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Official report of debates

Ouverture de la séance n°26

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Good morning, dear colleagues.

The sitting is open.

I remind members that they should insert their badge before taking the floor. As you begin your speech, please press the microphone button only once.

This morning the Agenda calls for the election of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of Poland.

The list of candidates and biographical notices are to be found in Doc. 16025. The opinion of the Committee is presented in Doc. 16045, Addendum 2.

The voting will take place in the area behind the President's chair.

At 1:00 p.m. I shall announce the closing of the poll. As usual, counting will then take place under the supervision of five tellers.

Each political group has appointed a teller according to the rules. The tellers are:

SOC: Stefan SCHENNACH

EPP/CD: Sergiy VLASENKO

EC/DA: Daniel MILEWSKI

ALDE: Rian VOGELS

UEL: Berdan ÖZTÜRK

I would like to remind them that they should go to the room set aside for that purpose when the ballot closes.

The result of the vote will be announced at the start of this afternoon's sitting.

For these first ballots, an absolute majority of the votes is required. If a second round has to be organised, it will take place this afternoon.

I now declare the ballot open, and we continue our work in the meantime.

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 next item of business this morning is the debate on the report titled "Propaganda and freedom of information in Europe" (Doc. 16034) presented by Mr Stefan SCHENNACH on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media.

In order to finish by 12:00 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 11:45 a.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I now call Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, rapporteur.

Stefan, you know very well that you have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

You have the floor.

Débat : Propagande et liberté d'information en Europe

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, the subject of this debate is a matter of a great urgency I thank you all that so many people want to speak today, and it shows how urgent this debate is of how to respond to the propaganda in the context of the digital age.

You can perceive the gravity of the situation and this impact in the electoral process, and you may even have experienced it first-hand.

I am referring to malicious actors, equally foreigners or domestic, that spread disinformation and manipulate information to mislead voters, discourage them from going to the polls or create division ahead of an election. These actions are being carried out through increasingly sophisticated means of communication, including networks of fake accounts as well as fake or impersonated media outlets.

The pervasive dissemination of harmful propaganda is a significant threat to the integrity of our democratic process and the fundamental values of human dignity that underpin them.

Harmful propaganda is particularly dangerous when it emanates from media outlets that are state-owned, state-backed, state-run, also by such or proxy.

Such propaganda is a useful instrument for promoting authoritarian regimes and defeating democracy.

As you know, Russian propaganda has been a significant source of concerns for a Council of Europe member states for many, many years. After the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine, some Russian media outlets were banned by the European Union because of conducting disinformation and information manipulation aimed at the destabilisation of neighbouring countries.

Certain Council of Europe member states imposed further sanctions or bans at additional media outlets on the grounds of propaganda or disinformation.

However, despite all these sanctions, Russian propaganda and so-called troll factories continue to operate in Europe supplying narratives and disinformation with the aim of subverting public support for Ukraine. The main channel for propaganda is not TV any more, but the internet, and more correctly social media and the problematic of algorithms.

Russian bloggers have really grown in their profile, have an extraordinary access to the front line of the war, and are playing the key role in how people get and interpret information about it.

In light of the current situation, one can wonder whether sanctions and broadcasting bans are the most effective approach to countering propaganda.

For instance, the EU sanctions have attracted a degree of criticism from members of academia, and the European Federation of Journalists has argued that fighting disinformation with censorship is a mistake.

Indeed, one of the key challenges in regulated propaganda is that it encourages upon the very essence of freedom of expression and information, yet the fundamental right is not absolute. Its exercise carries with it special duties and responsibility, and it may be subject to restriction. However, those restrictions must be prescribed by law, have a legitimization aim, and be necessary in a democratic society.

It is important to bear in mind two important facts highlighted by the European Court of Human Rights: firstly, freedom of expression and information; secondly, the Convention allows for few restrictions on political speech or discussion.

My report points to the danger that the propaganda represents and to the need of addressing it effectively and in a more co-ordinated way in the view of safeguarding media pluralism and the freedom of information.

I believe that states, however, should not confine their response against propaganda through restriction only. They should also focus on acting in favour of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of information.

Here we need to distinguish two types of propaganda. One is the dissemination of information that is illegal, that is propaganda for war, propaganda for terrorism. The other is a dissemination of information also not illegal can impair the development of free opinions and informed citizens participation in the public debate and decision making.

We must therefore develop holistic strategies to counter illegal propaganda that is clearly to be banned and provide effective responses to the spread of harmful though legal propaganda without giving in to the temptation of censorship.

Safeguards must be introduced so that the fight against propaganda does not become a duel to silence critical voice and opposition.

As your further general rapporteur for media freedom, I can only say the best is a good public broadcasting.

With this in mind, I would like to highlight the following lines of action.

We need to provide people with reliable and trustworthy information on matters of public interest and to ensure transparency of governmental activities.

We also need to foster equal access to information and promote media and information literacy.

Equally important is the existence of a free, independent, diverse, and pluralistic media landscape, including an adequately resourced public service media again.

Professionals and organisations in the media sector and internet intermediaries must co-operate in the fight against propaganda. The media sector must refuse to become an instrument of propaganda, adhere to the highest professional standards, and collaborate among themselves in the fight against propaganda.

The internet must develop adequate tools to identify and block illegal propaganda and remove content promptly and effectively when requested through the competent authorities.

Furthermore, they must support media literacy, enhance algorithmic transparency, ensure their artificial intelligence system upholds Council of Europe standards.

I hope in this short introduction to this important resolution to have given you a little bit of an overview, and I hope, as in the Committee, that you will support this resolution.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): This is for sure important, dear Stefan.

Dear colleagues, I now open the debate, and I call first Ms Sally-Ann HART from the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

Ms Sally-Ann HART (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

All over the world, we witness the increase of malignant propaganda aimed at manipulating public opinion, distorting democratic discourse, and undermining the values that bind free societies together. The report raises valid concerns about this threat. Yet, we need to approach the issue from a perspective that

emphasises individual freedom, responsibility and a limited role for government intervention. While no one here would defend propaganda that incites war, violence or hatred, we must be cautious about how we define and combat so-called harmful propaganda.

In a free society, the right to express opinions, even controversial or disagreeable ones, must be safeguarded. The Council of Europe's commitment to the protection of free speech, as outlined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, is a bedrock principle that must be upheld. We should be wary of measures that, in the name of combating propaganda, could infringe on the very freedoms they claim to protect.

Government overreach and censorship disguised as protectionism can create a chilling effect on legitimate debate. It's not the state's role to police thought or media. Freedom of expression and media pluralism ensure that diverse viewpoints can be heard, including those critical of governments.

Freedom of speech is under threat. It's the cornerstone of democracy and must be protected. We must emphasise personal responsibility over paternalistic government measures. Individuals must be empowered to discern truth from falsehood, not sheltered from ideas that some deem dangerous or harmful.

Education, media literacy, and community engagement are the most effective tools for building resilient democracies, not heavy-handed regulation or suppression of speech. We should be sceptical of calls for stronger collaboration between governments and private media to regulate content. The concentration of power in such partnerships risks creating a media landscape beholden to elite interests, further eroding trust in institutions.

True diversity in media ownership and thought is essential for democracy. Governments and politicians must take responsibility for the information, or lack of that they peddle to gain power. Strong democratic institutions, transparency and a free independent press are vital.

Democracy, like freedom of speech, is an ongoing journey. We must actively defend our hard-won rights, freedoms and responsibilities. While propaganda poses real challenges, any response must prioritise freedom over fear.

Let us defend democratic values not by curbing expression but by fostering informed citizens who can navigate the complexities of modern communication themselves.

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

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, I now call Mr Konstantin KUHLE.

Mr Konstantin KUHLE (Germany, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteur who has done a difficult job, because anyone who is dealing with the issue of propaganda and disinformation in this hemicycle is faced with a dilemma.

On the one hand, measures against disinformation and harmful propaganda must of course not violate the right to freedom of expression. But on the other hand, we have to face the reality. And the reality is that disinformation and harmful propaganda, especially coming from the Russian Federation and its proxies, is undermining the democratic discourse in Council of Europe member states.

It is actors linked to the Russian state that are using every crisis they can get a hand on to undermine our democratic discourse, be it Covid-19, be it migration, be it the economy. The aim is to undermine trust in our institutions. The aim is to cause fear in our societies. It is Russian state-linked agencies that actively try to strengthen extremist parties that are also present in this hemicycle.

It is Russian state-linked actors that are falsifying media, are falsifying social media accounts just to undermine the democratic discourse in our societies.

And I'm concerned that the threat posed by disinformation, by harmful propaganda, is still structurally and systematically not taken seriously in European societies. It is not seen as a real threat. And because of that, we have to strengthen the social resilience against propaganda and against disinformation.

We can apply many state measures, we can adopt laws, we can talk about state measures, but at the end of the day, we need more social resilience. And if this debate can contribute to the social resilience of European societies, it already has a value.

On top of that, I would like to point out that disinformation and propaganda have always played a role in societies. However, we have to see that due to social media, due to the use of the internet, it has become more severe – and the rapporteur is doing a good job in pointing out this potent or this actual threat.

From my point of view, it is a tragedy how institutions in politics, in the economy, in science, in culture, are still in Council of Europe member states not taking the issue seriously and the threat of disinformation and of harmful propaganda.

And on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group, we endorse the present report. But we also call upon each and every one of us to engage in the social discourse in order to strengthen the social resilience against disinformation and harmful propaganda.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr George LOUCAIDES.

Mr George LOUCAIDES (Cyprus, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, I would like to thank Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for his diligent work on this matter of utmost importance. The report correctly underlines key concerns regarding the impact of propaganda on public opinion, democratic values and human dignity.

States, including Council of Europe member states that we represent, are becoming much more adept at using propaganda techniques against their own population to undermine free and fair elections, state accountability or public scrutiny. This is, of course, done mainly to avoid confronting state-sanctioned criminal behaviours and to use social, racial and economic divisions in order to gain political mileage.

It is crucial, of course, that member states do not respond to these different types of propaganda with censorship or the application of restrictive measures which would amount to undermining the very freedoms we seek to protect.

Public trust in electoral politics is at an unprecedented low because of the use of both propaganda and censorship techniques: the two sides of the same coin.

Instead, the way forward is to insist on truth, transparency and accountability. Both member states, governments and parliaments must ensure that media ownership and financial influences are clearly defined, that independent and publicly funded media are protected and that citizens are sufficiently aware, empowered and literate to identify instances when news or information is fabricated in order to protect powerful private or public interests.

Terms like "fake news", dear colleagues, "misinformation" and "disinformation" are increasingly rightly perceived by the public as labels to silence political dissent and to close avenues for public debate that we all agree are essential for the functioning of a healthy democracy.

This does not concern only authoritarian states or states at war, but applies to all states, including the so-called "mature democracies".

I, therefore, agree with Mr Stefan SCHENNACH's remarks that simply imposing restrictions may result in silencing dissent and destroying public trust in democratic institutions.

If we are to be committed to democracy, the rule of law and human rights, we must increase media plurality and engage in informed public debate. We must not address the impact of propaganda at the national level, but also the way it distorts international narratives, especially in a world where information is increasingly utilised for political or economic gain.

Equal access to reliable, impartial information is essential if we are to defend human rights and uphold democratic values.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President and colleagues,

I'm delighted to have read this report and to see the challenge that it poses for all of us, even those who have developed legislation in their own constituencies, to deal with these very questions.

I had a humble role in our own parliament in shaping a Data Processing Act where the question of the freedom of information was key and also about to come into practice and already passed is an Online Safety Act that will have picked up some of the questions that have already been raised and which I expect to be raised in the course of this debate.

But I want really to look at the freedom of information apart from the anticipated discussion about the Russian Federation and the international uses of propaganda, the report is very positive and upbeat from its outset, asking governments to look at the positive rather than the negative, and asking also the press to be high minded rather than grubby.

And all I can say is that it's a wonderful declaration of hope, but hope will be overtaken, as the report goes on to say, by a multitude of instances of where the best is not what is always in focus.

I was very taken by the phrase that Mr Konstantin KUHLE used a moment ago about social resilience, because an area of great concern for me is the way that within our societies, at the social level, not at the political level at all, there is this creeping movement towards censorship taking place in the liberal institutions of our countries.

I just read one little paragraph from something I'm reading at the moment. "Britain has a problem with free speech. The exploration of difficult ideas is being discouraged in the very places we would expect to see it flourish: our universities and the traditionally progressive spheres of the arts and publishing – areas that exist to expand knowledge and encourage debate, not shut it down. Even science is not immune. Research is suppressed if its conclusions are uncomfortable, books are sanitised or not published at all and academics are bullied out of their institutions. A creeping censorship has captured Britain's liberal establishment. ."

And I want to suggest that at that level, before we get to the rarified atmospheres of the exercise of power and the shaping of the world that we want to live in, is where a significant effort needs to be made.

One last thing. Oh, no, I've got plenty of time. I can go on for a long time. Yes, and as a Welshman, I'm very good at doing that.

But I just want to say that I regularly go to the BBC and do some programme work with them. And every time I go to my studio, I pass under a statue of George Orwell. Now, if ever there was a champion of free speech, it's George Orwell. And there's his bust that was unveiled just in 2017 and an inscription from one of his works. And it reads in this. And let me just say, about the BBC, I do really appreciate what Mr Stefan SCHENNACH said about public service broadcasting. We've got it and it's under threat by forces that want to condition it, to put it out into the market and to do other things.

But this is the quotation: "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." Why have I quoted it? It's so self evident. I've quoted it because for me, I protest every time I pass underneath it, because it needs to be accompanied by another quotation that I will put into George Orwell's mouth: "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right of other people to tell me what I don't want to know." Until there's reciprocity in all of this mutual accountability, we won't make much progress. And social resilience, it seems to me, is something very noble that ought to be aimed at.

(Applause)

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I want the Assembly to know that by technical mistake, Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS time was doubled.

But, dear Leslie, it is always a joy to our ears to listen to you.

So, now Mr Anastasios CHATZIVASILEIOU, from the Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Anastasios CHATZIVASILEIOU (Greece, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to congratulate Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for this very good and important report.

We all agree in this chamber that propaganda is used to manipulate public opinion, and it threatens our common values and especially our democratic traditions.

So, following the despicable Russian invasion against Ukraine, certain political centres and governments have employed unethical methods of communication by spreading disinformation and fake news in an attempt to manipulate public opinion across Europe.

In some other cases, we observe countries like PUTIN's Russia attempting to interfere with electoral processes in third states. After the eruption of the war in Ukraine, certain media outlets have been accused of conducting misinformation and information manipulation in order to destabilise certain neighbouring states. In other cases, certain forces tried to manipulate electoral campaigns across the world.

Things have become more complicated, as propaganda's negative effect gets amplified with the global rise of social media usage. It is obvious, dear colleagues, that this information now extends beyond the traditional media channels, and social media influencers play a pivotal role in how public opinion receives and perceives information about politics, about war, about conflicts around the globe.

Dear colleagues, countering propaganda requires a multidimensional and holistic approach involving governmental bodies, states, civil society, the media, and, of course, business enterprises.

The solution to this problem should not be silencing critical voices. The solution lies in safeguarding pluralism, freedom of expression, and, of course, freedom of information.

Moreover, dear colleagues, an integral part of the solution is to educate our people to recognise and identify fake news so that they can detect every threat stemming from all forms of propaganda.

I would like to underline the necessity of educating the younger generation.

Our children are scrolling daily across social media, consuming news and absorbing tons of information and, of course, tons of fake news.

We all know that social media algorithms feed each user with tailored content based on his personal views, interest, and, of course, the past engagement in the website. In essence, with opinions that are similar to theirs. So this creates a situation where users are repeatedly exposed to the same type of information, effectively trapping them in an echo chamber where they only hear their own opinions reflected back at themselves.

So, dear colleagues, our democratic country should create an effective framework of pluralism and promote tools against propaganda.

It is high time to restrict the distribution of illegal content. We owe that to our children, the citizens of tomorrow.

This is why we support Mr Stefan SCHENNACH's report.

Thank you.

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

The floor now is for Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA.

Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD): Dear president, dear colleagues,

This indeed is a very hot topic, and I would like to share with you three brief points on that.

First, propaganda, or one of its very popular components, manipulation of information, disinformation, is around us every day.

Russia is attacking our societies every day and every minute. We see it particularly clearly, and we look at the attempts to decrease the support to Ukraine or the attempts to turn the society of Moldova away from its way to European Union (EU) integration.

To defend our societies and our values, we are obliged to counter malicious and fake information. It is our obligation to defend democracy.

Emerging technologies, the role of social platforms, as well as AI rapid developments are among the most significant issues that we have to tackle.

Secondly, disinformation campaigns using manipulation of information and AI technologies cannot always be easily defined as illegitimate actions, with that making it even harder to fight against them.

If there are concrete, targeted, harmful acts against our societies and our democracies, there should be concrete, bold response.

Nevertheless, I agree that in this fight, we cannot lose our values. To be precise, we cannot threaten our freedom of expression or information. This is a challenging task, but a very clear line between illegal targeted campaigns and diverse freedom of expression should be drawn.

Finally, it is not only about malicious acts of disinformation. We live in a time when people find out their news on their social network platforms, be it TikTok, X, or Facebook or whatever. Such platforms earn money by clicks. Unfortunately, human beings evolutionarily are developed so that they pay attention more to the dangerous and more critical news. This gives a certain ground for different agents and adversaries to use these platforms with targeted messages of disinformation, to influence the mindsets of our people and, drop by drop, disrupting belief to democracy.

Often the aim of our adversaries is exactly to disrupt our trust in democratic institutions and to seed polarisation in our societies. In conclusion, let me thank the rapporteur, our dear colleague, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, for bringing this very important topic to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) agenda.

So, we truly need to urgently address how to defend ourselves from propaganda and disinformation, and I thank this Assembly for taking it on our agenda.

Thank you.

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

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO is next. Oleksii, you have the floor.

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

But I want to speak about, you know, this very important report – propaganda. But this is just a part of a hybrid war. Hybrid war which Russia and its allies, North Korea, Iran, all these – their crazy terrorist proxies – Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and standing behind all of them, China, is conducting against the civilised world. This is the war.

And we need to protect our people, both from propaganda and from their direct attacks. And we are strong enough for this. Just watch. We are all now discussing, "Oh, who will be elected as the president of the United States of America?" Yeah, this is an important question, but tell me why we are so dependent on this. We have everything to be the strongest power in the world. Population – more than half a billion people. Economy – number one in the world combined European Union, Switzerland, Norway, United Kingdom, some other countries. Number one in the world. Technologies, culture, education, everything.

What are we lacking? Just the courage and decisiveness to act. Who are we afraid of? We are discussing whether we can give Ukraine the possibility to attack, aims on Russian territory, or maybe not. Who are we afraid of? Russia, where more than 20 million people shit on the streets because they don't have toilets in their houses. That's why they were stealing them from Ukrainian homes. North Korea, pitiful. Iran with this Ayatollah regime which just raises the flags and they can't even reply what is happening in their own capital when their key proxy was killed there. They can't do anything about this.

Who are we afraid of? They are attacking Salisbury, bomb Moscow. They are attacking Berlin, bomb Moscow. If we would do this, they would never attack Ukraine. But they did this just because they saw no reaction. And if we will do what we need to do, this pitiful regime will disappear like all other else. And then the Russian people will erect monuments to the European liberators of them from this awful regime, as well as Iranian people will do in Tehran. So that is what's happening and that's what we should do. We just need to be tough, strong, react yo what is happening and not just looking for some "Wow, we can't do this, we can't do that".

We can do everything. We are strong enough for this. We just need to believe in ourselves and act in the way we should to protect our values, to protect our people, both from propaganda and from direct attacks.

Thank you.

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

Ms Valentina GRIPPO is next.

You have to... Yes, you have to put your card first.

Ms Valentina GRIPPO (Italy, ALDE): Thank you, sir.

The resolution on propaganda presented by Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, who I thank, on which we have worked on the culture commission, is crucial in addressing the impact of propaganda on our society, not only as mentioned, because in recent years we have witnessed numerous conflicts where propaganda and disinformation have been powerful tools to manipulate public opinion and destabilise peace, but for all the other aspects that are mentioned in the report.

Among all, I would like to underline those which are connected with the freedom of information issues. The more than 50 international experts who contributed to outlining the report have underlined the challenges propaganda poses to human rights and the rule of law in Europe, and have emphasised that countermeasures must be proportionate and respect the freedom of expression enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, avoiding censorship or creating a chilling effect on freedom of the press.

And on this the report is very well balanced. Indeed the strategies we develop must serve as a security mechanism in times of war, as it is precisely during conflict that the right to freedom of information becomes more vulnerable and valuable.

Among the key points of the report that we found of interest, and that I as general rapporteur of the safety of journalists find of basic importance, is the need to develop holistic strategies rather than focusing solely on punitive restrictions that of course, is clear become more complex to accomplish during a situation of war.

I think it is very important that the report underlines the centrality of independent regulators and the agreements that are necessary between the public and the private sector in order to have a real achievement of the goal that the report underlines.

Of course, this issue is very strictly connected with other issues we are addressing and that I am addressing as in journalism – one is the freedom of information on digital platforms. Some of the colleagues that have spoken before have already underlined that TikTok, Facebook, Meta, X have a central role in information – it is not only the official press that is breached by....

...and I conclude, Chair, this balance is very important. Therefore I strongly recommend the assembly to assume this resolution and the member states to follow the address that comes from the resolution.

Thanks.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): I now give the floor to Mr Gergely ARATÓ, from Hungary.

Mr Gergely ARATÓ (Hungary, SOC): Thank you.

Dear Assembly,

First of all, I would like to thank Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for this excellent report. I consider it particularly important that the report explores the problems in a complex and in-depth manner and proposes solutions in a balanced and down-to-earth manner.

There is no doubt that the entire system of information and production is undergoing a rapid transformation. Information is created differently and reaches us differently than it was and did 30 or even 5 years ago. We live in the middle of a real information revolution, and as it usually happens, we do not see the end of this process, its depth, or even what the main directions are and what the side tracks are. One thing is certain; nothing is certain.

There is not only a revolution of information, but also a revolution of distortion. It has never been so easy to spread lies to people as recently, and society has never been so defenceless against disinformation as it is now. The spiral of lies is fuelled not only by malicious states and political forces, but also by big tech companies that do not restrict, but often support the spread of popular fake content in the charm of clicks and the associated advertising revenue.

The report contains an excellent set of tools for curbing fake news and defamation, and what member states can do to support clear information spread.

I consider the proposal to promote media and information literacy and invest in media and civic education programs to uphold critical thinking to be particularly important. I think that all information available without criticism or restriction, common sense and a critical spirit are the strongest line of defence against lies. Of course, this requires an education that itself respects and supports the independence, uniqueness, and critical spirit of students and teachers.

But the Council of Europe can do more in this area itself. I'm convinced that the European Council's education programmes should play a much stronger role in strengthening the Council's values not only in this area, but in general. The previous initiatives must be expanded and strengthened in the area of education of democracy, human rights, and, of course, conscientious media use.

I am convinced that this is the most direct and long-term effect tool in this important area.

Thank you very much.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We now turn to Mr Yunus EMRE, from Türkiye.

Mr Yunus EMRE (Türkiye, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

First of all, I would like to congratulate Mr Stefan SCHENNACH on this important report. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe develops effective policy proposals and comprehensive strategies regarding nearly every issue threatening democracy and human rights. Propaganda and freedom of expression are among these critical issues.

This report clearly outlines what needs to be done in this regard. The protection of freedom of expression and the issue of propaganda have been frequently discussed since the earliest days of democracy. Therefore, we know what actions to take against traditional threats based on lessons learned from history. However, advancements in internet technology and transformations in artificial intelligence have made issues of propaganda and freedom of expression much more complex. It is evident that the steps taken today will have unpredictable consequences for tomorrow. States and international organisations must promote good practices and address problems in light of these new developments.

At this point, I would like to highlight an important distinction: the difference between countries where democracy is consolidated and those facing widespread problems in democratic functioning.

In consolidated democratic countries, the sources of propaganda and freedom of expression problems mainly stem from extreme political movements or foreign powers.

On the other hand, in countries struggling with democracy, the fundamental source of these issues is often the governments themselves. In such countries, authorities frequently use propaganda or disinformation to deceive the public, mobilise their supporters and portray political rivals as enemies of the state. The situation represents one of the most significant challenges faced by the political opposition in those countries.

When considering that those in power may conduct propaganda activities with ill intent, it doesn't seem realistic to expect that the measures taken by them will effectively resolve the issue. However, I don't believe that the democratic opposition is helpless in the face of these challenges.

First and foremost, providing the public with alternative sources of information could be an important starting point. At the same time, the unity and collective action of all democratic forces are also of great importance.

In conclusion, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to defending democracy and human rights. By working together and fostering open dialogue, we can confront the challenges posed by propaganda and ensure that freedom of expression thrives in all contexts. Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We now move on to Ms Danuta JAZŁOWIECKA, from Poland.

Ms Danuta JAZŁOWIECKA (Poland, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, the report prepared by Mr Stefan SCHENNACH is crucial for the future of democracy in Europe.

The report highlights the complex and dangerous nature of propaganda as well as the importance of striking the right balance between combating it and protecting freedom of speech. Freedom which is the root of democracy. Propaganda is a powerful tool of manipulation that can destroy the reality, steering societies towards authoritarianism, and inciting violence and even war.

The rapporteur emphasises that we cannot underestimate this threat, particularly in the context of rapidly developing digital media or artificial intelligence. These platforms, when misused, can manipulate public opinion and undermine the foundation of the democratic system.

A key point in the report is the need for independent media regulators. Only an independent body can objectively address cases of propaganda and misinformation without turning into tools of censorship. When these bodies are controlled by politician forces, genuine media freedom is at risk.

Collaboration with the media and internet sectors is another crucial pillar the rapporteur highlights as essential in the fight against propaganda. The internet, social media and news platforms have become the primary sources of information for many citizens. It is on these platforms that misinformation spreads the fastest. The report calls for mechanisms of self regulation and accountability on these platform as well as more effective tools to combat the fake news.

We must also not forget the role of media literacy. Citizens must be equipped with the critical thinking skills and the ability to assess the reliability of information. This is especially important in the digital age, where information can be manipulated in many ways. Media literacy should be integrated into the educational system, helping people develop the skills necessary for independent and informed consumption of information.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that the fight against propaganda must not mean limiting freedom of speech. Our goal must be building a pluralistic, independent media landscape that is resistant to manipulation, yet open to free exchange of thoughts and opinion.

Freedom of speech and freedom of information are values that must be protected, not restricted. Even in the fight against the dangerous phenomenon of propaganda.

I congratulate Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, your job, and this report.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

We now turn to Mr Abdurrahman BABACAN, from Türkiye.

Mr Abdurrahman BABACAN (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Mister President.

While the subject of freedom of expression is expressed in terms of principles and values, from a European perspective, on the other hand, it has turned into a framework that contains serious contradictions in recent times.

Here we encounter a framework for freedom dominated by political projections and political baggage. For example, while the most serious insults and humiliations against the sanctity of religion are tolerated within the scope of freedom of expression, or a series of serious criminal cases, from advocacy of terrorism to hate crimes, are ignored. On the contrary, the expression of the clearest facts is coded with certain labels and systematically banned.

Unfortunately, we can see the most obvious manifestation of this European elite's categorically biased and inconsistent relationship with Muslim societies, in particular

In that respect, despite the undeniable importance of freedom of expression, when it comes to human rights violations in Palestine and criticism of Israel, many western states and private institutions exhibit an anti-freedom attitude reminiscent of a totalitarian regime. In almost every public sphere, criticism of Israel and even calls for support for the Palestinian community are suppressed with baseless allegations such as anti-Semitism and terrorist propaganda, and are faced with arbitrary sanctions.

A few examples from just within the first three months after 7 October: Mr Jackson FRANK, Mr Michael ESSIEN, Mr David VELASCO, Ms Zahraa AL-AKHRASS, Mr Steve BALL, and dozens of journalists and editors have been fired over their statements criticising Israel's barbarism against civilians.

France, Germany, UK, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, and the Netherlands banned peaceful demonstrations and meetings in support of Palestine.

An award ceremony for Palestinian author Ms Adania SHIBLI at the Frankfurt Book Fair was cancelled.

The French interior minister Mr Gérald Darmanin accused the French national footballer Mr Karim BENZEMA of having a notorious relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood after he posted support for civilians on his social media account.

Columbia University in the US suspends activities of student groups opposing human rights violations in Palestine.

Artist Mr Fazıl SAY, who criticised Israel's attacks on Gaza and asked that his concert in Switzerland was cancelled.

Mainz, a team in the Bundesliga, terminated the contract of its player Mr Anwar EL GHAZI due to his social media post supporting Palestine.

Thousands of violations aimed at restricting Palestinians' freedom of expression on digital platforms have been reported by Human Rights Watch.

Social media outlets have removed numerous [pieces of] content about Palestine and suspended user accounts.

These all have been selected to give an idea of the extent of systematic censorship and restrictions, showing the double standard completely woven with political and ideological commitments of the European elites, unfortunately.

Thanks.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Sir.

Now it's Italy's turn, with Mr Francesco VERDUCCI.

Please take the floor.

Mr Francesco VERDUCCI (Italy, SOC): Thank you, President.

Colleagues,

We have long had the illusion that the internet, Web 2.0, would strengthen freedom of information, allowing anyone to create and disseminate content.

In reality, disintermediation, by taking away the role and reputation of journalism, has struck a fundamental pillar of any democratic system. Free, autonomous and independent journalism is a fundamental garrison, and today it is under attack. Instead, the net is invaded by propagandists disguised as fake journalists.

Yet, we know that there can be no public opinion without correct information, and there can be no democracy without public opinion. Disinformation poisons democracy; it is a virus that distorts the relationship between truth and freedom. Today most of us inform ourselves through social networks, yet these platforms are divorced from any criteria of public service ethics, deontology, fairness, objectivity, and pluralism. No, these platforms are run by a discretionary private power, which decides what should be published and, therefore, what should be discussed: the agenda of our thoughts and language.

A private power with political, economic, commercial interests and, therefore, an abnormal concentration, exponential of all conflicts of interest, a danger to democracy. We have seen conspiracy theories go viral on social media, fake accounts create social tensions, outside actors influence elections, criminals steal personal data. These are the words of Mr Tim BERNERS-LEE, the inventor of the web.

Disinformation has a nexus with what we used to call "regime propaganda" and has an equally close link with hate speech, which always feeds on prejudice, stereotypes, which is always misleading. The most historically emblematic case, we know, was the production by the secret police of Tsarist Russia of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery around which a vicious spiral of antisemitic hatred was built throughout Europe, which was the glue of a terrible popular consensus all the way to the abomination of fascism, Nazism, and the Shoah.

Chairman, I want to thank the rapporteur Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for this very important work. Against disinformation we need a global strategy, international rules, a finally solid legal framework that strengthens and shelters our democracies.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Sir.

Now it's the turn of Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER, from Germany.

You have the floor.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Thank you very much, Mister President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many of you were at the hearing with Mr Julian ASSANGE earlier. And he said something very interesting. He said that he had virtually disappeared from the surface for 14 years. And when he came back now, freedom of expression and freedom of the press have become even worse than they were then. That must give us pause for thought.

At a time when there are more channels to say something than ever before, people feel they can say less than ever before. For fear that the algorithm will put them at a disadvantage, for fear of discrimination, for fear of repression, for fear of being called names - as corona deniers, as climate deniers, as carriers of Russian propaganda. And we also heard earlier in this Chamber that several Members of this Parliamentary Assembly have simply called entire parties that are members of this Parliamentary Assembly Russian propagandists - because they use figures, data and facts that simply do not suit this government. Mr Konstantin KUHLE; that is not right.

Freedom of expression is not just any freedom - it is the central freedom for democracy. And this is France, so I will simply take the liberty of quoting the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of 1789. It says: "*The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man.*" It is one of the most valuable rights, because only on this basis can democracy exist at all. If we want to act democratically, then we can't restrict, we can't regulate, we can't censor - as the EU intends to do with its Digital Services Act. In the UK, a person has even been arrested for giving a Like on Facebook. And I myself know a blogger who has already incurred five-figure legal fees because she posted the truth on X.

That can't be right, ladies and gentlemen. A strong democracy always has a strong freedom of expression. And yes, in the context of propaganda. Nobody doubts that Russia is running propaganda, that China is running propaganda, that our own governments are running propaganda. But a strong democracy must say: "Let them" - because in a free market with freedom of expression, the truth will ultimately prevail. Numbers, data and facts can be falsified. At the moment, however, those who falsify government narratives are called propagandists, while the real propagandists are the established media, which constantly spread government propaganda.

Ladies and gentlemen, the fight against propaganda is not waged by censoring facts. It is fought by the established media and journalists finally reporting only the truth and nothing but the truth. When these media become once again the most trustworthy sources, then the logical consequence is that there will no longer be a political battle on social media, where cat videos will once again be the most viewed videos. Thank you very much.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, sir.

Now, for North Macedonia Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA.

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear Chair. Dear colleagues, *Mesdames et Messieurs* [ladies and gentlemen in French].

It is an honour to address you as a newly appointed head of delegation on the current report and thank you, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for this excellent report.

As we know the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of information is the cornerstone of any functional democracy, ensuring that citizens are able to engage in the public debate and participate in the decision-making process. However, as we can see, in recent years, this freedom is under significant threat.

Propaganda, whether through traditional state-controlled media or through the rapid dissemination of disinformation through social media, has become a dangerous tool for manipulation of public opinion, destabilising democracy and undermining human dignity. These practices threaten the very foundation of the democratic system.

We have witnessed this in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, where media has been used as a weapon of disinformation both domestically and internationally, or in the Western Balkans, including my country, where propaganda and disinformation became a tool for harming the enlargement policy of the European Union and the European integration of the region.

Our response must be strategic and holistic. Moreover, international co-operation is essential. No country can tackle the problem of propaganda and disinformation alone. Collaboration between democratic nations, media outlets and civil society is crucial in developing best practices and strengthening the resilience of our society against these threats.

As policy makers, it is our responsibility to protect the freedom of expression and ensure that our citizens have access to reliable, accurate information that will safeguard the integrity of our democracy and the democratic values we hold dear. Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

It's now Mr Hubert BÜCHEL's turn, from Liechtenstein.

Mr Hubert BÜCHEL (Liechtenstein, ALDE): Dear Chair, dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Liechtenstein delegation, I'd like to thank Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for his important report.

Freedom of expression is an important pillar of democratic societies and must be protected with holistic strategies so that the population can obtain comprehensive information on all relevant topics and strengthen the trust in democratic institutions.

This is not only the case before upcoming elections. When taking measures against propaganda, which can undoubtedly cause harmful manipulation of public opinion and deepen divisions in society, care must be taken to ensure that it does not lead to the silencing of critical voices or of the opposition.

When combating propaganda, a careful balance between legality, legitimacy, and proportionality is therefore urgently needed.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

And now, Ms Eka SEPASHVILI, from Georgia.

You have the floor, Madam.

Ms Eka SEPASHVILI (Georgia, EC/DA): Dear colleagues, first of all let me congratulate Mr Stefan SCHENNACH on this timely report.

Indeed, today we are witnessing that propaganda is becoming a very dangerous and very harmful challenge to our societies on a global scale.

Mister SCHENNACH correctly identifies harmful propaganda and manipulation of public opinion as one of the threats that undermines our values. I agree with the resolution and believe that we should develop holistic strategies to counter illegal propaganda and help provide effective response to the spread of harmful though legal propaganda.

I would also like to agree that harmful propaganda can and will have negative consequences on public order, security of our societies, and also can have negative outcome on the relations even between states.

Sometimes the propaganda is not very vivid and is not very clearly seen by the society. Sometimes it is when the broadcasting is provided and the whole information is not provided to the public. Sometimes it's a false information which is very difficult to distinguish at once that it is false information. This information is often happening in the societies that's a part of propaganda. So that's why it's dangerous and that's why it's a great threat to our modern societies.

At the same time, I agree with the rapporteur that finding harmful propaganda must not become a pretext for censorship and that measures to fight against harmful propaganda must respect the right to freedom of expression.

In this respect, as far as this issue is very important to all of us and to any democratic society, we need joint efforts to develop and to establish some kind of holistic approach on how to manage to abolish and ban the threats of disinformation, of false information, of propaganda in a way that does not harm freedom of expression.

Let me once again endorse this resolution and applaud the rapporteur for his dedication to protecting free speech while also fighting harmful propaganda.

This resolution is an important document for us to protect freedom of speech while also fighting the unwanted and harmful propaganda.

Thank you very much.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

Now from Spain, Ms Belén HOYO.

Ms Belén HOYO (Spain, EPP/CD)*: Many thanks, Mister President.

Good morning, everyone.

First of all, I would like to congratulate the rapporteurs for this report, which deals with a very important subject that we need to tackle.

I agree with the idea that independence or not of communications, media and the freedom of the press or not is something that indicates whether the democracy of a country is healthy or not.

I would like to make more visible what is happening in my country, Spain. Mr Pedro SÁNCHEZ, President of the government, has spent years manipulating public media. He did not have any difficulty appointing someone from his own party as head of Spanish radio and television, which is a public radio and television.

The European Commission dealing with a report on the rule of law in Spain this year, according to the Media Pluralism Monitor, said that the independence of public media in Spain is at high risk.

But not feeling it was enough to manipulate public media, he has now developed a plan which is going to interfere with and manipulate private media. Something which could rapidly become censorship, a censorship of true information that inconveniences or is critical of the government. So "Why does he do this?", you would ask. His fundamental goal is to cover up the corruption that is very close to him. The corruption that is all around him. Because, I must recall here, that both his wife and his brother are the subject of judicial inquiries for presumed corruption. And in dealing with all of this, instead of giving explanations and instead of being transparent, he is, unfortunately, opting for censorship.

European directives, we should recall, referring to the freedom of expression, are quite clear. On the one hand, they say that any plan which gives a government the power to regulate the content of media, attacking basic rights of expression are erroneous and on the other hand, they also say that priority must be given to

the independence of the media and the absence of government interference. Unfortunately, in Spain, that is not what we are seeing. We are seeing the exact opposite and for that reason, I want to say here that we are deeply concerned by the step backward in our democracy and we hope that everyone will be aware of this and that everyone will help us to stop these unfortunate developments.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

Now for Norway, Mr Andreas Sjalg UNNELAND.

Mr Andreas Sjalg UNNELAND (Norway, UEL): Thank you, President, and thank you, rapporteur.

In this Assembly, we all live in societies flooded with information. How will we meet the forces that want to use propaganda to destroy the values which we have committed ourselves to uphold?

There is no doubt that the intention to protect and safeguard our societies is noble. However, just as excessive medication can harm a patient, overregulation and excessive surveillance can undermine democracy.

The report before us highlights a growing trend of hybrid warfare, where influence is wielded not through traditional means, but through disinformation aimed at achieving strategic goals. We have witnessed disturbing cases, such as journalists and influencers being offered substantial sums to spread false narratives and discredit legitimate information, as seen in the attempts to undermine trust in vaccines during the pandemic.

In recent months, intelligence agencies in countries like the Czech Republic and Belgium have exposed Russian-backed operations, using deceptive outlets, like Voice of Europe, to promote pro-Russian narratives. Such revelations underscore the need for decisive action, but it is crucial that these actions not compromise the very values we seek to protect.

The European Court of Human Rights has warned against the danger of "destroying democracy under the cloak of defending it". We must approach these threats with a strategy that balances vigilance with the preservation of our core democratic principles.

Our greatest defence against foreign influence is not censorship but resilience. This resilience is built on critical thinking, a well-informed public, and a state that earns the trust of its citizens. We must prioritise measures that enhance the public's resistance to disinformation, such as promoting media literacy, ensuring a free and diverse media landscape, and fostering an inclusive public discourse.

We must remember that the key to countering propaganda is not to eliminate false information entirely, a goal that is neither feasible nor desirable, but to empower our citizens with the tools to discern truth from falsehood. An educated and critically thinking population is the best protection against disinformation.

Tech giants play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and have a profound responsibility to safeguard the integrity of information in our societies. With their vast reach and influence, platforms like Google, Facebook, and Twitter must act as stewards of truth, not just passive conduits of content.

They must invest in and implement robust systems to detect and prevent the spread of disinformation, ensuring that harmful content does not exploit their platforms to sow division and mistrust. Additionally, these companies should promote transparency in their algorithms and advertising policies, helping users understand why they see certain information and who is behind it.

I thank the rapporteur and the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media for an important report. Let us remember that a Europe where freedom of expression and critical thinking thrive is the best way to meet propaganda.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Next, the Assembly of Kosovo with Mr Besnik TAHIRI.

You have the floor.

Mr Besnik TAHIRI (Assembly of Kosovo*): Ladies and gentlemen, let me first of all express my great appreciation for an excellent report. A report that raises an important issue that we have all to tackle down.

We all agree that the freedom of expression is a fundamental right that we have to protect, stipulated in Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

All of us, we have to note that relations between propaganda and freedom of speech and expression in Europe, especially in the western Balkans, is at risk and we have to take this issue seriously.

The rise of propaganda in context of the war in Ukraine has been a serious issue that we have debated here and that we still have to look at.

Dear colleagues, I believe that all of us have to take the new war seriously, the war of democracies against the fake news and propaganda which is becoming a serious threat to our systems, especially in the countries of Southeast Europe.

In the western Balkan countries the Russian propaganda is present, it is serious and it has posed a significant challenge aiming at political and security destabilisation.

Our country, the Republic of Kosovo, after the terrorist attack in Banjska on 24 September sponsored by our neighbour, was also facing another attack sponsored by Russia with propaganda and fake news trying to portray our country as a country that is mistreating minorities and is looking for destabilisation.

Please, such propaganda and fake news should never influence, neither mislead none of the EU institutions nor international organisations, especially this respected institution that we all are present here.

Freedom of speech is a noble value and principle that we all obey and we have to protect, while confronting and fighting Russian propaganda. It is our duty and responsibility.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

I now give the floor to Ms Larysa BILOZIR from Ukraine.

You have the floor.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE): Dear Mister Chair, fellow colleagues,

As a representative of Ukraine, I can assure you that fighting propaganda is one of the undeniable crucial tasks and challenges that we have today, because it is about protecting our citizens and the national security of our countries.

As we speak, my country is facing a cruel, unprovoked Russian war, not only physical aggression but also an onslaught of Russian manipulation, which is dangerous not only for Ukraine, but the whole of Europe.

Recent reports have shown how Russian propaganda and its media, TV and social media has infiltrated European countries. The European Parliament has expressed concerns of Russian-supplied narratives to far right political parties, aiming to subvert public support to Ukraine, cancel sanctions, and to do business as usual.

Let's take one example of a recent Russian propaganda film – if you talk about propaganda – which was shown at the Venice International Film Festival (and it's called a French Canadian documentary film, let's be honest) – *Russians at War*, it is called. Let's be honest. This is not a documentary, it is a Trojan horse which paints Russia as a victim and denies the sovereignty and suffering of the Ukrainian people.

The Ukrainian delegation is grateful to Switzerland that upon our request it was decided not to screen this propaganda film. I ask your countries also not to do this. Instead, this Thursday, take the invitation of our president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and come and see at 8 p.m. in the evening this film, *Intercepted*, and you will hear the talks of Russian soldiers and their families that approved the killing of Ukrainian children.

We must recognise that harmful propaganda goes beyond what international law prohibits and employs aggressive practises that create mistrust in our institutions, in our societies. We must also implement initiatives like the EU's Digital Services Act which provides a framework for addressing online disinformation while protecting fundamental rights.

I also wanted to say that in the third year of war – this aggressive, unbelievable and cruel war in Ukraine – we still have Russian channels which are still broadcast in Germany. Of course, Germany imposed sanctions in 2022, but still these illegally streamed Russian channels are streaming in Germany and they were blocked only three days ago.

So we have seen how quickly disinformation can invest into real world instability, but we can reaffirm our commitment to truth, human rights and democratic values. We can ensure that facts, not propaganda, shape the future of the viewer.

Thank you to the rapporteur for the perfect, very good report.

The Ukrainian delegation will definitely vote for it.

Thank you.

(One person applauds).

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madame.

I now give the floor to Ms Edite ESTRELA, from Portugal.

Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC): I will start.

Dear President, first of all I'd like to congratulate Mr Stefan SCHENNACH for this crucial report.

Dear colleagues, are you sure that the car you bought was really chosen by you? Are you sure that the book you read was really chosen by you? Are you sure that the opinion you expressed is your own thinking?

These are not provocative questions. These are questions and concerns I have after reading Edward Bernays' book *Propaganda*, published in 1928.

Edward Bernays laid the foundation for what we now call political marketing. He used the word “propaganda”, created by the Catholic Church and now discredited, to define how “an invisible government manipulates our minds, tastes and ideas”. This is the hidden mechanism that the propagandist analyses and works with: disinformation and tools of psychological manipulation.

Propaganda comes from far away. And it can have many faces. The most obvious may not be the most dangerous.

Dear colleagues,

There are concepts that cannot be confused. Propaganda is not information. Propaganda can be presented in a subtle way, and therefore can deceive people more easily. Propaganda proliferates on social media, but not only. However, accurate information is essential for conscientious decision-making. Well-informed citizens are more attentive to reality and have a more responsible and constructive critical sense.

Propaganda, misinformation and fake news have the potential to polarise public opinion, to promote violent extremism and hate speech and, ultimately, to undermine democracies and reduce trust in the democratic processes.

I agree with the rapporteur's proposals. Propaganda has no borders, so cooperation at all levels is necessary. Between states and institutions. Between authorities and citizens.

News media outlets and journalists should play an important role in this fight against the dissemination of propaganda and the manipulation of the public opinion. We should ensure that activities within artificial intelligence systems are fully consistent with human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Artificial intelligence is in our every day lives so we should find ways to use this tool to better our societies, not excluding artificial intelligence tools under human control.

Thank you very much.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We now move on to Ms Meryem GÖKA for Türkiye.

You have the floor.

Ms Meryem GÖKA (Türkiye, NR): Sorry. Okay. Thank you.

Dear President and colleagues,

Today we are facing one of the most significant challenges to democracy, the rise of disinformation and the dangers of the post-truth era.

With modern technology, propaganda now has the potential to spread rapidly, infecting and influencing individuals, communities, and societies on a large scale.

Propaganda is no longer just a tool for political manipulation. It has become a weapon to destabilise nations, weaken societies, and erode trust in media and government institutions.

In Türkiye, we have tirelessly promoted media literacy by launching public awareness campaigns and partnering with media outlets through the Directorate of Communications to foster responsible journalism.

Colleagues,

We cannot discuss this information without addressing the most harmful impacts, such as racism, xenophobia, and religious hatred.

Anti-muslim racism in particular, has become a growing trend, often fuelled by deliberate disinformation campaigns. This has become institutionalised in media narratives framing Muslims as the other, a dangerous foreign element in society.

Far-right parties have weaponised this rhetoric, portraying Muslims as a cultural threat to stoke fear and win votes.

On a separate note, the report appropriately acknowledges the issue of illegal propaganda, which is often used by terrorist organisations as a tool to spread their ideologies and recruit new members.

Unfortunately, in some of our member states, there are media outlets with clear ties to terrorist organisations, such as the PKK, that promote terrorism, racism, and hatred.

The prohibition of such media outlets cannot be considered as an interference with freedom of the press.

Lastly, the report thoroughly addresses the disinformation and propaganda of war that Ukraine has been confronting since the Russian Federation's aggression.

However, the report does not address the ultra far right Israeli disinformation campaign, which has been used to shape narratives and justify actions in the region.

Israel frequently uses the antisemitism card to deflect criticism, using it as a shield while justifying the killing of thousands of civilians in Gaza and devaluing Palestinian lives.

Will we continue to accept silence in the face of propaganda that mask the truth of civilian massacres?

As member states upholding human rights and the value of human life, I strongly believe we must raise our voices boldly and hold the Israeli government accountable.

What does it say about our humanity if we allow the suffering of children to become a daily occurrence?

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

For Italy, Mr Marco DREOSTO.

You have the floor.

Mr Marco DREOSTO (Italy, EC/DA): President,

Dear colleagues,

On this issue, on freedom of information and propaganda, I would like to point out in this Chamber, in front of so many foreign colleagues, how not in PUTIN's Russia, not in Communist China or in the Iran of the Ayatollahs, but in Italy there has been a short circuit, a serious and alarming short circuit. I am referring to the case of so-called *dossieraggio*, which is an illegal and abusive collection of information against political figures and parties that was filtered to compliant press organs and then used to alter political debate. My party, Lega, was the first target of this *dossieraggio*, which provoked journalistic and scandalous investigations, often fabricated or used at critical moments to denigrate the work of our movement and our secretary, Matteo SALVINI.

One of the biggest scandals in our recent republican history, but one that, unfortunately, too many newspapers are forgetting about and too easily. Here it is that in this important debate at the Council of Europe on freedom of information, I would like to applaud the Italian newspapers and media who, instead of putting their heads in the sand, are investigating what happened and who were not part of that rotten and undemocratic system. I would like to publicly thank a newspaper, *Il Tempo*, which, with its editor Tommaso CERNO, does not stop every day to talk about it, to denounce it, even at the risk of being denigrated, excluded or discredited.

Thanks to these newspapers and journalists with a straight back and outside the power system, which often, unfortunately, we must say, belong to the left. Thanks to them freedom of information can still be a bulwark of our countries.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I now give the floor, for Monaco, to Mr Christophe BRICO.

Mr Christophe BRICO (Monaco, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

As many of our colleagues have said, propaganda is information used as a weapon: a weapon of war, a weapon of oppression, because when propaganda is state-sponsored, it is applied first and foremost to the people for whom the state is responsible, and a weapon against democracy.

As our colleague's excellent report makes clear, information is democracy's primary resource. Informed citizens who make enlightened choices are necessary for functioning democracies.

So, I'm not going to paraphrase what many of us have already said, but I'll simply highlight the need to ensure that our citizens are sufficiently enlightened, sufficiently critical to distinguish between accurate and false information, between opinion and information – which is a real subject – and that we defend the media, journalists, who also do their job ethically and deontologically. They are necessary third parties, even when they ask us questions we don't want to answer. We urgently need these trusted third parties.

Our colleague quoted George ORWELL earlier: all the authors of dystopias – ORWELL, HUXLEY, ATWOOD – have all, in their terrifying societies, imagined a society where propaganda controlled the people. Here, where we defend democracy, we must defend freedom of information, but we must also defend our fellow citizens' ability to sort out this information. In a generation that has experienced the transition to mass information, we had hoped, at one point, that this would be a call towards more knowledge and more enlightened citizens, but these information highways have become information labyrinths, where it's increasingly difficult to sort out the true from the false and, as I said, between opinion and fact.

I therefore invite everyone to continue defending the principles we uphold here, and thank you again for this excellent report on a subject that is undoubtedly one of the most important challenges of our generation.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Sir.

And last speaker, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, from Ukraine.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): "Thank you, President" [spoken in French].

I would like today to start my speech, I was saying that today is National Defenders Day in Ukraine. It's brave men and women that are defending democracy right now for your countries as well. But how do you think they are pictured in Russian media, state media and Russian propaganda? As Nazis who are, you know, doing the war crimes, committing war crimes, not the Russians committing war crimes.

Yesterday you were applauding Vladimir KARA-MURZA. Do you know how he is pictured in Russian propaganda? As a traitor and a foreign agent. Do you know how you are pictured in Russian propaganda? As those who started this war. Because they claim the western countries to be responsible for this war of aggression that Russian federation started.

So that's why I really congratulate the report of Mr Stefan SCHENNACH saying that illegal propaganda, the propaganda that is genocidal, that is calling to war, that is using these as instruments to fuel violence, should be banned, it should be sanctioned. And we as Ukrainian delegation are very much thankful for supporting the amendments about sanctions on state Russian media on Russia today that still works in some of the member states of the Council of Europe, to sanction Margarita SIMONYAN, Vladimir SOLOVYOV, all these propagandists that are fueling this war.

And, you know, they had very nice houses in some of the countries in the western world. So they have to be sanctioned and better put to the tribunal as well as it was after the second world war when a nazi newspaper editor was in tribunal in Nuremberg as well.

So, of course, we call as a delegation, me myself I'm a journalist in my previous capacity, to support this resolution. But also to be very serious about propaganda, Russian propaganda that is in your countries. Because the international media had a research that there is an agency sponsored by the Kremlin, troll factories that are influencing European Parliament elections, elections in your country, trying to undermine democracy.

So, please, support the resolution and of course, please, support all the media literacy projects in your countries.

Please, support the media regulators in your country, strong regulators, and public media.

And glory to Ukraine. *Slava Ukraini.*

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

We must now interrupt the hearing of speakers.

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

I will now call for the Committee's reply and ask the rapporteur to answer questions from the floor.

You have 3 minutes, Mister SCHENNACH.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Mister President,

First of all, I would like to express my sincere thanks for the many positive comments on this report from all political groups, but I would like to pass on their praise straight away, namely to the Secretariat, to Mr Francisco CABRERA and Mr Roberto FASINO on the one hand, but also to the mover of this declaration, who is no longer a colleague, Ms Tonia ANTONIAZZI, who took the decisive step for this report.

I would actually like to thank everyone, including those who spoke on behalf of the political groups, for example Mr George LOUCAIDES, who said that it was about democratic values, and above all Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS, who - and I am particularly grateful to him for this - brought George Orwell into this debate. Because much of what we read in George Orwell sometimes reminds us in the present day that many a nightmare is coming true.

I would also like to express my gratitude that no one - and the appeal was a bit given - hijacked this report in view of the world situation; by hijacked I mean pulling in a completely different direction. Of course, it was clear that what Russian propaganda and trolls produce here, but - I readily admit - much of what comes from Israel and other countries is also worth questioning. But I am grateful that no one has tried to pull the report in one direction. Because in times like these, we really should keep a straight face and keep our eyes open on all sides.

Many people have spoken positively about public service broadcasting. Sometimes, when I think of Ms Belén HOYO, negatively, as far as Spain is concerned. Nevertheless, once again a huge appeal; public broadcasting is the guarantee for value-free and correct information. And yes, it's all right. Keep laughing, because when you hear the right-wing sector laughing, you know that there is often a media of its own involved, which has nothing to do with journalism - but the important thing is that the basics of journalism are mainly realised in public broadcasting. And that is important. And it should be in the hands of the people and not in the hands of governments. And that is my appeal. And someone also said that the approach in this report is a positive one. Yes, and we should also think positively and think less about censorship, banning and so on, but we have to stand up to it. That is important.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister SCHENNACH.

Now Lord George FOULKES has the floor on behalf of the Committee.

You have 3 minutes, Mister Vice Chairman.

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC, on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media): Thank you, my technical advisor, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, as well as doing this excellent report.

It was a great honour for me to stand in as Chair for this report, because I greatly welcome the report. It's really very appropriately timed with the advent of the internet, with modern democracies becoming increasingly vulnerable to disinformation and fake news. We saw it in the United Kingdom with the recent riots when fake news was spread about deaths.

Thanks to the work of Western intelligence agencies and the brave investigative reporters, we've now an ever-growing awareness of the key actors in this balance of ideas. Russia is, undoubtedly, as others have said in this debate, leading the pack, using the power of the state to undermine and to disrupt our democracies by spreading fake news. They've engaged in a systematic disinformation campaign to influence the 2018 presidential elections. They've promoted Mr Donald TRUMP, and even Mr Bernie SANDERS to undermine and discredit Ms Hillary CLINTON. They're at it again in the current US elections, supporting their puppet, Mr Donald TRUMP.

In the United Kingdom, they were active in the 2016 Brexit referendum, particularly Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, promoting pro-Brexit messages, particularly that Brexiteer Mr Nigel FARAGE. Clearly, the Kremlin believed that a weakened European Union was to Russia's advantage.

One of the emerging tools for spreading this propaganda is Telegram, which lends itself to the task of sowing disruption due to its twin offers of message encryption and lack of content regulation. Pro-Kremlin channels have used this platform to spread disinformation about various Western elections, about Covid-19 and, of course, about the invasion of Ukraine.

These conspiracies have been further bolstered by media outlets such as Russia Today and Sputnik, acting as amplifiers which transform falsehoods into mainstream narratives. It remains difficult to measure the precise impact these platforms have on shaping the news agenda, but it's undoubtedly the case that Russia views fake news as a valuable strategic tool to create confusion, distrust, and division within our societies.

Our response to date has been slow, but there has now been movement in the right direction, most notably the bans on RT and Sputnik and the creation of the European Union Code of Practice on Disinformation, as others have mentioned, and are excellent initiatives compelling social media companies to take active steps against fake news and disinformation. But as we agreed at our media and information subcommittee meeting in Edinburgh, the Council of Europe must follow suit in taking aggressive steps to regulate our media landscape and protect all our democracies in Europe from being undermined.

This report by Mr Stefan SCHENNACH is an excellent start, but it's only a start. We need to do more, much more before it is too late.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM (Sweden, EC/DA): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Dear Mister President and colleagues,

Initially, Mister President, I want to say that I reject this report. Freedom of speech is the very core value and foundation of a democratic society and we must be aware of the forces threatening this. We have been spoilt in our part of the world and are now waking up and realising what is happening. With the large immigration of people from countries in the Middle East and North Africa, our freedom of speech is threatened in a manner we have not seen in Europe since the early days of the Second World War. These people come from countries that are neither democratic nor do they honor freedom of speech. And very often they attack our freedom of speech, claiming that freedom of speech equals hate speech. Regrettably, freedom of expression is also under attack in some of our member states. Thus people in Britain have been apprehended for simply having dared to criticise unhappiness with migration and islamisation. In addition, the EU trade commissioner warned Elon Musk ahead of his phone call to Mr Donald TRUMP.

Our present debate on the subject of propaganda and freedom of information, opinion and expression in today's Europe goes to the very heart of our organisation's mission. If democracy, human rights and freedoms seemed relatively well protected by the early 2000s, we then recognise today that the situation has changed radically. It has changed in the sense that technological internet developments have opened both new vistas and new challenges for us. In addition, there is now a totalitarian Russia which is hyper-active in spreading false propaganda, not at least in connection with its illegal invasion of Ukraine. Today, so-called 'fake news' confuses us, as do falsified voices, videos and pictures mass-produced with the aid of artificial intelligence. They upset us, and may even in the end make us no longer believe as firmly as in the past in basic values such as democracy and liberty. In a way we find ourselves in a situation not too different from that facing the members of this Assembly in the early post-Second World War. In a period of high international tension and rapid societal change.

Thank you, Mister President.

Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA (Bulgaria, NR): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Dear Mr Chair,

Dear Colleagues,

I will support the resolution, with an emphasis on elaborating a counter-propaganda approach without chaining freedom of expression and freedom of information. Fighting harmful propaganda in a balanced, yet decisive manner, is both an universal challenge and a common responsibility for our Member States.

The digital age of lightning fast spread of information will be replaced by a future where lights could be the very source of fast data and the Internet. In the current decade, however, our physical and virtual realities have been marked by successive global health and regional security crises, while propaganda has flourished in all its forms.

Today, propaganda represents a significant threat to national and social security. Bulgaria has been at the forefront of a perfect disinformation storm originating from the Kremlin, with propaganda being weaponized through corrupt public speakers, infiltrated parties, fake news content, online troll factories. In the first days following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the Russian online propaganda materials in Bulgaria multiplied ten times from 39 on an average daily basis to almost 400.

Experience has taught us that media capture could easily be the first step towards state capture. This is why from its inception my political family has been fighting the systematic concentration first of media and later on of judicial, economic and political power in the hands of an individual eventually sanctioned under the Magnitsky act.

We have also been advocating for a wide-encompassing program for media literacy targeting students, young people and adults. According to Eurostat, only 16% of Bulgarians verify the information they find online. We have proposed reforms on the Radio and Television Act aiming to explicitly clarify the role and mission of the public media, while also increasing the budget and capacities of the independent media regulator.

In Bulgaria, freedom of expression and freedom of information remain among our most precious civilizational gains after 45 years of Soviet-style regime. As an organisation of like-minded Member States with shared values, we shall not allow censorship to prevail once again in Europe. Such a bleak scenario would create a fertile ground for more propaganda at the expense of freedom of information. In establishing a fine but

sustainable balance between countering propaganda and preserving freedom of information, our strategic and most reliable allies shall remain the public media, the respective online platforms and last but definitely not least - the European citizens.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Our best defence against the enemies of freedom and free speech is our free press. I spent 27 years of my life working in newspapers and in those three decades I saw more and more challenges to that freedom.

And now another three decades further on, I see governments around the world including some here too in Europe, controlling and wanting to control the press.

State actors are investing heavily in the media in order to own and control it and thereby control their people denying them the liberty, freedom and justice which most of us take for granted.

Almost threequarters of countries around the globe now completely or partially prevent the media from doing its job and reporting free of political control.

The first sentence in this excellent report Stefan Schennach writes:

Propaganda can be used to manipulate public opinion and threaten our common values and human dignity.

He later reminds us that Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights says we should have freedom of expression including freedom of information.

That is best protected by a free press.

More, the spread of disinformation, aided by rapid developments in technology, is transforming the way many of us get our news.

The racially motivated riots we witnessed in Britain this summer were, in so many instances, caused and spurred on by the spread of misinformation on social media.

How we combat misinformation on social media and at the same time remain a free society is a matter yet to be resolved

But we can counter the lies and propaganda only by ensuring we have a free press.

In Britain we are so very fortunate to have the BBC funded by households, companies and organisations required to buy a licence.

The cost of the licence is often controversial, but it gives us much more than the right to watch television, it also gives us an independent source of news free of government control.

A free press is a key pillar supporting democratic societies.

To live in a society where there are no questions asked and none are tolerated, is not to live in a democracy or know the blessings of freedom.

The American Richard Feynman summed it up well when he said, 'I would rather have questions that can't be answered, than answers that cannot be questioned'.

Freedom of the press ensures that we can question. That our society is free, that people are informed. And we must always fight to defend a free press, recognizing its vital part in democracy.

Threats to media freedom and safety of journalists lead to uninformed citizens and oppression.

Such threats create instability and undermine the proper functioning of a democratic society. We must always resist those who would deny us a free press.

A free press means a free Europe.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, EC/DA): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

So much of government, of good decision-making, is about maintaining a fine and often very delicate balance.

This report and its resolution are both very wise and measured in that regard.

Citizens today are all subject to a barrage of propaganda from a variety of sources.

This is the age of the “influencer” on social media, and – given our fallen human nature – not all influences are beneficial or even benign.

At the same time, the resolution is entirely right in affirm:

“Fighting harmful propaganda must not become a pretext for censorship.”

Freedom of speech is one of the essential ingredients of a free society.

It is certainly one of the cornerstones of the Council of Europe.

It is intimately interwoven with adjacent rights like freedom of expression or freedom of religion.

Many of these have been under threat in recent years.

Sometimes this is by blatant means like the shutting down of newspapers or independent broadcasters – very rare in Europe.

But we have seen far more subtle – and in some ways much more disturbing – means of curbing essential freedoms.

In my own country, the United Kingdom, there have been multiple arrests for quiet, silent prayer outside abortion clinics.

This is because there are now laws on our statute books which have allowed the creation of zones around abortion clinics where freedom of speech and freedom of expression is proscribed.

As unwise as measures like this are, I suspect even their proponents did not imagine they would be used to punish silent prayer.

It shows that the slippery slope is very real.

Member states must proceed with extreme caution when limiting the freedom of our citizens.

Cases of attempting to counter propaganda fall within this.

As the report points out, there is no internationally accepted definition of ‘propaganda’.

What one person considers opinion or reporting, another might interpret as propaganda.

Certainly the BBC, our own state-backed broadcaster in the United Kingdom, has sometimes fallen short of the editorial standards we expect of it.

I suspect the case is similar in other European countries for other influential media outlets, whether fully independent, state-owned, or state-supported but effectively managerially independent like our BBC.

The speed with which the BBC – by no means alone – accepted the Hamas narrative that an explosion at a Gaza hospital was a directly targeted attack by Israel was a gross failure of editorial standards.

It was very soon shown that the attack was almost certainly a misfire of a rocket aimed at Israel by Islamic Jihad.

There is another danger to consider in this maelstrom of fact, fiction, information, and propaganda:

Sometimes efforts at fighting disinformation have actually being guilty of spreading disinformation or alarmism.

Again, our own BBC has hired a ‘disinformation correspondent’ and commissioned a study that reported that a whole quarter of the British public believed that COVID was a hoax.

Subsequent investigations have questioned the reliability of the study.

Kings College London, which cooperated with the Savanta opinion research firm, has distanced itself from the results.

The science writer Stuart Ritchie – himself often a guest on the BBC – condemned the survey as “100% false” with its alarming results the product of very small sample sizes and ambiguously worded questions.

The BBC’s alarmist rhetoric might best be interpreted as an assertion of social superiority against those it disapproves of.

This is an irresponsibility and an irritation, but it falls mightily short of the propaganda for war cited in the report we are debating.

The report is right in highlighting that this is not merely something which governments must concern themselves with.

Individual journalists, news outlets, professional bodies, and of course the news consumer should all be on their guard against disinformation and propaganda.

Democracy is built upon the belief that the individual citizen is capable of discerning fact from falsehood, of right from wrong.

When societies are facing threats like these, we must proceed with extreme caution.

And we should always err on the side of freedom rather than giving state-based control the benefit of the doubt.

Sometimes – I hope rarely – legislation and state action are required.

Other times, journalists and editors themselves but take appropriate action.

But the public square must remain a free forum where the individual can decide.

Bad information is best countered with reasoned argument backed up by fact, not by making martyrs of those who are either mistaken or pernicious in spreading falsehood and propaganda.

History is replete with examples of how difficult it is to regain a freedom once it is given up.

It would be unwise for this generation to squander the freedoms we have inherited.

Ms Sona GHAZARYAN (Armenia, ALDE): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Honorable colleagues,

In recent times, we have been increasingly confronted with the backsliding of democracy, both within member states and beyond. I share the view that propaganda, particularly driven by certain states, poses a significant threat to the proper functioning of our democratic systems. It jeopardizes our shared values and human dignity, something Armenians experience on a daily basis. We are witnessing how propaganda, financed by third countries, is aimed at influencing our policies. A recent study by the Varieties of Democracies highlights the substantial influence such foreign financing has on our media. This type of propaganda, rooted in disinformation and psychological manipulation, raises concerns that touch upon national security. Naturally, this has intensified debates around the potential restriction of freedom of expression. However, I am pleased to note that democratic values have ultimately triumphed in this debate. We have come to a collective understanding that any measures taken to combat harmful propaganda must still uphold the fundamental right to freedom of expression, as outlined in Article 10 of the Convention, which protects the freedom of information. In line with the remarks made by the ALDE group, I fully endorse the consensus that building social resilience is key. Our media must be encouraged to be at the forefront of defending freedom of speech. Harmful propaganda knows no borders and has truly taken on a transnational dimension. Therefore, rather than limiting democratic processes, we must focus on endorsing and strengthening them.

To that end, I would like to highlight several important steps we can take: Promote Media Literacy: We must support educational initiatives that equip citizens with the tools to critically analyse information and recognize biases in the media. Encourage Transparency: It is essential that we commit to open communication and transparency in government actions, decisions, and funding. This will help to foster trust between governments and the public. In closing, it is clear that while propaganda may aim to destabilize our democratic values, our response must be measured, rooted in respect for freedom of expression, and focused on strengthening our democratic foundations. Together, we can build the resilience needed to safeguard democracy in an increasingly complex world.

Thank you.

Ms Carmen LEYTE (Spain, EPP/CD): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

My congratulations to Mr. Stefan Schennach for his excellent report.

In recent years, the society has witnessed the worrying increase of Fake News that cause a great wave of rumours and manipulations in various areas, such as conflicts like Russia's war against Ukraine or the COVID 19 pandemic and anti-vaccines.

We live in a digital world that offers advantages but also presents challenges, since anyone can publish on social networks and often paying attention to racial bias and against other political or religious ideas.

The difficulty lies in both maintaining the freedom of the media and the right of professionals to inform and fighting against fake news and hidden propaganda, a difficult balance because it is very complicated to "put gates to the field" as we say in my country.

In Spain, the Government has just proposed a Law that seeks to control the media. It is worrying that this decision occurs at a time when the Government is besieged by cases of corruption that directly affect even the close family of the President of the Government. This has been denounced by my party and by other political parties and is even a cause for concern at European level.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental part of a democracy, it is a fundamental part of the rights of people. We cannot silence those who criticize, those who have other opinions different from those in power.

Laws of this type must respect the rights to freedom of expression and the double protection both of professionals in their right to inform and of citizens in their right to be multi-informed.

It is true that the fight against disinformation and fake news has to be a common objective but it cannot be an excuse to restrict freedom. Any attempt to legislate must be widely agreed upon by the different political forces.

Seven months ago, the European Parliament approved with a broad support, 464 votes, the Media Freedom Act, which attempts to maintain the obligation to protect the media and journalists, while requiring transparency from the media regarding their ownership, funding and advertising.

To ensure enforcement, the European Media Services Council has been created.

I firmly believe in defending freedom of expression as a fundamental part of human rights and democracy.

Ms Christiana EROTKRITOU (Cyprus, SOC): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Dear Colleagues,

In today's digital era of instant information and communication, the use of propaganda has been elevated into a dominant trend, characterized by limitless potential and increasing sophistication. In the common effort to address this phenomenon, the role of the CoE is vital, especially in fostering cross-border collaboration through its pertinent mechanisms.

The Council should urge member States to fully adhere with the existing international legal framework but also provide comprehensive support in relation to establishing the necessary mechanisms to ensure their full implementation. In this respect, it is important that member States sign and ratify the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law that clearly stipulates the dangers and threats associated with the use of artificial intelligence and the dissemination of disinformation and illegal propaganda.

As well stated in this Report, in their effort to successfully address the multidimensional threats of orchestrated propaganda, Member States must ensure that the fundamental rights for freedom of information and freedom of expression are unequivocally safeguarded. The relevant legal framework should not in any way impede on, or risk criminalizing Media freedom and pluralism, an essential pillar of any democratic society.

The necessary restrictions and countermeasures should be proportionate and oversight mechanisms should be set to ensure that propaganda is not fought through censorship and prohibitions are not based on illegitimate motives and not directed towards specific groups of society. The tools to combat cases of fake news and defamation should not turn into instruments to silence fair criticism and the diversity of opinions and beliefs.

In today's digital world, it is essential to equip the public, especially the vulnerable groups of society, with the knowledge to evaluate information and distinguish between fact and opinion. Our youth are particularly susceptible to propaganda and are therefore widely and systematically targeted. I cannot stress enough the urgency of employing contemporary policies, aimed at fortifying them with the essential critical thinking skills they need to filter propaganda, disinformation, and fake news.

We have a duty to safeguard the next generation against any kind of manipulation that fosters communities grounded on hate, intolerance, polarized public opinion and extreme political viewpoints.

Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN (Finland, SOC): Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French

Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA (Ukraine, ALDE): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Dear ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, Mr Rapporteur!

Every day, my country wakes up to air raid sirens, shattered lives, and the relentless violence of a war that seeks not just to conquer territory but to destroy the very idea of Ukraine, the idea of freedom, democracy, and sovereignty, a dedicated European choice. And every single day the whole world wakes up to the well-orchestrated choir of Russian propaganda that poisons the minds of millions of people all around the world. Every day Russian bots, kremlin media, Russian politicians, Russia-dependent so-called journalists continue their massive propaganda and disinformation attacks with lies and controlled narratives of Orwell-style. Propaganda and disinformation have been continuously shared from the highest meetings of the United Nations. The democratic world is under serious disinformation and propaganda siege, designed to divide us and erode trust in democratic institutions.

We must unite our efforts across CoE member states to defend our values:

- 1) We must ensure that propaganda for war, incitement to hatred, and disinformation threatening democracy are outlawed under national law. This is especially vital in the context of Russia's aggression, where disinformation campaigns are being used to justify war crimes and violations of human rights.
- 2) We need transparent, independent regulators to counter disinformation without infringing on free speech.
- 3) Our citizens must be empowered to discern fact from fiction. We call to invest in comprehensive media literacy programs that foster critical thinking, especially among young people.
- 4) Propaganda does not stop at national borders. We need reinforced cooperation among CoE member States to develop coordinated responses to harmful propaganda. Together, we must share intelligence, best practices to counter the disinformation networks that seek to destabilize our societies.

But while we must counter-propaganda in all its forms, we must not sacrifice the essential right to freedom of expression. The line between fighting propaganda and preserving freedoms is thin, but we must tread carefully, ensuring that our responses do not become a tool for censorship.

To combat harmful propaganda, we need a coordinated approach involving all stakeholders. Moreover, transparency in media ownership and the sources of financial support are essential to build trust in our media institutions.

Together, we must reinforce our defenses against the weaponization of information. We must ensure that those who seek to undermine peace and democracy through lies and manipulation are held accountable.

Thank you very much,

Slava Ukraini. Glory to Ukraine.

Ms Marietta KARAMANLI (France, SOC): Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French

Mr Lulzim BASHA (Albania, EPP/CD): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Mr President,

Dear colleagues,

Propaganda and desinformation pose significant risks to freedom of information in Europe, particularly in the context of the Balkans, where autocratic states threaten democratic principles. In these nations, propaganda is not just a means of influence; it is a tool for control, undermining public opinion and eroding trust in democratic institutions.

A particularly insidious actor in this landscape is Russia, which has actively sought to manipulate public opinion through disinformation campaigns in both the Balkans and across Europe. By exploiting historical grievances and societal divisions, Russia aims to destabilize democracies, weaken alliances, and foster discord. This disinformation not only sows confusion but also fuels mistrust among citizens, further complicating the fight against harmful propaganda.

In countries with autocratic tendencies, the manipulation of information impairs the development of informed citizen participation and stifles public debate. We see how regimes exploit propaganda to promote divisive narratives, suppress dissent, and consolidate power. This creates an environment where misinformation flourishes, making it difficult for citizens to engage in meaningful dialogue and decision-making.

The report and the draft resolution emphasize the urgent need for a coordinated response to harmful propaganda. States must avoid reactive measures that may silence critical voices. Instead, we should advocate for holistic strategies that protect freedom of expression and information. A strong, independent media is crucial, alongside public service outlets that can provide reliable information.

Furthermore, transparency in media ownership and funding is vital. In the Balkans, where political interests often intertwine with media, fostering media literacy and ensuring equal access to information can empower citizens to resist manipulation.

Ultimately, a well-informed citizenry is essential for democracy. By promoting a diverse media landscape and safeguarding the free flow of information, we can combat the autocratic forces and malignant disinformation campaigns that seek to undermine our values. This is crucial to ensure that truth and democracy prevail in the Balkans and elsewhere in Europe. Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Mr President, dear colleagues,

I think that this excellent report by Mr Schennach raises an important question: how do we fight propaganda without resorting to censorship? In the digital era when anyone can say anything and reach large audiences without ever having to face counter arguments it is easy to dismiss critique as censorship or as a restriction of freedom of expression. Social media and their algorithms bring new dimensions to the challenge at hand. Technology is part of the problem, sure, but it can also be part of the solution.

In the draft resolution Mr. Schennach also refers to the use of artificial intelligence in countering harmful propaganda. I believe that technology offers many opportunities to fight disinformation and false narratives, but we must be smart. According to the New York Times, a recent study made in the United States shows that people are growing more and more immune towards fact-checking and warning labels. Unfortunately, this labor-intensive way of pointing out disinformation is not working anymore to the detriment of democratic processes.

Ten years ago, the Italian programmer Alberto Brandolini came up with a theory according to which far more energy is needed to refute bad information than what is needed to produce it. As AI technology improves, we must be aware that it will also be used by those spreading harmful propaganda. So, we must always be one step ahead. This report calls for a holistic approach, where technology and AI play an important role but are only one part of the solution. As AI is biased per definition, we must ensure human rights and rule of law compliant ways to teach AI to distinguish between real information and harmful propaganda and false narratives.

And to those screaming censorship I would say that freedom of expression as guaranteed in article 10 of the European human rights convention is not an absolute right. It comes with a requirement for responsibility not to spread hatred, violence and discrimination. Remember to always think twice before posting anything online or you might end up spreading propaganda yourself.

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

I thank the rapporteur for an excellent presentation! I agree that the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of information, is a fundamental element of any democracy. However, as we can see, this freedom can be abused, and propaganda can be used to manipulate public opinion and undermine democracy. It may seem silly to hear that 'Ukraine is an aggressor country', but this is the narrative that the Kremlin's propaganda machine is pushing in the West today. For example, the publication Resistance Republican, which hosts its website in Moscow and notes that it was Ukraine that attacked Russia. This is a clear example

of propaganda in the European media. One of the main goals of Russian propaganda is to disrupt support for Ukraine from European partners. The agents of propaganda are trying to reduce military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, as well as to create a negative image of Ukrainian refugees in Europe. This information war is aimed at destroying the solidarity that European countries show with Ukraine in the fight for shared democratic values. We can start by identifying the country where the media outlets broadcasting propaganda are registered. Back in 2015, after our parliament recognised Russia as an 'aggressor state', Ukraine introduced a complete ban on the operation of media outlets registered in the aggressor country for the duration of the aggression and a 5-year transition period afterwards. In 2022, several European countries and the European Parliament declared Russia a 'state sponsor of terrorism', which also contributed to the establishment of a legal approach to limiting propaganda. I support the conclusions of the Assembly and agree with its recommendation that PACE member states develop comprehensive strategies to counter illegal propaganda and ensure an effective response to the spread of harmful, albeit legal, propaganda. I call on European governments to increase transparency of media ownership and sources of media funding, and to ensure that propaganda prohibited by international law and propaganda that seriously threatens democracy is made illegal in each country's domestic legislation. Thank you!

Mr Kristoffer LINDBERG (Sweden, SOC): (Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)

Thank you president, dear colleagues.

Thank you to the rapporteur for a very important and profound report!

Propaganda and disinformation are a way of manipulating public opinion and threatening our shared democratic values and the democratic system itself.

We can only look at the Russian propaganda and disinformation regarding their full scale invasion of Ukraine to get a horrible example.

Certainly, society's measures to combat harmful propaganda and disinformation must respect the right to freedom of expression, follow the principles of the rule of law, and not lead to censorship. The report highlights the challenge and complexity for democratic states in this matter.

I would like to emphasize the role of free and independent media and their ability to meet the public's need for correct and reliable information. Properly funded public service media is fundamental to counter harmful propaganda and uphold a democratic society.

Unfortunately, we can see examples of how governments in Europe are limiting the ability of public service media to function as the guardians of democracy. This is done both through restrictions in the legislation, and through its funding.

On the contrary, we now need to ensure that public service media are independent and sufficiently resourced to fulfill their mission for society, on the same time as member states should encourage and support quality journalism.

In Sweden this spring, it was revealed by media how the largest party in the coalition supporting the government was operating a troll factory on social media to spread propaganda and disinformation under cover.

It is an important signal that this assembly expresses concern over the widespread distribution of propaganda and disinformation aimed at influencing public opinion through unethical communication methods.

The solutions to this problem must, of course, be layered and approached with caution. Member states need to review their legislation to ensure suitable legal measures, while still respecting the right to freedom of expression and ensuring that critical voices, media, and the opposition are not silenced but given the full opportunity to operate in accordance with democratic principles.

Thank you!

Vote : Propagande et liberté d'information en Europe

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

The general discussion is closed.

The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media has presented a draft resolution (Doc 16034) to which six amendments have been tabled.

I have been informed by the Chairman of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media that he wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 4, 6, 5 and 3, which were adopted unanimously by the Committee, be deemed adopted by the Assembly.

Is this the case?

Yes.

If no one objects, I consider these amendments definitively adopted. If there are any objections, we'll have to check that they have the requisite support of 10 people. Is there any objection?

Please rise.

This is obviously not the case. I therefore see no objection.

Amendments 4, 6, 5 and 3 to the draft resolution are therefore adopted definitively.

Amendment 1 is the subject of an oral subamendment by the Committee.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO has the floor to support Amendment 1.

Does anyone else wish to speak in favour of this amendment...?

Sorry, Mister GONCHARENKO, you have the floor.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Hey, I'm here. Dear Chair, "Mister President, I am here" [spoken in French].

Yes, it's a very important amendment, because it's about Russian media outlets, which are an instrument of Russian propaganda and a hybrid war against the civilised world, especially *RT (Russia Today)* and its affiliates. We need to impose targeted sanctions on them, because that's not about journalism, that's not about media. That's about propaganda – exactly what is in the report. So, I ask for your support for this amendment.

Thank you very much. Let's stop Russian propaganda.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Chair has received the following oral sub-amendment from the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media:

In paragraph 2 of Amendment 1, after the word "targeted", add the word "those", replace the words "since their" with the words "whose", and replace the words "should be considered as" with the words "represents".

Paragraph 2 of Amendment 1 would therefore read as follows - to make it understandable:

"Impose targeted sanctions on those Russian media outlets such as RT and its affiliates, whose work violates journalism ethics and represents a threat to the national security of member States."

I consider this sub-amendment to be admissible under the criteria of the Regulation.

However, it cannot be taken into account if at least 10 representatives or substitutes object and stand up.

Are there any objections to this oral sub-amendment being taken into account?

There are no objections.

We will therefore consider this oral sub-amendment.

The rapporteur has the floor to support the oral sub-amendment.

You have 30 seconds.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): The Amendment includes all media outlets from Russia and should be aware that we have less opposition media outlets, which are still living and working.

And so I made a clearer focus on what the mover of the Amendment thought, and I said "impose targeted sanctions on those Russian media outlets". And I think this is now more correct and will not be on the wrong side.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against the oral sub-amendment?

I don't see anyone.

What is the opinion of the author of the amendment on the oral sub-amendment?

Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO, 30 seconds.

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

I support this oral sub-amendment. It's very good and many thanks to the rapporteur for his excellent work.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Committee's opinion is naturally in favour.

We shall now proceed to vote on the oral sub-amendment.

The vote is open.

The oral sub-amendment is adopted.

We return to the amendment.

Does anyone wish to speak against Amendment 1 as sub-amended?

There are none.

What is the Committee's opinion on the amendment as sub-amended?

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC, on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media): In favour.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): We shall therefore proceed to the vote on Amendment 1 as amended.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Amendment 1, as amended, is adopted.

We now move on to Amendment 2, which has also been the subject of an oral sub-amendment by the Committee.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO has the floor to support Amendment 2.

You have 30 seconds.

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

This is a very important Amendment because it says about targeted sanctions against key Russian propagandists. For example, Margarita SIMONYAN, Olga SKABEYEVAA, Vladimir SOLOVYOV. Those who should be in tribunal, not just sanctioned, that's just the first step. Then there should be warrants against them. They should be in tribunal. They should be in prison for what they did, because they have blood on their hands. And we need to start this process of taking them to responsibility.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister GONCHARENKO.

The Chair has received the following oral sub-amendment from the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media:

In paragraph 2 of Amendment 2, leave out the word "the" and add "war".

Paragraph 2 of amendment no. 2 would then read as follows: "impose targeted sanctions on war propagandists, including Margarita SIMONIAN, Olga SKABEYEVA and Vladimir SOLOVIEV, if they have not already done so".

I consider this sub-amendment to be in order in terms of the criteria laid down in the Rules of Procedure.

However, it cannot be taken into account if at least 10 representatives or substitutes object and stand up.

Are there any objections?

No objections, learily.

We will therefore examine this oral sub-amendment.

The rapporteur has the floor to support the oral sub-amendment.

You have 30 seconds, Mr SCHENNACH.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): The fact that these two women and this man - Ms Margarita SIMONYAN, Ms Olga SKABEYEVAA, Mr Vladimir SOLOVYOV - are under European Union sanctions.

But I want to make it much more concrete; they are under sanctions by war propagandists. Not only propagandists of Mr Vladimir PUTIN's regime, they are war propagandists and I ask that we put the word 'war' in front of "propagandists".

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Stefan SCHENNACH.

Does anyone wish to speak against the sub-amendment?

Evidently not.

What is the opinion of the author of the amendment regarding the sub-amendment?

Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO, you have 30 seconds.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): I support this sub-amendment and would like to thank the rapporteur once again for his excellent work.

We must take action against Russian propagandists.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Committee's opinion is naturally in favour.

We shall now proceed to the vote on the oral sub-amendment.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The oral sub-amendment is adopted.

We return to the amendment.

Does anyone wish to speak against Amendment 2 as sub-amended?

There are none.

What is the opinion of the Committee on the amendment as amended?

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC, on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media): Unanimously.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): We shall now proceed to the vote on Amendment 2 as amended.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 2, as amended, is adopted.

Vote on the draft resolution: a simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution contained in Document 16034 (amended) was adopted.

Election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights.

Dear colleagues, I remind you that the ballot for the election of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of Poland is now in progress.

It will be closed at 1 p.m.

I invite those of you who have not yet voted to do so.

Discours : M. Alain BERSET, Secrétaire Général du Conseil de l'Europe

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

We now come to the communication from the new Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Alain BERSET.

Mr Alain BERSET will give us his speech, and then the representatives of the groups and the parliamentarians who have already asked to take the floor will take the floor.

One minute each - it is not about questions. There are not questions which will be answered today.

Today we will listen to the Secretary General and to those who want to express themselves on the new term, the new Secretary General. And maybe ideas, thoughts or proposals that you have.

So, dear Alain, you have the floor.

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Madam Secretary General of the Assembly,

Mister Deputy Secretary General,

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Your Excellencies,

First of all, I would like to thank you for welcoming me this morning, Mister President, to address the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for the first time. I began my mandate less than two weeks ago, and I have to tell you that I am very much looking forward to working with all of you.

Serving the Council of Europe is a privilege. Serving the Council of Europe is an honour. I am aware of the responsibility it represents at this crucial time for our continent, Europe, and for the world. I wish to honour the trust placed in me by this Assembly. Allow me also to pay tribute to Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, the outgoing Secretary General. Her commitment, determination, and composure have been essential at a decisive moment for the Council of Europe.

As we know, last year's Reykjavík Summit was a crucial milestone. I know that the commitment of the Parliamentary Assembly was essential to achieving this result. For my part, I was very proud to sign the Reykjavík Declaration on behalf of my country, and I'm very proud and very happy today to be back in action as Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

Together, we must continue the work already begun and implement the commitments made by the Heads of State and Government. Our role, together, is to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These principles are at the heart of the European Convention on Human Rights. These principles are at the heart of the interpretation of the Convention by the European Court of Human Rights. We know, of course, that their application is an essential obligation for all member states. I am counting on your determination to work together to ensure that these commitments are always respected.

Mister Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this context and at this time in our history, we must have clear priorities.

The first is renewed support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression.

The second is to revitalise our democracy, which has been subjected to pressures and shocks that are sometimes very violent.

The third will be to guarantee the unity of the European family, made up, in all its diversity, of 46 proud and equal members. This diversity must be an enrichment, an added value, a soul supplement, and not a factor of judgment or division.

First and foremost, then, our support for Ukraine, as it fights for its democratic future in the face of aggression from the Russian Federation. This support must remain unwavering, and it will remain our absolute priority. I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that the European Court of Human Rights, our Court, is not only essential but unique in this context, as we speak, because to date, the Court is the only international jurisdiction to judge on the merits human rights violations in the context of the war since 2014.

What's more, the Register of Damage is now fully operational. This is an essential step forward, but we also know that its success will depend on expanding the circle of its members. We must therefore do our utmost to win over even more states, including of course non-member countries of the Council of Europe. As you can imagine, I have taken every opportunity to raise this issue with the players I met last week on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and we will of course continue to use every opportunity to push this idea forward. But the Register alone is not enough; it must be followed by a fair compensation mechanism, which must be properly funded. Together with the institutions of the Council of Europe, we will have a full role to play in this respect.

Finally, Russia must be held responsible for all unlawful acts under international law. This is why, in addition to the work on the Register and all that has just been mentioned, the Council of Europe is of course also taking part in the consultations and negotiations for the creation of a special tribunal where the crime of aggression against Ukraine will have to be discussed. In this context, we need to remain open and creative, open to new initiatives to support Ukraine in its resilience, reconstruction, and search for justice.

This morning, I had the opportunity to speak with 11 Ukrainian women who are in Strasbourg today, whose loved ones are being illegally detained, to remind us that everything we do, everything we discuss here, everything you decide, everything we do together, has a single aim: to protect human rights, to protect the rule of law, to protect democracy, wherever they are affected and threatened. In this respect, may I stress that the debate and resolution you are about to have are of the utmost importance.

But our commitment doesn't stop there, and I'd now like to turn to what I'd call my second priority: democracy. We are facing, and have been for years, a democratic regression in the world, but also on our own continent, on our doorstep, around our home. And we can see it everywhere, affecting all our member states to varying degrees and in different forms.

We have the tools to respond. We have, of course, the support of all member states for the principle of democracy affirmed in Reykjavík. We have the work of the Venice Commission, and of course, we have your work, that of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, an essential task which you carry out here, but which you also carry out in each of our member states. As we all know, it's not enough to set international standards. These standards must also be applied at national level, and as national parliamentarians, you also have a fundamental role to play in this respect.

In this context, education plays a vital role. It is an essential democratic investment. We're going to have to step up our commitment in this area, to remind us all that democracy isn't a given. On the contrary, it's a priceless asset that we have to fight to preserve and develop.

Then there are all the other difficulties we face. We have the combined effects of wars: those taking place on the European territory of the Council of Europe, those taking place on our doorstep with essential and dramatic consequences for the people affected and concerned, on our own continent, with the divisions this engenders, with the rise in anti-Semitism, the rise in anti-Muslim hatred and the division of our societies. We have the combined effects of these wars with climate change, and the combined effects of these wars and climate change with democratic erosion. It's an unprecedented challenge for our societies, a challenge I've tried to describe as "the perfect storm".

But in the face of this challenge, we have tools. In the face of this challenge, the Council of Europe has already demonstrated its strength, its vast experience, its agility and its responsiveness, whether in the fight against migrant smuggling, environmental protection or artificial intelligence. The Council of Europe has often shown the way. Our new Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, recently opened for signature, is a perfect example.

The third element, the third priority that I will mention to you this morning, is to support the unity of the European family in all its diversity.

Mister Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe has seventy-five years of experience: seventy-five years of experience. It is a unique organisation. We must strengthen our cohesion, our action to guarantee the citizens of our continent a future of peace, stability, prosperity and security under dignified conditions.

What do our citizens want? What do all the people living on our continent want? They want a life in peace, in conditions of dignity that give them prospects: prospects for themselves, for their families, for their children, for future generations. This is the purpose of the work we are doing, and that you are doing, to bring stability to the continent. That's why we're fighting for the rule of law, for relations based on rules that are clear and accepted by all, and not on force, violence, and arbitrariness. This is why we must continue to work together in a world beset by centrifugal forces, in which divergent forces often seem to prevail at present. But we need to rediscover greater convergence. To do this, to stay the course, there are two essential elements: always telling the truth and being based on values. That's why, in the method we use between us, we have to talk to each other, especially when there are difficulties. We have to talk to each other frankly, but with respect for positions that are different, and with all the transparency necessary to progress together.

This dialogue is essential. It is a dialogue, of course, between and with the 46 members of the Council of Europe, whom I described earlier as proud and equal. It's an inter-institutional dialogue between us, of course, within the Council of Europe, both formal and informal. It's a dialogue that respects diversity, but is also

fundamentally anchored in the bedrock of our values. And then convergence becomes possible again if we think outside the box, if we seek common ground and points of convergence through dialogue. That's how we can build a more united future, based on mutual understanding, inclusion and respect for differences.

Then, in this context, within this framework, of course, we need to make what we are doing visible so that the Council of Europe, in public opinion and in institutional circles, fully reflects its importance, its relevance and the reality of the immense achievements that have been made over the last seventy-five years and continue to be made today. I heard this again a few days ago, if only in the context of the General Assembly in New York.

We need to be visible and proud of what we're doing, and I'm going to work tirelessly towards this goal. To do this, we will of course need the support of our member states. That's why we need to hold regular summits of Heads of State and Government, concluding work on key issues such as the revitalisation of democracy, which is to be the subject of an action plan that I intend to launch immediately. This will certainly help, but it won't be enough. We're going to have to find every way to work better, to communicate better about the essential work we do every day.

Mister Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

To conclude, I would like to remind you that the work of the Council of Europe is more fundamental than ever. Whether in support of Ukraine, the fight against violence against women, gender equality, the protection of the rights of minorities and the most vulnerable, or the defense of freedom of expression and journalists, we know that our Organisation fights for the equality and dignity of every individual.

I've just mentioned a point that is extremely important for stability, peace and prospects on our continent. It's everything we can do for gender equality, to effectively combat violence against women and girls, with this very important Istanbul Convention, which was developed here and is still developing and which must find more convergence and more support, not only in our member states but also beyond.

During this mandate, I will work with passion, with determination, with all the commitment I can give to build or to continue to build, to continue on the path of those who have gone before us, to continue to build a Europe where every human being will be at the center, truly at the heart of our actions, with the ultimate goal that each and every one of us can live in the freedom and security that democracy provides.

I'm looking forward to what we're going to accomplish together – and I emphasise "together". I intend to put all my energy into serving our mission, serving our shared values, serving the Council of Europe.

Thank you all very much.

(Applause)

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

Now I will give the floor to parliamentarians on behalf of the political groups.

As I mentioned earlier, this is our first meeting with the Secretary General. All parliamentarians will have the ability to speak for 1 minute.

There are no questions to be answered today by the Secretary General – as you know, he just took office 10 or 15 days ago.

I am starting with the leader of the Socialist Group, Mr Frank SCHWABE – he is first.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Dear President,

First of all, congratulations, Mister Secretary General.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much for your encouraging speech. You mentioned the United Nations, and we had the opportunity on different occasions to speak about your experiences in New York. And what is really important is to understand that we have a crisis of international organisations. How could we not have a crisis if we have some crisis in democracies in some countries?

But the good thing in this organisation is that we are based on values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, and we can decide with qualified majorities. And it brings me to the second question. I really want to offer you, together with all the colleagues from our groups here, a very good cooperation, understanding that we have different things to do in this organisation, this Parliamentary Assembly is sometimes a little bit more pushing, and if you allow me, the Council of Ministers is sometimes a little bit more hesitant in some situations.

But in the end, we have to act together, and, in the end, this is the strength of this organisation. So I wish for very good cooperation, and we are prepared to do so.

Thank you very much.

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

I just want to remind all colleagues that there are only comments, not questions, to be answered today.

Ms Elvira KOVÁCS from Group of the European People's Party.

Ms Elvira KOVÁCS (Serbia, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, distinguished President, Secretary General,

Congratulations on your election.

While the period of 26 years of the overall impact of the Framework Convention on National Minorities can be considered positive, in some cases – we are all aware – states only formally address issues without really committing to practical implementation, and often issues of educational and language rights of people belonging to national minorities remain unresolved.

Therefore the political group I am representing would like to suggest taking into consideration that it is extremely important to overcome setbacks in the enforcement of minority rights, especially in the areas of language and educational rights, as well as the insufficient implementation of monitoring recommendations which causes a diminished image of the Framework Convention on National Minorities as an effective instrument of minority protection, and it is, I believe we would all agree, important for us.

Thank you for your attention.

(Sporadic light applause)

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

Ms Katalin CSÖBÖR from European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

Ms Katalin CSÖBÖR (Hungary, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman and Mister Secretary General.

First of all, I'd like to congratulate you here in the hemicycle of the Council of Europe. It's a great honour to see you here at the Council of Europe and, at the same time, to speak on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

We wish you every success and good work in the years ahead.

Support for Ukraine has been at the forefront of the Council of Europe's objectives for over two years. Unfortunately, war is still raging in Ukraine, devastating the country and claiming new victims among innocent civilians.

Given all our efforts to support Ukraine, we want the Council of Europe to make its best and earliest possible contribution to putting peace back on the European agenda.

I'd like to see us succeed together.

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

Ms Sabina ĆUDIĆ from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

...Have you inserted your card?

Ms Sabina ĆUDIĆ (Bosnia and Herzegovina, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Are we okay now?

Mister BERSET, thank you for your vision. We are obviously in an institution based on dialogue and we participate in dialogue. But not only that, we also create a vision and norms and behave by the rules.

At the same time, we live in unfortunately interesting times and when democracy is challenged in the ways that it's challenged today, and when we are witnessing severe human rights abuses all around us, the question of our responsibility is more important than ever.

In that regard, on behalf of the European liberals, we welcome your support for more ambitious co-operation with our key partners, of course, starting with the European Union, but also the UN, and a place where we need greater, greater co-operation, with the International Red Cross in addressing abuses around us.

At the same time, we welcome your support for the opening of the Council of Europe office at the UN headquarters, something that would enhance our co-operation with the key institutions and will raise the profile of our organisation.

Thank you.

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

Mr Andrej HUNKO from the Unified European Left.

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

Mister Secretary General,

I am delighted. I would also like to congratulate you on behalf of the group here. I believe that people rightly have the impression that we now have a strong Secretary General, and that is what this Organisation needs.

At the beginning of your speech, you emphasised the importance of the Court of Justice. As you know, we have the problem that judgments, Osman KAVALA's and Selahattin DEMIRTA'ş, are not being implemented in Türkiye. We now also have the problem of a lack of coherence when it comes to Azerbaijan. Coherence between Parliament and the Committee of Ministers. I am not allowed to ask any questions, but perhaps you could comment on this.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN is next.

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Mister Secretary General,

First of all, let me congratulate you on your election to this important position.

Recently during the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, you had a meeting with the Prime Minister of Armenia, Mr Nikol PASHINYAN, and you are aware of the security situation in our region.

Armenia has been constructively engaged in peace negotiations with Azerbaijan based on mutual recognition of territorial integrity and conduction of a delimitation process based on the Almaty Declaration of 1991.

We are committed to finalising the negotiations and signing the agreement, but unfortunately there is no positive feedback from Azerbaijan.

On the contrary, we see that new artificial obstacles are sometimes created to prolong the process.

We hope that as a newly elected Secretary General, you will take all appropriate actions to advance the peace process.

Thank you.

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

Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER is next.

Is Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER here? Yes.

Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER (Austria, EPP/CD): Mister President,

Mister Secretary General,

I am very pleased that there is now a Swiss Secretary General, a neighbor of Austria, and I am very much looking forward to working with him. Thank you very much for your comments.

You have already said that all member states want to make the Council of Europe and its values and basic principles better known so that people there become more aware of the importance of human rights again. I can only support that, and we need more respect for human rights again. Today is 1 October, the Day of Older Persons. I know that you have this on your agenda, the rights and duties of older people, and I am happy to offer my support as a representative for older people.

Now that Christmas is approaching, I would like to make three wishes: be an active and strong representative of the Council of Europe, continue to raise our profile, support us parliamentary members, be open to our concerns and ideas, visit us in the member states and maintain a dialogue with our parliamentary colleagues on the ground.

Thank you very much.

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

Now it's Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): Mister Secretary General. Mister Alain BERSET, it's my pleasure to welcome you and address you in this capacity as a member of the Ukrainian delegation.

I do have the letter that you sent in June to all of the members of the delegation. I have it at home. So, we will all be, of course, following your steps to help and aid Ukraine and you rightfully mentioned the special tribunal and we're so happy that the Council of Europe could be the international organisation to do it. But, of course, the Register of Damage that will not be full without the comprehensive mechanism and actually the payment, and Russia has to pay for it.

And, of course, we would like to see further communication on this special task force that you mentioned that you might introduce to put together, Secretary General, the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, all of the bodies, but also the appointment of special representative on Ukrainian children to report to you directly.

And, by the way, we will have the first topical meeting of the network of Ukrainian children in just half an hour.

Thank you.

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

Ms Franziska HOOP is next.

Ms Franziska HOOP (Liechtenstein, ALDE): Dear Mister Secretary General,

Thank you very much for your comments. On behalf of the Liechtenstein delegation, I would like to warmly congratulate you on your new office. It is a great sign of confidence in your abilities and your commitment to the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Europe. Your new role comes at a time when Europe is facing significant challenges. I am convinced that with your experience and leadership you will contribute to strengthening the Council of Europe as the central institution for safeguarding these fundamental values.

Especially in times of political and social tensions, the work of the Council of Europe is essential to promote dialogue between nations and protect the rights of all citizens.

We wish you every success in accomplishing your tasks and are convinced that you will provide important impetus in your new position. May your term of office be characterised by foresight, dialogue, and a strong commitment to European cohesion.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Khatia TSILOSANI is next.

We cannot hear you. Have you inserted your card?

Just press the button once and wait, please, for a couple of seconds.

Ms Khatia TSILOSANI (Georgia, SOC): Secretary General,

Congratulations on your election, and I wish you success in your future endeavours.

Your mandate comes at challenging times for Europe with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine undermining the international rules-based order and the core values of the Council of Europe.

Regretfully, Russia continues the illegal occupation of my country, 20% of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. We see that persistent human rights violations in both occupied regions continues to cause immense suffering of both sides for the occupation line.

The Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe have been champions in acknowledging and addressing the issues of the occupation of Georgia's territories and its drastic security and human rights consequences.

We appreciate your contribution to the peaceful conflict resolution process. The Secretary General and Committee of Ministers' decision constitute important instruments in this regard.

These documents underline the responsibility of Russia's referencing European Court on Human Rights (ECHR) judgments.

So I look forward to joining our efforts and utilising these existing tools in a more effective manner to address the concerns related to the challenges and human rights violations coming from the Russian occupation.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Zita GURMAI.

Ms Zita GURMAI (Hungary, SOC): Dear Secretary General, President and Colleagues,

I extend my sincere congratulations to Mr Alain BERSET on his election as Secretary General of the Council of Europe. Your dedication to upholding the rule of law and promoting human rights throughout your career inspires confidence in your ability to lead the Council with the same passion and commitment.

As a feminist activist, I trust that equal opportunity and anti-discrimination will be central to your agenda, as they are key to safeguarding human dignity. In a world where inequality persists, I am hopeful that under your leadership, the Council will continue to strive for justice and equality for all.

I also wish to honour - that's why I'm in black - Mr Dániel KARSAL, a courageous human rights lawyer who recently passed away at the age of 47 after battling ALS. Until the very end, he fought for the right to a dignified death through euthanasia. Though the European Court of Human Rights rejected his case, I hope that, in his memory, the Council of Europe will one day recognise euthanasia as a fundamental human right.

Thank you very much.

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

Titus CORLĂȚEAN.

Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN (Romania, SOC): Secretary General,

I was negatively surprised a few weeks ago while learning the fact that during the recent opening for signature of the newly adopted Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence – our convention – the governments of the European Union (EU) member states, which are members of the Council of Europe, granted a unique right for signature to the European Commission, not accepting any individual signature on behalf of these member states.

I think, and it's my opinion, it was a huge and strategic, political and legal mistake, because this Framework Convention is, first of all, not about the internal market and the competence of the European Union. First of all, it's about protecting fundamental human rights, human dignity, to protect the interferences in the democratic electoral processes in our countries. It's a long list, strategic partnership between the Council of Europe and EU not being an appendix of the European Union.

I encourage you in your new capacity, Secretary General, for the future, to be a guardian of our historical competencies while establishing the standards in this Europe.

I'm sure that you will receive the political support of this Assembly.

I appeal to the colleagues of this Assembly to ask the governments to refresh their positions and to find legal solutions, regenerative solutions, which in my opinion are possible for individual signatures accompanied, for instance, by interpretative declarations in the domain of competency.

Thank you so much.

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

Mr Marko PAVIĆ.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD): Thank you very much.

Dear Secretary General BERSET, congratulations on your election.

Thank you for your exchange of views with the Croatian delegation we had last Assembly. I would also like to thank your predecessor, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ. She had very turbulent mandates, with many crises, but I think she led this organisation with the highest esteem.

I'm sure we can agree on working together on supporting our friends in Ukraine and working together on peace in the Middle East.

Defending democracy and democratic standards is one of your priorities. We see evidence of democratic backsliding and I'm glad that we will fight together against it.

Croatia, as an EU country, fully supports Ukraine. President ZELENSKYY is next week in Croatia, in Dubrovnik, with leaders of south-east Europe to promise them support.

Finally, we stress the importance of giving support to our friends in the Western Balkan countries for their democratic processes. I wish you all well and success and you have the support of the Croatian delegation in strengthening this organisation.

Thank you.

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

Madam Elisabetta GARDINI.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA): Yes, thank you, President.

Dear colleagues, it is truly my pleasure and honour to welcome and congratulate our new Secretary General on his election.

I am confident that, thanks in part to his experience, we will be able to carry on our work with renewed energy and determination. But, in this context, I would really like to emphasise the importance of the role of our Parliamentary Assembly. Our mission is to create a space to address problems and seek solutions together. Even in the face of complex challenges, it is crucial to keep the channel of dialogue open so that the Council of Europe remains an institution that builds bridges and seeks peace.

Unfortunately, that world of peace that seemed closer a few decades ago now seems more distant, but that is precisely why we must renew our commitment to overcome divisions and work together for a better future.

That is why I wish you, Mister Secretary General, and all of us my sincerest wishes for a path full of success and satisfaction.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): "Thank you Ms Elisabetta GARDINI" [spoken in Italian].

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS is next.

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS (Cyprus, EPP/CD): Secretary General,

Recently, a number of cases concerning the usurpation of Greek Cypriot properties in the areas under Türkiye's occupation in Cyprus have been prosecuted.

Nationals of Council of Europe member states have been convicted on charges relating to the commercial exploitation and development of these properties.

We ask that, in line with the recent decision of the Committee of Ministers to maintain the supervision of the execution of the European Court of Human Rights in the fourth interstate case, *Cyprus v. Türkiye*, you take a firm stance on this issue by advocating with member states to discourage their nationals from such illegal activities that not only violate international law, but also seriously undermine prospects for the resumption of negotiations leading to a lasting solution to the Cyprus problem.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA is next.

Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD): Dear Secretary General,

Congratulations on behalf of the Latvian delegation on assuming this very important position. I wish you the best of success in your endeavours in strengthening the role of the Council of Europe and implementing the agenda agreed in Reykjavík.

During the first half of the year in your position, I invite you to pay particular importance to reaching a clear agreement on making concrete decisions and practical steps to create a compensation mechanism that would build upon the success of the establishment of the Register of Damage caused by the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. We need it in the nearest future indeed.

And dear Secretary General, there are no small or insignificant steps in strengthening the Council of Europe. Therefore, I hope that you will pay attention to a longstanding request from many member states to solve the unacceptable situation with Russian citizens still working in the Council of Europe's structure. This issue has long been on the agenda and I truly hope that there will be no more Russian citizens working and spying in the structure of the Council of Europe.

Thank you so much.

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

Mr Theo BOVENS.

Mr Theo BOVENS (Netherlands, EPP/CD): Thank you.

Mister Secretary General, also from the Netherlands, congratulations. You show *engagement* for the values and challenges for the Council of Europe. They are in good hands!

We in Europe are a family of nations that share this common goal. Our family of nations is rich in diversity, consists of family members with different beliefs, cultural heritage, languages and political opinions. And pluralism, I think, in itself, is the strength of Europe, a strength that I cherish.

Secretary General, I am more and more worried about the increasing atmosphere in Europe of "nation first", building stronger internal borders. I am a citizen of Maastricht and was a governor of the border province of Limburg. My colleague here in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr Armin LASCHET once said, "Borders are connection lines, not lines of division".

You, Mister BERSET, come from a nation in which four cultural groups, with different languages, work and live together. I ask you to be a modern *pater familias* for this family of 46 European nations. Nobody asks family members to join in matrimony, that's not healthy, but it is also not healthy to divorce from your neighbours.

Mister Secretary General, by tearing down more internal barriers on the continent, I think that democracy can grow, in the same way that cross-border dialogue can strengthen the rule of law.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI is next.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC): Dear President,

Congratulations for your nomination.

I liked very much – and also on behalf of the Finnish delegation – your priorities: Ukraine, democracy and global visibility for our 75-year old institution.

I hope you can make 75 years of work for the future. And the future is children. And we see this brutal war of Mr Vladimir PUTIN in Ukraine is not good for children. We see this strategy: deported children. They are even detained minors, Ukrainian minors. We're not signing the Russian passports. We need to make the world to act to see that the future is brighter for Ukrainian children too.

And in your campaign, you promised to nominate a special representative. It is not the call of the Ukrainian delegation only. It is the call of this house. We will need to work together for the brighter future of all the member countries we have here.

Thank you.

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

Ms Ariana MUSLIU-SHOSHI is next.

Ms Ariana MUSLIU-SHOSHI (Assembly of Kosovo*): Yeah. Secretary General, thank you so much for your speech. On behalf of the delegation of the Republic of Kosovo, I would like to congratulate you on your appointment and wish you success.

Your engagement and commitment to the functioning of democracy, the rule of law, and the respect of human rights removes all doubts in the process of Kosovo's well deserved right to be part of this family and of this institution.

We are committed and we welcome your support and cooperation to be part of the agenda of the next ministerial meeting.

Thank you.

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

Now it is Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ LIMONES.

Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ LIMONES (Spain, SOC)*: Dear Secretary General,

Congratulations on behalf of the Spanish delegation.

I am sure that this Assembly will be proud of the work you will do to perform your task.

As was stated in the earlier debate, populism is on the march in our democracies using communication outlets to produce propaganda, to undermine our institutions, but as you said, we need to react, not only internationally, but also nationally.

The Spanish Government has put forward a bill with a number of measures to strengthen democracy, seeking transparency, independence and plurality of the mass media. This bill will be discussed in parliament. The European Commissioner of Justice, Mr Didier REYNDERS, has said that this is the path to follow.

I'd like you to take a good look at these measures, as they can serve as examples for other national parliaments.

Thank you.

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

Before I give the floor to our next colleague, I just want to remind that there are only 10 minutes left for those who have not already voted for the judge with respect to Poland. So please, colleagues, if you have not yet voted, you can proceed behind the Presidency stage.

So now, next is Ms Naomi CACHIA.

Ms Naomi CACHIA (Malta, SOC): Secretary General, I sincerely wish you strength and energy as you take on this pivotal role at such a delicate time for our continent.

One of the priorities highlighted during your campaign was having a Council of Europe for today and tomorrow, and this is more than just a very good slogan but it must be embedded in our actions, especially here at the Parliamentary Assembly.

In order to ensure the relevancy and longevity of this organisation, we must really work harder to ensure the visibility of our very important work – what we do here must transcend all national borders and be embraced by the citizens that we represent.

In order to bridge this gap, I wholeheartedly believe that we must continue to step up our efforts to engage with young people.

Young people must be the ambassadors of our work in favour of human rights and democracy, just as much as we have the responsibility to safeguard the younger generations in everything that we do.

It is a bilateral relationship which we must continue to strengthen with meaningful and genuine dialogue and inclusiveness.

Youth empowerment will be the cornerstone of Malta's Presidency of the Committee of Ministers next year, we intend to ensure the integration of the Youth Perspective as agreed at the Reykjavík Summit.

And my hope is to see a more conscious and comprehensive effort during your tenure, Secretary General, to make sure that young people are truly at the heart of the work of the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

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

Madam Sibel ARSLAN.

Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Mister Secretary General,

As a Swiss national – and I think I can say this on behalf of all the Swiss in the delegation's parliament – I am naturally a little proud that you have made it so clearly. I think that you will be a very strong representative for this body.

You mentioned the implementation of the judgments. Thank you very much for that. Of course, I very much hope that you, as a Swiss citizen, will continue to defend this judgment, especially against this resistance from Switzerland. I would also like to thank you for mentioning the right to truth and for your commitment to journalists, both written and visual. Thank you for mentioning women's rights and minority rights so clearly. In this context, I would ask you to focus on and support NGOs that are also committed to this Organisation or to these rights and that contribute a great deal with their criticism.

I wish for us, but also for you, courage, strength, and continued good humor, Mister Secretary General.

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

Mr Oğuzhan HASIPOĞLU is next.

You have to press the button.

Mr Oğuzhan HASIPOĞLU (Cyprus* [Resolution 1376 (2004)]): Secretary General, as you have rightly stated, democracy is a very valuable principle for the Council of Europe. However, the full democratic rights of Turkish Cypriot elected representatives are not respected in the Council. Equal representation rights of Turkish Cypriot elected representatives should be granted. Unfortunately, we are not entitled to vote. We are not entitled to table amendments in the Council. So this is a big issue in respect of democracy.

Also, I would like to invite the Greek Cypriot administration to recognise the Immovable Property Commission which is recognised by the European Court of Human Rights. So far, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has paid £475 million to Greek Cypriot displaced people. However, the Greek Cypriot administration started to arrest individuals who were also European Union citizens who had invested in Northern Cyprus. These are illegal actions. This is against the European Court of Human Rights principles.

Thank you.

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

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN is next.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA): Mister Secretary General,

The first prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Mr Luis Moreno OCAMPO, publicly assessed Azerbaijan's policy in Nagorno-Karabakh as genocide.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention declared that in 2023, a new era of acceptable genocide started in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mr Ilham ALIYEV publicly promises his citizens to live in the territories of Armenia, calling them "Western Azerbaijan".

Armenian prisoners, including the former leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh, continue to remain in detention in Baku.

Afterwards Azerbaijan is hosting COP 29 under the guise of a COP for peace.

Mister Secretary General,

I call on you today to take all possible strong efforts to achieve the release of prisoners in Baku before COP 29.

Thank you.

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

Ms Petra BAYR is next.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC): Yesterday here, Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA, and this morning in the Committee on Legal Affairs, Mr Julian ASSANGE, have, I believe, made it clear that the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly really do have an impact, really can make a difference.

I see many other areas where this is also the case whether it is the question of enforcing the human right to live in a healthy environment or whether it is that artificial intelligence must not undermine human rights, whether it is that we finally create peace on this continent or whether it is violence against women.

I see the enforcement of human rights as a broad field and an opportunity for us as the Council of Europe, for you as Secretary General, to raise the profile of the Council of Europe. I hope this is not because the problems are becoming more and more urgent, but because we can offer solutions that have political support and are also implemented.

With this in mind, Mister Secretary General, I wish you all the very best for your office, and I hope for very good co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly.

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

Mister Vladimir VARDANYAN.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you.

Thank you, Mister President.

First of all, Mister Secretary General, I would like to congratulate you for the election and for the very interesting timing for your being as a Secretary General.

I would like to raise the issue of the further challenges our organisation might be facing in the future, interconnected with the protecting of its core values: rule of law, democracy and human rights. One of the main aspects I would like to raise is quite important, and it would be one of the priorities for the acting of this Assembly, it is the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. From this perspective, it's quite important also for the Secretary General to address the issues of respect towards the interim measures of the court, which for a long time would be one of the main basis for the real fulfilment of the role and functions of the European Court of Human Rights.

Thank you.

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

Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

I don't see Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

So, we have only one more question. Time. There's a limit of time, as you know.

Ms Eka SEPASHVILI. Is she here?

Mister Serhii SOBOLIEV?

Madam Larysa BILOZIR?

Mister Serhii SOBOLIEV, okay, you are here. You are the last one.

Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Secretary General, you are the best person in the best place.

We have discussed today the excellent position of our organisation, and I think that the roadmap that you built, not only for Ukraine but for whole of democracy in Europe and in the whole world, is very important to realise in very concrete methods and in a very short time.

So this roadmap, of course, first of all, it's the special representative in Ukraine. Of course, it's Russian excess. We now know that millions of Ukrainians have already lost their properties because of the Russian aggression. And a lot of Russians who are under the sanctions now have this property in the countries where we are now.

And the most important is to find a way how Putin and his regime will be responsible for everything they did. So the special tribunal is the main aspect that we need to do during your Presidency in the most short period of time.

Thank you for your position, and I will do everything to support you in these questions.

Thank you.

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

Now I'll give the floor to Mr Alain BERSET, Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Mister President, dear members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

I will not have the time to answer or to react to all comments you made and questions you asked.

I look forward to do this the next time.

But I just wanted to say a few words to thank you for your support, to tell you that I see and I hear that the expectations are much too high, but we need to have the most ambitious goals to achieve something together.

Let's do this.

Thank you.

(Applause)

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mister Secretary General, thank you so much for being with us today.

We are looking forward to our next meeting in January.

The questions will be answered then. It will be a full interrogation, I can assure you.

So, dear colleagues, it is now 1 p.m.

The ballot for electing a judge to the European Court of Human Rights is closed.

The counting of votes will take place under the supervision of the tellers. I have already announced their names.

I invite them to go at once to the room set aside for that purpose.

The results of the election will be announced at the start of the sitting this afternoon.

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

The sitting is adjourned.