Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Provisional edition
Monday 29 September 2025, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the fourth part session

Opening of sitting No 28

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, please be seated, we're about to begin.

I think the political groups haven't finished yet, that's why we have this delay. Sorry for this delay.

Dear Secretary General,

Dear Deputy Secretary General,

Secretary General of the Assembly,

Ambassadors,

Members of the Assembly,

Dear colleagues,

As I stand before you, you can see in front of me the original text of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is not simply a document on display; it is the very compass that has guided Europe for 75 years towards law, democracy and dignity.

And just a few steps away, in the foyer outside this Chamber, you will find another treasure later: a thirteenth-century manuscript of *Ptolemy's Geography* from the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos, a book first written in the 2nd century AD, nearly 1 800 years ago.

This genuine Athonite codex that we are privileged to host for the next few days has a sister volume in the Marciana Biblioteca in Venice. Tradition holds that Renaissance navigators – Columbus among them – drew on Ptolemaic co-ordinates as they prepared their bold crossings.

Two texts, dear colleagues, side by side for the first time, and in conversation across the centuries. Why? Because each, in its own way, is about borders.

The Convention draws the human boundaries that must never be crossed: the inviolable line against torture and slavery, the line that guards liberty and security, the sacred space of thought, conscience and religion, the open horizon of expression and of peaceful assembly and association.

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.

These are the protective borders of human dignity, the lines we draw not to divide people, but to defend the person.

Ptolemy, by contrast, mapped the geographical borders: mountains and rivers, capes and seas, the lines that separate polities and shape their destinies.

Ptolemy's Geography reflected the limits of the knowledge of his time. By moving beyond such imagined borders, humanity learned to envision not only a larger world, but also another world of rights, founded on the equal dignity of all human beings.

As the journalist and historian Tim MARSHALL has reminded us, geography still exerts its quiet pressure on politics; mountains, steppes and straits can predispose nations toward rivalry or restraint.

But our task here, dear colleagues, is to prove that we are not prisoners of geography, that institutions, law and dialogue can soften the hard edges of terrain.

Those who drafted the Convention understood this deeply. They set limits so that freedom might flourish within them.

In John Donne's enduring words, "No man is an island… Any man's death diminishes me."

In our European key we might add: when even a small piece of land is washed away by the sea, the whole continent is made smaller, just as when one nation suffers, all Europe is diminished.

There is also a warning that reaches us from philosophy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote of "the first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, said 'This is mine'," and called him the founder of civil society, for good and for ill.

That moment of enclosure created order and property, but also the temptation to forget the common good.

The Convention answers that temptation, it re-grounds possession in personhood, sovereignty in responsibility, power in rights.

And so these two manuscripts, one of law, one of maps, engage in a conversation across the centuries.

The Convention marks the borders of what must not be done to a human being; Ptolemy marks the borders of where we are.

Between the two lies the work of statesmanship: to ensure that the lines on maps never erase the lines of conscience.

Dear colleagues, I look out at the benches before me and I see colleagues from countries that have not always enjoyed easy relations; nations that in other centuries met on battlefields now sit shoulder to shoulder.

This Assembly binds them, like the pages of Ptolemy's codex, bound tightly together for centuries. If parchment can hold together through time, surely parliaments can hold together through debate.

Nearly thirty years ago, when I was working as a journalist, I first entered Mount Athos to report on a treasure, the same Ptolemy's code we show today.

The Athonite community, founded and inhabited exclusively by Orthodox monks since 963, more than one thousand years ago, preserves not only relics of faith but also records of science and art.

From the shelves of Athos to the benches of this Chamber runs a single thread: Europe safeguards memory not as a relic of the past, but as the very condition for freedom in the present and the future.

This is why, today, the original Convention stands within this hall, because our politics must be measured against it.

And why, just beyond these doors, *Ptolemy's Geography* stands watch, a reminder that the world we govern is not abstract but physical: mountains, valleys, rivers, lines on the map.

We cannot redraw the mountains; but we can redraw the meaning of their borders.

Let me end with the lesson I hope we will carry away. The Convention teaches that the true borders of Europe are ethical: the limits we set to protect the person. Ptolemy teaches that the visible borders of Europe are geographical: the lines on the map that once divided us. If we are faithful to the first, the second need not be our fate.

May these two books, so different, so near, remind us that law can humanise space, and that maps, when read with wisdom, can point not only to where we are, but to who we must become.

Thank you.

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

I would like to invite all of you to hold a minute of silence to remember a long-standing and extremely vocal member of our Assembly from Switzerland and ALDE, Mr Alfred HEER, who passed away 10 days ago.

Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

Before I move to our first item, let me remind the Assembly that members who have not submitted an annual declaration of interest are required to start any intervention with an oral declaration of interest under paragraph 20 of the Code of conduct for members of the Parliamentary Assembly. I also remind members that in order to be registered for the sitting, you should insert your badge when you take your seat and keep it inserted for at least 30 seconds.

The first item on the agenda is the examination of credentials of new members. The names of the members and substitutes are in document number 16265. If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified.

Are any credentials challenged?

The credentials are ratified.

Welcome to our new colleagues.

The next item on the agenda is the election of a Vice President of the Assembly in respect of Albania. The candidate is Ms Olta XHAÇKA. If there is no request for a vote, she will be declared elected.

So, she is elected. I congratulate Olta.

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in the document Commissions (2025) 06 and Addendum 1.

Are the proposed changes in the membership of the committees of the Assembly agreed?

Agreed.

I'm moving forward now with a request for current affairs debates or debates under urgent procedures. Before we examine the draft agenda, the assembly needs to consider the request for debates under the urgent and current affairs procedures.

The bureau has received the following request. First, the current affairs debate requested by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe political group under the title "Political Crisis in Serbia".

Second, the urgent procedure debate requested by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media under the title "Reporting from Gaza: an urgent call to protect the lives of journalists and support their work".

Third, an urgent procedure debate as part of the framework of the assembly, an opinion requested by the Committee of Ministers under the title "Draft convention establishing an international claims commission for Ukraine".

Fourth, an urgent procedure debate requested by Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group) supported by 24 members of the Assembly under the title "Democracy, rule of law and inclusive dialogue in Türkiye".

Fifth, a current affairs debate requested by political groups under the title "Russia: new threats to European democracies".

Sixth, a debate under urgent procedure requested by Mr Christophe LACROIX (Belgium, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group), supported by 23 members of the Assembly under the title "Israel's deliberate attacks on the Global Sumud humanitarian flotilla en route to Gaza".

Seventh, a debate under urgent procedure requested by political groups under the title "Urgent call to put an end to the devastating humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza".

Eighth, a debate under urgent procedure requested by the European People's Party political group under the title "Uphold democracy and the rule of law in Georgia".

Ninth, a debate under urgent procedure requested by the Socialists, Democrats and Greens political group under the title "Urgent call to put an end to the devastating humanitarian catastrophe and the killing of journalists in Gaza".

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau decided to recommend that the Assembly hold four urgent procedure debates ("Draft convention establishing an international claims commission for Ukraine", "Russia: new threats to European democracies", "Urgent call to put an end to the devastating humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza", and "Uphold democracy and the rule of law in Georgia") and two current affairs debates ("Political crisis in Serbia" and "Democracy, rule of law and inclusive dialogue in Türkiye") during this part session.

Is that agreed, dear colleagues?

Agreed. Thank you.

The next item of business is the adoption of the agenda for the fourth part of the 2025 Ordinary Session. The draft agenda submitted for the approval of the Assembly was brought up to date and adopted this morning by the Bureau. I remind you that we have just agreed the urgent procedure debates and current affairs debates set out in the draft before you.

To allow more members to participate in this very busy part session, I have decided to reduce speaking times in debates throughout this part session to two minutes. I'm sorry about this, but otherwise we wouldn't have time for the usual three minutes from tomorrow onwards.

Is the draft agenda as amended agreed?

It is agreed. Thank you.

The next item on the agenda is the debate on the progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee, Document 16257, with addenda one and two. The progress report will be presented by Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, leader of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates and he's here.

With this, we will consider the report by the Ad-hoc Committee of the Bureau on observation of the presidential election in Poland on the 18 May and 1 June 2025. The report on election observation will be presented by Mr Iulian BULAI, the leader of ALDE. We will suspend this item at 12:30pm to enable the prize award ceremony for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. The debate will then continue at 4:30pm this afternoon.

I now call Mr Zsolt NÉMETH to present the progress report. Dear Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, you have the floor for seven minutes now and will have three minutes at the end to respond to the debate.

Progress report: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the presidential election in Poland (18 May and 1 June 2025)

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA, Rapporteur): Secretary General,

I would like to welcome the very honourable guests in the chamber.

There are guests from Greece from Mount Athos with us. Father Ephraim from the Vatopedi monastery and Father Eliseos from the Simonopetra monastery.

We have been very much honoured on the invitation of our President, Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS to visit Mount Athos with the colleagues of the Presidential Committee.

And we have experienced, among a lot of things, living faith. We have experienced that Christianity in Mount Athos is not history, but it is a reality targeting towards the future, and that faith reflects and generates important values for our social existence as well. And our values drive us towards political action. I am very grateful to you, President, for organising this trip and also for the exhibition which will open at 1 p.m.. Welcome, fathers from Mount Athos.

Secondly, colleagues, I would like to underline and draw your attention that this week we will talk a lot about journalists. Journalists in the context of the Václav Havel Prize. I am very glad to see that three candidates have been for the Václav Havel Prize from this background. And I am also very glad that many other topics relate to the hardships journalists confront with.

At this point, I would like to mention the brutality of how Charlie Kirk was murdered in the United States. Journalists, influencers, are our voice and we need to protect them to be able to say what they think for our societies. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe plays a very important role in election observation. We had the Moldovan elections and we had an exercise, in this case. We had a successful election in Moldova and hopefully the observation of the out-of-country vote will be also a positive experiment.

I would like to express my gratitude to Lord David BLENCATHRA. Lord David BLENCATHRA was initiating the revision of our observation activity. And now we had the first opportunity, probably it is just the beginning, but I think it is important to draw the conclusions on how the election observation in Moldova was happening.

Also, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe plays a very important role in the election of judges. As you are aware, the Hungarian list has been rejected and there have been some voices and political groups as well challenging this decision. I would like to draw your attention, colleagues, that the Advisory Panel of the Committee of Ministers headed by the Spanish former member and former ambassador did not raise any concerns concerning neither the candidates nor the procedure. Still, the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights has rejected this list. I wouldn't like to see the over-politicisation of the activity of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights. And I think we should pay attention to this question and to the position of the Hungarian government in this respect which is available to all of you.

The summer has been broadly defined and influenced by important geopolitical steps and developments. I would draw your attention to the fact that we had a NATO Summit in The Hague, which was a successful exercise. We had also the Alaska Summit which we don't know how far it will take us. We also had the Shanghai Cooperation Council and we are going to have the Asia Pacific Summit coming up soon between the leaders of the United States and China. All these developments were not necessarily able to influence strengthening diplomacy where it should have, especially the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine is still going on. And similarly, the tension in the Middle East has substantially grown. And it is not an accident that on our agenda this week we will have both Russia, the Ukrainian question, and also the Gaza and Middle East situation. We will discuss these questions and hope that diplomacy will take over the role of violence and the role of aggression.

There have been some positive developments in the past couple of months as well. Especially, I would like to mention under this the Azeri-Armenian agreement, which has been brokered by the United States. Hopefully the open questions, because there are open questions, we are all aware that there are open questions in this relationship as well, will be solved in this new climate. And for that reason I am very glad that we will be able to welcome the Armenian Prime Minister in our circles. And I also hope that the more intensive diplomatic activity of Azerbaijan, our Secretary General's meeting with the Azeri President in New York at the General Assembly, will contribute to the solution of the so-called Azerbaijan question in the Council of Europe. And we will find a way to be able to see again our Azeri colleagues back in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

With this, we will consider the report by the Ad-hoc Committee of the Bureau on the observation of the presidential election in Poland. The report on the election observation will be presented by the leader of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Iulian BULAI. Iulian, you have the floor.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, President, Secretary General, former presidents of this Assembly, dear Ambassadors, representatives of the Russian forces in exile, dear Vladimir KARA-MURZA, dear Abbott, Father Ephraim, Father Elias from Vatopedi and Simonos Petra, all of you.

It's been an honour to chair the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegation that observed Poland's presidential election on 18 May and 1 June 2025. We paid a pre-electoral visit in May. During the two rounds of elections, observers of our 31 member delegations visited over 180 polling stations. This coverage gave the delegation a broad overview of the electoral process across urban and rural Poland. I thank the Polish authorities and the Chair of the Polish delegation, Madam POMASKA, for their invitation and smooth

co-operation. I also wish to thank my colleague Ms Liliana TANGUY for leading the delegation during the first round, as I was present in Romania during our presidential election, the monitoring rapporteurs for their precious input, and the Venice Commission for its individual legal support.

Our Assembly was the only international parliamentary organisation observing these elections, alongside a limited ODIHR mission headed by our dear Dunja MIJATOVIC, with whom we had excellent co-operation.

Dear colleagues, Poland's 2025 election again unfolded deep political polarisation and unresolved institutional disputes. The rule of law crisis, ongoing since 2015, when PiS reshaped the judiciary, including the Constitutional Tribunal and Supreme Court, still means there is no fully credible independent mechanism to resolve electoral disputes domestically. The campaign was also marked by disinformation and foreign interference, much of it linked by Polish institutions to Russian sources. Polish authorities deployed significant resources to counter disinformation, cyberattacks and co-ordinated campaigns from abroad, notably from Russia and Belarus.

However, weak institutional co-ordination reduced effectiveness and countermeasures, and hybrid and cyberthreats further undermine public trust. Social networks emerged as decisive tools for voter outreach. Online campaigning, however, was accompanied by disinformation, including third-party paid advertisements of unclear origin. This vulnerability cannot be underestimated.

Against this backdrop, the election day was calm and professional. Our delegation concluded that the election was competitive, well-managed and offered voters a genuine choice. The very high turnout confirmed the strong democratic commitment of Polish citizens. Yet long-standing political polarisation, biased media coverage, misuse of official resources, limited campaign finance transparency and persistent concerns about judicial independence undermined overall confidence in the process.

Our delegation formulated clear recommendations for the Polish authorities, including: improving vote secrecy to protect voters from undue pressure, reforming the process for validating results, removing it from bodies found illegitimate by the European Court of Human Rights, implementing European Court of Human Rights judgments to restore judicial independence including on Supreme Court chambers and Constitutional Tribunal appointments, depoliticising the National Electoral Commission and reforming the National Broadcasting Council for impartiality and accountability, combating foreign interference through full implementation of the EU Digital Services Act, improved platform co-operation and stronger enforcement, enhancing transparency in campaign finance through real-time reporting of income, expenditures and sanctions on illegal third-party campaigning, ensuring inclusive elections by improving accessibility for persons with disabilities, removing voting restrictions for persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, promoting gender balance in electoral bodies and supporting citizen observation in line with international standards.

Dear all, the runoff was decided by a razor-thin margin. PiS-backed candidate Karol NAWROCKI won with 50.89% – a difference of fewer than 370 000 votes out of nearly 21 million. Turnout reached 71.63%, with record participation abroad, over 84%, where the candidate of the Civic Platform, Rafał TRZASKOWSKI, won nearly two-thirds of the vote. The results reflect Poland's two-camp politics, giving the president-elect a narrow but clear mandate. Karol NAWROCKI's victory marks not just a close result, but a turning point. Poland's politics will remain polarised, and institutional standoffs and constitutional disputes are likely to continue. Nonetheless, consensus endures the key foreign policy challenges.

In conclusion, I congratulate the Polish people for their commitment to democracy and exceptionally high turnout. And despite polarisation, this election confirms Poland's democratic resilience and peaceful transfer of power. The civic commitment now calls on political leaders to engage in inclusive dialogue, bridge divisions and strengthen trust in institutions.

Thank you.

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

Dear colleagues,

We will now hear speeches from the speakers on behalf of the political groups.

I remind members that speaking time only for today is three minutes, as tomorrow it will be for two minutes.

And I call first Ms Petra BAYR on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Ms Petra BAYR.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS.

Dear colleagues, allow me to address you not only as speaker on behalf of my group, but also as the Chair of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights. You all know that originally on the agenda there was foreseen a voting on a judge in respect of Cyprus tomorrow, which disappeared from the agenda.

I first want to explain why it was so. We heard in our September session the three candidates and then we had a debate and we suggested that Ms Margarita PAPANTONIOU is the most qualified. Then, after we published this result, one of the other two candidates withdrew from the list.

But this is our obligation, in accordance with the rules and in accordance with all the things we are following, that we have to present you three good qualified candidates. And we only have two left over. There can't be an election tomorrow. And that's the reason why we postponed that.

So what will happen now? We hope that Cyprus will bring us a new list soon and that we can continue in January. And I also will make a recommendation in my ongoing report on the election of judges that we limit this phase to withdraw, because otherwise every not successful candidate ever could avoid to have a new judge elected.

And the second case on Hungary, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH already mentioned and told you what was going on. We discussed very extensively in our committee the Hungarian list. But we do not only look at the list, we also look at the procedure before. And if we are not happy with the procedure, then it can be that we do not hear the candidates at all.

And in this case it happens because it's our responsibility to also look at this. There is the requirement that a national selection procedure must satisfy the minimum requirements of fairness and transparency. And that is also in line with, on the one hand, our own resolutions and decisions, but also with a guideline of the Committee of Ministers, and these foresee a balanced composition of the national selection body, And also that we can assume that the members of this selection body at the national level is free from undue influence.

And in this case, three fourths of the Committee members were in the opinion that that was not the case, and so the procedure was rejected. And I think that it's not a politicisation of the Committee, and we also do not always follow what the advisory panel tells us. So this was a decision and yes, we have to speak about it later on in case there is a request for a rejection of the whole progress report on this behalf.

Thank you

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the European People's Party, Mr Christophe BRICO. Christophe, you have the floor.

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

A lot has already been said, so I'll try to be brief. The last time we met here was for the signing of the agreement creating a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine, which, along with the Register of Damages, completes a long-standing work that is still going on, and that's positive. Personally, I am proud to have played a part in this and to continue to do so.

I would also like to welcome the report by Mr Iulian BULAI on the elections in Poland, which shows that the electoral process went well overall, even though it took place in an extremely polarised political environment under various influences, particularly from the Russian Federation.

And finally, a quick word on the inflation of urgent debates that are submitted for our consideration, debate and discussion, which makes it rather difficult to prepare for them. It's a bit of a shame sometimes. So perhaps in the rules we work on regularly, there's a way of anticipating this better. That's all I'd like to say.

And finally, to add to what Ms Petra BAYR said, we have put in place a fairly comprehensive process for selecting judges, involving governments, a panel of experts, a dedicated committee and then a vote by all parliamentarians. I think we have to trust the process and avoid questioning it every time we don't like the decisions it takes. And I don't think this is a political issue. I agree.

Thank you.

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

Trust the secretariat and of course, the colleagues, if they speak as you did that we are going to have time for all these issues we have to deal with.

Now, on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI.

You have the floor.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President, dear colleagues.

So, first of all, let me thank Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, not only for the consistently excellent work he does, but also to mark the anniversary of his election as chairperson of our group.

I would also like to thank you, President and the Assembly for holding a minute of silence dedicated to our colleague Mr Alfred HEER.

We all remember him as a friend, as someone who was always extremely dedicated to politics in Switzerland, as well as in our home here in Strasbourg. He was part of this organisation since 2011, so did a great deal of work here.

And I think that brings home to us all that we are not only parliamentarians but we are all human beings. Everyone remembers his direct, independent, outspoken character, even his sense of humour, and that's how we all want to remember him.

Let me also echo what our President, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH said, because in recent months we have seen a great deal of turmoil globally. One event particularly shocked the world and that was the killing of the young American Mr Charlie KIRK, which caused quite a stir.

I believe that what happened there, that brutal violence, is unacceptable, because, as you also mentioned today, Mr President, no one deserves to die for their ideas. Whether or not we disagree or agree with them, that does not change this principle. I think that as we in the Political Committee are working on a document on violence against politicians, what happened to young Kirk, but also the reactions that followed, can offer insights, because empathy cannot be conditional.

And I should also like to raise another issue. There are all kinds of things that we could be talking about, but I'd like to pick up on something that my colleague Ms Petra BAYR said. I do not agree with her intervention at all, she did not bring a concrete fact, she brought political opinions.

The fact that this has happened here shows that the Committee of Ministers, which has a panel of advisors that has evaluated both the procedure (which it considered to be correct) and also the CVs (which are CVs of the highest level, which respect the characteristics that are required for judges), and this, I believe might be a shortcoming.

We would not like to see a Court with vacant chairs. I don't think that there is room for any kind of political evaluation in this process.

Having said that, let us say that since June 2025 we have seen that this world has not become safer, we know that there are 55 ongoing wars that continue to plague humanity, with escalations and new conflicts.

Here, I would like to make an invitation, because we do not need fan clubs but balance and goodwill. I think that we can only turn divisions into a common commitment in the service of democracy if we know how to stay on course.

Thank you all.

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

I fully agree with what you have said about the violence against politicians.

I just want to remind you, colleagues, that after my proposal last March, we had this issue as a main issue to be discussed among the 60 speakers of the parliaments, members of our Council of Europe observers, and it was really the most important issue to be discussed.

So I believe that maybe Ms Elisabetta GARDINI's proposal should be thoroughly discussed in the relevant committees, and we may need to do more on that.

Now, I will give the floor to Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, you have the floor.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank both of the rapporteurs for their tremendous work over these months, although it was summer it was very intense and you see how fast the world is changing around us and we have to keep up.

And I would like to thank actually for bringing all of these important topics to the debates this week, because we cannot just be silent or pretend that drones are not flying over your countries right now, not only in Ukraine. And there is a direct threat to democracy. There are hybrid attacks on your countries and there are bad things, but also there are some very good things.

As Mr Iulian BULAI mentioned, despite the polarisation in Polish society, the Russians were not successful to actually interfere in the elections. I would like to congratulate us all with the result of the Moldovan elections, because Russians again [are] putting billions of dollars and euros into buying votes in Moldova and trying to threaten citizens, and actually [the] pro-European parties were not successful.

And what does it prove?

It proves that if you are not afraid, then you can tackle the problems. You have to have a plan. We have to be united. All of these threats from autocrats and different regimes can be just fought back. And that's what we have to do in our respective home countries.

But also I cannot just not mention the backsliding in different member states. We will be talking also about the youth movements this session. And the young people are protesting on the streets, they're protesting in Serbia, they're still protesting in Georgia. And we will be having debates on these countries as well.

But also we need to ensure that if there are violations of human rights, there are violations of international law, that justice will come.

So I would like, on behalf of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, of course, to welcome also the debates on the Convention, the draft Convention on Establishing an International Claims Commission, which is the second element of the comprehensive mechanism to be able to actually help and bring justice to all of those millions of people in Ukraine that were hurt by Russian aggression.

So we have plenty of events during this week. I would like to ask this Parliamentary Assembly to be united; we need our democracy alive.

Thank you.

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

And now on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, I call Ms Laura CASTEL, the co-Chair of the party group.

Ms Laura CASTEL (Spain, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues, my political group, we confirm that in this Parliamentary Assembly the agenda is more and more monopolised by geopolitical-motivated issues – especially after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. We see this in cases such as Serbia, Georgia or Moldova.

Colleagues,

We should avoid double standards and we should be consistent in how we react in backslidings in each case. This is to say, for instance, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Georgia. There is no consistency in the reactions from this Parliamentary Assembly.

For example, Türkiye, since 2016, the situations regarding human rights are not improving – on the contrary. Or Georgia, there is an anomaly of having representation in the Committee of Ministers. But the colleagues of the Georgian Parliament are not present here; and etc.

We have to remember that we, as an organisation, we could trigger the joint procedure as a way to help and respond to the backslidings. But instead, sometimes we request, depending on the member states, impossible conditions to meet, as in Georgia. So, double standards.

And the double standards are crystal clear in Gaza, in the Gaza genocide. It is outrageous that this organisation has no single word of condemnation of the Gaza atrocities. No single word in the worst situation currently in the whole world. And the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is avoiding condemning Israel or even the United States, whose President is disrespecting international law.

We are the only one international organisation of human rights, rule of law and democracy, the only one. We have to have all this under our scope, not having double standards. And our group is wondering if this Assembly consider Palestinians as human beings with the same human rights. Since we condemn Georgia, we condemn Azerbaijan, we condemn foreign interference from Russia, etc. But no word, not a single word on Israel, no word about the genocide.

Dear colleagues,

The Helsinki Summit concluded with 10 obligations on the member states., and our member states are obliged.

We, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe represent a human rights organisation, not a pro-militarist organisation, nor a geopolitical organisation, nor a security organisation, nor an economical organisation.

So I beg all of you to just focus on our brothers, sisters and children who suffer the worst atrocities.

We cannot leave them alone. Let's leave aside the double standards.

Thank you.

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

Now the floor is for Ms Agnieszka POMASKA. Agnieszka, you have the floor for 3 minutes.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President, distinguished colleagues.

The report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the presidential election in Poland makes one conclusion unmistakably clear. Despite deep political polarisation, Polish democracy is vibrant and resilient.

First, voter participation: turnout reached more than 67% in the first round and over 71% in the runoff, among the highest in Europe. This demonstrates that Polish citizens are determined to shape their country's future and will not be discouraged by sharp political rhetoric.

Second, resistance to disinformation and foreign interference. Our enemies from the East seek to divide Poland internally, especially on questions of foreign policy. But as we often remind ourselves, the threat is to the East, not to the West.

Polish institutions supported by civil society and a diverse media landscape effectively neutralise these attempts. No credible evidence showed any impact on the outcome. We greatly value the presence of PACE members who observed these democratic processes, strengthening confidence that Poland's elections were free and fair. And it's good to see that also in this Assembly, it's clear, we are here among friends who understand where good lies and where evil lies.

And last but not least, I wish to express special thanks to Mr Iulian BULAI, who headed the PACE observation mission in Poland, and to his entire team. Your careful monitoring and balanced assessment have helped reinforce public trust in Poland's democratic institutions. Today, we can state with confidence that Polish democracy has passed an important test. In the face of polarisation and external propaganda, the people of

Poland showed that differences are settled at the ballot box, never through violence or manipulation. This is not a Polish achievement. It is an example to all of Europe of how democratic institutions can remain strong and resilient.

Thank you very much.

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

Dear colleagues, as I said earlier, we will now interrupt the debate to move to the next agenda item. The debate will resume at 4:30 p.m. The next item on the agenda is the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

Prize Award Ceremony: Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Of course, with all these drones and bombing, it's very difficult to look up to the skies.

Dear colleagues,

I am very honoured to open the Award Ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, the prize by which we recognise and honour the work of thousands of individuals and organisations who share our values and goals: the protection of fundamental freedoms and human dignity.

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

Ms Anne BRASSEUR from 2014 to 2016, and Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER from 2018 to 2020.

Ms Zuzana ČAPUTOVÁ, former President of the Slovak Republic from 2019 to 2024, who became both the first woman and the youngest person to hold the office. She is known for her background as a lawyer and environmental activist, notably winning the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2016 for her campaign against a toxic landfill.

Mr Tiny KOX, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe from 2022 to 2024, whom you all know well, and Mr Martin BOJAR, who is a professor of medicine specialised in neurology, who served as the Minister of Health of the Czech Republic from 1990 to 1992.

And Mr Jiří PŘIBÁŇ, a legal scholar, academic and writer, who was appointed as a Justice of the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic in 2024. He is renowned for his expertise in sociology of law, legal philosophy and constitutional theory. His academic work and public engagement have established him as a leading figure in European constitutional law and legal philosophy.

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

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues, dear friends,

You will have noticed that all three shortlisted candidates for the Prize this year are journalists.

This is not a coincidence. Mr Václav HAVEL himself believed deeply in the power of words and in the importance of journalism, stating that words can change history, and that truthful expression can disrupt oppressive regimes.

Recent years and months have been particularly dangerous for journalists, with record numbers of attacks or intimidations on them.

As stated by this Assembly, I would like to reiterate that without the right to freedom of expression and free, independent and pluralistic media, there is no true democracy. The Parliamentary Assembly is firmly committed to strengthening media freedom in all its aspects, including the right to access information, the

protection of sources, the protection against searches of professional workplaces and private residences and the seizure of materials, the safeguarding of editorial independence and of the ability to investigate, criticise and contribute to public debate without fear of pressure or interference.

The safety of journalists and other media actors is a fundamental component of this freedom. As of 15 March 2025, the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform recorded 171 journalists in detention in Europe, including 98 in member states of the Council of Europe.

More precisely, at least 26 Ukrainian journalists remain unlawfully detained by the Russian Federation or in temporarily occupied territories, facing fabricated charges, torture, enforced disappearance, and even death.

We will have the occasion to discuss it later this week in the Plenary, with the report of Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK and the proposal to establish an annual commemoration day named "Victory for Viktoria", in honour of 28-year-old Ukrainian journalist Ms Viktoria ROSHCHYNA, who was tortured and killed after more than a year in Russian custody. Journalists in conflict zones must make significant sacrifices and take life-endangering actions to provide us with reliable information in times of conflict.

To all my fellow colleagues, journalists who are currently imprisoned, I say: your voice may be silenced, but your testimony is heard loud and clear.

This clear focus on journalists during this session is highly symbolic and it underlines one of the most striking challenges to our shared system of fundamental rights and values: the attack on freedom of speech.

In the year when we mark the 75th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights, the right to speak up, to tell the truth, is often challenged by the rising populist and authoritarian tendencies that aim to suppress alternative positions and promote blunt propaganda instead.

As former US President Mr Barack OBAMA recently said, reacting to the assassination of Mr Charlie KIRK, "it is possible for us to disagree while abiding by a basic code of how we should engage in public debate, and we must respect other people's right to say things that we profoundly disagree with".

This is the basic principle of our democracy and one of the key issues that the New Democratic Pact, that the Secretary General is currently developing, has to address.

Dear colleagues, we recently had the opportunity to follow an event during our meetings in the last session in June about journalists killed in Gaza. We have hundreds of journalists, all around the world, killed or assassinated. I did a survey, and that is why I proposed to the jury of the Václav Havel Award to look thoroughly into the dangers that journalists are facing nowadays. The results of this survey have showed us that we are living, in the last two years, the most devastating years for journalism. Not even in the Second World War or the War in Vietnam were so many journalists killed or detained or jailed.

Dear friends,

The shortlisted candidates this year, for this Václav Havel Prize, as you have seen earlier in the video, are:

Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI from Georgia, who has been a pioneering Georgian journalist since 2000 and co-founder of the independent media outlets Batumelebi and Netgazeti. Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI, being in jail, is represented today by her lawyer, Ms Maya MTSARIASHVILI.

Second nominee, and he is present with us today, is Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH from Ukraine. Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH is a Ukrainian journalist, a human rights defender, and co-founder of the Human Rights Centre Zmina and Hromadske Radio. Thank you, Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH, for being present today. I know that all candidates would like to be with us today, but they are in jail, they couldn't.

And the third nominee is Mr Ulvi HASANLI from Azerbaijan. Mr Ulvi HASANLI is an Azerbaijani journalist and director of the independent media outlet Abzas Media since 2016 and is currently, as I said, in jail. Mr Ulvi HASANLI could not obviously be with us today, he is therefore represented by Ms Gunel SAFAROVA, director of Abzas Media.

To all three candidates and their representatives, I would like to say a big thank you. Thank you for showing us the courage to say no to authoritarianism. Thank you for being role models for a whole generation of journalists and human rights defenders. I solemnly ask here in this chamber for the immediate release of Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI and Mr Ulvi HASANLI. Governments should show that they are not afraid of the truth.

(Applause)

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues, it is alongside the members of the jury, our partners from the Václav Havel Library and Charter 77, and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, that I finally have the immense honour, pleasure and privilege of announcing the name of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize laureate for 2025.

The Prize is awarded to Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH.

And I want to congratulate you, Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH, for this!

(Applause)

Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH (Ukraine): Dear ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, friends,

One year ago on this very date, I was in Russian captivity in a penal colony on Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia. I was sentenced by the Russian so-called court on fabricated charges to 13 years of imprisonment of harsh regime.

At that time, standing here in the Council of Europe, in the Palace of Europe in Strasbourg, receiving this award, addressing you, would be just a dream.

Currently it is a reality, and it is a great honour to be here today, and an even greater honour to receive this award which means so much to me, and to all of us.

In the shortlist of the Václav Havel Prize this year, I'm in the company of two incredibly brave colleagues: Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI and Mr Ulvi HASANLI, who defend freedom of speech, freedom of expression, independent thought, and who are subjected to repression by authoritarian regimes, and I sincerely hope that they are released as soon as possible.

The fact that I am standing here is also a promise that everyone who is currently in Russian captivity, as well as in jails of authoritarian regimes, will be set free.

I dare to say that I participate in this ceremony, and I receive this honourable award, not only in my personal capacity, but on behalf of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians illegally detained by Russia, all those deprived of their liberty, subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, injured, raped, or imprisoned by Russian occupiers, all my colleagues, fellow journalists who are deprived of their liberty in authoritarian regimes' attempts to silence free media and free speech.

I am often asked if captivity disillusioned me about human rights. That human rights institutions did not prevent or influence my detention, absurd conviction, physical and psychological pressure, or a verdict based on a confession extracted under duress.

I always say no. I am not disillusioned because I have been inside a system that does not value human rights.

That means it does not value human dignity, human agency, or the ability of human beings to influence their present and their future.

When one is deprived of something, one starts to understand how precious it is.

Human rights: One has to face their absence to understand their value. They are not to be taken for granted. Human rights must be valued, treasured, protected and defended if necessary.

My brothers and sisters-in-arms in Ukraine are doing this right now, including at the front lines, by resisting Russian aggression and the ideology of the "Russian world". An ideology that turns human beings into disposable material and puts the authoritarian state first.

This is why defence of Ukraine, assistance to Ukraine, and victory of Ukraine will not belong to Ukraine alone. It will belong to all people who value human rights, dignity, and human agency, free speech, free expression and freedom of media.

Ukraine defends not only its territorial integrity, but also fundamental values. Our cooperation, freedom and desire to live in mutual respect, with dignity and without fear, are based on these values.

Using this opportunity, I call upon all of you. Please, do not forget Ukrainian prisoners of war. Do not forget Ukrainian civilians illegally detained by Russia, Ukrainian children illegally kidnapped by Russia. Do not forget all those who fight for freedom and dignity and are repressed and deprived of liberty in Europe, or elsewhere. Please remember them, fight for their release, and help us defend the most fundamental things, without which we cannot imagine our Europe, our future, nor our very humanity.

Thank you. Glory to the heroes, glory to Ukraine.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I would now like to invite, on behalf of Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI and Mr Ulvi HASANLI, their representatives, to say a few words.

Let me first give you the prize.

(Applause)

You may have the floor.

Ms Maya MTSARIASHVILI (Representative of Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI): Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President,

Esteemed members of the Assembly and of the Selection Committee, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for giving me the floor.

First of all, I would like to thank you, on behalf of Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI, for including her among the nominees for this highly prestigious prize.

I would also like to congratulate the other nominee for this prize, Mr Ulvi HASANLI, and wish him a swift release. I also would like to congratulate the winner of this honourable prize, Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH.

To be named among the nominees for the Václav Havel Prize is the greatest honour, an honour for moral courage, for truth, for resilience. But it is also a signal, an alarming signal which means that in my country, in Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI's country, something is deeply wrong.

Today, at the age of 50, Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI is a prisoner of conscience in her own country. She is also a victim of political persecution. She did not confess to a crime that she did not commit. She refused to accept a plea bargain in exchange for freedom. She refused to play by the regime’s rules, and she never did. Those who orchestrated and carried out Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI's case tried to reduce her to a symbol of silence and surrender. Instead, she became a voice of defiance.

Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI's fight embodies the very tools that shape a free society: speech, publicity, principles, values, equality before the law, respect for the law, but not submission to injustice.

Honourable Members of this Assembly, please note, Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI remains unlawfully imprisoned. More precisely, she’s a hostage. She has lost nearly all her eyesight. She is able to read only a few pages per day, so she mainly writes.

I would like to read a short message of Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI's to you:

"On the path toward freedom and democracy, I rarely thought anything was impossible. Yet it is overwhelmingly emotional to see my name alongside Havel Prize nominees. I have always admired Azerbaijani journalists who stayed in their homeland despite persecution. I deeply respect Mr Ulvi HASANLI's courage. My social media cover still reads: “Be brave like Ukraine.” To Mr Maksym BUTKEVYCH, I want to say: I sincerely believe in Ukraine’s victory. This recognition is not alone mine, I accept it on behalf of my Georgian colleagues, journalists working in critical independent media outlets.

In Georgia, being a journalist today means self-sacrifice. My colleagues face harassment, persecution, blackmail and even physical assault. The one-party parliament of Georgian Dream fast-tracked “Russian laws,” effectively banning freedom of speech, equating grant-raising and partnering with international organisations with spying and treason, like in Russia. Georgia’s government is captured by a regime advancing Russian interests. Today, Georgia holds over 60 political and conscience prisoners from all fields: actors, poets, teachers, comedians, students and journalists.

Yet, Georgians continue to fight for a European future for over 300 days because we believe that the EU guarantees all the values of democracy that Georgian citizens stand for. We see ourselves beside you, so do not leave us alone in the face of Russia. Stand with us in the fight for freedom."

This was the short message from Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI's prison cell.

As long as her voice is heard in this chamber, and in others like it, there is a hope. The hope, that prison will not become a place, where voices like hers could be silenced. However, dear members of the Parliamentary Assembly, if courtrooms fall silent, if critical and independent media is extinguished, if civil society disappears and if independent lawyers and human-rights defenders no longer exist, and if those, who imprisoned Ms Mzia AMAGHLOBELI, see that the civilized world is no longer watching, and distorting justice goes unpunished, then I am afraid, the prison will become a place, from which no voice will ever reach Europe again.

So do not allow this to happen. Thank you very much.

Ms Gunel SAFAROVA (Representative of Mr Ulvi HASANLI): Thank you.

Today Mr Ulvi HASANLI's wife Mrs Rubaba GULIYEVA was meant to be here with us tonight, but the Azerbaijani authorities imposed a travel ban that prevents her from leaving the country.

As Mr Ulvi HASANLI's colleague, I will read her words on her behalf.

Mr Ulvi HASANLI is in prison because he believed in truth, in freedom and in justice for our people. Before the judge gave him nine years in June 2025, he said: "Prison is not despair. Prison is not oppression. The struggle continues. Truth is with us." These words give me strength every day.

Mr Ulvi HASANLI is not alone. Six of his colleagues from Abzas Media are also jailed, three of them women. I must say their names with honour: Mrs Sevinj VAGIFGIZI, Mrs Nargiz ABSALAMOVA, Mrs Elnara GASIMOVA, Mr Hafiz BABALI and Mr Mohammad KEKALOV. I would also like to mention Mr Farid MEHRALIZADA, who is a Radio Free Europe contributor and economist. He was arrested in the Abzas Media case [too], and he also got nine years.

In Azerbaijan today, there are more than 360 political prisoners. Over 25 of them are journalists. They are young men and women who only wanted to tell the truth. The government has closed independent media, but they cannot close the hope in our hearts.

I want the world to hear their voices through me.

Mr Ulvi HASANLI and his friends are not forgotten. Their struggle is alive.

Mr Ulvi HASANLI and his colleagues stood with the people when no one else dared to.

Today, Mr Ulvi HASANLI is in prison, but what matters most is that since November 2023, Mr Ulvi HASANLI and the journalists I have just named, despite enormous difficulties, have continued to publicise the torture and inhumane treatment inflicted on prisoners in Azerbaijan's jails, and for that they are facing retaliation again.

As his wife, I miss him every day. But I am proud; I am proud that he chose truth; proud that he continues to fight even in prison. I believe one day soon, our 3 year old daughter Suad and all the children will see their parents free again.

Thank you.

I would also like to add that it's not only Abzas Media. In Azerbaijan there are several independent media that are closed, which are Meydan TV, Toplum TV. Their offices are shut and their voices are silenced, but we still have true hope that one day, maybe, independent media will live again in Azerbaijan.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you all, this closes the Award Ceremony. The Assembly will hold its next public sitting later today at 4:30 p.m. with the agenda which was approved this morning. The sitting is adjourned.

The sitting is closed at 1 p.m.