



Provisional edition

Monday 30 September 2024, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the part session

Opening of the sitting No 24

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

I declare the Fourth Part-Session of the 2024 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe open.

Dear Secretary General, dear Deputy Secretary General, Madam Secretary General of the Assembly, ambassadors, members of the Assembly,

I wish to welcome you warmly to this fourth and final part-session of our Assembly in 2024. I particularly welcome Mr Alain BERSET, the new Secretary General of the Council of Europe whom we elected back in June and who has taken up his duties just a few weeks ago.

(Applause)

Dear Alain,

I understand that these first days in this important capacity have been extremely busy and dynamic and that you already feel in your position like a fish in water and there is a lot of water in Strasbourg. However, as this is the first Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe session for you as the Secretary General, I still would like on behalf of our entire Assembly to wish you every success in your mandate. You have the heavy responsibility, yet also the privilege, of taking up these duties in a truly historic period, when your leadership can really make a visible impact and difference to our European continent, for the relevance and the importance of the Council of Europe could not be higher than it is right now, and I can assure you that you can count on every support from our Assembly, as together we defend the mental principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, of which this organisation is guardian.

We look forward, dear Alain, to your first address to the Assembly tomorrow. Also to make your first session even more exciting, we have prepared a very interesting and politically topical agenda for this week, which will clearly create numerous opportunities for synergies and joint follow-ups by all statutory bodies of the Council of Europe.

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.

Today, we will start our session with the awarding of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, with a ceremony which will be presented by an address by Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA, winner of the 2022 Václav Havel Prize, and thankfully, now released from Russia – from a Russian gulag, actually – as part of a complex prisoners exchange.

Dear Vladimir,

Let me once again express my utmost relief to see you free, and all the more determined to continue with your fight for a free and democratic Russia, which we all long for, and which poses no threats to its neighbours nor to its own citizens. Our Assembly has been one of the loudest voices calling for the release of not only Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA, but all of those who are political prisoners in illegal detention. And I believe that we have contributed to international visibility and pressure, which led Vladimir to his safe release. I am very happy that earlier this month he could celebrate his birthday with his family in Paris, and not in a prison cell in Omsk, and we are delighted to greet him here in Strasbourg today.

I know that Vladimir, like us all, is thinking today of all others who have suffered imprisonment, and even died in voicing their opposition to this brutal dictatorship and its allies.

The 2021 Václav Havel prizewinner Ms Maria KALESNIKAVA is, as we speak, still in the hands of a totalitarian dictator, and we hear very worrying reports about her physical situation and condition. We must not rest until Maria and all other political prisoners in Russia and Belarus are freed. We will do whatever we can to achieve this objective.

The ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its consequences remain the top priority for us. Clearly, this will remain our key concern for as long as needed. The situation on the frontline is very volatile. Recently we witnessed yet more indiscriminate air and missile strikes by the Russian Federation against the cities, towns and villages of Ukraine, with dozens of civilian deaths, and still more damage and destruction to the infrastructure of society, schools, hospitals, historic monuments and homes. We need to step up, with ever more urgency, the discussions on how to achieve peace for Ukraine and its people, based on justice and accountability for the Russian Federation, for its crimes, in and against Ukraine. The innocent victims of this brutal aggression deserve reparation and justice. In that regard, earlier this morning, the Bureau recommended to hold an urgent debate on one of the most heartbreaking dimensions of this war: missing persons – both civilians and prisoners of war – who are today still unaccounted for, or kept in captivity, often in conditions of torture and inhumane treatment.

There will also be the first meeting of the parliamentary network on the situation of Ukrainian children, and I wish to express my admiration to our colleague Ms Olena KHOMENKO, who has worked so tirelessly to set up this network which will now certainly be able to play an important part in addressing the tragic situation of so many children of Ukraine.

Next Tuesday, we will mark the third anniversary of the horrible terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel, which resulted in hundreds of innocent civilians, including women, children and even babies brutally killed, injured or kidnapped. Many of them are still in the hands of terrorists. Our thoughts and sympathies are of course with them, their relatives and friends. This attack is yet another example of how violence and terror only perpetuate suffering of people on both sides, and only exacerbate already complex situations in Palestine. The military operation unleashed by the Israeli defence forces in response to the Hamas terror and which continues to this very day also brought more bloodshed and pain in the Middle East, with many innocent civilians caught in the crossfire, and a humanitarian crisis of a huge magnitude, unravelling in our closest neighbourhood.

There is no doubt that our Assembly has a role to play in the international efforts to end this dangerous spiral of violence that may soon spill over to the neighbouring countries and lead to a much wider regional conflict. Later this week, we are expected to debate on the escalation of the violence and the mounting humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza.

Another issue, dear colleagues, high on the political agenda for today is that of migration. A joint debate on the smuggling of migrants and fate of missing migrants will take place tomorrow, with the participation of the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY.

We will also hold debates on the detention and conviction of Mr Julian ASSANGE and the chilling effects on human rights, the issue of propaganda and freedom of information in Europe, the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member states, preventing and combating violence and discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Europe, and many other topics.

Later today we will exchange views with the Governor of the Council of Europe Development Bank, Mr Carlo MONTICELLI. I recently met Mr MONTICELLI with leaders of our political groups in Paris, and I am convinced that this opportunity to learn more about the bank's activities and functioning will be most valuable to all of you as national parliamentarians, and will allow us also to step up our co-operation and synergies with the bank.

The Lithuanian foreign minister Mr Gabrielius LANDSBERGIS, president of the Committee of Ministers, will present an additional communication from that body and answer questions from the members. The foreign minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, Mr Timčo MUCUNSKI, will also address the Assembly later this week.

I wish all of us a productive and effective session and I look forward to our debate.

Let's go to work.

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

The names of the members and substitutes are in Document 16046. If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified.

Are there any credentials challenged?

No.

The credentials are ratified. And I welcome our new colleagues.

(Applause)

The next item on the Agenda is the election of Vice-President of the Assembly in respect of Belgium and San Marino. The two candidates are, from the Delegation of Belgium, Mr Andries GRYFFROY, and, from the Delegation of San Marino, Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI.

If there is no request for a vote, Mr Andries GRYFFROY and Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI will be declared elected.

No objections, so I congratulate Mr Andries GRYFFROY and Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI on their elections.

(Applause)

The next item on the Agenda is changes in the membership of committees.

The candidatures for the general committees of the Assembly have been published as Document Committees (Commissions (2024) 07).

Are these proposals approved?

Yes, approved. And the committees are appointed accordingly.

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

The Bureau has received the following four requests:

- Urgent procedure debate requested by the political groups under the title: "Missing persons, prisoners of war and civilians in captivity as a result of the war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine;
- Urgent procedure debate requested by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, under the title: "The emergency healthcare and humanitarian situation of women and children in Gaza";
- Current affairs debate requested by the Group of the European People's Party, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, and the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, under the title: "Situation in the Middle-East: escalation of violence and mounting humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza";
- Current affairs debate requested by the political groups, under the title: "Deteriorating situation of human rights, rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan".

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau decided to recommend to the Assembly to hold one urgent procedure debate and two current affairs debates during this part-session. We will consider the requests in the order that they were made, beginning with the urgent procedure debates.

The first request for debate under the urgent procedure: I would like to ask the Assembly if the Assembly agrees to the Bureau's recommendation to hold an urgent debate on "Missing persons, prisoners of war and civilians in captivity as a result of the war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine"?

The Bureau's recommendation is accepted, and the request for urgent procedure is therefore approved, and referred to the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons for report.

We now come to the second request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "The emergency healthcare and humanitarian situation of women and children in Gaza".

At its meeting this morning the Bureau agreed to recommend to the Assembly that this request be rejected in view of its support for the request for a current affairs debate on "Situation in the Middle-East: escalation of violence and mounting humanitarian crisis".

Is the Bureau's recommendation accepted?

Yes, the Bureau's recommendation is accepted, and the request for an urgent procedure debate on this topic is therefore NOT approved.

We now come to the first request for a current affairs debate. The Bureau was in favour of this request for a current affairs debate on "Situation in the Middle-East: escalation of violence and mounting humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza".

Does the Assembly agree to the recommendation of the Bureau that there should be a current affairs debate on this topic?

The Bureau's recommendation is accepted, and the request for a current affairs debate is therefore approved. It will be opened by Ms Saskia KLUIT.

We now come to the second request for a current affairs debate. The Bureau was in favour of the request for a current affairs debate on "Deteriorating situation of human rights, rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan".

Does the Assembly agree to the recommendation of the Bureau that there should be a current affairs debate on this topic?

Yes, I am listening.

Mr Givi MIKANADZE (Georgia, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

I would like to challenge this current debate because we have an absence of the Azerbaijani delegation. At the same time we have to consider that recently the new elections of the parliament took place. Therefore, I think that, in accordance with the values of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it is important that all sides be present and participating and also to discuss the possibility of establishing direct communication with the newly-elected parliament.

Therefore I would like to challenge this current debate.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Okay then.

It is clear that Mr Givi MIKANADZE has made an objection to the Bureau's proposal for the current affairs debate on the "Deteriorating situation of human rights, rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan".

Does Mr Iulian BULAI wish to respond to explain the position of the Bureau?

Maybe the one at the left, Iulian.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE): Thank you, Mister President.

I would not like to respond, but rather reconfirm that there's been a unanimous decision in both the Presidential Committee and the Bureau of this Assembly. There's been no opposing voices from any of the groups of the Assembly within all the formats we've had as filters of decisions till now. So I see no reason for not going ahead with this proposal that has been, till now, unanimously accepted by all the political groups and all the MPs.

Thank you.

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

The Assembly will now vote according to our rules on the Bureau's proposal that the current affairs debate be held.

I remind the Assembly that the decision requires a simple majority.

Those who are in favour of holding this current affairs debate should vote yes. Those who are against holding such a debate should vote no.

The vote is open.

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

The current affairs debate is approved and it will be opened by Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN.

I have to announce that I have received a request from the authorities in Poland for the waiver of immunity of a representative, Mr Marcin ROMANOWSKI. Under Rule 73 of the Assembly, this request stands referred to the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs.

The Committee shall immediately consider the request. Its report has been scheduled as first item of business on the afternoon of Wednesday 2 October.

The next item of business is the adoption of the agenda for the fourth part of the 2024 ordinary session.

The draft agenda submitted for the Assembly's approval was adopted by the Bureau this morning.

Let me ask now the Assembly... sorry.

I remind members that we have just agreed one debate under the urgent procedure and two current affairs debates. The debate under the urgent procedure will take place on Wednesday as set out in the provisional agenda.

The current affairs debates will take place on Tuesday afternoon.

In order to accommodate the current affairs debates on Tuesday, the Bureau proposes to move the debate on Commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Holodomor to Thursday morning.

Is the draft agenda agreed to?

Yes, it is agreed.

The next item on the Agenda is the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. The programme has been distributed as in paper 2024/09. The awards ceremony will be preceded by a speech by Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA, 2022 prize-winner.

But before I call Mister KARA-MURZA allow me..

Okay.

Since we are four minutes ahead of time, I will give the floor to Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS. No, give me a minute.

We just need a couple of minutes to prepare the scenery and we'll go on immediately.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, it is now an immense honour for me and an equally true pleasure to welcome among us in this hemicycle, which we call the agora for democracy, the 2022 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize winner, journalist, historian, political resistant Mister Vladimir KARA-MURZA and his wife Evgenia.

Dear Vladimir, words are the weapons of intellectuals. Your words against the war in Ukraine scared the current leader of the Russian government so much that you were sentenced to 25 years in prison, in what was a mockery of the justice system.

Our relief was immense, our joy extreme, when we learned this summer that you had been released together with several other political prisoners.

Your first words were for those who remain in prison, the political prisoners who are still facing absurd condemnations, pleading to the world not to forget them.

You are an example of courage, of resilience for all of us. The courage to say no, even at the cost of your freedom and maybe even your life. The courage to show the world that another Russia is possible.

It makes me think of the words written by Albert Camus in his diary, when he learned that the war had started: swear to do, in the worst situation, only the noblest act.

Vladimir, you have applied this principle throughout your life and your life of predecessors, as much as I remember. And in your speech before the tribunal, you declared:

"I also know that the day will come where the darkness over our country will dissipate, when black will be called black and white will be called white, when at the official level, it will be recognised that two times two is still four, when a war will be called a war, and an usurper an usurper, and when those who kindled and unleashed this war, rather than those who try to stop it, will be recognised as criminals. Even today, even in the darkness around us, even sitting in this cage, I love my country and believe in our people."

And when the judge asked you if you repented, you replied: not only do I not repent of any of this, but I'm proud of it.

This is a lesson for all of us. With you, I hope and want to believe that the day will come when people from Russia will wake up and realise that atrocities are being done in their names by a terrorist regime in total disrespect of international law and with a lack of a common sense of humanity and decency.

I remember when your wife Evgenia came to address our Assembly last April. Her most dignified and powerful speech made a lasting impression on all of us. I told her at the time that she was not alone, that we all stood in support of her. I'm most happy to see her again with us today, definitely no longer alone and reunited with the person she has been fighting for so much, travelling all over the world to demand his release, and also for the release of all political prisoners.

Dear Vladimir, in the house of democracy for which you have been fighting so hard, it is my honour now to give you the floor.

Prize Award Ceremony: Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA (2022 Prize winner): Thank you so much, President Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS, members of the Assembly, your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends.

It is a great privilege to join you here in the main hemicycle of European parliamentary democracy for the presentation of the Václav Havel Prize.

In a few minutes we will hear the name of the winner, and I want to take this opportunity to convey my deep respect to all of this year's finalists.

Coming from different backgrounds, from different countries – Azerbaijan, Georgia and Venezuela – they represent different facets of a common struggle for the values on which this organisation is founded – democracy, human dignity, respect for the rule of law.

I also want to acknowledge the past recipients of the Václav Havel Prize, who are still held in captivity for the only "crime" of expressing opinions that happen to differ from the opinion of their governments: Maria KALESNIKAVA and Alexander BELETSKY in Belarus; Osman KAVALA and Murat ARSLAN in Türkiye; Anar MAMMADLI in Azerbaijan; Ilham TOHTI in China. We must continue to fight for their release and for the release of all those unjustly imprisoned around the world.

I was on that same list just eight weeks ago, sitting in a two by three cell in solitary confinement in a maximum security prison in Siberia and thinking that this was what the rest of my life was going to look like. I'm only here today because of you, because of sustained efforts by good people in democratic nations, including so many people in this Chamber that have proven stronger than any dictatorship can ever hope to be. And the most powerful message sent by the world's democracies in last month's prisoner exchange was to insist that it included not only Western hostages held by Vladimir PUTIN, but also Russian political prisoners. The message was loud and clear. The free world knows that the real criminals are those in the Kremlin who have started the war in Ukraine, not those of us who were imprisoned because we had opposed it.

Two years ago, my wife, Yevgenia, stood here to accept the Václav Havel Prize on my behalf. I learned the news on a staircase of the Basmanny District Court in Moscow when a friend shouted it to me as I was being escorted in handcuffs into a hearing. I have to tell you, that was a pretty surreal experience.

And although I'm two years late, I want to take this opportunity to thank you from the bottom of my heart and to reiterate the message that I sent in a note that my wife read out in this chamber. I was deeply humbled by this prize, but I view it, first and foremost, as your recognition of all my fellow Russians who had the courage to stand up to Putin's regime and to call out his murderous war in Ukraine in full knowledge of what the price of that stand would be.

According to self-admittedly incomplete counts from human rights groups, more than 20 000 people were detained by police across Russia since February of 2022 for anti-war protests. More than 9 000 were subjected to administrative arrests or penalties, just one step away from criminal prosecution. And more than 1 000 have been criminally indicted, tried or imprisoned for protesting against this war.

These protests have taken different forms. In the case of Alexei GORINOV, a Moscow municipal councillor, it was calling for a minute of silence at his council meeting for Ukrainian children killed by Russian bombs. The price was seven years in prison.

In the case of Maria PONOMARENKO, a Siberian journalist, it was reporting honestly about the Russian airstrike on a theatre in Mariupol that left hundreds of civilians dead. The price was six years in prison.

In the case of Dmitriy IVANOV, a talented young mathematician who was arrested on the day of his final exam at Moscow State University before he could graduate, it was posting on social media about the war crimes committed by Russian forces in Bucha and elsewhere in Ukraine. The price was eight and a half years in prison.

And the list goes on. More than 1 300 known political prisoners in Putin's Russia, many more than in the whole of the Soviet Union in its later years.

But it's not only the people who are jailed. It is impossible to judge the true state of public opinion in a country that imprisons you for expressing it. But we do sometimes get glimpses into how many Russians actually feel about Putin and about his war. One such glimpse came in February of this year, when, amid the staged circus and the total unanimity of our so called presidential election, one candidate, actually a former member of this Assembly, Boris NADEZHDIN, tried to run on an anti-war platform. The public response was unimaginable. That month, almost all the letters I received in prison were about the long lines, hours-long lines, that suddenly appeared in cities and towns across Russia, the lines of people who wanted to sign the nominating petitions to get an anti-war candidate on the ballot.

Needless to say, he was barred from running, as opposition candidates in today's Russia invariably are. But that was almost besides the point, because suddenly everyone saw through the lie – peddled by Putin's propaganda – that all Russians backed his regime, that all Russians supported his war.

I'll never forget one letter a young woman sent me from the Black Sea town of Novorossiysk. After describing how she waited for hours in a long line of like-minded people – mostly young people – to sign the nomination papers for the anti-war candidate, she wrote, "I never realised how many of us there are. This is my Russia, the Russia I love, the Russia I call home. Not the Russia of Vladimir PUTIN, but the Russia of Boris NEMTSOV and Alexei NAVALNY. Not the Russia of murderers and war criminals who are sitting in the Kremlin, but the Russia of decent and good-hearted people who oppose that. Not the archaic, repressive and belligerent Russia of today, but a hopeful, peaceful, democratic Russia of tomorrow".

One day I know that Russia will regain its rightful place in the family of European nations, in this Chamber, in this palais, in this Council of Europe, that will attain that pan-European dimension its founders had dreamed of. And that will be a very bright day for all of us. Because the best promise of long-term security, stability and democracy on our continent, the best promise of a Europe that would finally be whole, free and at peace, lies with a democratic Russia. I believe in this promise with all my heart. I know that many of you do, too. Let us work together to make it a reality. Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much, dear Vladimir.

Dear colleagues, I will now give the floor to representatives of the political groups for two minutes each.

And first I will give the floor to Mr Frank SCHWABE.

No, sorry, it's Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR, sorry, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR (Iceland, SOC): Dear Vladimir, I'm so happy that you can finally deliver your acceptance speech for your well-earned Václav Havel Human Rights Prize for which I had the great honour of nominating you back in 2022.

You were imprisoned for speaking your mind, for bravely speaking against war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the agents of the usurper of your beloved home country, Russia, against your friends and neighbours in Ukraine.

You were imprisoned because you returned to Russia after speaking your mind about this horrendous and unjustified war of aggression, despite the pleas of your friends, myself included, not to return because of the obvious danger involved.

I remember what you said to me, that you couldn't ask the Russian people to fight for a free Russia if you weren't willing to be there to do that yourself.

Here you are, again a free man, still advocating for the release of other political prisoners.

I want to thank you in particular for mentioning Anar MAMMADLI, another Václav Havel prisoner laureate. Not prisoner laureate... well, he is a prisoner laureate, but prize-winner laureate, who was indeed, like you, imprisoned when he was awarded the prize ten years ago, but since then freed and now again imprisoned on bogus charges amid a continuing crackdown on civil society activists in his home country of Azerbaijan.

The charges against him are fabricated, and his prosecution is an apparent retaliation for his criticism of the government and his activism.

Dear Vladimir, I have often said that imprisoning people for expressing their opinions is a lethal weapon against democracy.

The fear that it instils in any given population to see their critics, their activists, their advocates for freedom imprisoned, or even worse, killed, which sadly applies to too many of Russian freedom fighters, like Boris NEMTSOV, Alexei NAVALNY, and Sergei MAGNITSKY. The fear that this instils in the population is immense, and it delivers a message of hopelessness and despair. But, dear Vladimir, if imprisoning people for expressing their opinion is a lethal weapon against democracy, freeing political prisoners is a lethal weapon against tyranny. Seeing you here, a free man again, is one big blow to the tyranny of Vladimir PUTIN.

May there be many more.

Thank you.

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

I give now the floor to the leader of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Pablo HISPÁN.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD): Mister President.

Welcome, Mister Vladimir KARA-MURZA.

You are here today to accept the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize awarded to you in 2022. When Evgenia accepted the award on your behalf on that day, she spoke the words you sent from prison. You dedicated the prize to all those brave Russians who had spoken out against the war in Ukraine.

In interviews you gave to the BBC since your release, you described being taken from your prison cell to a room where you sat under a portrait of Vladimir PUTIN. You were given a pen and paper and instructed to write a confession and plead for clemency. You refused to do so, and instead, you wrote a message stating that Vladimir PUTIN was not a legitimate president and that he was conducting an illegal war against Ukraine. Despite two poison attempts and a harsh prison sentence – 25 years – much of it in solitary confinement, you managed to win the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for the columns you wrote from your prison cell for *The Washington Post*.

Your social media content since your release has continued to call for a free, independent press to the news, the murder of Alexei Navalny, and to call for the release of all the hundreds of thousands – perhaps we will never know how many – being kept illegally in Russian prisons for poorly political charges.

On the day you were released, we witnessed the images of Evgenia and your children in the Oval Office, speaking on the telephone with you for the first time since your release. You have exhibited the kind of moral courage, resilience, honesty in the face of tyranny and innate humanity believed by your soft-spoken voice.

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, I congratulate you and I thank you for your continued work for press freedom, peace and a better future for the Russian people. You know that some of us have been tireless defenders of you, as, for example, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

And on behalf of the Spanish-speaking countries, I welcome you. You learned Spanish in the years that you were imprisoned, so now you can read the language of Cervantes, that freedom is the most precious gift that heaven has given to the human being. You are not only a quixotic dreamer, you are a true hero of our times. Thank you.

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

On behalf of the European Conservatives Group, Ms Olena KHOMENKO.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Honoured guest, distinguished colleagues, friends of freedom.

Václav HAVEL was a man who understood the true essence of resistance.

He once wrote, "You do not become a dissident just because you decide one day to take up the most unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances."

HAVEL's life, and the lives of those honoured with this prize, teach us that resisting oppression is never a matter of choice, but of a moral duty.

Today, we honour those who have taken on this heavy burden, including Vladimir KARA-MURZA, who, despite enduring two years of imprisonment under the Russian regime, remains unwavering in his position to the unjust and brutal war being waged by Russia against my country, Ukraine.

Yet, as Ukrainians, we know that courage alone is not enough. Our struggle today is one for survival. While we appreciate the acts of individuals like Mister KARA-MURZA, we must remind ourselves that words and declarations must be met with actions, tangible efforts that contribute to the end of this aggression.

HAVEL wrote, "None of us are just victims; we are also co-creators of a system that oppresses us."

If there is to be a real anti-war movement in Russia, it cannot morally be in opposition to the visible symptoms of violence. It must confront the deeper roots, the imperial policy, the aggression, and the systemic oppression that fuels the war. To the anti-war movements in Russia we ask:

Will you actively contribute to the just peace we seek grounded in international law and guided by Ukraine's peace plan?

Will you join us in calling for secondary sanctions that restrict the resources enabling this horrific war?

Will you take up the cause of Ukrainian prisoners of war and the civilians illegally detained, advocating for their release?

And what will you do to stop killing and deporting Ukrainian children?

In the spirit of Václav HAVEL, we urge you not only to speak out, but also act with conviction. Your movement has the potential to do just that if it commits fully to not only ending the war, but ensuring a future free from imperialistic ambitions.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

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

Mister Iulian BULAI, the leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE): Dear Mister Vladimir KARA-MURZA, we are so happy to have you back. Welcome back. We are also very relieved to know that other friends of the Council of Europe and our group, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), including Oleg ORLOV and Ilya YASHIN, are free.

On behalf of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, and I think of all of us, I also want to praise Yevgenia's unstoppable, tireless commitment to fighting for her husband's freedom. You, Yevgenia, became a true example for us and have proved that no matter how terrible the situation of political prisoners may be, their families should not abandon hope or give up the fight.

You, Yevgenia, have been a constant reminder that we have the duty to support the families of political prisoners.

We also have the responsibility to protect Russian dissidents who have found refuge in our Council of Europe member states. We all know that Russian secret services and their agents have long hands and strike our friends even within the relative security zone of the free world.

At the same time, colleagues, our joy has a bitter taste, too. Too many political prisoners remain behind bars in Russia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, including two other Václav Havel Human Rights Prize laureates: Ales BIALIATSKI and Maria KALESNIKAVA.

How can we not mention the Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians kept hostage in Russia? How can we not mention Anar MAMMADLI, yet another laureate and renowned human rights defender currently detained in Azerbaijan? We must pay tribute to their courage because you do need a lot of courage to stand up fighting the brutality of an authoritarian regime.

Our joy, dear colleagues, has a bitter taste because of the very reason for Vladimir's imprisonment. The horrible Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the Russian dictatorial, criminal and corrupt government are still there. We know Vladimir will continue his fight, and we should do so too.

But now, at the end of my intervention, colleagues, today in this very hemicycle, there are friends of the Russian dictatorship who work tirelessly to legitimise it by downplaying the crime of aggression and who push Putin's agenda to undermine European solidarity. Here, we cannot turn a blind eye to Putin's regime, devious crimes both in Ukraine and Russia. It represses the opposition, silences every dissenting voice, and crushes the grassroots of democracy. This is why I want to call upon all present, especially you and you and everyone who is on the extreme sides think that this is not necessarily an argument in being on the right side of history but legitimising by false peace speeches a dictator, someone who started a war in Ukraine and who has no interest in going back just because of you using a false argument of peace. Please refrain from that and be on the right side of the history.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister BULAI. On behalf of United European Left, Mr Andrej HUNKO.

Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, UEL): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Group of the European Left, on behalf of the Group of the European United Left, I would like to warmly congratulate you, Mister Vladimir KARA-MURZA, on being here, on having been released from unlawful imprisonment a few weeks ago.

It is always good when people who are imprisoned because of their political activity, because of what they have said, are then released under external pressure, so to speak. That is why I am very pleased that you are here. Who would have thought six months ago that we would be launching the Václav Havel Prize here in Strasbourg this week with an opening speech by Mr KARA-MURZA and that Julian ASSANGE would also be speaking here in this Assembly tomorrow? I think that would have been unimaginable six months ago.

I would also like to take this opportunity to perhaps point out a political prisoner, Boris KAGARLITSKY, who is also being held unlawfully in Russian prisons and for whom we are also very committed. I would also like to remind you that we need mediators to make something like this possible at all. The prisoner exchange was carried out by Türkiye. I have often criticised Türkiye, but in this case it was a good thing that there was a mediator who made this prisoner exchange possible in the first place.

Finally, I would like to remind you that you spoke of the great dream of a great Europe, a pan-Europe. Mikhail GORBACHEV was here in June 1989; he formulated the idea of a common European home. Regardless of how we get there, I believe we must not lose sight of this perspective. Thank you very much.

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

Dear colleagues,

This Assembly sticks to the rules but in my country, Greece, we sometimes say that the exception makes the rule. And I will make an exception now for exceptional reasons and for emotional reasons. I will ask Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to have the floor for 15 seconds, because he's a very close friend of Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA and he had asked me exceptionally to say just a few words.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

I hope the leaders of the parties will not blame me for this.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): It is an incredible moment of victory, of democracy, and it's not a gift from the Kremlin. It's our everyday efforts not to give the democratic world to be shrunk.

And I would like to say that we have a chance to win. The democratic space led by people like Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA is our chance to win. I would like to say thank you so much to everyone here. Vladimir, can you imagine our session, January session started with you. Everyone was appealing to the governments from this hall in January, at the beginning of the session, asking every country to be behind you, behind Russian political prisoners, behind our hope that Russia will come to the terms.

Remembering Mr Boris Nemtsov and remembering the poor Ukrainians in the field. Thank you for confirming the reality of democracy, that not real politics, but democracy will win. Thank you for that. Thank you to your family. Thank you to Ms Evgenia Kara-Murza, thank you to your grandfather, and thank you for your family's support and to your mother in Berlin too. So thank you so much for your support. Thank you.

(Applause)

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

You may have the floor for a couple of minutes if you want to respond.

Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA (2022 Prize winner): Thank you very much. Thank you very much, again, Mister President.

I just want to thank all the representatives from the political groups who have spoken.

I want to thank in particular Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR for leading the work on liberation of political prisoners, first as a rapporteur on political prisoners in Russia specifically, and now as a general rapporteur on the political prisoners in all Council of Europe member states and beyond, in non-member states in Europe,

like Russia. I should also mention that the other pan European Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), now has its own special representative on the same issue, on the issue of political prisoners.

So, now we have two office holders who are dedicated to this most important and most urgent cause.

I hope we can work together, going ahead, to make sure that many, many others who are still left behind, who still have to wake up at five in the morning and attach their bunk to the wall and, you know, walk in that small circle around in a small cell. I hope we can get all the others out, too, because it is not acceptable that in the 21st century, in European countries, or in any countries for that matter, people are being held in prison with longer terms than murderers or drug dealers simply because they have an opinion that diverges from the opinion of their government.

To the honourable representative from Ukraine, from the European Conservatives Group, I want to say that we hear you. We hear you very well. I, too, am a big believer that deeds are more important than words. On this matter, I just want to say that the Free Russia Foundation, which I am honoured to be associated with and serve as vice president for, is actively engaged in helping to find Ukrainian prisoners of war, but also Ukrainian civilian hostages who are being held in PUTIN's jails. Out of the 4 000 some people who were exchanged from the Ukrainian side in these past two and a half years, as part of these regular POW exchanges, 900 plus were found by our organisation. So, that's the work we're dedicated to and we will continue. We'll continue going forward with it. You know, to me, this is personal now, too, because Ukrainian POWs were my neighbours back in Omsk. We were sitting in the same internal prison, called PKT in Russian, an internal cell-type facility inside the penal colony, including with a very senior military officer from Ukraine, whom I very much hope to see his name one of these days on one of the exchange lists.

Finally, I just want to say, don't let anyone ever tell you that, you know, what happens in this chamber, what happens in this Assembly, is just talk and just paper and resolutions, and that all of it is meaningless. The cynics and the sceptics who say things like this have been not only proven wrong, but have really been put to shame with that prisoner exchange last month, when 16 human lives were saved from the hell that is Vladimir PUTIN's modern-day gulag, because this exchange would never have happened without your debates, without your resolutions, without your words, without your solidarity, without your support, because public opinion matters. This house, this Assembly, has really been leading the way on so many issues that are important to us.

For example, this Assembly was the first parliamentary body anywhere in the world. The European Parliament has now followed. But you were the first to officially state that Vladimir PUTIN is a usurper, that he's not a legitimate president, that he has illegally overstepped the constitutional term limits to remain in power.

This was a resolution passed overwhelmingly in this chamber earlier this year. The work that was led by Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, whom I see here in this chamber. It was this house that led the way in defence and in support of all those thousands of people in Russia who have been imprisoned or persecuted for speaking out against the war in Ukraine with the resolution and the report that Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR worked on earlier this year.

You have led this house on the issue of political prisoners. The direct result of that was the liberation of 16 people last month. But you're absolutely right in saying that there's so many others who still need to get out. This is something that I will dedicate all my time and all my efforts to in the coming weeks, in the coming months and in the coming years.

Another issue that I think is very important to work on together is to lay down a roadmap to prepare ourselves for that day when a free and democratic Russia can regain its place in Europe, in this chamber, in this House. That is going to be in the interests of all of us. That that day will come, I have absolutely no doubt. But it is within our strength, it is within our power, it is within our efforts to try to bring this day a little quicker, a little faster, a little closer. So let's work together to make it happen.

Thank you so very much.

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

Now, colleagues, I invite you all to watch a short video on the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize by which we recognise and honour the work of thousands of individuals and organisations who share our values and goals, the protection of fundamental freedoms and human dignity.

Let the video roll.

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

I would like to first welcome the jury of the Václav Havel Human Rights prize who have joined us today. Ms Anne BRASSEUR and Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER, whom you know well, as both have served as Presidents of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Ms Anne BRASSEUR from 2014 to 2016, and Ms MAURY PASQUIER from 2018 to 2020.

Mr Nils MUIŽNEKS, Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe from 2012 to 2018, who attended the first Václav Havel award ceremony in 2013.

We also have with us today Mr Michael ŽANTOVSKY, one of the founders of the Civic Forum, a spokesperson and advisor to President Václav Havel, a renowned diplomat.

Mr Martin BOJAR is a professor of medicine specialising in neurology. Following the Velvet Revolution, he entered politics and served as the Minister of Health of the Czech Republic from 1990 to 1992. He's also a member of the steering board of the Charta 77 Foundation. Mr Martin BUTORA sends his apologies as he is, unfortunately, unable to be with us today.

These are the members of the jury, but allow me now to welcome among us Mr Tiny KOX, who handed the Presidency of the Assembly over to me. Mister Tiny KOX, it is a great pleasure and honour to have you back in the hemicycle.

(Applause)

You presided over this Assembly from 2022 to 2024. In 2022, you gave the prize to Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA as her husband, Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA – as I mentioned earlier, the winner of the prize – was in prison. I'm tremendously happy to see them both with us today.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of all the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I would like to thank our partners from the Václav Havel Library, the Charter 77 foundation, and of course, his Excellency the Ambassador and the Government of Czechia for their commitment and contribution, without which the Václav Havel Human Rights prize could not have come into being.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, dear colleagues,

It was in 2007 that the Assembly first awarded a human rights prize to recognise the courage and dedication of human rights defenders.

Since 2013, this prize has borne the name of Václav Havel. Over time, this prize should have become a celebration of the triumph of human rights and democracy. It has rather become a reward for the struggle and perseverance in defending the values promoted by the Council of Europe.

Since 2013, the year in which the Václav Havel Human Rights prize was awarded for the first time, we have witnessed the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, later followed by the large scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine, an unprecedented migration crisis since World War two, the tightening of Mr Alexander Lukashenko's regime, with political repression forcing nearly half a million people into exile.

We have also witnessed democratic backsliding in both new and established democratic regimes. Today, six out of the twelve winners of the Václav Havel Prize are imprisoned, ladies and gentlemen, half of them.

The 2023 winner, Mr Osman KAVALA, imprisoned since 2017.

The 2021 winner, Ms Maria KALESNIKOVA, sentenced in 2021 to eleven years of imprisonment.

The 2019 winner, Mr Ilham TOTI, sentenced to life in prison in 2014.

The 2017 winner, Mister Murat ARSLAN, in prison since 2016.

The 2014 winner, Mr Anar MAMMADLI, with whom the Council of Europe has been working with for so many years on election, observation and other issues, was once again arrested this year, earlier this year, and remains in pre trial detention.

The 2013 winner, Mr Ales BIALITSKI, was in prison twice and currently since 2021.

These individuals committed only one crime. They simply wanted to make their voices heard, to share their vision of a just and free society. Instead, their voices were silenced, they were imprisoned and deprived of contact with their loved ones.

I call on the authorities to grant their immediate release, along with all other political prisoners, and I hope to be able to welcome them one day in this hemicycle, as we did today with Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA.

(Applause)

The picture I have drawn might seem bleak and hopeless, but hope still exists. I see beside me Mr KARA-MURZA, the 2022 winner, who is now free and ready to continue his commitment, as he said just minutes before.

Although the Assembly could not prevent actions driven by selfish ambitions, it has managed to respond. The register of damage is operational since this year. The work on the tribunal on the crime of aggression and the plans for the reconstruction of Ukraine are just some initiatives that demonstrate the Council of Europe's commitment to stand alongside those who risk their lives and the lives of their beloved ones to make our societies more democratic, more just.

I'm particularly glad that this recognition of courage has a universal vocation, as many of our nominated candidates represent other continents, illustrating that the thirst for freedom and democratic values is universal to humanity.

Dear friends,

The shortlisted candidates this year for the Václav Havel Prize, as you have already seen on the screen, are Mr Akif GUTBANOV from Azerbaijan. Mr GURBANOV is a human rights defender, political activist and active member of Azerbaijani civil society. He's the co-founder of the Institute of Democratic Initiative and the Third Republic Platform, and he was arrested in March 2024 in a wave of arrests targeting journalists and activists in the country and remains in detention.

Ms María Corina MACHADO from Venezuela. Ms MACHADO is a leading political figure in Venezuela, engaged in denouncing human rights abuses in her country and defending democracy and the rule of law. She is the co-founder of the Venezuelan volunteer civil organisation Súmate for civil and political freedom and citizen participation.

Ms Babutsa PATARAIA from Georgia. Ms PATARAIA is a leading feminist activist and human rights lawyer in Georgia. She is the director of Sapari, an NGO focusing on women's rights and providing support for victims of violence since 2013. She has worked for over a decade to fight femicide, sexual violence against women, and sexual harassment.

I would like to warmly welcome the candidates who have joined us today either in person or online. I don't know if Ms MACHADO is with us – until now, we have tried to – ah yes, I want to welcome Ms MACHADO. I would like also to thank...

(Applause)

I would also like to thank Ms Shahla HUMBATOVA, Mr Gurbanov's lawyer, and Ms Ana Corina MACHADO, who is with us today in the hemicycle.

Madam MACHADO, I deeply regret that you are not able to travel to Strasbourg to be with us today. But your colleagues have to know already that – most of you know it already – that there are multiple threats to Ms MACHADO.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is alongside the members of the jury, our partners from the Václav Havel Library and Charter 77 and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, that I finally have the immense honour, pleasure, and privilege of announcing the name of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize laureate for 2022.

The prize is awarded to Ms María Corina MACHADO from Venezuela.

(Applause)

I would like to ask her daughter to come and receive the diploma.

(Applause)

I would like to invite the two finalists among the three to come to the floor, and I will give you your diploma.

(Applause)

Ms Babutsa PATARAIA (Nominee for the 2024 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): It is my honour to be chosen as a finalist together with such distinguished activists and a real privilege to be able to attend this event physically.

I would like to use this opportunity and talk about the disturbing rise of authoritarianism in my homeland, Georgia. A Russian oligarch, Bidzina IVANISHVILI, has captured the state for years and now he is trying to change the entire foreign trajectory of the country from Europe to Russia. The oligarch single-handedly controls states, parliament, government, courts, the most popular TV channel, and now, with the adoption of a Russian-style foreign influence legislation, he's about to shut down all the watchdog non-governmental organisations and independent media.

For the last two years, members of civil society have been under constant threats, verbal and sometimes physical attacks. Propaganda and smear campaigns target every actor, including artists, writers and scientists who are critical and vocal about the rising authoritarianism. Anti-gender, far-right and violent groups are staying unpunished. The only hope lies with the upcoming elections on 26 October. I know the Georgian people have made their decision to get rid of IVANISHVILI, but we have to protect freedom and fairness of the elections and its outcomes. Thus, the international society should stay vigilant to safeguard the will of the Georgian people and its manifestation. A pro-European and democratic future is important not only for Georgia or the Caucasus but for the entire world as the struggle demonstrates a fight between democracy and authoritarianism, between truth and propaganda. So, let good prevail over evil.

Ms Shahla Humbatova (On behalf of Mr Akif GURBANOV, Nominee for the 2024 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): Thank you, Mister President.

I'm speaking on behalf of Akif GURBANOV, who is in jail, as it was said, since March this year.

It is sad that he cannot attend this event to be here in person, but I'm proud to be his lawyer, and the fact of his absence is a dark reflection of the ongoing political repression in Azerbaijan. Eleven years ago, Akif GURBANOV founded the Institute for Democratic Initiatives, the organisation which has trained dozens of journalists and human rights defenders. Now four employees of the organisation are in prison. Besides, Akif GURBANOV is one of the founders of the media outlet Toplum TV, which was shut down during the latest crackdown. The legal representative and journalist of Toplum TV is also in jail now. Apart from this, Akif GURBANOV is a co-founder of a newly created political movement, Third Republic Platform, another founding member of which was also arrested in March.

I have to be brief, so I want just to quote just a small part of his message, he writes from the prison:

"I am absolutely honoured to be considered for this award as it signifies acknowledgement for my organisation's contribution to civil society and serves as encouragement for all the courageous individuals advocating for human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan. I'm deeply grateful for this opportunity and extend my best wishes to my fellow nominees. Together, let's continue to strive for positive change and make a lasting impact in our community. I express my special thanks to the organisations that nominated me: Freedom Now, People in Need, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Human Rights Watch, and International Partnership for Human Rights."

The recognition from this Parliamentary Assembly is particularly important as many voices are being silenced in Azerbaijan right now. Since November 2023, Azerbaijan has seen an unprecedented escalation of political repression targeting civil society organisations, media journalists, human rights defenders, activists, politicians, and so on. Two media outlets, Abzas and Toplum TV, were shut down. The current crackdown is more than a series of isolated actions; it's a systematic campaign to silence every critical voice. So, the charge against Azerbaijan civil society stems from a simple demand for basic freedoms and accountability.

So, we ask you for your continuous support and solidarity for the brave men and women who are in jail now in Azerbaijan and others who continue to fight for human rights despite the risks. We need your solidarity now more than ever.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I will now call Madam María Corina MACHADO to address our Assembly online. Congratulations.

Ms María Corina MACHADO (Winner of the 2024 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): Thank you very much. Thank you very much. I'm very honoured. I would like to thank the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and its President, Mister Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS, the Václav Havel Library, Charta 77 Foundation, and the jury of this prize for honouring me with this year's Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

I also want to express my recognition to Akif GURBANOV and Babutsa PATARAIA. I would also like to thank the Human Rights Committee of Liberal International for nominating me and for all those who supported this nomination. I am deeply moved, honoured and grateful. Also I'm the first Latin American to win this distinction. I want to especially acknowledge Mister Vladimir KARA-MURZA and recognise his courage and his testimony to fight for a free Russia. I'd also like to thank my daughter, Ana Corina, for being there on my behalf and for her constant support to me as well as my other two sons, Ricardo and Enrique.

The significance of this award is immense, not only for me but, above all, for all those who fight together today for the cause of freedom in Venezuela. The ethical and political legacy of Václav Havel shines brightly for anyone who studies it, but it reaches its full splendour when we're called upon to put it into practice. For this reason, I want to dedicate recognition to the millions of Venezuelans who have every day embodied Havel's values and ideas, thousands of them today imprisoned or persecuted.

Today, I want to convey how Havel's legacy has become profoundly relevant to us Venezuelans, given the immense challenges we have faced over the last 25 years to regain our freedom. Amid the enormous difficulties the country is enduring, it almost feels like a dream today to recall that Venezuela was the most solid democracy in Latin America during the 1980s, a country that used its diplomacy and resources to help its neighbours overcome dictatorships and civil wars and supported them in transitions to democracy. It was still the time of the Cold War in a very different part of the world and in a country like Czechoslovakia, a movement called Charta 77 emerged to fight against a different kind of autocratic regime. In Havel's words, Charta 77 was an attempt by a group of courageous and upright citizens to build a true parallel police, seeking to escape the totalitarian lie. What motivated these brave pioneers was not an ambition for power. It wasn't a desire to carve out a space for themselves within the existing political system. It was simply the rejection of the regime's lies, which permeated every aspect of daily life. It was a longing to live in a world where words once again served to tell the truth. The goal was none other than to live in the truth. As Havel himself pointed out, only those who refuse to sacrifice their human identity to politics can arrive at this concept. Havel understood that there could be no political solution to a totalitarian regime like that unless, first and foremost, its effects on daily life were neutralised. Life had to cease being an empty pretence driven by fear. In his own words, "People want to hear that true decency and courage make sense, that something must be risked in the struggle against dirty tricks. They want to know they are not alone, forgotten, written off".

I have kept these words written on a small piece of paper on my desk for years, and I've strived to live by them every day since. Following his mentor, Jan PATOČKA, Havel became the principal architect of a powerful idea that emerged during the harsh struggles against soviet totalitarianism. This idea, which has inspired so many around the world and today forms the backbone of the citizens' movement gaining momentum and growing in Venezuela, is that the foundation of any desirable political reality is the truth. That is why in Havel's words, it is my responsibility to emphasise again and again, the moral origin of all genuine politics, to stress the significance of moral values and standards in all spheres of social life, including economics, and to explain that if we don't try within ourselves to discover or rediscover or cultivate what I call high responsibility, things will turn out very badly indeed for our country. They have. These words have resonated in my mind for many years.

During my solitary journey, crossing deserts and swimming many times against the current, the human cost that this brave Czechoslovak citizen had to live a truth was without a doubt very high. Some paid with their lives, but in the end, they prevailed. And believe me, in today's world, no one understands this struggle better than we Venezuelans who are compelled to make similar sacrifices for our own freedom. The kind of atrocities we Venezuelans face is also sustained by the eternal presence of forcing us to live a lie, just as if it were under the Soviet empire, terror aims to reduce people's daily lives to mere fiction, a cynical, scandalous fiction where words are used solely to obscure reality and prevent us from exposing it, or worse, to make us doubt the truth itself. Am I the crazy one? Did what I know what happened not actually happen? But in the light of philosophical, ethical and political legacy, we Venezuelans have identified the root of the problem in defending the dictatorship, defeating the dictatorship, adhering to our core values and holding the truth as our banner.

I would like to very briefly summarise these years of struggle and democratic resistance. Chavismo came to power 25 years ago, co-opting all branches of public authority, destroying our institutions, breaking the economy, stealing our reserves, and forcing over eight million Venezuelans to leave the country. This is over one-quarter of our society. This is equivalent to nearly 21 million people fleeing Germany or more than 2.7 million fleeing the Czech Republic.

Over 25 years, we have fought by every means possible. Large protests, national strikes and shutdowns, external diplomatic pressure and more than 30 elections, almost all of which were scandalous and fraudulent.

In January 2023, Venezuela appeared sad, dim and hopeless. We decided to spark a great awakening. We had to tear down the barriers that Chavismo had directed between us for 25 years, dividing us into rich and poor, white and Black, left and right, those of us who are still here and those who had to leave our country. We built town by town and house by house, a movement of redemption for our liberation.

Without access to media, without money, and under fierce persecution, we travelled across all of Venezuela, and we successfully mobilised the country to hold primary elections to elect a new leadership to confront Nicolás Maduro in this year's presidential election.

So many times I've heard people say that it was impossible. It was impossible to organise these elections without the regime's participation, that it was impossible for people to turn out bravely and vote, and it was impossible to unite our country. But we did it. And on 22 October 2023, nearly three million Venezuelans participated in the most powerful and defiant act of civic protest. With this legitimacy and strength, we embark on the path to the presidential election. Although I won the primaries, the regime forcibly prevented me from participating as a candidate. We managed to have a decent and courageous man, Edmundo González Urrutia, take on the significant responsibility of running. We built a formidable platform, and on 28 July, over a million volunteers spread across the country to defend our votes and collect the tally sheets which serve as proof of our victory. In less than 24 hours, we successfully collected, digitalised, and published 84% of the official tally sheets issued by the top voting machines, demonstrating to the world the victory of democrats over the dictatorship.

In response to this resounding defeat, the regime has reacted brutally. Thousands of my fellow citizens, including women and children, have been detained and tortured. Hundreds of fellow colleagues have been arrested, mistreated, have sought asylum or have gone into exile. Our elected president, Edmundo González Urrutia, has been forced into exile in Spain.

Today, our struggle continues because the truth persists until it prevails. Amid my force, sheltered due to the regime's persecution, I find solace in repeatedly reading Havel, whom I paraphrased when recalling one of his letters to Olga, in which he said he was where he should be and had not strayed from himself. I know that I am in the right place at the right moment, steadfast in my convictions that is why I have decided to continue fighting alongside the Venezuelan people. I am convinced it is the right thing to do, that is my role and it's why they chose me as their leader for this stage of the struggle. The truth is harsh for us Venezuelans at this moment. But since we place it at the centre of our actions, the dictatorship has begun its inevitable fall. It is a just struggle. It is an ethical struggle for the truth. It is an existential struggle for life. It is a spiritual struggle for the good. In the depth of my being, I hold fast to Havel's lessons to which I am committed till the end. *Hasta el final* [in Spanish]. Thank you very much.

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

Thank you Madam María CORINA MACHADO.

Dear colleagues, we need two more minutes.

I would like to call now to the rostrum the Secretary General, the Deputy Secretary General, the Secretary General of the Assembly, the leaders of the parties, the jury, Mr Tiny KOX, our previous president, of course, the finalists and the winners, Mr Vladimir Evgenia KARA-MURZA and Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA for a photo opportunity.

Please, come close.