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Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 14

Debate: Respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption within the Council of Europe

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Good morning, everybody.

Thank you very much.

The sitting is open.

I remind members of the Assembly that they should insert their badge before taking the floor. As you begin your speech, please press the microphone button only once and wait for a couple of seconds.

The first item of business this morning is the debate on the Report titled "Respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption within the Council of Europe", Document 16138, presented by Mr Frank SCHWABE on behalf of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs.

We will conclude this debate at about 11:50 a.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I call now the rapporteur Mr Frank SCHWABE.

You have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes at the end to debate.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Good morning. Maybe sometimes some people think I have a kind of fever or mania about certain people in certain countries, but I don't. It would be much better not to have to discuss such topics, but we have to discuss them. We need this anti-corruption report. Why? Because corruption is destroying all our values: democracy, rule of law and human rights. We could write a book about it. But this is how it is. We have to deal with it.

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.

We must not forget the damage that was done to our Parliamentary Assembly after the Azerbaijan-funded corruption scandal of the last decade, and the consequent importance of protecting ourselves against such risks.

But these risks are not something only from the last decade. This year we have had nearly weekly announcements of European politicians being involved in corruption scandals. Many of you will have been following the money laundering corruption scandal involving Didier REYNDERS. He was a candidate to be Secretary General of the Council of Europe two times. There is no current court case, but there are really very interesting and really adventurous accusations against him. I really recommend you check them.

When you read about these cases, you think you are in a mixture of a James Bond and maybe a comedy film, but this is the reality, unfortunately. There are stories where people here in Strasbourg hide money under a bed in a hotel. There are stories that people who came home from the Parliamentary Assembly in recent years. They went to their bank the next day, and they put cash in their bank account.

In Germany, there's an indictment by the public prosecutor about the influence here in the Council of Europe on reports, on rapporteurs, on election of the various missions.

A former chair of the Group of the European People's Party and the German delegation, Axel FISCHER, was accused of getting some €10 000. Karin STRENZ, who unfortunately passed away, a former member in this Assembly is accused of getting €150 000. Eduard LINTNER, former member of this Parliamentary Assembly is accused of distributing €3.4 million, and we don't know where it is. That means there is evidence. There is a situation, a real situation we have to face in the Parliamentary Assembly, in the European Parliament as well.

We have to deal with it, and we have to respond to it. We have to take action. I want to thank civil society and the media, like the European Stability Initiative, like the OCCRP (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project), like movie makers. There are movies, meanwhile about it in documentaries, because they are the ones who tried to bring new trust in this Organisation, and they really make such things public. We have to deal with it, we have to answer to it. This report tries to answer to it. We have to establish a culture. I don't want to accuse single persons. We need a culture of anti-corruption where we are aware. We need awareness of the difficulties and the challenges. We have to prevent it in the end. It is crucial that democratic institutions are able to take decisive action to prevent, detect, and act upon risks that could undermine their credibility and the trust of the public in those institutions.

This report and the draft resolution and recommendation we are debating today are a result of a number of years of reflection and respond to the current challenges. I would like to say that there are maybe five key proposals in this report. The first three are about how we can improve our rules of transparency.

What we want to do, firstly, is a single online update, an updatable declaration of interest. It should start from 1 January 2026 already. Maybe this report doesn't seem the most interesting one in this week. I don't know, but it has an influence on you. Please check it. Read the report, and check what you should do quite soon.

Secondly, the amendments would increase the implications for those members who repeatedly fail to comply with the obligation on us all to complete a declaration of interest. We make it simpler for you so nobody can say, "I don't know how to do it; I forgot it", or whatever. If you do it twice, we will go to the national parliament, inform the national parliament and ask the president of the national parliament not to appoint such a member again to the delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

Thirdly, detection is important. For now you say, "Oh, I make a declaration, I declare it, and nobody reviews it". We will review it better in the future, and each and every person has to know it.

Fourthly, we need an improved system for reacting to alleged breaches of the code of conduct. What we try to introduce is looking into the history. I would call it "IBAC light". Around the other Azerbaijan scandal we had an IBAC. They produced an IBAC report on this report. The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs can take decisions. Now we want to ask seven judges, former judges of the Court, to be prepared if we need them in a special case to help us. Finally the decisions will be taken by the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs although we will change the name of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs.

Fifthly, I suggest improving the coherence of the rules in ensuring that enhanced ethical standards are applied to all those granted specific roles within the Assembly. That means we're looking into each and everyone's declarations, but we look into the specific situation of those who are presidents, vice-presidents, chairs of election observation missions, those going to election observation missions, chairs and co-chairs of committees, and so on and so on.

I consider that ethical standards are essential for democratic institutions. We really have to do everything to support it. With this decision of the report we have two decisions, let's say in parallel and in the report.

First, as I mentioned already, we will change the name of the committee to a "committee on rules, ethics and immunities" to make clear about what we say there. We will introduce a general rapporteur on ethical standards and anti-corruption.

Dear colleagues,

Please let's discuss this report. There are no amendments for now, because certainly no one is against a report against corruption, for sure not. Again, we need to implement a culture of anti-corruption. This is an exercise each and every one of us has to do. No one here is born corrupt, but there is a kind of danger and we have to know that it is here. We have this kind of danger, and we have to do everything to prevent it.

Thank you very much.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Schwabe, as rapporteur.

Now we follow on the speakers list.

And in this debate I first call on behalf of political groups, Mr Ryszard PETRU from Poland for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Group.

You have the floor.

Mr Ryszard PETRU (Poland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Dear colleagues,

First of all, let me congratulate the rapporteur for his solid and important report for this Assembly.

And the Assembly has come a long way since the 2017 corruption scandal. The so-called "caviar diplomacy" involving Azerbaijan seriously damaged the credibility of our work and revealed major weaknesses in our ethical safeguards. Just for the recollection, in response, we took important steps: we launched an independent investigation, introduced codes of conduct, strengthened rules on gifts and lobbying, and required members to fill in public declarations of interest. We also established sanctions and banned lobbies linked to the scandal.

In 2023, we added the Speak Up Policy, giving members and staff a safe and confidential way to report wrongdoing. But, as the report rightly argues, this reform must continue and go much further. The report rightly proposes a few steps in order to strengthen our credibility. The major improvement, one single public and updatable declaration of interest for each member, covering all roles held, from rapporteurs to vice president, is going to replace the current patchwork of different declarations with one clear, accessible document.

Second, the report tightens rules on conflicts of interest, gifts, lobbying and outside paid roles.

Third, it improves enforcement. It's important – members who do not submit a declaration won't be allowed to hold official roles. I think it's very important, and this is really the enforcement. If a member ignores this for two years, the national parliament will be notified. Sanctions will also apply to members who leave the Assembly before proceedings are complete.

Fourth, the report proposes a stronger ethical culture, clear guidance, online tools, and even appointing a general rapporteur on anti-corruption, which we support in ethics to keep this issue at the forefront.

In our view, the responsibility should lie more with the national parliaments, since they are the ones who delegate to the Council. It's important that local parliaments respond to the Council when a member does not fulfill his or her declaration on time.

Colleagues, our past response to corruption was necessary and serious. But this report gives us a chance to go further, to simplify the rules, close loopholes and truly lead by example.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group fully supports this proposal and the strength of this Assembly depends not just on its voice, but on its integrity.

Thank you very much. Thank you very much for your report.

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

I now give the floor to Mr Andrej HUNKO in front of the Group of the Unified European Left.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would first like to congratulate Mr Frank SCHWABE for his work in this area. I have to say that I have been a member of this Assembly since January 2010, so I was an active member here at the height of the corruption scandal. And even as a new Member of Parliament, it was difficult for me to see through what was actually going on in the background. There were a lot of decisions back then where I scratched my head, so to speak, and tried to understand them because they were incomprehensible if you didn't know the caviar network. But it was still very opaque to me.

And Mr Frank SCHWABE – I think you came a little later – focused very much on uncovering this network, so to speak - and was indeed very successful. So congratulations for that. And I believe that the recommendations that we now have, which are also formulated in the new report and in the recommendation, all make sense, that it makes sense for us to adopt them and that they will be implemented.

There are currently a number of lawsuits in Germany against German MPs who were present here. That, too, is a scandal, it has to be said – that people are elected here for this Assembly and then receive remuneration in the four-figure, five-figure, six-figure and seven-figure euro range. So, it is good that this is being clarified and that we are drawing appropriate conclusions from it.

Finally, I would like to make a few general observations. It is of course always a problem when there is a lot of money and a lot of interest on one side – as was the case in Azerbaijan – and on the other side there are recipients, so to speak. This money naturally finds its way to the recipient in a variety of ways, sometimes via the pillows of hotels in Strasbourg.

It is of course good to develop rules, which is what we are doing here to prevent this corruption. But a world in which inequality is growing and in which such concentrations of money arise will of course always be susceptible to such corruption. And that is why the fight against inequality is always indirectly a fight against corruption. Thank you very much.

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

In the debate, I call next Ms Petra BAYR from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Yeah, thank you very much.

We know that many countries start to fight corruption in politics when there is a specific case that becomes public. And of course that's a good reason, and better then, than never. But I think that we are all united in the idea that a system to assist MPs to respect ethical standards from scratch is much better than one that only relies on responding to breaches of standards.

It's obvious that throughout Europe we have very diverse standards, from clear settled laws up to codes of conduct, so guiding principles, and indeed, Frank said, what we need is an underlying culture. So we also have to work not only on laws, but also on culture.

I think it's important to harmonise our standards. The degree of transparency, the content we disclose. We must have clear standards on how to validate the disclosed information. This is also something that we, at the Parliamentary Assembly, are still lacking. How to execute the requirements of ethical behavior in politics and how we sanction infringements.

We must be aware that standards for ethics in parliament that were settled once, will not stay the same forever, but need to be adopted, constantly improved and enforced all the time.

The goal is not only to boost public trust and accountability in parliamentary institutions. The target is also to prevent and detect unethical conduct, such as in transparent assets declaration or expense reporting, to deter misuse of public funds for corruptible activities.

We also need enforcement mechanisms to reassure the public that there are adequate responses to violations of ethical standards. This all will need sufficient personnel and resources. Also, here in the Parliamentary Assembly again, we know that we are lacking that at the moment, but also common learnings and international co-operation.

I also want to thank Mr Frank SCHWABE for this very important and timely report. I think, as you already said also in the Committee, it is the first step and there will be many steps to follow. So I'm quite sure that it will be a topic that will guide us in our political work for the next years. So thank you for this. It's not the first steps, I know, but for these very important steps at the moment. And we will have the chance to build on this foundation that you will settle with this report. And it will be a concern of all of us to really have a culture, as you said, and really also to boost trust in institutions like parliaments again.

So thank you very much.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Petra BAYR.

In the debate, I call next Mr Christophe BRICO on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

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

I, too, would like to congratulate Mr Frank SCHWABE on his tireless work on a subject that concerns us all.

Corruption is a special disease. In the end, it affects very few of us directly, yet its consequences weigh heavily on all of us. Trust is the first treasure we must preserve, the trust of our fellow citizens, the trust between us, because, let's not forget, corruption is also one of the preferred weapons of countries waging hybrid wars against us.

Alexis DE TOCQUEVILLE wrote, in a work called *De la démocratie en Amérique* - it's almost ironic, "What threatens society is not the corruption of some, but the laxity of all". The question of corruption is not an ideological one. No one here will say they are in favour of corruption. On the contrary, it's a question of resolution. Are we resolute enough to fight it?

I believe that what this report proposes, the tools of transparency, control and sometimes investigation, is a step forward. Because we are legislators, it is up to us to self-impose the rules that enable us to act with transparency and honesty.

I believe this report is an important step in the right direction. We support it unreservedly, and will continue to participate in the work, which will no doubt evolve with time and the use of these new tools.

Thank you again for all your hard work.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Brico.

And now in debate, I call next Mr Markus WIECHEL on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates.

Mr Markus WIECHEL (Sweden, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Following a review of the report presented, I am reminded of the timeless proverb "trust but verify", which gained prominence during the Cold War disarmament dialogues. This phrase encapsulates a fundamental principle that is particularly relevant to our discussion today.

Our Assembly has evolved significantly from a position of naive trust to one characterised by diligent verification and accountability. This transformation was necessitated by serious corruption cases that emerged in the 2010s, which served as a wake-up call for all of us. Since then, we have made it our mission to aggressively root out corruption, reflecting our unwavering commitment to not only address past failures, but also to prevent such occurrences in the future. The comprehensive overhaul of our rules of procedure is a testament to our determination to establish a robust and corruption-proof framework. This initiative is not merely procedural, it is essential for the integrity and credibility of our institution.

As the saying goes, "a fish rots from the head down", underscoring that we as European parliamentarians have a profound responsibility to exemplify ethical conduct and inspire confidence in our constituents. Especially in the context of today's global instability and economic challenges, it is imperative that we earn the trust that has been bestowed upon us.

Let us be candid. A failure to uphold this sacred trust not only tarnishes our individual and collective integrity, but it has the potential to undermine the very essence of the European idea. Our commitment to combating corruption is a shared obligation with the European Parliament, which has faced analogous challenges in its own domain.

Dear colleagues, we cannot be silent bystanders to corruption. If we allow corruption to thrive, are we not complicit in stealing the future from our children?

I implore you all to consider the weight of our collective efforts. Let us work together to ensure that the insights and recommendations outlined in this report translate into meaningful and lasting change.

Thank you.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

And now, after speakers on behalf of political groups, I call Mr Nicos TORNARITIS from Cyprus.

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS (Cyprus, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I commend rapporteur Mr Frank SCHWABE and the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs Secretariat for this excellent report. Updating our ethical standards is vital to maintaining our organisation's legitimacy and credibility.

The values of the Council of Europe – democracy, rule of law and human rights – are not only our goals but also guide how we achieve them. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has made significant progress: the code of conduct, member declarations, the Speak Up Policy, and revised provisions for former members and election missions are essential steps towards greater accountability and transparency.

As the report rightly states, no institution is immune to corruption. Past scandals underline the urgent need for clear rules and effective oversight. We must continue to condemn and prevent corrupt practices while promoting awareness and strong ethical standards.

I hope this report will support further reforms and help rebuild public trust.

Thank you very much.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

In the debate I call next Mr István HOLLIK from Hungary. Just insert your card, please. You need to insert your card to speak, and you need to press the button. Yes.

Mr István HOLLIK (Hungary, ECPA): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues, I think it is important to talk about corruption because the European institutions, European Parliament, the Commission or the Council of Europe accused many Member States of corruption and lectured many member states about transparency. And now it seems that corruption and lack of transparency is present in these institutions!

So, the report raises an important issue, but I still find it incomplete, because the biggest corruption scandal of the European Union and the entire European community is missing from this report! Which case is this? The latest report of the the European Court of Auditors on NGO-funding clearly showed that left-wing activist groups who carry out political activities, received 7 billion EUR from Brussels between 2021 and 2023.

According to the report, 40% of the funding went only to 30 politically-motivated organisations. And not surprisingly, these NGOs were funded by American Democrats with political reasons through the USAID programme. The USAID and Brussels NGO-funding scandal also affects the Council of Europe, because

many supported political activist NGOs are in the "INGOs" programme and provide advice to the operation of Council of Europe. Now it is crystal clear that they are absolutely not objective and independent institutions! My question: what will be the consequence, and will the rapporteur point out these possibilities of abuse?

Thank you very much.

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

I now call Ms Louise MOREL from France.

Ms Louise MOREL (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Allow me first of all to praise the quality of your work, Mister Rapporteur. The report you are presenting to us today tackles with rigour and clarity an old but still burning challenge: corruption. This insidious, multi-faceted scourge undermines the foundations of our rule of law, erodes public confidence and permanently weakens our democratic institutions.

It must be remembered that, looking at the attitude of several years ago, if corruption is proven, the entire political class of those who engage in it is brought into disrepute, and only confidence in solid control mechanisms will make it possible to condemn those who must be condemned without bringing all others into disrepute.

Over the last few months, our Assembly and the Council of Europe have taken some welcome steps forward. Important measures have been put in place to consolidate our prevention, transparency and accountability mechanisms, with a more decisive role given to the ethics advisor and the Internal Audit Department's enhanced capacity to examine reports of irregularities. These advances are a step in the right direction, and demonstrate our sincere desire to strengthen our institutional integrity. But we must do more than just praise them: it is essential to bring them to life, give them the means to act, make them known and guarantee their accessibility. A rule, however virtuous, only protects if it is applied, if it is visible.

And yet, despite this progress, current events remind us that vigilance is still required. Today, Europe is still the continent least affected by corruption – Transparency International's indices bear witness to this – but this global reality must not mask a number of vulnerabilities. Such is the case of the "washing machine" affair, which you discuss in your report, where opaque financial flows from Azerbaijan were used to try to influence votes.

Corruption is thus not just an individual transgression or an ethical flaw: it becomes a political weapon, used to manipulate our democratic processes from within. Our institutions must therefore be more resilient and, in this respect, our ethical frameworks must, I believe, be updated on a regular basis.

We must also draw inspiration from what is being done in the neighbouring European Parliament: strengthening transparency obligations, providing a better framework for relations with interest representatives, facilitating the reporting of irregularities and communicating about these mechanisms. The trust of our fellow citizens is at stake, as is the legitimacy of our public action.

Thank you for this, for your work on this subject.

Thank you very much.

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

I call next Mr Ivan RAČAN from Croatia.

Mr Ivan RAČAN (Croatia, SOC): Thank you, Marco. Dear colleagues, dear Frank.

It is a privilege to speak in support of this landmark document. This is not just another report. It is, in every sense, a comprehensive and thoughtful blueprint for ethical standards in our institutions.

This report carefully examines the past. It acknowledges the deep wounds left by the scandals. It names names, it cites convictions, and it demonstrates what happens when ethical oversight fails. But more importantly, it moves us forward - not with cosmetic changes, but with deep, systemic reform.

The strength of this report lies in its scope and precision. It covers everything: from public declarations of interest to whistleblower protections; from banning paid consultancies to redefining the ethical responsibilities of all major officeholders - be it presidents, vice-presidents, rapporteurs, committee chairs, and political group leaders.

It proposes a single, public, and updatable declaration of interests, including gifts, roles, and potential conflicts - an elegant solution to a long-standing patchwork of declarations that were neither coherent nor enforceable. It sends a powerful message: transparency is not optional.

It also introduces smart enforcement tools. The creation of a Conduct Investigation Panel composed of former-ECtHR (European Court of Human Rights) judges brings legal expertise and neutrality. And by extending ethical scrutiny - even to former members, the report ensures that resignation is no longer an escape route from accountability.

I particularly commend the emphasis on culture. Ethics is not just about rules. It is about trust, tone, and public confidence. The report urges us to lead by example and build a climate where speaking up is protected, where misconduct is not tolerated, and where public service is once again something to be proud of.

And I am sure this is something where many of us struggle because we are simply often ashamed of what we do.

Finally, this report speaks not just to Strasbourg, but to all of us in national parliaments. It invites us to reflect on our own standards, to adopt similar reforms, and to join a network of ethics commissioners that can raise the bar across Europe.

This is a comprehensive, courageous, and credible plan.

I urge this Assembly not only to adopt it, but to honour it at every level of our work.

Thank you.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ivan.

Now I call Ms Albana VOKSHI from Albania. Is she present? You withdraw. Do you withdraw your speech?

Okay, we can go to the next one. I give the floor to Ms Minna REIJONEN from Finland.

Ms Minna REIJONEN (Finland, ECPA): Mister President, dear colleagues,

I would like to thank Mr Frank SCHWABE for this timely and important report. At a time when our European values of the rule of law and democracy are being questioned, we need to step up our efforts in defending what we stand for.

Corruption is a disease that kills democracy. The Council of Europe and this Assembly have done a lot of work to improve our measures to counter corruption, but research shows that we are far from being free from corruption in our countries.

My country, Finland, is often topping the lists of the least corrupt countries in the world together with our Nordic neighbours. This, of course, makes us proud, but we must never become complacent and think that our job here is done.

Although we do not have much or any street corruption in my country, where envelopes exchange hands, we do recognise risks of systemic corruption. In small countries where the distance between businesses and decision makers is quite short, the risk for so-called "best brother" practices becomes apparent. This is especially true for public procurement procedures.

For this reason, we must make sure to make solid legislation. As decision makers, we might have to recuse ourselves to avoid making decisions in which we might have an invested interest. Systemic corruption is very hard to measure and sometimes hard to prove, but if we are aware of the risks we can put in place warning systems that help us to counter it.

Thank you!

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

I'll now call Ms Saskia KLUIT from the Netherlands.

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC): Thank you very much, President.

I'm from a political body in the Netherlands that has regularly debated on the issue of integrity, which is the Senate.

We do not have outspoken corruption cases, but we do have integrity issues. And when you do not treat it, it's a fungi that rots the foundations of our democratic system.

And also for our Organisation, it works the same way. We can only achieve the values we strive for if we also make them apply to ourselves. Our Council has been associated with integrity issues and with outrage, corruption. I mean, the names are funny. The Caviar Network. But the impact is of course terrible. And the upside is one can say that we found these cases, and Frank did a really good job in doing that. So our system works.

But the reality is that we are not free from that now. We almost voted for an SG - Secretary General - who has now been inflicted with a corruption case in a lottery.

We need to be sharper. We have to do better. Corruption, and even the smell of corruption damages our integrity to a very serious degree. It raises legitimacy questions. Who do we work for? I mean, we have all been chosen by people, but maybe we work for a company or maybe we work for another country instead of our own people. And that cannot be the case. So I'm very happy with the very concrete changes you propose that we make. I'm very happy with that.

It clarifies what we need to do, but it also specifies what we need to do, and it makes it punishable, which is very important. And I'm explicitly very positive that we are going to redo our work, because we know that caviar can be a means of corruption. We know that a house can be a means of corruption. We know that money can be a means of corruption. But we are not debating yet that also attention on social media can also be a financial transaction. And if one party is being specifically promoted on social media, that is also a financial transaction. It should be treated like that.

I hope we see that back in our next report.

And thank you, President. This was what I wanted to say.

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

I now give the floor to and I call Mr Pedro NEVES DE SOUSA from Portugal.

Mr Pedro NEVES DE SOUSA (Portugal, EPP/CD): Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

Corruption is a poison that contaminates the health of the liberal democracies and helps populist speech to grow all over the world. In fact, if we don't take good care of democracy, other political forces, built usually with fake news and searching for autocratic policies, will conquer and earn the vote of the citizens.

In these troubled days and attending to the geopolitical framework, the democratic values must be preserved, and we need to recall them every time and everywhere, otherwise we cannot be surprised and we will assist regimes that want to mitigate and most of the time to suppress and to knock out our fundamental rights.

On this basis, the respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption represent an enforcement of the values of democracy, freedom and transparency. That's why we need to be strict and demanding concerning the ethical framework. There is not one perfect world, no perfect person, and no life without mistakes.

But those who are invested in public positions, mostly when they have the power to govern, to legislate or to decide in a court of law – the three pillars of the state, as MONTESQUIEU said – cannot be in a cloud of suspicion in order to preserve their authority and the trust of the citizens.

All the mechanisms for monitoring integrity, such as a code of conduct or the declarations of interest to avoid conflicts, play a crucial role in the construction of strong political institutions with superior ethical standards.

For in these goals, we need a new approach and appropriate legislation. These reasons make us support this report. Increasing trust in the political institutions is the passport to reinforce our values and the trigger to move away from undesirable ideas and political proposals. At least, we can never forget that preserving and

protecting our democratic values and fighting against corruption will always be a work in progress and need the contribution of all, multiplying our strengths in order to establish responsibility and transparency in public governance.

Thank you very much.

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

I call now Mr Alfred HEER from Switzerland.

Mr Alfred HEER (Switzerland, ALDE): Thank you very much, Mister Chair. Thank you, Mr Frank SCHWABE, for your report.

I think Frank and I, we've been in the Council of Europe for many years, and we also had some good experience on corruption, mainly when we were observing the elections in Azerbaijan. It was very easy to tell who could have gotten a bribe and who didn't get the bribe.

We nearly lost our report. We made a negative report about the outcome of the election and how the elections were done. We nearly lost it, because we had many members of this body here who were bribed and who wanted to give a clean sheet to the Azerbaijani Government.

I also want to thank in this regard the European Stability Initiative, to Gerald Knauss. I think it was he at that time who was really investigating this caviar diplomacy. Our body was not able to clean ourselves up. It was an NGO that had to do this work. It was also because of the media, which brought on television what is going on in the Council of Europe. Finally, when I was head of the Swiss delegation, we wrote a letter to the bureau to ask that an investigation be started, which was done by former judges of the Court of Human Rights, and they produced a very good report.

Finally, we got rid of those people who brought a lot of damage to our institution.

Today we are, I hope we are on a better side than before.

One of the problems is that our national parliaments don't really care what we are doing here. I think that's valid for most of our countries. They send us here, but they don't care what we do here. That's another problem.

The jurisdiction is a problem, because if someone takes a bribe, who will be responsible to follow up on this crime? We don't have a body here that will do this investigation. It's always the national courts that must follow it through. That might be another problem.

There is also something like responsibility of our own. I think we know the people here. We are engaged in groups, we know each other, and we should be attentive how people vote. If there is another network of bribery – because the network we had in the past was among *all* political groups, it was among *all* nations, and that's something that was scary – it's up to us to keep an eye on it. If we see suspicious activity, we need to act immediately as individuals.

Thank you and thank you, Frank SCHWABE, for your report.

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

I now call Mr Denis BEGIC from Sweden.

Mr Denis BEGIC (Sweden, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

I must begin by addressing the claims of corruption among left-wing parties and NGOs. This is the typical right-wing rhetoric without any substance, directly echoing PUTIN's narrative. I will always be one supporting my sister party in organising against corrupt governments and those who fail to respect human rights. There is not corruption about it, is my duty to actively support this fight, whether inside Europe or beyond.

When power serves itself instead of the people, it's not just unjust – it's a betrayal of democracy. As a Social Democrat, I cannot and will not accept that. Our duty here is clear: to protect democracy, to uphold the rule of law and to safeguard human rights for everyone – not just in words, but in action.

But let's be honest, none of that is possible without trust. And nothing destroys trust faster than corruption.

Corruption is not just a misuse of power – it's a direct attack on democracy itself. It diverts public resources away from schools and hospitals. It closes doors for young people. And it tells people that the system is not for them, but for the few.

In my country, Sweden, we've learned that trust in institutions is something we must earn every day – through openness, accountability and constant self-reflection.

I welcome the recent efforts in this Assembly to address these very issues. The proposed reforms to our Rules of Procedure – from clearer codes of conduct to stronger rules around lobbying and transparency – are not just administrative challenges. They are political signals. They show that we, as elected representatives, are willing to hold ourselves to the same standards we expect from others.

It is especially important that those rules apply not only to ordinary members, but also to those in positions of leadership – including committee chairs and vice presidents. No one should be above scrutiny. Power must come with responsibility.

Colleagues, we cannot demand democratic standards from our member states if we do not first apply them here, within these walls. If we want to be credible, we must lead by example.

Let us not wait for a second scandal to react. Let us act now, not because we are forced to – but because it is the right thing to do.

We owe it to the citizens of Europe to be better, to be cleaner, and to be braver.

Thank you.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. I now invite Ms Santy MONTEMAYOR CASTILLO from Mexico to address us.

Ms Santy MONTEMAYOR CASTILLO (Mexico): Hi, good morning,

It is a pleasure to be here, as I have been on a yearly basis for the past four years, as a member of this committee representing my country, Mexico, my city Cancún, and my state, Quintana Roo, from the Mexican Federal Congress. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today on such an important topic.

As we all know, the Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation whose main objectives are to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. Even though its primary focus is on European countries, its influence and relevance also extend to Latin America, and specifically to Mexico, which has been an Observer state since 1999, for several reasons:

One of those reasons is human rights: the Council of Europe is well known for its work in the protection of human rights, particularly through the European Convention on Human Rights. This has always served as a model for Mexico in the development and strengthening of its own human rights legal framework.

Co-operation and dialogue: the Council of Europe promotes dialogue and co-operation between countries. This is of great benefit to Latin American countries, such as Mexico, which seek to build stronger ties with Europe and learn from its experience in governance and justice.

Rule of law: promoting the rule of law is essential for sustainable development and peace in any region, especially in the difficult times that we all know the world is currently facing. The Council of Europe's principles and standards have inspired legal and constitutional reforms throughout Latin America.

Public policy expertise: the Council of Europe has developed a wide range of policies and strategies on issues such as fighting corruption, strengthening democracy, social inclusion, building pluralist democracy and addressing pressing societal issues such as intolerance and environmental challenges, among others. These approaches are of great value to Latin American countries facing similar challenges.

Relations between Europe and Latin America – and in this case with Mexico in particular – can continue to grow through exchange programmes and joint initiatives on topics of common interest, fostering a deeper understanding between our regions.

Through the Council of Europe, Latin American countries can establish networks and alliances that allow us to share experiences, resources and knowledge in the promotion of democratic values and human rights.

In conclusion, the Council of Europe is an important ally for the whole of Latin America, providing a framework for the strengthening of democratic institutions and human rights throughout the region.

One of the most admirable aspects of the Council, which has been addressed through various initiatives and regulatory frameworks aimed at providing transparency, integrity and accountability within the governments and institutions of member states.

International co-operation and the commitment of member states are essential to the success of these initiatives. As I mentioned at the beginning, they have been – and continue to be – an invaluable tool for Mexico. It is important for federal legislators to look at these experiences as examples and apply them to our own realities and dynamics.

Thanks for your attention.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Our next speaker is Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN from Armenia.

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

First of all, let me congratulate Mr Frank SCHWABE, the rapporteur, for an excellent report reflecting the main challenges in the field of the fight against corruption that our Organisation is faced with.

The Council of Europe was established to enhance respect for the rule of law, improve democracy and uphold human rights. During the last 75 years, we have reached tremendous results in the field of fight against corruption. It is important to recognise that the Council of Europe is more than just a human rights organisation. We became the benchmark, standard-setting organisation in many fields, including human rights, democracy, rule of law and the fight against corruption. We have created GRECO (Group of States against Corruption) and launched other anti-corruption initiatives.

Several years ago, we were all taken aback by the news that our Assembly, a democratic forum, decided, inter alia, to combat corruption, included members who were embroiled in corruption practices. It was a shock for all of us, and those corruption scandals severely tarnished the Organisation's image.

Nevertheless, due to the decisive actions of this Assembly and its brave members, we were able to rectify the situation.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no vaccination against corruption. We must remain vigilant and proactive in our daily lives, adapting to the challenges we encounter. We need to establish updated integrity rules that align with current standards and expectations. Having clear, user-friendly rules of procedure, while prioritising ethical standards will significantly enhance our organisation's anti-corruption efforts.

The integrity of the Assembly's members should serve as a foundational principle for our ongoing work.

I firmly believe that an updated code of conduct for our members will set a new benchmark for all the member states. It is difficult to comprehend and even more complicated to explain to others why within the Organisation, where the integrity of members is a keystone, we still face instances of members failing to submit their annual declarations.

Therefore, the amendments to the rules of procedure proposed by the draft resolution are both timely and justified. Each and every member of the Assembly should operate with the understanding that the status of a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) is not to be taken for granted. It gives privileges and immunities, but also implies high moral standards and responsibilities. Those who hold this status should respect the Council of Europe, this Assembly and its values during their terms of office. And especially after their termination. Any former members of PACE who fail to honour these values should not continue to benefit from their honorary status. This would be our moral response to those who disregard the very essence of our Organisation. Regardless of whether we are ordinary citizens, members of parliament or heads of states.

Thank you.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Our next speaker is Ms Aisarakan ABDIBAEVA from Kyrgyzstan.

I think she may not be here. No.

Then I now call Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS from the United Kingdom.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): President, forgive this stumble at the beginning. I thought I had another three minutes space before I entertain everybody with my ideas.

It is a privilege to stand in this debate and take my part. And I'm grateful to Mr Frank SCHWABE and his collaborators in putting this report together.

It is astonishing, however, that 25 pages are needed to spell out what all of us ought to know instinctively: that doing wrong things and risking losing one's trust is simply at odds with everything that this particular institution stands for. I'm sorry to quote a little Latin, but I am in Europe, *custodiet ipsos custodis*: who will look after, scrutinise the activities of those who are there to scrutinise? And it seems to me that of all the bodies that I know about or am member of, this is *the* place where the highest possible standards should be a matter of course. It therefore shocked me, I have to say, to discover that there had been the infractions alluded to in this particular report. And I hope it will be a wake-up call and a shock to our system.

However, from the report I do see that whilst we are emphasising the importance of effective enforcement, it's recognised that there are quite a large number of cases that don't come to the attention of the department. Well, we really must do something about that! And we must help each other. There are shortcuts always in the public lives that we live. Attractive other possible ways of behaving. They come our way! We must check ourselves out, and we must help each other to check themselves out as we move forward. Trust can't be bought in the marketplace.

I have to say that rather naughtily I think, I had wanted to believe that I'd got the title of the debate wrong: "Respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption within the United States of America". I just wondered how that one might work out in another place.

But now the trick will be to turn the fine words, the worthy words, the outstandingly *obvious* words that fill this report into what is described here as "coherent, accessible, user-friendly codes of advice". In the United Kingdom, I have been involved with helping our own parliament through a crisis where the Archbishop of Canterbury himself has had to take resignation from his office, and lose his seat in parliament. So even at the highest levels, there are these infractions. This is the place where that has to stop. People must know that what happens here, what comes from here, the personal testimonies, and the ways of behaviour that we offer to the public at large are incorruptible.

There is no option other than that without losing our credulity altogether.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Leslie, and thank you for the Hoyle.

Our next speaker is Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU from Norway.

Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD): Dear President and Colleagues, and dear Mister Schwabe,

We have been colleagues in the Assembly for 14 years. For many years we sat side-by-side in the hemicycle, and our surnames start with S. For many years we have worked together in the Rules Committee.

We have not always agreed, but on *this* issue, on the fight against corruption in our Assembly and the Council of Europe, we have collaborated closely, and we fully agree.

I congratulate you on this important report. Eight years have passed since the corruption scandal erupted in 2017. It is time to take stock and to review the measures that were implemented after the thorough process following the work of the independent investigation body.

President, in my report on the changes to our Rules of Procedure, which I presented last year, I included a suggestion to revise the rules so that they are more user-friendly. I am pleased that Mr Frank SCHWABE and the Committee is building on this and suggesting a restructuring of our rules so that there are two parts.

The first part setting out all the relevant ethical standards and codes of conduct; and the second part setting out the procedural rules. This would make the ethical standards and codes of conduct more accessible, as compared to the many additional documents which must now be consulted.

Mr Frank SCHWABE's suggestion to make a single public declaration of interest is also very good. It is important that we streamline this important process so that it is possible to refer to one source when there are inquiries about conflicts of interest. The proposal that all declarations of interest should be made public is also important. I see no reason why this should not be transparent.

At first glance the draft resolution might seem complicated, with many proposals to change rules and practices. To some, this might seem bureaucratic and cumbersome. I assure you, though, that this is necessary. Our history is proof that we must be vigilant, and that we need good systems to counter corruption. This review is, therefore, both timely and important.

I encourage you all to support Mr Frank SCHWABE's report and vote in favour of the draft resolution and recommendation.

Thank you, Mister President.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I now call Ms Marietta KARAMANLI from France.

Ms Marietta KARAMANLI (France, SOC): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

First of all, I'd like to thank our colleague Mr Frank SCHWABE, who acted as rapporteur for the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs, and who has drawn up a statement with some very useful observations and proposals on this major theme of preventing corruption, its environment and its damaging effects on our democracies and our Assembly.

Corruption is indeed a major problem, manifestations in different forms and with different severities. Corruption and conflicts of interest generally affect the ability of governments to govern in the general interest and for the benefit of the greatest number. It is also a source of dispute for democracy itself. It therefore weakens it.

In response to our colleague's remarks and proposals, I would like to suggest three points for the attention of our Assembly.

The first is that our Assembly might consider using all or part of the declarations of interest made by national parliamentarians to simplify the system and superimpose only what usefully completes it.

My second suggestion is that our Assembly should put in place measures to raise awareness among our colleagues of the damaging effects of corruption and conflicts of interest, and how we can prevent them by developing exchanges and other communication mechanisms.

Finally, a third suggestion for contributing to this fine reflection by our rapporteur is that our Assembly should also develop links with civil society on these themes, in order to publicise what we are doing to prevent within the institution and what we are doing in general for the attention of states and public decision-makers to prevent the same evils in society in general. We therefore need to make our internal and external activity more visible.

We can achieve this if our concern is understood as a cross-cutting one, and not as yet another measure added on to others without keeping in mind its shared meaning.

Of course, we support and I support this proposal and the work that will be launched for the future.

Thank you for your support.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

And our final speaker is Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK from Ukraine.

Mister Kamelchuk, you have the floor.

Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister Chairman,

Distinguished colleagues,

Thank you, Mister Schwabe, for your report.

Today, I speak in strong support of the Council of Europe's commitment to the rule of law and the fight against corruption principles that are vital for Ukraine's democratic resilience and for Eurointegration.

Ukraine's participation in the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) has been instrumental in aligning our anti-corruption efforts with European standards. GRECO's evaluations have not only identified challenges but also provided clear direction for reform. In a country undergoing democratic transformation, such as Ukraine, this guidance is critical.

Judicial reform remains one of Ukraine's top priorities. We are grateful for the Council's consistent support in this area. We are working to ensure our judges and prosecutors are free from both political influence and corruption.

Fighting high-level corruption is not just a legal issue – it is a test of our democracy. Trust in public institutions depends on visible and credible action. That's why Ukraine established independent bodies like the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the High Anti-Corruption Court. These institutions have already shown that change is possible when political will and international co-operation align.

Let us also be clear: Russia's ongoing aggression underscores the need for stronger, more resilient legal systems. The rule of law must withstand both internal pressures and external threats. For Ukraine, this is not an abstract concept – it is a matter of national survival and democratic legitimacy.

In conclusion, Ukraine is determined to continue its reform path. We count on the continued support of the Council of Europe, not only as a partner but as a co-guardian of the values we all share: democracy, accountability and justice.

Thank you.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Colleagues, earlier in the debate, there was a little confusion, and Ms Albana VOKSHI of Albania was unable to make her address.

We have time, so I've agreed that she can now address the Assembly.

Now, Madam Albana VOKSHI.

Ms Albana VOKSHI (Albania, EPP/CD): Thank you very much for giving me another possibility to speak on an issue that is very problematic in the whole region, but especially in my country, Albania.

So that's why I requested to have this chance to speak. It's time to speak loudly about a plague that silently consumes nations from within. So, corruption.

Corruption is not a political issue. Corruption is worse than every other phenomenon. It's like a disease that has metastasised across all layers of society; that destroys all institutions, paralyses the economy and erodes public trust.

Corruption is stealing, but it steals not only money, it steals opportunity, it steals dignity and it steals justice. It breeds inequality, it undermines foreign investments. The rule of law rewards criminality over merits.

Every bribe paid, every contract rigged, every institution that is hijacked by private interest, by oligarchs, is a stab to the heart of democracy.

Nowhere is it more painfully visible these days than in Albania. A country rich in potential, rich in human resources and natural resources. It's a beautiful country. It has seas, mountains, lakes, everything. It has nice people, but bad governments.

Corruption is no longer incidental, it is institutionalised. It is built into public contracts, public-private partnerships (PPPs), concessions, tenders and services. It is embedded in the procurement processes. It is present in the justice system, in the police force, in the local and central government.

It's a shadow, it's a parallel state stealing from the future of our children. Corruption is killing people. You have seen it lately. It has killed in Serbia, but through the concessions, PPPs and contracts in Albania, it's killing people in the health sector because they are not taking health services, because the money is going to oligarchs and clients of the government.

International indices have repeatedly sounded the alarm. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranks Albania among the most corrupt countries in Europe. EU progress does as well.

Let's be clear. Corruption in Albania is not about a few bad people. It's about a system that should be destroyed. And here all of us have our roles.

Thank you very much.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

And that definitely now concludes the list of speakers.

I now invite the rapporteur, Mr Frank SCHWABE, to reply.

You have three minutes.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Mister President. Thank you very much, dear colleagues.

Thank you very much for this exchange of views and for, I understand, the unanimous support of this report. Thank you very much, especially to our colleague. *Gracias* to Mexico.

I think we can really co-operate and learn from each other how to prevent corruption.

I cannot refer to all of you. It's not possible in three minutes time, but I want to refer maybe to those who spoke in the name of the groups.

Thank you to Mr Markus WIECHEL in the name of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates (ECPA).

Thanks to Mr Ryszard PETRU from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). I think you are right. We have to make clear that there is a kind of interconnection with the national level, and we have to encourage all our national parliaments to deal with this topic.

I would like to thank Ms Petra BAYR in the name of the Socialist Group (SOC). She underlined that we need a kind of culture of anti-corruption. I fully agree with this.

Thank you to Mr Christophe BRICO about giving the report a kind of historical and philosophical dimension with naming Alexis DE TOCQUEVILLE.

Finally, thank you to Mr Andrej HUNKO. Thank you for these very warm words you found about the history of everything. Thank you very much, especially because you will leave the Assembly as a chair of the... Maybe you will leave it as a chair of the UL. Thank you so much.

Three things I would like really to underline in the end.

First, really take it seriously, Take it seriously. If we speak about a culture, take it seriously. Don't feel annoyed by this kind of system. Sometimes I think you have to declare this and that. It's a little bit difficult that you have to do that, but it's necessary. We need this kind of culture.

Second, definitely take it home. We have a lot of problems with a kind of game between the national parliament and the kind of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) work. So, please look into it.

Third, value civil society. There was a kind of attack on civil society. Without civil society, without free media, we would not know about the scandal here, and we could not take action. I underline again the work of the European Stability Initiative. Mister KNAUSS was named of the OCCRP, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. Just so you know it's financed in half by USAID, or was financed by the Government of Switzerland and by the George Soros's Open Society Foundation. I know about attacks on this foundation. Without this Foundation, there really would not have been the possibility to speak about the scandal.

There is free and publicly-financed media, which was involved as well. Again, there is a documentary in English. I really would recommend you look and check it. A movie made by Mister HARRICH at the very end. I do my work really by heart. I do it by heart, and I know that there are people who work in this Organisation, and they do it by heart. I know that the scandal disturbed them a lot in their work and they didn't understand what was going on.

So, I would like to thank Eleanor Hourigan and, for sure, Isild Heurtin as well for your work.

Very finally I want to thank because you have to leave maybe as well, I would to thank the chair of the next time: we will call it the 'Rules and Ethics and Immunity Committee'. Thank you very much, dear Heike.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Frank.

I now invite the Chair of the Committee, you have to address us for 3 minutes.

Ms Heike ENGELHARDT (Germany, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs): Thank you.

Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

Firstly, I would like to thank the rapporteur for his continued energy and determination to ensure a sufficient focus on these important issues to fight corruption and to ensure robust integrity frameworks within the Council of Europe and our Parliamentary Assembly.

As the rapporteur has pointed out, no institution, including this Assembly, is immune from the risks of corruptible influences. But we are responsible for how we respond to these risks. As politicians, we must demonstrate our continued commitment to robust integrity frameworks and strong ethical standards. This is vital in order to maintain public trust in politicians who serve their people and public confidence in our democratic institutions.

With this in mind, I welcome the proposals contained in this report and the draft resolution and recommendation to strengthen the Assembly's integrity framework.

Moreover, I welcome the proposals to ensure that the Assembly continues to keep such matters under careful scrutiny, notably through the work of the newly renamed Committee on Rules, Immunities and Ethics and the newly established General Rapporteur on Ethical Standards and Anti-Corruption.

In that light, I welcome the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs and the Assembly's continued commitment to making ethics and integrity a central part of what we, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, stand for, fully in line with the Council of Europe's commitment to democratic principles and its focus on promoting its core values and democracy, rule of law and human rights.

Dear colleagues, this report was the last one I had the honour to chair here in Strasbourg. For three and a half years I was a member of our Assembly. I would like to thank you all for your kind co-operation. I wish you all the best. Keep strong fighting for our ideals for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Thank you to all who are doing this work. Thank you for the great support, the assistants and secretariats, and last but not least, the ladies and gentlemen hidden in the boxes who are doing the great translation service.

Thank you [She says thank you in several languages].

Vote: Respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption within the Council of Europe

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Thank you for all your hard work and we wish you well for the future.

Colleagues, the debate is now closed.

The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs has presented a draft resolution to which no amendments have been tabled, and a draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

We now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16138.

A simple majority is required.

The vote is now open.

The vote is now closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

There's no doubt it's been adopted.

Colleagues, we will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Document 16138.

I remind you, a two-thirds majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the vote to be displayed.

I think that's quite clear.

It is adopted.

Colleagues, the debate is now totally concluded.

I will now propose to suspend the sitting.

Please could you be back here by 11:55 a.m. for the next item of business, which will be the communication from the Committee of Ministers. The assembly is now adjourned until 12.00 p.m.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Communication from the Committee of Ministers

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

Please be seated.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

It is an honour, once again, to welcome Mr Xavier BETTEL, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg and Chair of the Committee of Ministers to this Assembly.

Minister BETTEL will present the communication about the ongoing activities of the Luxembourg Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, which will be followed by an exchange of views with our parliamentarians.

Minister BETTEL, I should like to thank you for the excellent co-operation we have between us and between the statutory bodies during your Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, which will come to an end in just a few weeks' time.

I have already had the honour of visiting your country on a couple of occasions during my time as President of the Assembly and look forward to returning for the Ministerial Conference in May, when we will continue to work together to advance the core values that unite us.

We look forward to hearing your address today and I now have the honour to give you the floor.

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Mister Chairman,

As I told you last time that it was always my wish, as a young member of parliament to be a member of this Assembly, I never managed to be here, so you cannot imagine how pleased I am for being in Strasbourg for the third time now to meet the Council of Europe and the second time in this distinguished Assembly.

Since my last speech here, I have to tell you that a lot of things have changed. A lot of things have changed. We have some positive news, but most of the time we cannot, when we watch TV and listen to the news, be the most excited about the news that we get.

And sometimes, even the morning news is not the same as the evening news. But that's the reality, and especially in our democracies. We need to be aware. And that's a difficult time. And I lived it when I was also a prime minister during the Covid-19 period, that we don't have answers to all the questions that our citizens have and that they live in situations today that they don't know what is going to happen tomorrow and they ask the politicians, "so how do you think that the things are going to evolve?" And I would bet that what someone is telling us today that will happen in the next six months will not exist.

Yes, we are living in an unpredictable period where geopolitics is changing all the time. That's a fact. You can't say that everything is going well. You can't say that everything is perfect. You can't think that isolating and just focusing on yourself could be a solution. I just can't tell you that for common problems we need mostly common solutions.

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Indeed, since the last meeting, and it's not even that long ago, there's a subject that's occupying us at the moment – I'm also Minister for Foreign Trade: the meeting of foreign trade ministers that took place in Luxembourg on Monday concerned US tariffs and the number of decrees that have been issued in the United States, which have also affected the global situation.

So, the first decrees, if I may say so, were... We are here in a multilateralist Assembly, where we share a continent together; we don't all share the same language, we don't all share the same culture, we don't all share the same workings, but we share a continent. I believe in multilateralism, and multilateralism has taken a beating.

When a major donor like the United States decides to cut aid, it has an impact on everyone. And I'm sure that many of you, in your parliaments, have been asked questions, NGOs have asked questions, people have asked questions. Are you going to replace them? Will you be able to hire more? What are you going to do, given the decision taken by the Americans? So we can see that alliances and multilateralism are taking a beating at the moment.

On our own continent – as I said before, we share this continent – a country has been attacked by Russia: my country, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, I would like to point out, in its vast majority – there are really only a few who are more nuanced – agrees to support Ukraine.

The greatest condemnation I could make today, Mister President, is that of people who want to rewrite history. And some of them, if I listen to them, give the impression that it was Ukraine that attacked Russia. So I'd like to remind you of history, and I don't need to look it up in a history book: it's today's news.

So we have partnership relations, we have co-operation, we have alliances, friendships that have been forged since the Second World War, when we ourselves lived a little on this "never again", after the Second World War, of wanting to work together.

So, on the one hand, we can see that old partnerships are a little "shaken", if I may say so; and on the other hand, we can also see that multilateralism is taking a beating. At the UN, decisions can be taken; an international criminal court can take decisions; an international court of justice can take decisions, and executions, or what comes out of them afterwards, can remain dead letters, depending on one person or another.

I know I'm not supposed to be making my plea here before your Assembly, but I think that today, we also need to ask ourselves whether we shouldn't be reforming our multilateral international operating system. We have five countries, the P5, who are the guarantors of peace, I would remind you, because that was their mission when the UN was created, and who today have a right of veto over any decisions that may be taken in the world.

And I'd like to launch an idea here, Mister Chairman, Mister Secretary General: first of all, why is Africa not represented in the Security Council? First observation. If we're talking about other continents, why isn't Africa there? And the second thing, I've always learned - I'm not an economist, but I've always learned that the Board of Directors is accountable to a General Assembly, just as I'm here today to present to my General Assembly a little of what I've done; well, at the United Nations, it's the other way round. It's the General Assembly that is accountable to the board of directors that is the Security Council. So we need to ask ourselves the question: why not, one day, introduce a reform whereby, for example, a General Assembly could override a country's veto with a two-thirds or three-quarters majority? Of course, we'll need the agreement of the P5, and it won't be easy to get them to agree to abolish the veto. But if we want to make progress, I think, in terms of multilateralism and mutual understanding, it would be important to change some of these points of view.

I was in Cambodia last week, I was in India the week before that, I was in Bhutan the week before that, I'm off to Japan tomorrow, so with the different hats I wear, I'm out and about a lot; and we can see that today, it's not because one country decides to stop co-operation that co-operation will improve. It will have to be reduced. Believe me, there are disparities between countries today, and co-operation is no longer the most "trendy"

thing; in many of your parliaments, when we talk about increasing military spending today, because it's something we feel slightly pressured to do, well, most of the time, it's with a red pen that we deal with co-operation, and I deeply regret this.

So diversity, and even today the equality and rights of individuals, which we used to take for granted, are under threat these days.

So, what can we learn from this? Shouldn't this be seen as an opportunity for Europe? Does the fact that we only want to find individual solutions make us stronger? As I said at the Council of Foreign Trade Ministers on Monday, if we want to make an impact, we have to do it together. The 27 of us will carry weight. I know, as a former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, the weight I carried in that capacity at the time and today as Minister of Foreign Affairs: it's not now by wanting to flatter or, on the contrary, point out an ego problem or whatever, it's together at 27 that we'll carry much more weight. If everyone thinks that a pilgrimage to Washington will change positions on tariffs, I'm just telling you that in that case, we run the risk of weakening ourselves because we'll find that we don't have a union that works. And it's the union, together, that's the European market. And we are trying, as the European Union... Some people will say: "But you're weak, you'll have to retaliate right away against the United States".

I can only tell you that we are currently trying to show, with calculations in hand, what the impacts are, and that in the end, it's the American taxpayer who will pay the bill for these mistakes. But that's plan A. And plan B will be the one that hurts. It will be the one where we have to respond in the same way, with measures taken by the European Union; that's really not what I want. I hope we'll be able to have diplomatic and effective discussions.

But then, just to let you know that it was burning. The last time I was with you, I said it was already a bit of a... I've got to make... no, not a mess (laughs). It wasn't easy then, and it's not any easier now.

I'd just like to mention an episode that I won't forget, because I have to tell you about the international situation. It's the episode we saw with President ZELENSKY in Washington. Having been Prime Minister for ten years, I can tell you that I know many of my colleagues, heads of state and heads of government. I don't know many who, after what happened at the White House, would have had the political modesty to say a few days later: "I'm coming back because we need to move forward". Someone who says: "I'm ready to resign if my country's security is guaranteed". I know very few politicians who put their country before their duties, and I say that loud and clear. So those who think that President ZELENSKY is a dictator, or not a democrat, have really not understood his desire to want only the best for his people.

Concerning the situation in Ukraine, we also have the Core Group working, and we took a decision together on the special tribunal; we are also working on setting up a compensation commission, and I also welcome Thórdís GYLFADÓTTIR, who is the Secretary-General's special envoy on the situation of children in Ukraine. Last week, also on the initiative of the Secretary General, the Committee of Ministers decided to set up a Council of Europe liaison office with the United Nations in New York; this is important because, once again, it means getting closer together instead of dividing and going further and further apart.

So, let's take stock of the presidency. You've got another month to put up with us, and then it's on to the next one. But since I last spoke to you, at the beginning of March, the Council of Ministers adopted the Convention for the Protection of the Legal Profession, which will also be signed in Luxembourg on May 13. This is an important step in the protection of those who embody and defend the rule of law. Over the past five months, I could tell you all about the mid-term review conference on children's rights, the High-Level Conference for Ombudsman institutions, the conference on the university, etc., etc., etc.

For me, what was important was to see my country make a real commitment to the Council of Europe and to this presidency. Because it's not easy. I have our Head of State, who is here again today, who is going to speak; our Prime Minister has come; I have a large number of ministers who have come too. Believe me, it's important for me to see that my colleagues in the Government Council have really taken this presidency seriously. I have no less than six ministers who have come to see you.

So, there's no point hiding the main challenges of the Presidency from you, you all know them.

The first was Georgia. I had a meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs on Georgia not so long ago, because I think it's important to talk to each other, and I think that always talking about each other without talking to each other is one of the biggest mistakes we make in politics today. But I told her, I told her that it's not up to me to tell her what to do, but it's up to her to show us which way they want to go. They have a choice, but they can't say on the one hand: "We want to be closer to Europe, but we also want to be Russia's friends" and "We want to be close to Russia and still benefit a little from Europe's stuff". That's not right. I don't

want to say that we have to choose, that these are camps, but we can't go one way and say the opposite, or say we want to and do the opposite. When we see the demonstrations that are still taking place in Tbilisi today, when we see the rights of minorities being curtailed, we see on the ground that Georgia is moving in a direction that is not the one we share here in this Assembly. So it's important to tell our Georgian colleagues that they are the ones who must decide the future; but if they make a mistake, let them be aware of the consequences of that mistake too.

Today, and I've also spoken to my colleague, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, we have a thorny situation in Türkiye. So, I'm sure I'll be asked a question: it's a judicial matter; I can give you the official version that it's a judicial matter, I don't interfere in judicial matters. But all that's happening today is that I see thousands and thousands of Turks in the streets who are simply saying: "Stop saying that he doesn't have his diploma, stop saying that this is a corruption trial". They feel that their election isn't fair, because there was an opponent who had a chance, and who was said to have found spurious things to remove him from the race. In any case, that's the impression we get from discussions we may have with one or other of the opponents of the Turkish regime today. And so, together with our Turkish colleagues, we need to see how elections can be held, in which the various candidates also have a chance of succeeding.

We have Azerbaijan and Armenia. I'm pleased to say that, for the time being, we're making rather slow progress. Small steps. But we are moving in the right direction. Some agreements have been signed: let's hope they last. But it's fragile. It's fragile. But we can see that it's also important to have discussions.

And I know: Kosovo is a subject close to your heart. I know that in your Assembly, there was a desire to submit Kosovo to a vote at the next Council of Ministers to decide on the procedure to follow. All I can tell you is that since the beginning of my presidency, I've been told that there was the situation of Serb minority town halls. That's what I've been told. For the past six months, I've been told: "The Serbian minority, the KURTI government must make progress on this issue". And now I'm told: "There's no longer any problem". So I say to myself: "What does that mean? Do we have to do something or not?" I was told: "Yes, but they're making progress. But there's no government at the moment. There are negotiations going on. So all I can say is that Kosovo is a country I know well; Serbia is a country I know well. I can only tell you that the Balkans, at present, are not limited to these two. I can tell you that Bosnia is currently a powder keg too, and that the region is under tension. And whether it's DODIK, whether it's MANAJ in Pristina, whether it's VUCIC, whether it's Mr KURTI, it's important to keep an eye on it, it's also important to keep the pressure on to move in the right direction, to avoid the worst, because don't forget what we've already experienced in the region and how it set Europe ablaze, how it was one of the last genocides to take place on our territory.

That's reality too. So it's important to talk to the various parties, to try and see how we can move forward to find a real solution. I myself grew up in peace, as I told you last time, Mister President, and I was lucky enough to grow up in peace. I never asked myself the question: is my neighbour a danger or not? But today, we see that even within the European Union, we have to ask ourselves questions about the behaviour of one or other of our neighbours.

For us, it's important to continue defending these values; to defend these values, and also to defend the European Court of Human Rights. In early March, the Committee of Ministers held a quarterly meeting on the supervision of the execution of the Court's judgments, at which 38 decisions concerning 17 states were adopted. For me, it's quite simply important to continue working in this direction, working in this platform here which brings together, as I said earlier, people with different opinions, different views, different traditions. In the end, don't forget that difference is our wealth - and I know that some people have made it their business to say that our differences are our weakness in Europe. It's our wealth. And don't fall into some people's trap.

Today, I see certain countries that are a little afraid of certain parties that could nibble away at some of the votes of more traditional parties: don't imitate them. Don't imitate them. When I see today that Schengen - and we'll soon be celebrating Schengen's anniversary - is almost, I don't want to say "in danger", but some people think that closing or imposing border controls will put an end to the problems we can have in certain countries, whereas if we want to have a migration policy that works, we need a common migration policy, with common decisions, common implementation and common controls. We saw with Covid-19 that closing borders was very effective - the virus stopped at the border. I would have hoped that we would learn from our mistakes and not fall prey to the sirens of populism which, unfortunately, have been far too successful of late, in my view.

Thank you for your kind words.

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

Though as a very experienced politician you have already answered a lot of the questions which are going to be addressed to you, I am going to start now the procedure which is the questions from my colleagues.

And on behalf of the political groups I will give first the floor to the leader of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, Mr Frank SCHWABE.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Thank you, Mister Foreign Minister, for the enthusiasm with which you are fighting for the values of the Council of Europe.

You have already addressed the issue of Kosovo, but I would like to do it again and ask you more specifically. We feel a bit like we've been invited to a birthday party, and we say yes, and then we come, and then there's no cake. So, you just have to remember that the Committee of Ministers, those who represent the countries there, asked us for an opinion. We gave the opinion, with 82%. We are now waiting for the answer.

This will be on the agenda at the ministerial, where a decision can be made. You are setting the agenda for this ministerial.

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

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Yes, I think I have. Can I answer in German?

Yes, so the question is clear to me, I have nothing against it. I had an exchange with the Foreign Minister this morning. I am the first person who, if there is unanimity in the Council of Ministers, would really like to put it on the agenda. The problem is that I don't have unanimity at the moment and I don't want to run the risk of leaving Kosovo on my birthday doorstep afterwards and not even being able to let them in so that they could even taste the cake if it were there.

As I said, I hope it's a matter of time and that the situation stabilises a bit in this area. The future of Kosovo is with us. For me, Europe is the future of Kosovo. Let me be clear. I know that I'm not necessarily making everyone happy, but I don't care. I said it before. It's not normal for a country to be concerned about the behaviour of its neighbour these days.

My hope would be that if there really is a government afterwards, also in Kosovo, which hopefully can be formed as quickly as possible, that a dialogue with Serbs can really be re-established as quickly as possible.

But please don't forget Bosnia and Herzegovina either. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a powder keg, and people talk about Kosovo so often that they sometimes forget that things can get very messy not far away.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Linda Hofstad HELLELAND on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Ms Linda Hofstad HELLELAND (Norway, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Minister, for your engaging speech.

The Minister mentioned that the partnership, which has now been shaken, means that we, as a continent, more than ever need to stand united.

At the same time, the Minister said that this could create opportunities for our continent. What kind of opportunities should we, as the Council of Europe, focus on to make our continent stronger?

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

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): It is a bit hard to give advice to the Parliamentary Assembly.

I can just tell you that as a Minister of Foreign Affairs and also of Foreign Trade, it is an opportunity to realise that we as Europe should also be stronger in Europe.

I saw it with COVID. Remember the masks were all coming from China. All the machines were coming from China. I saw it with gas, when the Russians decided to cut the gas, we didn't know what to do. And we see it today also with car production, so many pieces do not come from Europe. I could make a long list of where Europe always counted on trusted partners.

So from my point of view, it will be important in the coming years to think how we can be more independent. We are all talking about Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the moment. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a big topic. Where is Europe at the moment? I am sorry to be so frank with you, but we are squeezed between Asia and America. Europe is a piece of confetti. We think we have millions of habitants, that we have so much money and that we are the biggest economy. But where are we?

That is for me the biggest challenge, we have the opportunity maybe to see that with defence, NATO. I remember the meeting, I was Prime Minister at the moment when we had the meeting in Brussels about defence with Donald TRUMP. After that we realised, okay, this was a wake-up call, to think that we always took peace for granted.

We have to admit, you come from a country where you are closer to Russia than I am for the moment. So I have to admit, for our politicians, the sensitivity to Russian threat was not the same. I am speaking now as someone from Luxembourg. So imagine Portugal and Spain, they even more to the south-west. So we did not think it was really so urgent to have more, I don't want to say military, but more security, because the deal of dissuasion is also important.

So there are opportunities, and I might be provoking the Assembly with this, but we should not forget that the European Union (EU) was built on coal and steel. At the beginning, this was the aim of the European Union (EU). Today, when it seems more than this, for example, Artificial Intelligence (AI) on phones, you have Samsung, Apple, or Huawei. I remember, and I am sorry to say as someone from the north, I remember Motorola and Ericsson. But I remember this, I don't have them now.

Today we see, for example, that Airbus is a big success, because we are able to say it is a European company. Together with the Brits, with the Germans, with the French, with the Spanish, we were able to create a European company to be stronger. We have European rules, for the moment, where when you are too strong in Europe, then you have to be smaller.

We had it in Luxembourg, for example, Mittal wanted to buy Ilva in Italy. Because they wanted to buy Ilva in Italy, they had to sell Liberty Steel in Luxembourg because they would have been too big. At the end of the day, Liberty Steel was close to bankruptcy and the deal with Ilva was never done.

So we need to see, firstly, the competitive rules in European Union (EU). Not to just think about Europe, but also on a global scale. Because, as I told you before, for the moment we are not global leaders. On the other hand, for example, for security, we have so many countries producing military industry. So, there is no interest for the moment. In America, I would say, I don't have the exact figures, if they have about four guns, we have 25. So the interoperability between the countries is smaller.

But the second thing is the production costs are higher. So why don't we think of it as an opportunity to say, okay, let us do things together instead of producing just for ourselves. Because we very often speak global, but we act local. So if you want to have a stronger Europe, we have to not only speak global, but also act global.

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

Ms Sylvie JOSSERAND on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates.

Ms Sylvie JOSSERAND (France, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

The immediate execution of the ineligibility sentence handed down to Marine LE PEN last week was requested by the French public prosecutor's office, which is organically linked to the executive by a hierarchical subordination. The main opponent is thus deprived of an effective remedy, since immediate ineligibility prevents her, despite the appeal, from standing as a candidate in the 2027 presidential election, and deprives voters of the opportunity to express their choice.

As this is a major obstacle to democratic participation, will the Committee of Ministers acknowledge the death of the principle of fair trial in France?

Thank you.

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

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): What always bothers me is that when it's the others, it's no big deal, but when it's us, it's a catastrophe.

Provisional execution wasn't invented last week. So now, Ms LE PEN is a victim of it, and we're all up in arms. But it's a principle that was voted for in France's National Assembly. If there's a problem with French laws, it's up to the National Assembly to change them.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS on behalf of Liberal, Democratic and Reformers Group.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, President.

Dear Minister, you talked about the Russian crime of aggression against Ukraine. Thank you very much for that.

My question is about next steps. This House has repeatedly emphasised the urgency for justice in Ukraine. What are the priorities, political, legal priorities, for the Committee of Ministers, for you personally to successfully launch the international special tribunal, the compensation mechanism for Ukraine, and also what can we do to transfer the frozen Russian assets for use in Ukraine?

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

Minister?

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Two different things. So the first thing will be about the tribunal. So there was a core group and the 14th and final meeting of the core group took place from 19 to 21 March, and they also finalised the technical work. And the Luxembourg Presidency actively supports the implementation of decisions taken at the Reykjavík Summit, and this includes also the steadfast support for Ukraine on that topic.

About frozen Russian assets, we have just to be aware that there are two discussions that we also have in Europe and very often we mix up everything between the frozen assets and the immobilised assets. And the one from the central bank – the central Russian bank – and the one belonging to entities, companies or private persons. And for me, it is just important that we make a big difference between the two. And for the moment, the discussion is because we have, for example, Belgium – Eurocler has a lot of frozen assets from the Russian central bank.

I belong to the one. It's not because I was a lawyer in my former life, but it is difficult to take. For the moment, we have the interest and with the interest, we can invest it in Ukraine. But for me, it's legally difficult to take away something from someone if you have just a political decision. That's the first thing. For me, it is important that you have a court decision or that we ask a judicial body to take decisions that are just guaranteed. Because I know how it will go, if afterwards, there is a trial and Belgium will be condemned to pay back the money, I don't know if the other 26 countries will be solidary and support Belgium to pay back the money they gave on the political decisions to Ukraine. First thing.

The second thing is, from my point of view, that we should also see with the private persons, because this was now the central bank with the private persons. Again, if we take, then it's not only a confiscation, but it's to deprive, as the ambassador said, to deprive someone of his own goods. And then we have to know, and that's not me saying that, that comes from the central bank. If with those decisions, those political decisions can decide to take things away from persons or from companies or from national banks, then we have the risk for investors to leave Europe, and then prefer going to Dubai or London, because they would say in Europe political decisions can decide to take away things – political decisions, not judicial decisions.

And so, from my point of view, or we have the principle of solidarity. So if one country is sued and after needs to pay that we give the guarantee that because they will pay in the name of us to someone. But then we are solidary there also to pay back if there is a case. Because the worst thing is that they ask Ukraine to pay back, if something has been taken away and given to Ukraine. And I would recommend to really have a judicial decision where we have the guarantee that at least the legality has been proven. And I just want to remind also that it's a question of the stability of financial markets. If you have the feeling that in Europe political decisions can take things away without a judicial decision, which is usually the principle that we have.

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

Mr Andrej HUNKO, the co-chair of the Group of the Unified European Left.

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

I will ask you in German.

I will come to your ruling from the European Court of Human Rights, which I understand is on your desk, because it has not been implemented, because of the right to hope in the case of Öcalan.

Do you agree with me that the implementation of this judgment could make a contribution to ensuring a possible peace process in this conflict? There is currently something in motion.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Yes, thank you for the question.

The case of Mr ÖCALAN is not a new case; it has also been on the agenda of the Council of Ministers since 2014. We have also asked the Turkish administration to set up a mechanism so that, if there is a deterioration in conditions, we can also help analyse this.

In any case, I hope that the Turkish administration will continue to co-operate with the Council of Europe on this *issue* – for which the national law can also be aligned with the internship of our standards on the European Convention on Human Rights and Human Rights...

But we also have to look ahead, and at the moment the last news we will have will be the one that will tell us what the future looks like. In any case, we cannot close our eyes, and this situation will definitely remain on the agenda.

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

Now we are going to the rest of the list.

The speakers will be divided in groups of three.

You know the procedure, dear Minister.

So if you want to take notes, I will start with Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN first.

Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN (Türkiye, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

My question will be about the case of Mr İMAMOĞLU, the Republican People's Party's (CHP) presidential candidate. Ekrem İMAMOĞLU has been jailed for political reasons along with his closest colleagues, including his campaign manager, his main advisor and several district mayors in Istanbul. There are several lawsuits filed against the Republican People's Party (CHP) with demands for the appointment of a trustee to our party.

Mister Minister, you already mentioned the case of İMAMOĞLU and thank you for being very aware of the message of the protests. But what do you think the role of the Committee of Ministers can be regarding this crisis of democracy in Türkiye?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI is next.

Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI (San Marino, SOC): Thank you, Minister.

A strong headwind is blowing from the United States of America with the directives of Donald TRUMP's presidency, which are also the benchmark of many European political forces but which are based on everything the Council of Europe does not stand for: force winning over dialogue, discrimination winning over inclusion, allergy to multilateralism.

The hope is that this sort of nightmare will end quickly, thanks to the American citizens themselves who are opposed to this drift. But hope is a theological virtue, not a political one. The welding together of those who prefer authoritarianism in Europe and in America can be exacerbating for our body.

Do you agree that it is a priority to reverse this course? What concrete steps can the Council of Europe take to counter this authoritarian regression that unfortunately... [speech interrupted].

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Jamila MADEIRA is next.

Colleagues, please keep to the time limit.

Ms Jamila MADEIRA (Portugal, SOC): Dear Minister,

Dear friend,

The proportion of foreigners living in Luxembourg stood at 47% on 1 January 2024. In 1961, the percentage of foreigners was just 13%.

Luxembourg is an example of welcome and integration, and we are proud of your example. Help us to emphasise that migration is necessary in the world to reflect development, promote prosperity and deploy opportunities.

Tell us how we, as Council of Europe countries, should draw the line to do it well.

We thank you.

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

Would you like to respond to these three questions?

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Mister Giovagnoli, force should never be the solution.

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): ...afterwards for our Turkish friends, I just raised it up before. All decisions just before elections to put someone in jail. And that's what I asked. I spoke, to be very frank with you, also to my counterpart to tell him that from the outside it is difficult to understand.

I usually do not comment on trials because I don't know what is exactly against someone or in favour of someone. But I just see from the outside that, someone who is in the polls the first one and who is put into jail without a justice decision for the moment, so no trial. These presumptions or anything. It is something that, from the outside, for me, I believe in the Turkish future to be a democratic country, sticking to the values.

That's why we sitting also here together.

And I really hope that this is not a signal that they want to go in a direction which is not the one I would love to see from Türkiye.

But I said it to Mr Hakan FIDAN, that I trust him and I trust also the Turkish colleagues to realise that from the outside it is difficult to understand.

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): The third question concerns...

So, you know...

Where is she, the Portuguese colleague who posed...?

Ah, right, sorry.

My country was a poor country. My country was a poor country, and recently it was mentioned again that in the 19th century, many Luxembourgers left Luxembourg because we didn't have enough to eat. And the wealth of my country has been that of openness. First it was steel, where iron was discovered, and then it was services. For example, many people don't know it, but RTL was the radio station - when there was still an iron curtain separating Europe - of freedom for many. And the "L" stood for Luxembourg, not Lisbon. It was just to tell you that we've always been able to move forward.

Today, Astra, a satellite company founded in the 1980s by former Prime Minister Pierre WERNER, is one of the world's largest satellite companies. And believe me, back in the 1980s, when he said he wanted to get into satellites, a lot of people thought he should see a shrink. But today, it's a jewel in the crown of our economy. Quite simply because Luxembourg has always been a little ahead of the game on certain economic fronts, but above all because Luxembourg has always been welcoming.

Today, the Portuguese community is the second largest in my country. As I said, and I know that not everyone appreciates this, you just have to realize that in Luxembourg, salaries may be a little higher, but so is the cost of living, and you shouldn't make the mistake of saying: "I'm leaving everything, I'm giving up everything and I'm going to find something easily, a job and find accommodation". It's important to prepare for your departure.

But Luxembourg is a country today - and I was mayor of Luxembourg City, 70% of the population of Luxembourg City is not Luxembourgish - with almost 50% of the national population not Luxembourgers. I don't have a single elected member of the extreme right in my Parliament.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Armen GEVORGYAN is next.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, ECPA): Mister Minister, there is growing concern over the destruction of Armenian heritage in Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, which creates conditions that make the return of Armenians to their historic homeland nearly impossible.

What steps is the Council of Europe taking to ensure the right of Armenians to a safe and collective return to Artsakh under these alarming circumstances?

Thank you.

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

Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA (Ukraine, ECPA): Dear Minister Bettel, thank you for your consistent support for Ukraine and for standing up for us. It's a true pleasure.

Just days ago, a Russian missile strike killed nine children playing on a playground in Kryvyi Rih. It's a tragedy that begs for justice.

The ICC has issued a warrant for Mr Vladimir PUTIN, but we know that without a dedicated tribunal for the crime of aggression, a major gap remains.

And the EU and the Council of Europe have endorsed the creation of such a tribunal, but the timeline remains vague.

Will Luxembourg commit to advocating for a faster launch of this special tribunal? And what concrete steps can be taken?

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Nina KASIMATI (Greece, UEL): Thank you, Mister Minister.

The political turmoil which has overwhelmed Syria and the emergence of radical Islamists, Islamist groups nurtured by Turkey to dominate the revolutionary scene, and now the administration, has fuelled fears among the Christians, in particular those who live close to the group's areas of influence.

These fears have materialised and the ongoing atrocities being committed against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities leading to elimination, seem not to have shocked enough the international community in view of the aforementioned cataclysmic developments, but also non negotiable commitments, statements of the Council of Europe on the freedom of religion and belief. How is the esteemed Council of Europe Committee of Ministers under the Luxembourgian presidency willing to act apart from raising the issue?

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

Mister Minister, would you like to respond?

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): You asked "would you like to respond?".

If I said "no", what would you say?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I would say that there will be a lack of joy in this Parliament because we all enjoy your presence here.

So that the last memorabilia that will be left by you will be only your pen that you forgot in the rostrum.

So we want the last remembrance of you to be your very interesting answers to the questions you have been asked.

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you so much.

So the first one, the human rights of the Armenians in Karabakh are guaranteed by the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and they have to be respected. Also, the right to go back in full safety. I would also like to say thank you to the Secretary General, Mr BĚRZINŠ, who took various of measures with the authorities to support their efforts in that field.

What happened in Ukraine is terrible and I am planning, I don't know when for sure, but I am in contact with my Ukrainian counterparts to go to Ukraine again in two weeks. I don't want to be misunderstood. We are all humans, and when you see the news, six months ago we spoke about Ukraine and now we speak about tariffs. That is terrible because people are dying every day in Ukraine. For example, two Chinese soldiers have been arrested in Ukraine. These are all topics we need to discuss, also on the level of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, at least being able to ask our Chinese counterparts what is happening there.

The region where it happened is a special region, Kryvyi Rih. Sorry if I'm not pronouncing it well. It is a region with which Luxembourg has a special link and we continue to support this region. We are also looking at how we can continue to deepen relations. I had a special signature also with that region. But don't misunderstand me, if it is in that region or another, every child, every woman, every man who dies is one too many.

Then the third one about Syria. I fully understand that this is important for some of you, Catholics or non-Catholics. Again, I don't want to be misunderstood. For me, what happened in Syria in the last weeks is not only about Catholics, it is also about different minorities. We need to defend all of them. We cannot just pick one religion.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): It is about Christian minorities.

She didn't say Catholics, and others there. Christian minorities was the question.

Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers): Yeah, but that's okay. Okay I understood Catholic minorities. And so for me it was because – you forgot the Alawite – and so that was for me... Congratulations. Congratulations. I studied ecclesiastical law in Greece. I should have known that before. Sorry.

The fact is, for the moment we have a regime in Syria where I just would recommend to avoid to go all in.

Everybody at the beginning thought we need to find deals with the new government – "they are perfect" – without knowing them, because for a lot of us, it was a solution to send back Syrians without knowing how the situation in Syria will evolve also in the next months.

For us, no new activity of co-operation has been extended about the countries you just mentioned.

But for me, I just want to say that if we have sanctions against Syria and if we want to lift sanctions against Syria, we have to do it from my point of view, step by step - so results-linked. If there are protections, if there are liberties. They have created now a new government, if I'm right, yesterday or a few days ago, a new government where they had also minorities, also women inside.

Is that the right direction or not?

Again, please don't jump at every news you get about Syria to say "now everything is perfect". I would really go there step by step. I like people asking questions and leaving during the answers.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Minister Bettel, thank you so much for being with us today and thank you for your Presidency.

Dear colleagues, before we close the sitting, I wish to ask the Assembly to approve a change in the agenda for tomorrow, Thursday, 10 April.

The debate on legal aspects of the accession of the European Union to the European Convention on Human Rights is currently due to take place in the afternoon sitting. I propose to bring that forward to the end of the morning sitting of the same day.

Is that agreed?

Agreed. Thank you.

And the agenda is amended accordingly.

Dear colleagues,

Once again, I want to thank Mr Xavier BETTEL for being with us today, and I will applaud him for his lively presence as always.

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.

The sitting is closed at 12:55 p.m.