



Provisional edition

Friday 4 October 2024, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 32

Debate: Risks and opportunities of the metaverse

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Good morning, everyone.

I propose to start in a minute.

Mister CRISTEA, as the rapporteur, you can also sit in the front on place 014.

So, good morning everyone.

You're on the last day of this week, Friday.

And I would like to remind members that they should of course insert their badge before you can take the floor. And as you begin your speech, please, press the microphone button, but once only.

The first item of business this morning is the debate on the report titled "Risks and opportunities of the metaverse" (Doc. 16031) presented by Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media.

We will finish the speakers' list, replies, and the vote by around 11:00 a.m.

And I call Mr CRISTEA as the rapporteur. You have 7 minutes now, and then later on 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Mister CRISTEA, you have the floor.

Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA (Romania, SOC, Rapporteur): Chair, thank you so much for this.

Good morning, dear colleagues.

May I start with a word of praise for my distinguished colleagues and from the staff, from our Committee, because this is the result of the work which happened in the last two years? We had seven rounds of consultations with the tech companies, with all the stakeholders, with NGOs, with academia and this is the final result.

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.

Dear colleagues, indeed, Marshall McLuhan was right – "the medium is the message". While the internet is a medium for interaction where people engage with content and processes, the metaverse is an enhanced and upgraded medium, where immersive technologies play a central role.

The metaverse, along with virtual and augmented reality, is more than just a technological advancement; it represents a profound shift in how we live, interact and experience reality. But what are the deeper societal and personal consequences of this transformation? How do we ensure it aligns with democratic values, human rights and social stability in an era of unprecedented technological changes?

Dear colleagues, There is a physical reality and a social one constructed by the human species. This constructed reality doesn't need to be accurate, doesn't need to be correct or even real to create real consequences for real people in the real world.

Historically, the power to shape social realities belonged to religious institutions and later to states. Now, tech companies are creating the infrastructure for others to play that role. What does this mean for our societies? In the past, states controlled physical spaces; in the metaverse, control shifts to the virtual realm. You no longer need to physically move to explore the world or engage with others. But as our interactions are increasingly mediated by technology, let me ask you, are they still authentic? What defines a "real" experience when so much of it occurs digitally?

The metaverse offers immersive experiences that blur the lines between the real and the virtual. For instance, visiting a museum from your living room might feel real, but you aren't physically there. The technology of tomorrow can make it possible to drive your real car on the streets from your living room. What about the regulations, the norms and the consequences?

Human social interaction is deeply rooted in our nature. Virtual experiences may efficiently satisfy this need, but will they eventually replace slower, more meaningful, face-to-face interactions? As virtual interactions become more intense, they may overshadow less stimulating but potentially richer real-world experiences, particularly for developing young minds.

At its core, the metaverse allows for the separation of cognitive presence from physical presence. You can travel the world, manipulate objects, and participate – all without physical effort. It offers the most intense subjective experiences at the lowest metabolic cost. But when technology makes everything easy, do we risk losing touch with the effort and authenticity that define human experience?

Beyond the individual, we must consider what kind of society we are building with this technology. If the internet democratised information, the metaverse democratises experiences. While this opens up incredible possibilities, it also shifts power away from traditional institutions and towards tech companies. What happens when reality becomes subjective, shaped by the stories and experiences the metaverse delivers?

In the metaverse, dear colleagues, reality is experienced through a technological filter, which changes everything. How we perceive the world affects how we act. If the metaverse becomes the dominant way we experience life, what does this mean for our behaviours, politics, and social structures? Will it empower individuals or deepen inequalities? Will it promote peace and respect, or fuel abuse, hatred, and polarisation?

As we step into this new frontier, we need to think carefully about the kind of world we want to build for future generations. Technology is a tool, an interface between our biology and the world, but it is also becoming the medium in which we live. We are used to navigating interactions in the physical realm, but are we prepared for the interactions that will dominate in the metaverse?

In a world where consensus is shaped by algorithms, by blockchain technology, distributed ledger systems, and interaction happens without physical presence, how do we ensure that we don't lose sight of the human elements that hold society together? How do we ensure that the metaverse serves the collective good and upholds our social and democratic values?

The resolution we examine today offers concrete recommendations to ensure that legislative frameworks for the metaverse uphold democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It calls for enhanced international co-operation and collaboration with the private sector to address the complexities of this technology, promote fair competition and develop ethical standards for a safe and creative metaverse.

While the future is uncertain, one thing is clear: the decisions we make now will shape the world we live in tomorrow.

And dear colleagues, to end, I would like to ask you, 60 years from now, what is our goal? I mean, do we want to be the richest men and women in the cemeteries? Or do we really care about what kind of society we leave behind?

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister CRISTEA, for this report and for keeping within the time.

Now I start with the debates. And we'll start first with the speakers on behalf of the political groups. And then afterwards the normal speakers' list.

The first is Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO for the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

You have the floor. 3 minutes.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mister Chairman.

Thank you to the rapporteur.

First of all, I'd like to thank the rapporteur and the Committee secretariat for the excellent work they've done. It's a very important thing. We need to talk about new technologies, because they represent many opportunities, but also many threats.

And now, as a Ukrainian, I'd like to draw lessons from the war in Ukraine and underline the conclusions we can reach. It's very important to realise that war has changed. Today, in Ukraine, it's not a war like the First World War or the Second World War that's taking place. It's something completely different.

It's drone warfare, it's hybrid warfare, it's computer warfare, and we have to prepare for it. When a Ukrainian naval drone costing 100 000 euros destroys a Russian warship costing 50 million Euros, when a Ukrainian aerial drone costing 400 euros destroys a tank or an armoured vehicle costing 1 million Euros: we're talking about something absolutely different.

Today, a drone operator is far more important on the battlefield than an ordinary company of soldiers. This brings us to the question of our education system. At school, we need to prepare our students to pilot drones and 3D printers. It's also a question of war. *Si vis pacem, para bellum*: if you want peace, prepare for war. And it's a question that our children will also have to prepare for.

I'd like to say, colleagues, that we need to change our education system. Flying drones is very important, as is artificial intelligence and so on. Where do we prepare future generations to defend our civilisation? We have to do this in our schools, or our enemies will come and destroy our schools and our civilisations. That's the way it is.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): "Thank you, Mister GONCHARENKO". [Spoken in French]

Now I'll give the floor to Mr Mehmet AKALIN for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

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

Dear colleagues, first of all I would like to thank the rapporteur for this extensive report.

The metaverse is a symbol of the emerging digital age, represents an extraordinary digital innovation, with the potential to contribute up to 5 trillion to the global economy by 2030. It promises the revolutionise and provide opportunities for a whole range of sectors.

However, opportunities come with implications and significant risks. While this digital world is assumed to contribute to many aspects of our lives, it can harm human rights, individual's freedoms, and social equality, if not properly guided.

This resolution aims to address the issue and refers for measures to prevent monopolisation by a handful of corporations, which could exacerbate socio-economic inequalities and limit cultural diversity, draws attention to the need for privacy and data protection.

Discrimination, harassment, and online abuse, especially towards children and vulnerable members of society, could carry over.

Human rights and effective age-appropriate protections have to be developed and implemented within the metaverse. This means strict content moderation, parental controls, and educational programs to help young users navigate these new spaces safely.

Many traditional jobs may disappear entirely, with the metaverse giving rise to new professions.

The challenge for policymakers will be to prepare the workforce for these shifts to remain competitive in the global economy.

We need smart, forward-looking regulations that protect users rights without stifling innovation. A framework that encourages competition, transparency, and security in the metaverse, ensuring that it remains an open, fair space that respects freedom of expression and encourages diversity of thought for all.

A clear mechanism should be established for investigating and penalising the crimes committed in the metaverse.

Companies processing the technology must be aware of their responsibilities and develop technical measures to prevent such incidents.

Metaverse is a socio-economic revolution in the making.

Europe has a unique opportunity to shape its future, ensuring that it aligns with our shared values of fairness, equality, human rights, and sustainability.

We must act collaboratively to harness its potential while mitigating its risks and effectively addressing the emerging dangers, and work together to ensure that it is a future that benefits all, one that fosters innovation, safeguards rights, and promotes a more inclusive digital world.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister AKALIN.

"I now give the floor to Mrs Anne STAMBACH-TERRENOIR, on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left". [Spoken in French]

Ms Anne STAMBACH-TERRENOIR (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Thank you very much, Mister rapporteur, for this balanced presentation which recognises the opportunities brought by the metaverse, such as new forms of learning, psychiatric care or democratic participation, while pointing out the risks of virtual technology connected on a global scale.

Extended reality and immersive technologies present major risks for the respect of human rights, such as the spread of disinformation, increased surveillance of the population by states, and a problematic concentration of power and control in the hands of economically super-powerful technology giants.

Virtual reality helmets and augmented reality goggles, for example, combined with other connected objects, continue the march towards ever more invasive data collection, carried out in addition by companies that tend to prioritise profit over the protection of citizens, paving the way for unprecedented intrusions into our lives, our homes and even our thoughts, as your report shows that collected body data can enable biometric psychography that draws conclusions about our deepest desires and inclinations, which can be used for targeted advertising as well as mass surveillance.

These devices will also collect huge amounts of information about our homes and private spaces, and could enable governments and corporations alike to illegitimately access our private lives.

On Tuesday, before our Assembly, Julian ASSANGE spoke of the way in which governments, in contexts of war - we were talking about this - misuse mass surveillance data to organise targeted mass assassinations using artificial intelligence. And we can see the terrible reality of this today in Ukraine, Gaza and Lebanon.

We therefore urge this Assembly to defend the rule of law, international law and human rights, also and above all in the metaverse. The resolution must emphasise that virtual spaces are not, and never will be, lawless spaces.

It is therefore urgent to place human rights standards at the center of extended reality developments, with appropriate regulation and enforcement. With curbs on freedom of expression on the rise worldwide, it's crucial that we collectively adhere to proportionate measures in line with the Santa Clara Principles, and as legislators we must ensure that big tech companies don't swallow up all their competitors before they have a chance to develop more rights-friendly alternatives to dominant platforms. Companies have a responsibility to respect human rights, as set out in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Last but not least, let's not forget to monitor and limit the environmental impact of the development of the metaverse and associated technologies, which lead to the massive production of electronic waste, excessive energy consumption and the ever-increasing need for limited resources, minerals and metals, to manufacture devices and infrastructures.

To conclude, globally connected virtual spaces also have the potential to provide open access to information on government action, bypassing the filters of media agents and censorship. So, in the spirit of WikiLeaks, the resolution should encourage the emancipatory potential of the metaverse for an informed and interconnected citizenry.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): *"Thank you, Ms Anne STAMBACH-TERRENOIR"* [spoken in French].

And then I given the floor to Ms Saskia KLUIT from the Socialist Group.

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Well, without a doubt, we today have access to a diverse information thanks to the metaverse. It has an endless opportunity for humankind. But we also have to recognise that the things that happen in the meta universe also happen in the real world. We all could read about the influence of Mr Andrew TATE on young boys and young boys translating that to female-unfriendly responses in Australia. So women are leaving now the educational sector, and that is, of course, not the way we want to go.

So it is an opportunity and a risk in itself. It has, on the upside, it is a great pluralism of ideas. We have lots of educational opportunities. It helps us in our daily life with applications that make life simpler. And it also has a great opportunity for access to societies. I mean, where you had to go to a library, you can just google it, or you can ChatGPT it, and you get so much information. But it's not always reliable so you need to learn how to work with the metaverse. And people cannot do that by themselves. They need help, they need to be educated, and we need to take societies' responsibility to have them do so.

We have to also educate people about the democratic and limitations of the meta universe. We have seen over and over and over again how online information, online disinformation, and online aggressive campaigns against democracy can undermine our systems which we fight so hard for in this chamber.

So the freedom of expression must be compatible with ethical and responsible use of the metaverse. And there it's sometimes lacking. We have to find regulation that will protect our human rights and our democracy because we are otherwise misinformed, manipulated, so we get rare radical ideologies entering our debate. And that is really, really dangerous.

For example, editorial responsibilities are a big issue here. I mean, why are we regulating our newspapers with 2, 3, 400 000 readers? And we're not regulating people who have like millions, tens of millions of followers and are influencing the public debate? That is a big issue we need to address.

So this is precisely what governments need to work on. In Spain there's been some lovely work. My colleague will hopefully tell you a bit more about that later on, where they try to get more of a grip. And the European Union is also working on it. But we should also pay attention because I sincerely believe we do have to set limits on the metaverse if we want to uphold our humanitarian law and our democratic values. So it's about finding a balance.

It's an important report, but it will not be the last one, I hope. I hope we will keep working on it because we need to establish international agreements and we need to do it fast.

Thank you very much for your attention.

(Light applause)

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Miss KLUIT.

Then I give the floor to Mr Ricardo CARVALHO from the Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Ricardo CARVALHO (Portugal, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you Mister President, dear colleagues, Immersive technologies are changing the world and changing democracy.

Immersive technologies are changing the world and are changing democracy.

We cannot ignore that immersive technologies, including the metaverse, are being used to great positive effect in multiple sectors of society, including education, healthcare, culture, sport, and many others [which are important], such as media and communication and, increasing in participatory democracy.

It's a new world. It's no longer person to person.

Everything, in different dimensions, can be remote and virtual, and of course with benefits for those who are especially isolated by their location or lack of mobility, health or financial capacity.

Although we believe in self-regulation, we also know that might not be enough, and that's why we support the need to involve private companies and commitment to the necessity of an approach that can guarantee the reporting of criminal behaviour.

In the Group of the European People's Party we encourage member states to ensure a legislative and regulatory framework adapted to metaverse environments that uphold democracy, human rights, the rule of law, responding to law infringements with adequate measures concerning policing, jurisdiction, evidence gathering and deterrent sanctions on counteracting harassment, violence, abuse and manipulative and exploitative conducts, as well as safeguarding freedom of expression and dealing with new forms of social and political manipulation.

We cannot also forget the foreign interference, and fake news, which is one of the biggest threats to democracies, and that this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has put into different reports several times.

That's the reason why we are facing new challenges, and we cannot ignore that we need to deal with them.

Regarding the metaverse, we cannot ignore that we face, like in the real world, criminal behaviours like harassment, violence, abuse, fraud and theft and many other human rights violations, not forgetting that in metaverse environments we can also potentiate a manipulation of public opinion.

That's why in the Group of the European People's Party we believe that decision-makers must be aware of the threats to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, despite all the opportunities and advantages of the metaverse.

In the Group of the European People's Party we defend more international co-operation among governments, collaboration between governments and the private sector, researchers, so we can, all together, address the challenges of metaverse technology, incentivising a safe creative immersive ecosystem and ethical standards.

We congratulate the rapporteur, and we support the draft resolution.

Thank you very much.

(Light applause)

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister CARVALHO.

So we end now with these speakers on behalf of the political groups and we go to the other speakers lists.

I give first the floor to Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

You have the floor for 3 minutes, please.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): Is it working?

Yes. Good.

Thank you, President and colleagues,

I would like to thank the rapporteur and his Committee for a splendid piece of work. And perhaps add to that for his introduction to the debate today, which has laid the issues before us in a very clear way.

Members may wonder what an old man like me can contribute to a subject where emerging technology is very much in our focus. And it's a fair question since I started my intellectual life before the internet was invented. It went on to social media, we've been discussing artificial intelligence, and now we're in the metaverse. And I have seen so much happen. And I have just stepped down from three years on a select committee in the House of Lords in the British Parliament on communications and digital, where we were looking at large language models and artificial intelligence from that angle. We were urged in our committee, which was from all parties, we were urged to concentrate on the positive. And it's clear that there were people there, politicians, who saw the metaverse and the technology as aiding our commercial advantages in the world, helping us, as was said by the previous speaker, with various aspects of our daily living, but not to concentrate on the negative.

That's why I like this report. It was very clear about the balance of interests. But I have noticed the angle of approach in a body like ours in London, which wants to maximise the use of modern technology for political and social advantage, sometimes at the expense of a proper consideration of the negative aspects. And I dissented from that pressure and made it clear that I was going to add a view of the negative things we were discussing as we interviewed people from the top jobs in all the platforms and laboratories and research centres that you can imagine.

And it is really a worry, because from a human rights point of view, which is what we are here for, a different atmosphere altogether, we've got to approach it from the way that the technology can help to create societies that really could do without it.

It's just interesting to me that this is a worldwide phenomenon. Therefore, any regulatory body we set up, any code of conduct, will only be as strong as its weakest link, because we may urge the governments, for all we're worth, to do this, that and the other, to improve and to make things safe, but, at the end of the day, somewhere in the world, there'll be a way of contravening, undermining and breaking those codes to the disadvantage of all of us.

So I would just urge us to bear that in mind and to acknowledge that making laws and codes to govern practice in this area takes so much time that by the time they're enacted, the game is somewhere else. This is a phenomenally difficult subject and we should give it our cleverest attention and maximise everything that's in Section 5 of this wonderful report.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord GRIFFITHS.

And the next speaker is Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK, but I don't think he's in the room. No.

Then I go to Ms Valentina GRIPPO. No?

Then I go to Mr László TOROCZKAI. No?

Then I'm going to Mr Jeremy CORBYN. You have the floor for 3 minutes.

Mr Jeremy CORBYN (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you. Thank you, Mister President.

And this is a very valuable and very timely debate, even if not particularly well-attended this morning. But I suppose that's the price of Friday morning.

And I think we should thank the authors of this report. It's far-reaching, and it makes the point in the discussion that this is far more than just a technological advancement.

But like Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS, I've grown up from a pre-internet age to now incredibly sophisticated technology. I am not against technology in any way. I think it massively advances human understanding, massively advances opportunities and social inclusion at its best. But nevertheless, it does have to be monitored, it does have to be regulated and does have to be controlled in some way.

At its worst, the technology offered by the metaverse allows horrible attitudes to be promoted, isolated people to be exploited, racist and homophobic attitudes to be promoted and can be incredibly dangerous. But at its best, of course, it does provide the opportunities for massive access to information and experiences which would otherwise be denied. And so we have to make the balance that goes with it.

When Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO spoke earlier, he talked about the uses of high technology in war, which is killing an awful lot of people in both Russia and Ukraine at the present time, and being used to kill an awful lot of people in Gaza and in Lebanon. High technology can be used for the most brutal consequences and the most brutal effects, but it can also be used to promote understanding. It can also be used to promote peace. It can also be used to promote cultural solidarity, which is so often lacking in so much that we do in this world.

Mr Julian ASSANGE, who spoke here earlier this week, and personally, I think, has made a massive contribution to the understanding of the dangers of untrammelled power in this world, has exposed an awful lot of the way technology has been used.

What I would like to just draw attention to is three of the recommendations at the back: 11.5, which is concerning the promotion of ecological standards and sustainability, I think is very important; 11.7 on cultural alternatives and cultural understanding is, I think, extremely important as well; and 11.8, which is about the promotion of human rights.

Now, in the Council of Europe, we discuss many things and we have very many, very valuable reports. My concern is that quite often, that is, often, as far as they get. We're often unclear what governments actually do with these reports and how much they bring them back. So I hope when the rapporteur responds, he'll be able to assure us that there will be some method of monitoring and following up on this to see what response is achieved from all our member state governments so that we can look forward to something more appropriate in the future.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr CORBYN.

Then I go to Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE): Mister Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the rapporteur, Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA, for this important text.

I fully support it. The legislative framework for the metaverse must respect democracy, human rights and the rule of law, because the metaverse is developing very fast. This is the case in many countries. I can say the same for my country. Today, Ukraine is a highly digitised country. For example, our Diia application offers a wide range of digital government services. Thanks to Diia, Ukrainians can register companies and even get married. Ukraine is the first country in the world to organise online weddings on Diia. Wedding processes are digitised and long-distance military couples can marry online. This is a very important transformation. The metaverse offers us a way of bridging distances during the war in Ukraine.

Metaverse is being promoted in education. They enable students to receive an education at a distance.

But there's also a big problem: in Ukraine, there are constant cyberattacks organised by Russia, particularly on government sites. This digital war is just as horrific as the physical attacks, and we need decisive action to defeat it. We need to combat illegal content too. That's why I'd like to thank France for its response to these problems when illegal content was being disseminated via Telegram.

We need to combat cyberbullying, drug trafficking and other dangers in the metaverse, where people and children are vulnerable. That's why I fully support this resolution. We must ensure that this virtual world protects human rights. We must take steps to ensure that people have access to digital technologies. At the same time, they must be safe in this unique world.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): "Thank you, Madam BILOZIR".
[Spoken in French]

Now I give the floor to Mr Ričards ŠLESERS.

Mr Ričards ŠLESERS (Latvia, NR): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues, first I want to thank the rapporteur for his valuable contribution to the metaverse topic and all those involved in making this report possible.

As the metaverse takes shape, it's clear it will fundamentally impact how we interact with information, media, and each other.

This is not just a passing trend, but a transformative shift, and we must address both its opportunities and risks.

The progression of virtual reality technology has been remarkable. In the 1980s, early VR systems allowed interaction with virtual worlds, but they were limited by the technology of the time.

The concept of virtual reality had to remain dormant for decades, waiting for technological advancements to overcome the hardware limitations of the past.

In 2016, the release of the Oculus Rift marked a turning point. It offered room scale VR, but it required base stations like you see over here, and a powerful PC to run this.

This sparked a new VR boom, propelling major tech companies to enter the market and position themselves as key players in this emerging space, recognising the immense potential of immersive technologies.

Shortly after, in 2019, Oculus launched the Quest, an untethered standalone headset that made VR more accessible and user friendly, taking the technology further.

Meta has recently announced Meta Orion, a prototype AR glasses offering a glimpse into the future, where digital and physical worlds merge seamlessly.

With Meta's bold goal of reaching 1 billion VR users, it highlights the vast potential of this technology.

However, as the VR Bible is still being written, we must guide its development to align with societal needs and values.

The metaverse offers great opportunities, but also raises privacy concerns, especially around biometric data, and the risk to democracy and human rights through manipulation and exploitation.

Reports of abuse highlight the need for clear regulation and accountability, but it also has the potential to transform education and culture. But ethical standards are essential to ensure these advancements are safe and beneficial to society.

Dear colleagues, as members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we have a responsibility to guide the evolution of the metaverse. We must act now, creating regulatory frameworks that promote safety, transparency, and accountability.

This will ensure that the metaverse develops as a force for good, balancing innovation and protection.

Thank you so much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then I go to Ms Olena MOSHENETS.

Ms Olena MOSHENETS (Ukraine, ALDE): We are grateful for a comprehensive overview of the topic, the relevance of which is constantly growing in a world where the internet and digital technologies are transforming reality daily, opening new opportunities for humanity.

The full scale invasion by Russia demonstrates the potential of technologies to be a powerful tool. In the context of the occupation about 26% of Ukraine is expanding its operational capacity; increasing the accessibility of the metaverse gives us a chance to recreate cities which have been destroyed and use such virtual copies for future reconstruction. The evolution of digital tools is the key to recovering what modern humanity has lost or forgotten, what is hidden in our history.

The aggressor country has stolen more than 400 000 artworks from Ukraine and at least 38 museums have been damaged or destroyed. Thanks to the possibilities of the metaverse, the Ukrainian agency has created a virtual archive of memory with the lost exhibits of Kuindzhi Art Museum in Mariupol, which resists attempts to erase our national identity.

The metaverse, in co-operation with artificial intelligence, can offer innovative approaches to training military troops, providing a flexible and adaptive method, safe conditions and minimising the injuries during training.

The metaverse is a way of modernisation, a method of strengthening the stability of the state and new dimension of interaction between people, information and technology.

It is our duty to review, adopt and develop new standards of human rights protection to the realities of the modern information society, ensuring a balance between freedom of speech and security.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Because some time is left, I would just like to ask to the audience if there is anyone else who wants to contribute to the debate? No.

Then Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA as the rapporteur to reply. You have 3 minutes.

Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA (Romania, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Chair.

So indeed, Mister GONCHARENKO and Madam MOSHENETS, indeed, tech changes everything. Tech accelerates almost to the point of derailment. All the social, economic, political processes, even warfare, are being changed because of technology.

Indeed, we need to have digital tech and media literacy for ourselves, as law makers, as decision makers, but also for our people, for the young generation, and for the old generation because this is the future.

Mister AKALIN, you are perfectly right. It's the usage. It's how we use technology. Technology per se is not good, it's not bad, it's not even neutral. But how we use it, this is key. And indeed, artificial intelligence (AI) puts pressure on the job market we know today. And I agree with your remarks.

Madam STAMBACH-TERRENOIR, indeed, there are problems when it comes to energy needs, electricity needs to power these new technologies. And I agree with your point of view.

Madam KLUIT, indeed, how to work with the metaverse is key, education is of paramount importance, and the responsible use of technology is something we should keep in mind.

Mister CARVALHO, Lord GRIFFITHS, yes, I believe that indeed there is this structural asymmetry between the human capacity to adapt to change the biological capacity of the brain and the pace, the speed and the magnitude of change brought by emergent technologies.

I took note of all the comments. I would like to say a big thank you to Ričards Šlesers for showcasing us the technology, the history of the headsets and thank you for assisting me during our work in our Committee.

Mister Roberto FASINO is here today. He's a senior civil servant in the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media. His help was much appreciated. Together with Ms Silvia Arzilli and other colleagues, I should mention Rodica Ciochina and Patrick Penninckx. Thank you for assisting me. Because this is my last day here in the Council of Europe since I will take over a position in the European Parliament, I would like to thank you all for being good colleagues and having a very fruitful and constructive time in this House. Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister CRISTEA.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee wish to speak?

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media)*: Thank you, President,

Dear colleagues,

This is the first time that I have represented the Committee in plenary on a very innovative report that our colleague has prepared with great clarity, common sense and moderation.

First of all, this report and the accompanying draft resolution show that we parliamentarians need to be much more visionary and prudent as well as far-sighted in our roles as legislators, because although this may appear to belong to the realm of science fiction, in the very near future it will form part of our reality. Things are hurtling forward at a vertiginous pace and technological advances move in leaps and bounds.

The metaverse is already omnipresent in the daily lives of many of our fellow citizens. If we want to be prepared – the moment is now.

Of course, the metaverse offers opportunities that we must not squander if we remain on the sidelines, at the genesis of the metaverse, or if we find ourselves being passive users of the advances of others. Of course there are risks that may be lethal to our democratic systems, our societies, as well as our sovereignty if we don't put in place the means of avoiding such risks.

These risks particularly relate to vulnerable people who, in all likelihood, will not be able to access the metaverse, or indeed older people who don't have the digital know-how of young people. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media has identified some of these opportunities and the risks, the most obvious ones.

The draft resolution offers a number of specific proposals. I am confident you will be able to support them.

Secondly, I want to stress that this excellent work does not give us definitive solutions; rather, it paves the way for further reflection, at the same time indicating the various avenues that our Committee, along with others, could explore, delving deeper into the analysis of the fundamental problems, and trying to fill out and flesh out the framework in our report. This work is important because it is new and innovative, not only for our Assembly, but also for each and every one of us in our national parliaments.

That is why I very much hope that the report that we are poised to adopt will be circulated and used.

I close by wishing all the very best to our colleague and rapporteur in his future endeavours in the European Parliament, and I very much hope that he will represent us and keep up all of the very good work he has done here in defending human rights.

I wish you every success in the future in the European Parliament.

Good luck Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA.

Vote: Risks and opportunities of the metaverse

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Miss MARTINEZ, for the nice words.

So, the debate is closed now.

The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media has presented a draft resolution [Doc. 16031] to which 1 amendment has been tabled.

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

Any amendment which has been unanimously approved by the Committee seized for report shall not be put to the vote in plenary and shall be declared as definitively approved, unless 10 or more members of the Assembly object.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendment 1 to the draft resolution, which was unanimously approved, be declared as approved.

Is that so?

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media): Yes, Mister Chair. It has been approved, yes.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Okay. Unanimously?

[Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO off mic] Yeah.

Thank you, Ms MARTINEZ.

If no one objects, I will consider the amendment to be approved.

There's no objection from the room? No.

So Amendment 1 to the draft resolution is therefore approved and it will not be called.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Doc. 16031 [as amended]. A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Congratulations, this is unanimous.

The draft resolution in Doc. 16031 [as amended] is adopted unanimously.

And I also like in my name to wish you very good luck in the European Parliament, which is stated also for one week here in Strasbourg, but for three weeks in Brussels. So welcome to my country. Thank you, Mister CRISTEA, and see you maybe in Brussels. Thank you.

We now come to the free debate.

I would like to remind members that this debate is for topics NOT already on the agenda agreed on Monday morning.

Speeches must as always comply with the principles set out in Rule 22.6 on acceptable words.

Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes.

I call first Mr Randolph DE BATTISTA.

You have 3 minutes, and please start by identifying the topic you wish to raise.

You have the floor.

Free debate

Mr Randolph DE BATTISTA (Malta, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, dear Chair,

My topic is human rights. Given that this will be my last speech in this Plenary, as I move to a new role in Geneva in the coming months, I wanted to take this opportunity to reflect on the short but meaningful experience I had these months in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. And as I look back, I am proud of the work that has been done by the group that I proudly formed part of the Committee, particularly on equality, and some of the resolutions and reports that we have passed together in this Chamber, amongst others, the rights to a healthy environment, the protection of women human rights defenders, the rights of LGBTIQ persons, and the protection of journalists, including, obviously, Mr Julian ASSANGE. And in the pipeline, a number of reports that will also be debated, like the ban on conversion practices, the rapporteur, our very own friend Ms Kate OSBORNE, and also overcoming age-based discrimination against older persons.

As we navigate an increasingly complex world, our commitment to defending human rights must remain unwavering. In the face of modern threats, including the attack on multilateralism, misinformation, disinformation, the anti-gender movement, and the far right, human dignity must never be compromised. The future of human rights depends on our collective will to adapt and address emerging challenges. We must not fall for the trap of easy answers.

And as the new Prime Minister of the UK said recently, "You can call it populism, many people do. But I call it the "politics of easy answers". And we should not fall into the trap of easy answers.

Allow me to refer to some of the comments I heard during a number of these debates, especially from the opposite side, when, for example, they refer to gender ideology, when they refer to so-called hate speech. Well, you know what? A number of people died. So many people died because of this hate speech. And some of the colleagues referred to, also the exhibition that we have. Well, I received an email to protest against this exhibition, but my reply was, thank you for the promotion. It's such a wonderful expression of art.

I conclude by thanking everyone, all my colleagues and say that we must continue to innovate our approach to ensure that human rights are not just an old boring relic but remain a living thing that we should always protect.

As I leave this Assembly, I trust that the pursuit of human rights will remain at the heart of this Assembly and even as the landscape changes, we should always keep in mind Mother Teresa's words that human rights are not something that the government gives to people. It's every human being's reflection of their dignity.

Thank you very much for all the work you do. Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister DE BATTISTA.

Then I go to Mr Sergiy VLASENKO.

Okay, he's not in the room. Thank you. Then we go to Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Dear colleagues, dear Chairman, it's very good that we took back the free debate, because this is an important debate, because here we can speak about something which is maybe not in the agenda of our meetings, but which is so important.

And I want to speak now with you about the security situation in the world and what's going on. And the situation is very bad. And I'm not just saying it. I will now prove it to you, because when you leave, you may think, oh, it's more or less the same how it was yesterday. I just want to remind you.

So, here we have 4 October 2024. Three years ago. 4 October 2021. No big war in Ukraine. Yes, there was already Russian aggression, but not a full-scale invasion. No big war in the Middle East. The Red Sea is free for passage of the ships and so on. It's just three years ago.

Let's take another 4 October, 2022. Full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. A new *guerre mondiale*, a new world war. Because like tanks, missiles attacking European cities, but still Middle East, it was said, it's so calm, like not in the years, the Red Sea is calm.

Then you remember: 7 October, attack of Hamas on Israel, and the war in the Middle East began.

So, a year ago, again 4 October, 2023. Now we have a full-scale invasion in Ukraine. A big war in the Middle East already. And so on and so on.

So every year, the situation is deteriorating. Why? Because one more event, I didn't mention to you. It's what Houthis so-called are doing in the Red Sea. They're destroying ships, like just days ago, they destroyed British ships. Again. And we all pay a price for this, all of us, because it influences the world prices, because commercial navigation is so important. And what is the world doing to stop these pitiful Houthis? No, the whole world can't stop pitiful Houthis.

I'm opening Wikipedia. You can just open and watch yourself. The operation started 19 October last year. United States, United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway. All of them can't finish these Houthis. All these countries can't finish them.

I mean, it's a shame. And that's why they think that they can do whatever they want with us.

Why? Because when Russia sees, like yesterday was said in Washington, they said, Pentagon representative, we can't intercept Russian missiles and drones in Ukrainian skies. Why? Because this will be an escalation, they said. So it's crazy.

Russian missiles are falling on Polish territory. Russian drones are falling on Romanian territory. But Poland, Romania, and other NATO members are afraid to protect their territory. It's crazy.

And we need to make decisions and make lessons finally from this.

If we will not stop them, they will stop us.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, NR, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr GONCHARENKO.

Then I go to Mr Jeremy CORBYN.

Mr Jeremy CORBYN (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you, Mister President,

I too want to talk about the situation of security within the world.

At the moment there are serious wars going on in Ukraine, where Russia wrongly invaded Ukraine, and the terrible war is going on and thousands of people are dying both in Ukraine and in Russia.

There is the conflict going on of the continued bombardment of Gaza, now the invasion of Lebanon, and the dangers of a war with Iran.

There is a massive war going on in Sudan, fuelled by the arms trade and by internal conflict within Sudan.

There is a massive loss of life going on in the Democratic Republic of Congo where people have been killed because of the greed of mining companies wanting to get coltan to produce mobile phones.

The issues around the world are often complicated, but what seems to me to be so badly lacking from both the media reporting and our debates here, and often the debates at the United Nations as well, is the language of peace, the language of diplomacy, the language of diplomatic intervention to try to bring about a peace process of some sort.

All wars have to end with diplomacy. All wars have to end with some kind of agreement and some kind of conference. And it's to the credit of the general secretary of the United Nations that he's tried to do that. It is to the shame of Israel. They've now banned him from even visiting the country. And it is to the credit of Latin American presidents and the African Union that they have too tried to bring about some kind of diplomatic rapprochement.

But I want to also just say this about what's happening in Gaza and in Lebanon at the present time. What happened in October last year was not the start of the process. The start of the process was the occupation of the West Bank, is the invasion of Gaza by Israel, since then is the continued settlement policy on the West Bank.

So far in Gaza alone, 45 000 people have been killed by Israeli bombardment. The infrastructure has been destroyed, homes have been destroyed, schools have been destroyed, hospitals have been destroyed. And now with the invasion of Lebanon by Israel, a million people have already been displaced from their homes.

And so you have to ask the question, if the United States can afford 8.7 billion pounds to support Israel's armaments policy, why on earth can't the same energy, the same resources be put into promoting peace, environmental sustainability, decent food supplies and human rights around the world?

I hope that when we reconvene here in January in the Council of Europe, we'll be able to start discussing a bit more about how we can bring about peace and justice around the world, rather than fuelling the arms trade and the wars that are taking so many tens of thousands of lives, which we're able to watch live on our television screens.

(Light applause)

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

Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL is next.

Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL (Switzerland, ALDE): Dear Mister Chairman,

esteemed guests,

I am talking about human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These are the issues in our country and in our Council. And I'm talking about how we dealt with Corona.

Did we remember that in this Council when our countries took the harsh coronavirus measures? No, we in this Council failed to critically scrutinise the measures. Yes, the challenge at the beginning was a big one, especially at the very beginning. The uncertainty and fear of the virus required decisions to be made at the time. They were made in the name of health protection.

Today we know that they were exaggerated and that mistakes were made. The lockdowns imposed to contain the virus had a profound impact on society, on people. Many people lost their livelihoods and businesses went under. Freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and the right to education were more or less trampled on and restricted in all member states. Mental health problems increased dramatically. The consequences of these measures and the debts that our children will bear will be enormous.

In a society based on freedom and self-determination, we must not allow fear of a virus to undermine our fundamental rights in this way. I repeat; unfortunately, we in this Council have failed to do more to question and shed light on the work of our government. We have failed here and in many parliaments, I think, to show the executives that we are the representatives of the people, that we are the representatives of the people by whom we were elected.

How did we deal with people who were critical? We excluded them, we sidelined them, we pilloried them. Have we already forgotten all that?

Open and honest communication would have been crucial to gaining the trust of citizens. But no; propaganda was used everywhere. Government propaganda, which we rightly denounced in reports here - but only when it affects others. But of course it is crucial that we learn lessons in the future and find the right balance between protection and the fundamental rights of citizens. We should have hidden less behind masks, we should have been more honest, we should have wanted to be more open.

Here, in this area, we have unfortunately failed to stand up for our values in this Council. These are human rights, democracy and the rule of law. We should not do that again next time. And I appeal that we do better, that we act more consistently and honestly here. Thank you very much.

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

Ms Zeynep YILDIZ, you have the floor.

Ms Zeynep YILDIZ (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues, I will be talking about the preservation of co-existence in Europe.

And the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe serves as a platform for enhancing democracy, for protecting human rights, and also for understanding how others perceive the world and how our countries are perceived by others.

As we depart from here, I think it's essential that each of us leaves with this, with a sense of duty that we should have some homework to do.

In addition to our legislative function, we have the capacity to conduct awareness raising activities that can generate significant social impact.

In this context, I believe it's crucial for us to consider the measures that should be taken to preserve the culture of co-existence in Europe and worldwide.

Years of imperialism have corroded nations abilities to govern themselves. Approaches rooted in social Darwinism have led some nations into a misguided sense of dominance, inflicting irreparable wounds on the confidence and the dignity of others.

Indeed, these extremisms have primarily contributed to the outbreak of the First World War, and the heavy toll of that conflict subsequently paved the way for the Second World War.

As Eric Hobsbawm states; extremisms threaten not only the lives of individuals but also bonds of society. The rise of radical ideologies fosters animosity among people and fragments social cohesion.

The history of the world is filled with examples of demonstrating the consequences of fostering animosity between individuals.

I would like to draw your attention to a particular issue in this context.

Without falling into the age old conundrum of whether the chicken or the egg came first, I wish to share a brief chronology.

The law enacted in France in 2021 titled "Loi pour la protection de la République" was initially named "Loi sur le séparatisme islamiste". It should have been a matter of dark humour that a law aimed at combating discrimination bore a title that was fundamentally discriminatory. Yet this is not the case. Currently in France the headscarf is being excluded from all areas of public life, jeopardising the protection of fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of expression and assembly.

Excluding the headscarf from all public spaces, the headscarf ban particularly, is an intervention far beyond freedom of expression and constitutes state intervention in individuals' bodily choices.

Moreover, those who enacted this law have not only failed to secure the votes of the groups they sought to satisfy, but have also inadvertently provided legitimising ground for the growing xenophobia and hatred of Islam in Europe. Particularly, this is against hatred of Islam, thus contributing to the increase in their electoral support.

We should see this reality. Each member state owes its current prosperity to the people from all around the world. This presence enriches and diversifies our societies. We must not forget that we owe our current existence to this diversity.

Ms Zeynep YILDIZ (Türkiye, NR): Protecting this culture of co-existence is our common duty to avoid creating new fields of conflict.

As we return to our countries, we must consider this collective common duty.

I express my respect to all my colleagues who have made their opinions heard throughout this Assembly.

I thank them all.

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

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

Dear colleagues,

The next item on today's agenda is the continuation of the debate on the progress report of the Bureau of the Assembly and the Standing Committee, Document 16045, Addendum 3.

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau of the Assembly has proposed several references to Committees. They are set out in Document 16045, Addendum 3. These references must be submitted for ratification by the Assembly in accordance with Rule 26.3.

Are there any objections to these references? No. Thank you.

I now propose that the other decisions in the Progress Report, Document 16045, Addendum 3, be ratified. Any objections? Thank you.

Proposed changes in the composition of committees have been published in Commissions (2024)07, Addendum 3. Is there any objection to these changes? No. They are adopted.

We have now come to the end of our business. I would like to thank all members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, particularly rapporteurs of committees, for their hard work during this part-session.

I would like to thank the vice-presidents who chaired during this part session: Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ, Mr David MORRIS, Ms Bernadeta COMA, Ms Agnieszka POMASKA, Mr Markus WIECHEL, Mr Andries GRYFFROY, Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI.

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

I would like to thank especially Mr Randolph DE BATTISTA, who is, as you heard from him earlier, participating for the last time in this session.

I wish you all the best. Good luck. Thank you for your contribution to this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and its important role in our world.

Dear colleagues,

The first part of the 2025 session will be held from 27 to 31 January 2025.

I now declare the fourth part of the 2024 session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe closed.

The sitting is closed.

The sitting is closed at 11:15 a.m.