you very much for your questions.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): At this point, I want to warmly thank Ms Dominique HASLER for her presence and the answers that she gave this afternoon to my colleagues.

Dear colleagues,

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting later this afternoon at 3:30 p.m. with the agenda that was approved on Monday.

I invite you to be in the hemicycle at your seats in good time for the communication of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ, at 3:30 p.m.

For those colleagues who will be leaving Strasbourg today and will not be attending this afternoon, could you please deposit your voting cards in the ballot box provided for this purpose at the end of the chamber?

The sitting is adjourned.