



Provisional edition

Wednesday 22 April 2026, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 14

Joint Debate: Promoting the Istanbul Convention and improving its implementation: building on lessons learnt / Paving the way for a culture of consent

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): A very good morning.

The sitting is open.

I remind members that in order to be registered for this sitting, you should insert your badge when you take your seat, and keep it inserted for at least 30 seconds.

You should also insert your badge in order to speak or vote. To request the floor, please press the “request” button, just once.

I also remind the Assembly that members who have not submitted an annual declaration of interests are required to start any intervention with an oral declaration of interests under paragraph 20 of the Code of Conduct for Members of the Parliamentary Assembly.

I further remind members that the Assembly agreed yesterday that speaking time in all today’s debates would be 3 minutes for spokespersons for the political parties and 2 minutes for everyone else.

We now come to the joint debate on two reports from the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. The first is titled “Promoting the Istanbul Convention and improving its implementation: building on lessons learnt” (Document 16372); the second is titled “Paving the way for a culture of consent” (Document 16370). Both reports will be presented by Ms Zita GURMAI.

These will be followed by a statement by Ms Ana REDONDO GARCÍA, Minister for Equality of Spain.

In order to finish this item by 12:00 p.m., the list of speakers will be interrupted at about 11:45 a.m. to allow time for the replies and the votes. I now call Ms Zita GURMAI, rapporteur, to present the two reports. You have 10 minutes now, and 5 minutes at the end to reply to the debate. Please, Zita.

Ms Zita GURMAI (Hungary, SOC, Rapporteur): Luckily, I have an excellent President, as you can see. Okay.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

Dear Minister Redondo, Dear Ana,

It's a privilege that you are here today on this special occasion.

Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

Let me start by thanking Minister Ana REDONDO for your participation in this debate. It is absolutely impressive and encouraging for all of us to see how much can be achieved when there is a political will to promote and to protect and to defend women's rights in Europe.

The road ahead to achieve full gender equality and ensure that all women and girls enjoy their human rights on our continent is long and difficult. Very often, substantial progress for women is followed by a period of challenges, questioning the role of us women in society, as well as our dignity and autonomy. We are now living through one of such periods of backlash against women rights, with a very worrying statistic that mostly relates to young men, who now oppose and question gender equality and women's rights.

We seem to have failed in our duty to educate young people about the value of equality and non-discrimination. And part of that responsibility also lies in the open anti-women's rights narrative of populist far-right parties, which is spread through online media and is sometimes also in our institutions. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has been very vocal and active about promoting women's rights over the years. The former President, the current President, they really did their utmost to secure these values.

Special thanks. Let's have a round of applause for our President right now.

[Light applause]

That's not enough. Come on, you did much more.

Today's joint debate illustrates our strong commitment to protecting the rights of half of the population of Europe, which includes eradicating all forms of violence against women. Gender-based violence against women continues undebated online and offline. It is mostly perpetrated by men, intimate partners or ex-partners, family members, work colleagues or acquaintances of the women targeted, and sometimes strangers too. Sexist beliefs and attitudes that objectify and discriminate against women, together with the inability of many perpetrators of violence to accept the end of a relationship, are part of the root cause of this gender-based violence, which is structural, cultural, systematic and highly prevalent.

More than three years ago, in January 2023, I was here presenting the previous Assembly report and resolution, taking stock of the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. And special thanks for Ms Pénélope DENU, who has been the Head of the Secretariat of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, who did an amazing job. And we cannot forget all the women who did this job, and especially all my colleagues around here, to whom we should also give a round of applause, by the way. And of course the President, who is my sister as well.

But we are very far away from our final objective of getting rid of this human rights violation that affects one in three women in our member states. Nearly 12 years after the entry into force of the Istanbul Convention, it remains more relevant than ever.

While they are subject to many attacks, we are at a crucial time for women's rights in Europe and beyond. The political will, funding and support of the Convention shown by many parties need to be recognised, which I do in my report. I really tried to get the greatest consensus. It took time, but I did not want to lose anybody on board. We also really needed the civil society to get a discussion because this is something crucial to secure women's lives. This is really the goal of this court of law.

And of course, what is also important, let's face it, for the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention, is courage, engagement, joint action, funding and commitment by all actors concerned, governmental and non-governmental. Equally important to eradicate gender-based violence is a profound change of culture. To challenge inequality between women and men. To combat gender stereotypes to fight against normalising a culture of sexism and gender violence. To stop questioning victims for the delay in reporting. To stop expecting them to behave in a certain way to be treated as credible. Come on. In short, we need a system of law enforcement and justice and which is not biased against women.

But there is also a positive side. The Istanbul Convention has triggered many positive legal and policy developments at the national level with a tangible order. And of course we needed specialised policy and tribunals, helplines, protection orders, programmes for perpetrators and risk assessments: a long list of crucial measures required by the Istanbul Convention to put women's protection at the centre of the action against gender-based violence.

My special thanks to the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) for all their work, data collection and analysis, leading to reliable information on progress and remaining challenges regarding the implementation of the Convention. It is considered by the UN as a gold standard for combatting gender-based violence. The main background for my report is a sobering fact: the high prevalence of gender-based violence against women, with a high level of impunity for perpetrators too.

The Istanbul Convention saves lives, but it cannot do it alone. Reversing the statistics requires the engagement of the whole society, including us parliamentarians. The draft resolution addresses many of the critical needs to restore the trust of victims and violence in the justice system. This requires the urgent need to adequately train law enforcement and justice professionals to effectively investigate, prosecute and punish all forms of violence against women covered by the Istanbul Convention.

I already mentioned GREVIO. The Convention's independent monitoring body keeps calling for this training as one of the key measures that would lead to the increased trust of victims in the system, which would bring more reporting and less impunity. But we are not there yet. I propose a whole range of measures to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence in support of the Istanbul Convention. Action is needed on many fronts simultaneously to prevent, to protect and punish – the three Ps – protect, prevent and punish this violence. I also propose a number of measures for us parliamentarians, as we have an all-important role to play in keeping our governments accountable regarding the implementation of this gold-standard treaty, voting for the budget and holding debates.

The resolution on paving the way for a culture of consent is, well, a call for action. In past years we have had the #MeToo and the post-#MeToo movements. We have never had as many debates and headlines on the urgent need to prevent and combat sexual violence. There have been groundbreaking trials such as the Pelicot trial in France and the case in Germany. The Epstein files reveal how elite immunity prevailed for too many years. No country and no sector is immune to this phenomenon and more people are aware of the urgency to act.

However, the question of consent is still not overwhelmingly considered a priority. This is why we need to shed light on its importance. Let me be clear: only yes means yes. Consent can never be assumed and should never be ignored. Consent can be valid at a certain moment and not anymore in another one. Consent should be at the basis of our relationships, notably our intimate relationships. Consent therefore needs to be in our culture. We have to act so as to build a culture of consent which challenges the so-called traditional gender roles.

Consent is a key element in the prevention and fight against sexual violence. We need to accompany our societies towards a path where everyone, irrespective of one's gender, lives free from fear. I am coming from Hungary and now probably we can breathe. I have a court case, but I'll talk about it later. As parliamentarians, we need to call for legislative change and the legal definition of sexual violence based on the absence of consent. I recommend that the Assembly encourages member states to adopt the "only yes means yes" approach in the legislation on combatting violence. It is the only model that ensures the criminalisation of sexual intercourse with a person who has not expressed consent.

We spent dedicated time to meet so many different actors to understand what it is. And we really understood that this is the one that some member states already managed to do. And I really believe that the best practises are really showing us why it is so important. And we should also step up awareness-raising efforts, on the importance of consent via awareness-raising campaigns in traditional and social media, targeting different age groups.

Education, education, education. If you educate a man, you educate the man. If you educate a woman, you educate society. But we also need men in this fight, not only women.

And of course, we need to build a culture of respect. Training for law enforcement and healthcare staff; they need to take into account the importance of consent and its multiple dimensions. Consent is not secondary. We can show our support today. We can call for legislative changes back in our national parliaments. We can raise awareness in the media. We can contribute to changing mindsets. I call for your support for these two reports which receive anonymous support in the committee and are the result of building consensus in this organisation.

The right of women to live without violence cannot fade. We must act now. I call on you to do that.

Thank you so much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, dear Ms Zita GURMAI, for all your efforts, for what you did here in this Assembly for women. I think that your input, especially as General Rapporteur on Violence against Women, is unforgotten and really set standards here in the Parliamentary Assembly.

It is clear that the Istanbul Convention has been implemented in a way that really has effective measures so that women can enjoy their human right to live free from violence everywhere. And also the principle that "only yes means yes" and that this is the precondition for any sexual intercourse. Both are pressing issues, but something that is really very timely.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is now my honour to welcome among us the Minister for Equality of Spain, Ms Ana REDONDO GARCÍA.

Minister, thank you for joining us today and for taking part.

[Applause]

And for taking part in this important exchange. In this context, we greatly value Spain's commitment on fighting violence against women and girls. Your country has for a long time been at the forefront of advancing equality and promoting the protection of women's rights in Europe.

An illustration of Spain's commitments to preventing and combating gender based violence against women is the fact that our Assembly's General Rapporteur on this topic, Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO, elected in December, is a Spanish MP. That's not a coincidence. And we also wish to acknowledge your work in advancing gender equality and in highlighting its importance for the strength and resilience of our democracies, reminding us that without genuine equality, democracy cannot truly thrive.

It is certainly impressive that last year the Spanish government approved a state pact against gender-based violence with 400 new measures, which was supported by most political parties. Now some 180 million euros are about to be distributed among Spanish regions to combat gender-based violence against women. At the legislative level, we are also aware of initiatives to adopt legislation on vicarious violence and to reform the Spanish Constitution to recognise and safeguard women's sexual and reproductive rights.

Minister, we are looking forward to hearing your perspectives on these important issues and how we can all continue to move forward. Without further ado, it is my honour to give you the floor. Please.

Ms Ana REDONDO (Minister for Equality of Spain): Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Dear President,

Dear Ms Zita GURMAI, colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be here with all of you in this important event to promote the equality policies and the implementation, in order to build a world where human rights and especially women's rights are protected and guaranteed.

It's a great honour. It's my first time and I think this institution is important, in this moment, in this special and historic crossroads.

Ms Ana REDONDO (Minister for Equality of Spain)*: Because the fact of the matter is that we are at a very complicated historical turning point. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, democracies are in crisis. We have seen backsliding, and there are now more countries being governed as autocracies by authoritarian leaders – by authoritarian systems that deny fundamental rights and equality – than by authentic democracies.

72% of the global population is subject to authoritarian government, and that is why this is a particularly important moment for institutions such as this one, which was set up precisely to defend human rights, safeguard democracy and to champion equality.

Democracy cannot exist without equality between men and women. It's impossible. We are living in an increasingly violent, insecure and unjust world, and that is why we need voices that speak up and institutions such as the Council of Europe to stand up and genuinely defend equality, as well as human dignity.

Spain is a leader when it comes to equality. And it goes without saying that we welcome the Council of Europe's reports, such as the Istanbul Convention and the one on the culture of consent, but we very much wish to go even further and continue to be in the vanguard. Because in Spain, in the past, we had a society in which women were second-class citizens. Just 50 years ago, women couldn't open their own bank accounts, they couldn't work, and they could not travel abroad without the authorisation of either their husband or their father. For that reason, we have made a great deal of progress, and we are the fourth country when it comes to gender equality according to European indices.

How have we managed to come so far within that period of time? I think that one of the key words, as Ms Zita GURMAI was saying, is "consensus," because chauvinism is the primary global culture. We have therefore been living in male chauvinist cultures for centuries, and we can only move on from that if we manage to broker agreements and consensus. So we have to have consensus at a societal level, otherwise it is impossible to progress, but they're also at a political, institutional level, as well as in education, as has already been said.

We had the situation where a woman talked about the gender violence that she had been subject to on prime-time television, and was then killed by her husband two days later. Legislative action was initiated, which culminated in the 1/2004 Organic Law on combating gender violence, which made it possible for us to put in place three major pillars to combat gender-based violence, as well as promote a culture of consent.

Those three pillars are: legislation, the social and institutional network, and the necessary economic resources.

This overarching, comprehensive law made it possible for us to adopt a State Pact in 2017, which had the backing of all political parties in the Spanish Parliament, which was adopted unanimously. And last year, with all the complications of a very fractured parliament, in which the extreme right has gained strong representation, we were nevertheless able to adopt, in 2025, a second State Pact in which all political parties came on board, apart from the far right.

Now this comprehensive social and political pact comprises 461 different measures, and many of them are reflections of the Istanbul Convention, as well as the culture of consent. They address three new forms of violence that we've detected in society, which had not hitherto been reflected in our legislation.

The first is vicarious violence. This is violence that is exercised towards women via other individuals, such as their children or via other family members, like their parents or their partners. And I am sorry to say that, this year in Spain, three children have been killed because of this phenomenon of vicarious violence. And so that is why we have stepped up to the challenge of being the first nation to regulate this issue of vicarious violence. And that is why we have a bill, which is currently making its way through parliament, to enable us to make advances on this issue of vicarious violence with specific penalties for those offences. And, as I say, particularly important for families, and for mothers and their children.

Now, secondly, another form of violence that has erupted with great force and concerns young people in particular. We need young people – young women, but especially young men – to be on our side for this important cultural transformation that is required by equality and by feminism. It is digital violence. This violence is continuous, and directly affects our young people. It involves all kinds of terminology and euphemisms that are used and have nothing to do with reality, such as "tradwife", for example, whereby women are apparently supposed to take on traditional roles and stay at home. It also involves terms such as "OnlyFans" or "sugar daddy", for example, which are basically a cover for prostitution and proxenetism, but which are romanticised online. So, we therefore have to resist this kind of violence, which is affecting young people in our societies, and which is also being pushed by a culture of violent pornography, chauvinist pornography and male-dominant pornography, which is becoming normalised amongst our young people, our young women. We also have to find a way of countering this kind of violence.

This violence is institutionalised as well. We need to make sure that women are able to raise their voices, defend feminism and defend equality in political life and other professions, such as journalism. There is a fervent institutional violence being perpetrated against women on the internet, which is why we are developing tools to protect minors from social networks, proposing prohibiting under 14 and under 16 years old, but also to protect women against the kind of pornography, which reveals the kind of male chauvinism that we need our societies to be able to resist and overcome.

Now, the third major form of violence, that we have included in our state pact, is economic aggression against women. While it is true that there have been breakthroughs in the economy when it comes to employment and the wage gap, currently, in Spain, we have the lowest pay gap at 15.7%, which is precisely due to successful measures, including raising the minimum wage and increasing the lowest benefits which women usually receive. But we need to continue to insist on creating innovative measures against economic violence. In our country, as well as elsewhere, I dare say, there is a situation that is perpetuated from one generation to another, because when a couple divorces, one of the members of the couple has to pay alimony to the other member of the couple, which is usually denied, even going against what is dictated by the courts. We therefore believe it is important to create an instrument whereby the state advances any maintenance for the care of minors, for family maintenance, and so as to prevent this kind of insidious economic violence to which women are subjected on a daily basis and which ultimately is the basis of many other forms of violence.

We must continue in this line to develop the 461 measures, which form this State Pact. Naturally, we need to address the culture of domination and defend a culture of consent.

In Spain, [in 2022,] we adopted a very important piece of legislation, "Solo sí es sí" – only yes means yes, la LOGILS, which states that consent should be at the centre of affective-sexual relations. But this continues to be a considerable challenge, particularly in courts when proving consent. Because it seems that women's words are distrusted, as a result of the chauvinist culture that we are living in. We therefore need to strengthen and implement measures to ensure that women's words are not systematically questioned.

We do not only need legislation in order to make progress – although I recognise they are important – we also need a network, a really finely meshed institutional structure, which gets through to society, families, schools and to the people of our country as a whole. In 20 years, Spain has made great strides in this respect. We have put in place special instruments, we have specialised prosecutors, as well as lawyers, along with observatories, which make it possible for us to gauge the true extent of violence as well as the extent of inequality, such as the observatory on sexual violence, governmental department on gender violence, and also we have the supervisory bodies, which govern the judiciary. They are vital instruments that are replicated across our autonomous communities, across the country as a whole. Because that is the only way in which we can make sure that we are also present throughout the country. But again, those measures in themselves are not sufficient, and we are implementing those measures and developing that institutional network with so-called "purple points" and crisis centres.

And I would just like to remind you what these two concepts involve. So "purple points" are places that protect women against violence, and right now in Spain, pharmacies have become part of the "purple point" network.

And then the final point, crisis centres. Crisis centres are places in which we can safeguard women's rights, and we have them in all of our provincial capitals. Last year, we opened 59 different crisis centres.

I will leave it there. Thank you very much indeed, Madam President, and in conclusion, just to say that we will leave no stone unturned, we will continue the fight.

Violence has no future. War has no future.

The future is democratic. The future is one of equality and of human rights.

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly)*: "Thank you very much Madam Minister for your contributions and I wish you the best in your future work" [spoken in Spanish].

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): We now come to the debate and we start with a round of the spokespersons on behalf of the group.

I want to remind you that you have 3 minutes and the first one on the list is on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Ms Alessandra MAIORINO please.

Ms Alessandra MAIORINO (Italy, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the rapporteur for the excellent job on both resolutions. And thanks to the Minister of Equality, Ms Ana REDONDO, for her enlightening words.

We live in a time in history where giant bullies take a worldwide stage and they seem to know only the language of violence. They insult each other, they threaten to erase a whole from the earth, a whole civilisation. They use racist, sexist, discriminatory language as if it was nothing. And violence seems to be the only code they know to interact with others.

Children learn by examples. If we think this has little to do with violence against women, then think again. I come from a country, Italy, where a woman gets killed every 72 hours or less, and where the age of perpetrators and victims is going awfully low, to teenagers. How can we not, we as an Assembly, we as a whole, put in the top list priority of our political agenda, every political agenda, emotional and sexual education for everyone? Mandatory, and as it said in the resolution, and to really build a culture of consent.

I am deeply sorry that I got to say that in this very moment, as we speak, in the Italian parliament, emotional and sexual education is being deemed optional, put as a choice, up to the parents, thus cutting out exactly those who need it the most, the most vulnerable families who actually need it the most. And a beautiful law about consent, which was built together with all parties in the parliament, has been transformed into a law that speaks about acts against her will. So, thus reducing again women as objects deprived of positive will. But hey, that's the news. Women do have desire and they are entitled to positive desire. And that's what should matter every time and for everyone.

So I really hope this further step here in this Assembly, these two resolutions will push every member state, regardless of the colour of the government, to really put consent at the centre of their actions and to introduce an educational and sexual education for every child.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The next speaker is Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO.

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC, Spokesperson for the group)*: Thank you, Mister President.

Thank you for these two very valuable reports and, above all, for your work and contribution throughout the years in the protection of women and thank you very much dear Madam Minister. Welcome to this Assembly.

For me, it is an honour to represent my group in this debate, and as a Spanish woman, I can't hide my pride when I listen to the Spanish government and all of the initiatives that have been developed in recent years in equality policies to reject, in a convincing way, any kind of violence against women, which are recognised in the Istanbul Convention, and for the efforts that have been made to legislate and push forward for equality of sexual freedom and the protection of all women.

Defending the Istanbul Convention and putting consent at the centre of our policies is not an ideological notion, it is a democratic obligation. We can't look the other way when we speak of the rights and safety of 50% of the population.

Women are not a minority group, we are half of society, and without real equality, we cannot have full democracy. It's incomprehensible that there are still states that are members of this Assembly that haven't ratified the Istanbul Convention, the most complete international treaty that commits to prevention, protection and punishment, three fundamental pillars for any state that wants to respect human rights. Because yes, gender-based violence is a direct violence against human rights. Denying or minimising its existence means failing to carry out our most fundamental European and democratic commitments.

The figures are devastating. One in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence, but only one in eight women have reported it. The gap between real violence and visible violence is the result of a system that still doesn't sufficiently protect from hate speech and denial, which tries to reverse decades of progress. Meanwhile, aggressors continue, protected by impunity, by sexist stereotypes and by the relativising or denial of this structural violence.

For this reason, we should also talk about sexual violence and of the central role of consent. There is no sexual freedom without consent. And without sexual freedom, we can never eradicate gender-based violence. The Istanbul Convention establishes this forcefully. Silence, fear or paralysis can never be taken for a yes. Incorporating the principle of "only yes means yes" is an act of justice, equality and prevention. It builds a framework which protects women from domination and inequality in which sexist violence exists.

However, we see how certain governments and extreme movements try to put an end to this Convention, feeding fake news and sowing fear. This is unacceptable.

Ladies and gentlemen, defending the Istanbul Convention is defending democracy. Those who attack it don't only question the rights of women, they question the very foundations of our free and equal societies.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The next speaker is Ms Belén HOYO.

Ms Belén HOYO (Spain, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group)*: Thank you very much indeed, Madam President.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to congratulate the rapporteur on an excellent job, because obviously we have to fight against violence against women and sexual violence in particular. And in our political group, we are very much in favour of the report, as well as instruments to protect women and children. And we're all for promoting genuine equality and stamping out all forms of violence against the dignity and freedom of women.

In recent decades, we have made great strides, but it goes without saying that a great deal remains to be done. Now, this is our reality: violence against women continues to be one of the main scourges of our societies and one of the most serious violations of human rights of our age. It makes no distinction between social classes or ages. And that is why we require political determination to tackle it through legislation, as well as social consensus. And that is why we reaffirm our commitment to equality between men and women. And women and men, from all political stripes, should defend that principle; it is not something that is appropriated by any political party. Rather, it is an underlying principle of all mature democracies.

And that is why we would like to stand four-square behind the Istanbul Convention as an instrument designed to counter violence against women. It is a key instrument. It is there to prevent violence, to protect women and to tackle the perpetrators with co-ordinated policies. And women are at the centre of those efforts, as is only right and proper. Now, women have to be given real protection and not used for ideological experimentation. And that is why we have to deal with the issue seriously, particularly when it comes to our legal methods. And unfortunately, that has not been the case in Spain in recent years.

The Minister alluded to the very serious repercussions of the *Ley del solo sí es sí* or "Only Yes Means Yes" legislation, which was promoted by Mr Pedro SÁNCHEZ's government, which is an example of how it should *not* be done, because we saw ideological concerns prevail. We saw technical incompetence and that is why we have had a situation in which over 1 200 prisoners saw their sentences reduced. And 123 were granted early release. That is not an example of best practice. That is why we should also say that it is a serious failure not to recognise those mistakes, and to provide assistance to the victims.

The fight against gender violence requires professionalism, as well as state competence. Because you can't build a state with ideology, but rather with responsibility.

Thank you very much indeed.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU.

Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU (Romania, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Hello.

Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

First of all I would like to thank the rapporteur for having been all this year a fair and correct political opponent. We regret to hear that she will soon finish her mandate. We would have welcomed continued co-operation to address the gaps that remain in this report. While the report briefly mentions children, early enforced marriage

and female genital mutilation, it remains silent on where these practices still occur. We have to turn to the Memorandum to find even a first indication that the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) has identified serious challenges in certain migrant communities.

According to UK police data, since 2021 female genital mutilation cases recorded under honour-based abuse have increased by nearly 40%. The report itself called for improved data collection in the future. So why hesitate to state what is already known? In 13 of our member states, the nationality of perpetrators is already recorded. Based on careful estimates, since 2015, at least 3 to 400 000 non-EU migrants have been convicted of sexual offences. It is an unacceptable price to be paid by our women and children. What about their rights?

Dear colleagues, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention found that foreign-born individuals are about 2.5 times more likely to be registered as suspects. German police statistics show that non-German suspects account for around 30 to 40% of sexual offences, while representing only about 15% of the population.

Naming is not shaming. Naming is the first step towards solving the problem. We are not talking here about racism. We are just talking about cultural, religious and social differences. We are different and this is not a problem. But they should learn to respect every country's social system. Our women and children deserve better. Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next is Ms Carla MOONEN.

Ms Carla MOONEN (Netherlands, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Dear President,

Dear members of the Assembly,

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, I would like to thank the rapporteur, Ms Zita GURMAI, for her important report on the Istanbul Convention and I would also like to thank the Spanish minister.

One of the most alarming findings is what the report calls an "impunity crisis". Only one in 200 rapes in the European Union leads to a conviction.

Can you imagine that only one in 200 rapes leads to a conviction? That means that 99% of victims do not get the justice they deserve.

This is not a marginal failure. This is a systemic failure.

Across all countries, there is a lack of expertise and training. Medical staff, police officers, prosecutors, judges, they do not recognise the stories of the women. And that's a big failure. There are too many shortcomings in the whole chain, so women are not taken seriously enough.

Furthermore, we see a rise in technology-facilitated violence against women, the misuse of artificial intelligence. We see online groups who try to abuse their own partners. Also children are more often victims of social media. Children are sexually abused without any control of parents or other adults.

Moreover, we see a rise of patriarchal views about women. I would say: it's a toxic masculine behaviour which is very dangerous for women and children.

Furthermore, I would like to mention marriages without consent. In some countries, also in Europe, these marriages are ethical, cultural, arranged. Young women are married away without their own will. Can you imagine, in Europe? And they are losing their own future.

Dear colleagues,

There is clear evidence that we need the Istanbul Convention.

That's where we come in.

As parliamentarians, we have a responsibility to safeguard what has been achieved and to push further. We have to defend the Convention in public debate, countering disinformation, ensuring proper funding and holding our governments to account. Because the real test is not only what we agree on here: but what we deliver back home.

Thank you so much.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We now move on to the general speakers list and the first speaker is Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU.

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU (Türkiye, SOC): President,

Dear colleagues,

I am here today to give a voice to millions of women who have been silenced. Their safety was traded for political manoeuvring. Turkey's experience is not a footnote; it is a systematic alarm for the integrity of human rights across Europe.

In March 2021, at midnight, a presidential decision was published. And we woke up to a unilateral and undebated presidential decision attempting a withdrawal of Türkiye from the Istanbul Convention.

It is a war on human rights!

It is a war on women's human rights!

It is a war on our hard-won rights that we have fought for, for centuries!

It is depriving young women of their hopes and dreams for the future!

An attempt to design new models of society, where they neglect the rights of women as individuals and confine them to being a submissive member of the "family". Where they are attempting to distort the concept of "rights" in their limited way of understanding!

Since the withdrawal, at least 2000 women have been murdered by men. These are not just numbers; they are lives perished because the government dismantled its most effective shield.

When power targets life, life becomes a resistance to power. In Türkiye, women are now resisting with their very lives.

These rights were not granted by the grace of politicians; they were hard-won through decades of struggle. Turkey is not a past example, dear colleagues. Look to us as a warning. If we allow one pillar to be removed from our house of human rights, the entire structure will collapse.

Remember, right-wing policies and authoritarian governments are scared of women's movements.

We are still here, we are still fighting, we are the ones to bring change. And we will reclaim the future.

Because we all know that the Istanbul Convention saves lives.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next is Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN.

Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN (Türkiye, SOC): I would like to thank dear Ms Zita GURMAI for her remarkable work in this organisation and for being a true inspiration for all of us. And I believe that the democratic maturity demonstrated by her party in Hungary should be truly appreciated.

As for the report, when I looked at the amendments proposed, unfortunately, in the part concerning Türkiye, I saw that the issue has not been understood at all. Because it undermines the problem of withdrawal from the Convention and the value of Law No. 6284 has been emphasised. This law is very important. Without a doubt. But only if it is implemented.

Dear colleagues,

I will speak about the intersection of two incidents.

Nilay is a young woman. She has a boyfriend and is trying to break up. She goes to the police due to his threats. No result. She goes to the prosecutor. A restraining order is issued. While Ekrem İMAMOĞLU is already under detention, he is brought from prison to the courthouse to be detained once more, this time on espionage charges. There are thousands of policemen just to block İMAMOĞLU's supporters. Same day, only two blocks away from the courthouse, Nilay is murdered despite the restraining order. There is not a single police officer there.

If the law had been implemented,
if the political will that signed the Istanbul Convention had maintained the same determination, today,
Nilay would not have been killed.

Targeting the perpetrator who threatens a woman,
or
targeting those who fight against violence against women.
These are political choices.

That is why,
when we win the elections,
our first action
will be to sign the Istanbul Convention again.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Ms Boriana ÅBERG.

Ms Boriana ÅBERG (Sweden, EPP/CD): Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank Ms Zita GURMAI for her comprehensive report on such an important issue as the Istanbul Convention.

In the early 2000s, I worked in an emergency department. Women would come in beaten black and blue, offering one implausible explanation after another for their injuries. They were utterly unwilling to report the matter to the police and would often blame themselves for the violence they had suffered. Much has changed in Sweden since then. The current government has taken decisive action to combat domestic violence, including the recent adoption of a 10-year strategy to address male violence against women, violence in same-sex relationships and honour-based violence.

Honour-based violence is a serious problem in Sweden, not least because it has been denied and downplayed for far too long in an effort to avoid stigmatising Muslims. It has been reframed simply as male violence against women, with devastating consequences: the persistence of child marriage, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and the murder of women and girls.

In a great many countries, a culture of honour is the norm rather than the exception. And through migration it has taken root in Europe. Prevention must therefore begin with equal rights for girls and boys. To accept that girls cannot sit beside boys in the classroom, or that physical education and swimming lessons must be segregated, is to entrench the very structures that give rise to honour-based violence.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Mr Michael RUBBESTAD.

Mr Michael RUBBESTAD (Sweden, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President.

Let me begin by thanking the rapporteur, Ms Zita GURMAI, for a thorough and important report. Violence against women and domestic violence are serious issues that all of us have a responsibility to address, regardless of political affiliation or national context.

There is much in this report that I agree with, in particular the need to strengthen protection for victims, improve judicial processes, and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. In these areas, we must continue to do more, and do better.

At the same time, allow me to offer a few reflections.

First, we should be careful to distinguish between objectives and methods. The objective, combatting violence, is one we all share. However, the means to achieve it may differ. National legal systems, traditions, and priorities vary, and there must be room for member states to choose the most effective tools within their own contexts.

Second, we should maintain a clear focus on the practical dimension. For victims, the terminology that we use is of less importance than the outcomes that we actually deliver. What matters is access to protection, support, and justice. Our efforts should therefore primarily aim at strengthening law enforcement, increasing prosecution rates, and ensuring real support for those affected.

Third, I believe we benefit from maintaining an inclusive and respectful tone in this discussion. If we want more countries to engage in common efforts, we must also respect that there are different perspectives and legitimate questions about how best to move forward.

Mister President,

This is an issue that requires long-term commitment, co-operation, and mutual respect. We will not succeed by moving further apart, but by working together, step by step, with a clear focus on results.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Ms Louise MOREL.

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

One woman in three suffers violence in Europe. If it were an epidemic, we would be in a state of emergency. But because they are women, too many of our societies procrastinate.

At this level, it's no longer a problem, it's a systemic problem, a system that protects poorly, that believes too little, that condemns too rarely.

So what's not working? What's not working, let's be clear, is that too many of our public policies remain gender-blind. We claim to treat all citizens equally, but this violence is gendered.

And in fact, maintaining this neutrality is a dangerous illusion. What also doesn't work is the fact that it is the women who accumulate discrimination that are the least protected by our systems: precarious women, migrant women, women with disabilities.

What isn't working is that, for several years now, we have been faced with new forms of violence, particularly online: cyber harassment, deepfakes, surveillance, humiliation broadcast on a massive scale, and that, in the face of this violence, we are having immense difficulty in ensuring that it is effectively punished.

Faced with these structural dysfunctions, we must, of course, apply the Istanbul Convention to truly transform our societies. This means training our judges, our magistrates, our police officers and our institutions, providing real protection for victims and, above all, preventing any further attacks on the Istanbul Convention. Because in reality, any attack, any retreat from this Convention, is not an opinion, it is a threat to women's lives.

Thank you very much.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next Ms Aurora FLORIDIA.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC): Thank you very much, President.

Dear colleagues,

First of all, let me thank you, dear Minister Redondo, for your inspiring words. You are indeed an example and a guiding light for us to follow.

Secondly, as you may know, Ms Zita GURMAI will be leaving the Council of Europe. So, dear President, allow me to thank Ms Zita GURMAI, a strong woman, for the work she did at the Council of Europe.

Thank you, really, for your incredible voice for gender equality and women's rights. You are a true tiger.

[Applause]

We will miss your humanity. As you reminded us this morning, we are human beings advancing human rights for everyone. So thank you for your lessons, for your work also in the Women's Group of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, for your courage and fire, for the fire in your heart.

Thank you very much.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC): I would like, if possible, to continue in Italian, if you can give me a minute.

The report on the Istanbul Convention, which is legally binding in Europe for preventing and combatting gender-based violence, confronts us with a simple but uncomfortable truth: while there has been significant regulatory progress, structural obstacles persist which hinder the full implementation of the Convention.

And we are not just talking about norms and numbers, we are talking about culture, society, women and girls.

Unfortunately, in many European countries we are witnessing a cultural backsliding, fuelled by movements that revive dangerous gender stereotypes, of the sort we thought had been consigned to history, such as "tradwives", based on models of female submission.

We are even witnessing a worrying paralysis on the issue of consent, and here I'd like to say it loud and clear, that even in my country, Italy, only yes means yes.

Not to mention also the cultural and political approaches that unfortunately do not recognise violence against women as a structural phenomenon.

And that is why I am sounding the alarm here. I ask you, colleagues...

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Okay. Next, Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD.

Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD (Switzerland, SOC): Thank you, Mister Vice-President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

29 women were killed in Switzerland in 2025, that's more than one woman killed every fortnight. This figure has a strong impact on people's minds. It is a major wake-up call.

And as the report rightly points out, violence against women and domestic violence are present in all areas and affect all socio-economic strata. The Istanbul Convention has given a decisive boost to the fight against violence against women and domestic violence in Switzerland.

I would like to quote our Secretary General, Mr Alain BERSET, who was the Federal Councillor responsible for equality in our country in 2022. He was the initiator of a national action plan to implement the Istanbul Convention, comprising 44 measures divided into three thematic priorities: raising awareness, training and combating sexual violence.

But for these measures to become a reality, we obviously need reliable and sufficient funding. Last December, during the debate on the 2025 budget in the Swiss Parliament, we almost suffered a cut of one million Swiss francs in the funds earmarked for this fight. But an unprecedented mobilisation of civil society – a petition signed by over 500,000 people in just a few days – brought pressure to bear and enabled us to maintain the financial resources essential to the fight against sexual and domestic violence. This collective action was worthwhile and showed that civil society has expectations of politicians to take action against the scourge of domestic violence.

The aims of the Istanbul Convention are a high priority for Switzerland and many member states, and its implementation must become a reality. And no, we must not see it regress as it has in some countries. Violence against women and domestic violence are serious violations of human rights. It is our duty to prevent it and to prosecute it systematically.

Thank you once again to the rapporteur, Ms Zita GURMAI, for her work and her tireless commitment to protecting women.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Ms Catia POLIDORI.

Ms Catia POLIDORI (Italy, EPP/CD): Thank you Mister Chair.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank the rapporteur, my dear friend Ms Zita GURMAI, we will miss you, as you know, and the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination for the great job that they did.

If I may, I would like to take advantage of this excellent work to go the extra mile. I would like to propose to this Assembly, and of course to our Chair, Ms Petra BAYR, with whom we have fought side by side in the same committee, that we consider setting up an ad hoc committee to attempt dialogue with those countries that have not ratified or signed the Istanbul Convention, or have withdrawn from it.

Although this is a very serious matter, I do not believe that exclusion from this Assembly is the right course of action. Rather, we need to understand whether, by modifying the form, we can maintain the substance; whether the concerns they raise can be addressed.

I like to think that a committee composed of MPs from the Council of Europe's member states might be more successful than other solutions.

Parliamentarians speaking to parliamentarians. Let us give it some thought.

We don't have too much time, because, even as we speak, someone is undoubtedly committing an act of violence against women. Let us take action as soon as possible. Please.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Ms Mira NIEMINEN.

Ms Mira NIEMINEN (Finland, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Violence against women is one of the most serious human rights violations of our time, and it is also a reality here in Europe. Gender-based violence is not a private issue. It is a shared problem for our societies, and it affects far too many women and girls every single day.

The Istanbul Convention is the strongest international tool we have to prevent and address this violence. The report before us clearly shows that international attention and commitment to the Convention are needed now more than ever. Wars, crises, instability and growing polarisation increase violence against women. But no situation, no crisis and no tradition can ever be used as an excuse. At the same time, digital technologies, artificial intelligence and online spaces are creating new forms of abuse that we must respond to.

We must be stronger on preventing violence before it happens. At the same time, we must guarantee real support and protection for victims. Recognising that violence against women is gender-based, ensuring access to services and shelters, training authorities, and providing legal aid and healthcare are not extra services. They are basic parts of women's right to safety and dignity. We also need better data and stronger co-operation across borders to fully understand the scale of the problem.

Many countries have ratified the Istanbul Convention, but full implementation is still missing. Political disagreements must not distract us from the real issue: the daily violence faced by women.

No form of violence is acceptable.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Ms Kolbrún Áslaugar BALDURSDÓTTIR.

Ms Kolbrún Áslaugar BALDURSDÓTTIR (Iceland, SOC): Mister President,

I would like to thank the rapporteur for this important and timely report.

Iceland signed the Istanbul Convention on the same day it was adopted but ratified it seven years later in 2018. Numerous other states have ratified the Convention. However, as is the case with progressive international treaties on women's rights, ratification and full implementation have taken time in several Council of Europe member states.

The value and impact of the Convention are profound. It is the first legally binding international treaty to comprehensively address violence against women. The Convention clearly states that violence against women and girls is unacceptable.

While the Convention focuses on violence against women, protection systems must be effective for all victims of violence. This includes boys and men who are also victims of violence in the family and at home. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that the majority of victims of domestic violence are women. Violence against them within the home is part of a wider pattern of discrimination and inequality.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing a broader backlash against the Convention. This is evident, for example, in the withdrawal of Türkiye, as well as in recent political debates in some member states, such as Latvia, about the possibility of withdrawal. Women's rights organisations and the general public must fight against this backlash.

The Convention has had a positive impact in Iceland. Amendments have been made to the General Penal Code to better address intimate partner violence and sexual violence. The definition of rape has also been changed in law. The definition now focuses on the absence of consent rather than the use of force.

Provisions on digital sexual violence and stalking have been strengthened in line with the Convention. Services for victims have been improved, with increased emphasis on protection and assistance, although further progress is still needed.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next Ms Maria-Nefeli CHATZIOANNIDOU.

Ms Maria-Nefeli CHATZIOANNIDOU (Greece, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President, and thank you, Rapporteur, for this crucial report.

I stand here today as part of a generation that was told that equality was already within reach and that consent was understood. And yet, if we look more closely, this promise feels far from fulfilled. We continue to hear debates that question what consent really means. We see narratives that blur its boundaries, shifting responsibility and turning consent into something negotiable, ambiguous or conditional.

But consent is not a grey area. It is not silence. It is not something assumed within a relationship, a marriage or a fleeting moment. Consent is active, conscious and revocable every single time. It is the foundation of dignity, equality and freedom. And yet, if we are honest, our societies are still falling short. Recent revelations, such as the so-called "rape academy chat", attracting millions of visits every month, and many other negative examples, expose a disturbing reality where manipulation, coercion and violence are openly shared, discussed and normalised. These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a broader culture in which consent is still misunderstood, minimised or deliberately ignored.

This is exactly why this report matters. The framework already exists. The Istanbul Convention is clear. The principles are undeniable. Sexual violence must be defined by the absence of consent. But not everybody is equally free or able to give consent. Social norms, economic dependency, age and power dynamics shape that reality every day. And this is where we must lead. We must place responsibility where it belongs, on ensuring that consent is actively given and not passively assumed. Because when consent is treated as optional in conversation, it becomes fragile in practice. And when we fail to draw a firm line legally, culturally and politically, we allow that fragility to persist. There are no more excuses left for ambiguity, silence or inaction.

Only yes means yes.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next is Mr Bertrand BOUYX.

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

In France, in my country, a woman dies every three days at the hands of her partner or former partner, and domestic violence is on the increase. I'm sure that the same is true of most of the peoples we represent in this Assembly, as the speeches just underlined. And these murders are just the tip of the iceberg. Violence

against women takes many forms, from intimate partner violence to genital mutilation and cyber violence, which is also on the increase. Whatever its form, wherever it occurs, violence has one main cause: gender inequality. It has serious repercussions for the victims and represents a heavy burden for societies.

Yet the world seems to be mobilising more. However, despite this mobilisation, there is a persistent gap everywhere between principles and intentions, on the one hand, and the reality of violence against women, on the other.

However, we must not paint too bleak a picture, because the fight against violence has led to real progress. The Council of Europe is unanimously recognised as being in the vanguard with its flagship instrument: the Istanbul Convention.

This Convention has three major assets: it deals with violence against women in all its dimensions, and therefore seeks to criminalise a wide range of offences; although it is an instrument of regional origin, the Istanbul Convention was open to all countries from the outset, and has a universal vocation; lastly, it has a binding dimension, since it requires changes to be made to the domestic laws of states.

It is for these reasons that we can only encourage the member countries of our organisation that have not yet ratified or even signed the Convention to do so; our credibility on this essential issue depends on it.

As I said in my introduction, France is still far from finished with these scourges. I would, however, like to conclude with a small victory achieved recently. Parliament has adopted the notion of non-consent in the criminal definition of rape. "Consent is free and informed, specific, prior and revocable" and "cannot be...

[muted]

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): I'm sorry, but we have gone over time. We have gone over time, I'm afraid. Thank you.

Next speaker is Ms Edite ESTRELA.

Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC): Dear Ms Zita GURMAI, thank you for your tireless work and dedication to the cause of gender equality.

Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC)*: Madam Minister, Ms Ana REDONDO,

Thank you very much for taking part in this debate and for the progressive policies that your government has adopted.

Spain really is a source of inspiration.

Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC): Dear colleagues,

We are not discussing an abstract legal instrument today. We are discussing women's lives.

The report makes clear that the problem is no longer a lack of standards. The problem is a lack of political will to fully implement them.

Yes, there has been progress. Laws have changed. Strategies have been adopted. But let us be honest, for far too many women, violence remains a daily reality. Protection is still uneven. Justice is still uncertain. And in some cases, rights are even being rolled back.

This is the result of structural inequalities that continue to shape our societies.

Disinformation about the Convention is not simply misunderstanding. It is a deliberate political strategy. It seeks to undermine gender equality, to reinforce patriarchal norms, and to weaken protections for women and girls.

Defending the Istanbul Convention means defending the principle that violence against women is not private, not cultural, not inevitable, but political, systemic and preventable.

This requires training for all professionals involved, from police to judges.

We must reaffirm a fundamental truth: gender equality is not an ideological position. It is a human rights obligation.

Thank you very much.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Sir Edward LEIGH.
(Your microphone is off.)

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, ECPA): ...to protect women and call out violence against it, but we should be courageous as well.

We should not be afraid of calling out the grooming of young girls, forced marriage, child marriage, female genital mutilation, because we are worried about being accused of being racist.

We have to protect all women and speak up for traditional European values of respect for women.

There are serious questions, it has to be said, about the Istanbul Convention.

Is gender a social construct?

Should we promote gender equality education and its bias, real or suspected, against men?

Does the treaty's definition of gender in Article 3C as a socially constructed role threaten traditional family values?

Does the Convention undermine the traditional family unit, saying it a threat to social cohesion?

Is the treaty based on patriarchal theory and assumes men are exclusively perpetrators of violence so that male victims are neglected?

Do provisions in Articles 12 to 16 requiring states to eradicate prejudices undermine teaching about gender roles and interfere with parental rights and cultural norms?

That is why we need to be cautious about the Convention.

We need in this debate to have a balanced debate.

Everybody deserves respect, all women and all men.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next Ms Gabrielle CATHALA.

Ms Gabrielle CATHALA (France, UEL): Thank you, Mister President.

Since 2014, the Istanbul Convention has been the first legally binding instrument at European level to prevent and punish violence against women. 38 member states of the Council of Europe have signed up to the Convention. Several have withdrawn, including Türkiye. Several have never ratified it: Bulgaria, Hungary and Lithuania, to name but a few.

Others have ratified it, but are still very poor performers. I am referring, of course, to France, my country, where 170 feminicides took place last year. A record number. In June 2024, a number of associations, including the Centres d'information sur les droits des femmes et des familles (CIDFF), family planning and France terre d'asile, carried out an assessment of the application of this Convention. It noted that France had still not incorporated all the provisions of the Convention into its national law. Fortunately, we have since adopted the law on non-consent in the criminal definition of rape. It also noted that while the law is more or less in line with the Convention, its implementation is not up to scratch, that there was a clear lack of budget and that marginalised women, foreign women and women with disabilities were not properly taken into account.

Worse still, in 2025, the Council of Europe denounced persistent impunity in France for sexual violence. I am referring to the GREVIO report, which expressed particular concern about the low rate of prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence in France: 83% of these cases are dropped, and up to 94% are dropped in the case of rape.

Over the last two years, France has been condemned on numerous occasions by the European Court of Human Rights. I will mention just one recent case, the rape complaint of a minor that was dismissed for "insufficiently serious offence", because according to the investigators, she had not screamed, she had not

struggled, she had not verbalised her refusal of the act. Meanwhile, the defendant's mother has lodged a complaint for slanderous denunciation. And guess what? The French courts sent the young woman a reminder of the law, which was added to her criminal record, even though she maintained her version of events. But the facts were never the subject of debate. And a simple reminder of the law should only apply when the facts are simple, clarified, recognised or seriously disputable.

This is how the land of human rights treats women.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Ms Chi NGUYEN.

Ms Chi NGUYEN (Canada): Mister President,

Thank you very much for this important debate.

Many thanks to Ms Zita GURMAI for her extraordinary leadership in producing these two reports that speak to the painful global phenomenon of gender-based violence.

Violence against women must be acknowledged as the troubling epidemic that it is, because too many of us have experienced gender violence or love someone who has.

Many countries are investing significant efforts to align their national legislation and policies with their international obligations.

Yet, we are also witnessing growing pushback against the very instruments designed to protect women's rights, like the Istanbul Convention. We are seeing deeply troubling reminders of these dynamics in the everyday.

Recent reporting on the 62 million views of the so-called "global rape academies", websites where men have shared "how-to" lessons to drug and assault their partners are exchanged, underscores the urgency of this challenge.

It demonstrates how this global infrastructure of violence is evolving, especially online.

This report's emphasis on addressing technology-facilitated violence, strengthening prevention and building trust in our justice systems is critical.

In Canada, despite important progress, informed consent has been entrenched since the 1990s. There is more work to do, especially for Indigenous women who face disproportionately high rates of violence.

Over three years ago, the Government of Canada launched our ten-year National Action Plan to prevent gender-based violence, address its root causes and provide better support for victims.

Since 2017, more than \$820 million dollars has been invested for this work.

Our government is advancing new legislation: the Protecting Victims Act to add femicide and coercive control to our criminal code, strengthen our harassment laws and address deepfakes and the sharing of intimate images.

As legislators, we must all work to acknowledge this phenomenon of gender-based violence, to prevent and legislate protections and to collectively oppose any reversal of the progress on women's equality rights.

Without women's safety and security, we will not have healthy and thriving democratic societies.

We are in solidarity with women here in Europe and at home.

Thank you very much.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Ms Elvira KOVÁCS.

Ms Elvira KOVÁCS (Serbia, EPP/CD): Thank you,

Distinguished Chair, dear colleagues,

We must all remind ourselves of the sad fact that in every country in the world, women experience sexual, physical and emotional violence. On the one hand, domestic violence is a widespread form of violence. On the other hand, freedom from violence is a basic human right.

Violence against women is a huge problem; its effects are lasting and difficult to overcome.

It is a human rights violation that inevitably leads to other violations and therefore makes equal opportunities for women and men impossible to achieve.

Domestic violence is a form of gender-based violence, discrimination and denial of equal opportunities: its victims might not have the chance of reconstructing themselves, of finding a job, another partner, another home. Some of them will not have the chance to survive.

Therefore, I believe that it is important that our Parliamentary Assembly fights for these women's rights, to have a second chance.

The Istanbul Convention truly provides a comprehensive framework to prevent violence against women, to protect the victims, as well as to prosecute the perpetrators.

States have a responsibility to prevent, stop and sanction violence against women.

However, for this Convention to have an impact on the lives of millions of women, it is not enough to have it on paper: it needs to be applied, implemented in all our member states.

Unfortunately, inequality and discrimination against women are still a widespread occurrence.

It is evident today, as Ms Zita GURMAI also mentioned, that the progress in advancing women's rights is being made more slowly than originally desired.

There is a backlash.

Therefore, we should all be committed to improving the situation of women.

In the end, dear Ms Zita GURMAI, I must say that it was truly great to work with you, here, for all these years.

We all wish you the best.

I would like to say, you are a sister, as always, but on the other side, I think "tiger" and "fighter" are better words.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Ms Meryem GÖKA.

Ms Meryem GÖKA (Türkiye, NR): Dear President and colleagues,

I thank Ms Zita GURMAI for her report.

Violence against women remains one of the gravest human rights challenges of our time. It is a global issue that requires collective responsibility.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, one in three women in the EU experiences violence, one in five suffers from domestic violence and only one in eight cases is reported.

These figures point to a systemic failure despite long-standing commitments, including the Istanbul Convention.

If the Convention alone were sufficient, why do these numbers remain so alarming?

The European Union itself has implicitly acknowledged this. In May 2024, the European Parliament adopted the first binding directive on violence against women to be incorporated into national law by 2027, demonstrating that existing mechanisms, including the Istanbul Convention, have not been enough.

International agreements are normative tools that, on their own, cannot address gaps in existing legislation. Without strong national enforcement and societal transformation, their impact remains limited.

We, as Türkiye, have built a robust, enforceable national system, centred on Law No. 6284, one of the most comprehensive frameworks globally – immediate protection orders without burdensome procedures, removal of perpetrators from the household. In addition, electronic monitoring systems ensure enforcement, and the Women's Emergency Support Application (KADES), an emergency application, enables instant access to law enforcement.

These are not symbolic commitments. These are operational tools that save lives.

There is no one-size-fits-all model; countries must act in line with their societal and institutional realities.

Türkiye maintains a zero-tolerance policy and continues to strengthen enforcement, expand support services and invest in prevention, while remaining open to international co-operation.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next, Ms Victoria TIBLOM.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM (Sweden, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President.

Consent is not a vague concept. It is the line between freedom and violation. And in a strong society, that line must be clear, enforced and non-negotiable.

In the wake of #MeToo, we have seen progress, but also hesitation. Too many legal systems still rely on outdated ideas of force or resistance, instead of a simple standard: without free and informed consent, it is violence.

At the same time, we must have the courage to say this: a society that fails to protect women, that excuses abuse, or that tolerates parallel norms where women's rights are weakened, is a society that is failing its core values.

Equality between men and women is not cultural, conditional or negotiable. It is fundamental.

And yet, across Europe, we see worrying trends, segregation, honour-related violence, social pressure, and environments where women are expected to adapt, stay silent or accept less freedom. That is not progress. That is regression.

A culture of consent cannot exist without a culture of responsibility. Responsibility of the individual to respect boundaries. Responsibility of the state to enforce the law without hesitation. And responsibility of this Assembly to defend our principles without apology.

That means we must fully implement the Istanbul Convention. We must adopt clear consent-based laws: "only yes means yes". We must ensure that crimes like marital rape are prosecuted everywhere. And we must stop accepting excuses, cultural, social or otherwise, for violence against women. Because when we start making exceptions, we don't protect diversity, we abandon equality.

This is ultimately about the kind of Europe we want. A Europe where women live in freedom and safety, or a Europe where we look the other way.

I know where I stand.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Before I move on to the next speaker, could I remind those who are in the gallery, in the visitor's gallery, that applause is not permitted in this Chamber. You are very welcome of course, to observe proceedings, but no more than that. Just a gentle reminder of that.

The next speaker is Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

Today we discuss two very important reports by Ms Zita GURMAI. They are inseparable. One defines the standards and the other shows distance between the standard and reality. And the reality is really frightening. In more than half of our countries, rape is still not defined based on consent. That means a woman can experience violence and the law may still deny that the crime occurred. Let me again reiterate the stark fact indicated in the report. Only one in 200 rapes in the EU leads to a conviction. The statistics are clear. The world continues to fail women.

According to the United Nations, conflict-related sexual violence has increased by 87% in just two years. Rape remains a weapon of war. I will not name those countries of the Council of Europe that still didn't ratify the Istanbul Convention or withdrew from it. You all know these countries. I just highlight that Ukraine ratified

the Istanbul Convention in 2022, under bombardment, under occupation, under existential threat. While missiles were hitting the cities, Ukraine made a clear voice. Even in war, human rights matter. Even in war, women must be protected. Now imagine occupied territories where rape is used systematically with no prospect of justice. The United Nations documented hundreds of verified sexual harassment cases that were committed by Russian forces against women in the occupied territories. But in occupied areas there are no prosecutors, no services, no safe reporting, only silence.

That is why we must support the documents described now for future prosecution. And thank you for your countries helping other prosecutors with this. Because the Istanbul Convention is built on a simple truth. Violence against women is a public crime and when it is used as a weapon of war, it becomes a crime against humanity.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Georgios STAMATIS.

Mr Georgios STAMATIS (Greece, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Allow me to start my speech with two proposals.

I totally agree with Ms Catia POLIDORI. We have to act, not to talk. We need measures, not only reports.

And we have to convince our countries to be more active in this terrible issue for humanity.

The second proposal is that we need an observatory as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, a space about what happened for each country every day.

The third proposal – in memory of the dead women, after the violence against them – to build a monument outside the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, for the memory of these women who die every day in our countries.

Allow me to say something else. We don't talk about the Roma women, about the early marriages, about violence against trans women, about violence against refugees and migrant women, and finally about the violence against elderly women. They live alone and many of the families of the relatives, they push them, (out of) violence for money and from (a position of) power.

So for me it's very clear. We have to act, not to talk, and we have to find these keys, these elements, (of) how to convince our countries.

Finally, the Istanbul Convention is similar to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We have to put it in the schools. We have to inform all the politicians.

We have to sign a new declaration about the Istanbul Convention.

We have to act now.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Sam RUSHWORTH.

Mr Sam RUSHWORTH (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you.

Can I also thank the Minister for Spain for an excellent speech earlier that I think really showed the progress that can be made in 50 years.

I thank my friend Ms Zita GURMAI for these two excellent reports. I know that she's engaged so well in putting them together.

Violence against women and girls is a stain on all of our societies. It is a legislative and a justice challenge when we see that, for example, in the UK, fewer than 2% of reported rapes ever make it to a conviction – but it's not only a challenge of legislation, it's also a cultural challenge.

I really welcome the parts of this research report that talk about taking the legal and policy measures to prevent and combat forms of violence created and facilitated by technology companies, because this is a particular challenge of our time.

The spread of violent pornography, intimate image abuse and the digital creation of deepfake sexualised images.

We see an example of that recently in the UK, where our government took on Mr Elon MUSK's disgusting platform Grok, that was allowing these images to be created of children. He responded by putting an image out of our prime minister in a bikini. Such is the disgrace of that man.

One of my female colleagues had images created of her and circulated because she was a loud spokesperson on this issue.

But when we threatened Mr Elon MUSK with a potential fine of 10% of their global revenue, they quickly backed down and they withdrew it.

I cannot think of an area that needs a Council of Europe like this and pan-European co-operation more than regulating the wild west that is the internet.

I'm grateful to see that Ms Laura CASTEL, a colleague, is working on a report on this.

I'll support both of these reports today.

I'll support hers when that comes through as well.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER.

Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER (Austria, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Mister Vice-President.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Violence against women is a sad reality. In Austria, one in three women are affected, probably also here in this room. That is 1.1 million women and they have been affected by violence once or several times, physical, sexualised or psychological violence. Violence against women concerns us all. It concerns the countries, it concerns the municipalities, it concerns the cities and, of course, it concerns us here in the Council of Europe. That is why the Istanbul Convention is so important and necessary and why I am very glad that Ms Zita GURMAI has made this report to see the progress and challenges in promoting and implementing the Istanbul Convention. It's sad that we still have to talk about it and that we still have to get involved.

So protection against violence is not just a state task, it is a task for society as a whole. My colleague Mr Georgios STAMATIS has already said this very well. It would be good if we were to erect a memorial to women who have suffered violence. That's a very good idea and we can only support it. In Austria, we have also made protection against violence a priority in women's policy. We have therefore increased the money since 2019 and there are also good examples, for example, the "Is Lisa here?" project for women in nightlife. If they feel threatened, they can say these words. They then get help in bars, from taxi drivers, etc. And this is supported by society in Austria.

In conclusion, I would like to make an appeal to all of us. We are called upon to get involved, not to accept violence, to show civil courage and thus perhaps save a life. And very, very finally, dear Zita, many, many thanks for your commitment to us women, against violence, for our women's rights. We will certainly miss you. You are such a strong fighter. All the best.

Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA (North Macedonia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

"You will either mine or you will be dead"! These are one of the thousands of threats a 31 year old Rosica received by her partner who later killed her and her father. Rosica kept going to the authorities, but no answer nor reaction was there. 26 women were killed in 5 years in north macedonia. In 2024 5 women were killed. Only two of them reported domestic violence. 2023 was the most difficult year so far in terms of femicide, with 9 victims in total. Three of these were connected with domestic violence. In this same year, north Macedonia

was third in Europe with 6 femicides in one million inhabitants, landing third after Lithuania and Latvia. In 2025, there were 4,745 reports within the authorities of domestic violence and six murders. Just within the first three months of 2026 there were 4 cases of femicide.

The Istanbul convention on preventing and fighting domestic violence and violence against women is a document where prevention is rooted and managed. But it seems institutions still fail to recognize gender-based violence, to understand femicide and to approach the problem systematically. The rule of law must not be transformed into the rule of violent-consumed society!

The Istanbul convention was adopted in 2011 and its full ratification happened in late 2018. With its ratification, the state has taken over obligation for a functional system of protection, but that obligation can not stay declarative any longer. Even after 30 years of the Beijing declaration, women's rights are still endangered, especially in countries at war where women and girls are the most usual victims.

At last, this is a picture of Ivana and her daughter. Ivana killed herself last month after enduring years of domestic violence of the most brutal kind. In front of her daughter. Everytime she would go to the police, they would send her back with the perpetrator with the words- settle this between the two of you. 11 police officers are under investigation for 7 months now for this case! Social services did not recognize the violence. Ivana endured bruising, broken bones and being hurt in the stomach. When she decided to end her life, she had her daughter Katja in her arms. She was just 4.

Ms Natalia DAVIDOVICI (Republic of Moldova, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The Republic of Moldova ratified the Istanbul Convention in October 2021.

In this way, Moldova became the thirty-fifth state to join the Convention.

But more importantly – we made a clear choice. A choice to prevent violence, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators. Not as some abstract commitments, but as our real priorities.

Let me briefly highlight some of the recent measures:

We established a specialised National Agency for Preventing and Combating gender-based violence, responsible for the policy coordination.

We criminalized new forms of digital violence: online harassment, stalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate-images.

We expanded services for survivors. Today Moldova operates 11 shelters, covering 70% of the recommended national capacity.

We created multidisciplinary teams and launched the platform "VioData" to better coordinate help and gather vital information.

Today, our legal framework covers all major forms of violence: physical, sexual, economic, digital and psychological.

We have introduced the concept of femicide into our laws, and in the coming weeks we will pass new amendments in the Criminal Code to make femicide a separate and distinct criminal offence.

But we know that legislation alone is not enough.

Real change happens when every woman actually feels safe — in her home, at work, and in public spaces. And when she truly believes the system protects her.

For Moldova, the Istanbul Convention is not just an international obligation.

It is our choice to be part of a Europe, where dignity, safety, and human rights are non-negotiable.

Let us continue to work together, so that no woman in Europe is left to face violence alone.

Thank you.

Ms Lucia PLAVÁKOVÁ (Slovak Republic, ALDE): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Let me start with thanking Ms Zita GURMAI for both important and very well prepared reports and resolutions.

I believe we would all prefer it if we would not have to deal with these topics anymore. That would mean that the world, society and homes are safe for women. But they are not. And we unfortunately see not only positive changes but also a backlash.

And I would like to mention two trends which I found very worrying:

Firstly, it is very disturbing that the opinions of young men are being shifted towards patriarchy again. Recent data show that we face a potentially huge backlash. A team from the pollsters Ipsos and King's College London found that nearly a third (31%) of gen Z men believe that a woman should always obey her husband, a fifth (21%) believe that she should never initiate sex, and 33% believe that women should let their husbands have the final word on important decisions.

Secondly, we have seen a trend of online groups of men discussing and advising themselves on drugging their wives and assaulting and raping them while unconscious. The recent case investigated by CNN has found out such website where 62 millions online visits happen every month. And where you can find 20 thousands videos of such horrific acts. Some of them are even livestreamed.

Madame Gisele Pelicot was not a lonely case. It is happening everywhere. She knew exactly why she was opening the trial to the public. Because there are many more women who are experiencing the same horror as she did. It happened somewhere even last night and will happen the night to come also. And these horrific acts of men are happening at homes, places where women shall feel safest. But it is not the case.

Therefore it is very important that we act. And these reports are part of our fight to make the world a safer place for all women, for our daughters.

Ms Sevilay ÇELENK (Türkiye, UEL): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Madam President, Esteemed Colleagues,

I would like to state clearly that the reports are comprehensive and honest assessments of these critically important issues, recognising both achievements and persistent shortcomings. Thank you, dear Zita, for this excellent work.

The Istanbul Convention's core strength lies in providing a concrete policy framework while making national realities systematic, comparable, and traceable through GREVIO monitoring mechanisms.

As a Member of Parliament from Türkiye, I must be clear, the 2021 withdrawal was decided without parliamentary debate and left thousands of women without international protection. Since then, femicides and suspicious deaths of women have continued to be documented. The report's clear call for Türkiye to rejoin the Convention is essential and fully supported.

The emphasis on indirect violence is critical. Men using children as tools to inflict psychological harm on mothers, or harming children to punish women, is no longer anecdotal. It is a documented and systemic pattern requiring a policy response.

Gender-based violence is unequal. Kurdish women, Roma women, women with disabilities, and refugee women face overlapping poverty, discrimination, and legal precarity. Shelters remain inaccessible, helplines ineffective, and justice systems absent. This is structural exclusion, not a gap.

Digital platforms amplify misogyny and normalise toxic masculinity through algorithms that reward harmful content.

Fighting violence against women is not a budget issue; it is a political choice. Governments that cut support mechanisms fail in their obligations. We will stand in unwavering solidarity and continue this determined fight until every woman lives free from violence.

Ms Manuelle OUDAR (Canada): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Ms Kate OSAMOR (United Kingdom, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I would to thank the rapporteur Ms Zita GURMAI for the excellent report.

Colleagues, I welcome the continued focus on ensuring that the Convention is not only ratified.

Because ratification alone is insufficient. The true measure of our commitment lies in implementation: in prevention, in accessible protection, and in effective accountability.

The UK has taken forward important measures, including the Domestic Abuse Act and the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

While progress has been made, significant gaps remain.

To more fully meet the standards set out in the Istanbul Convention, and reaffirmed in this report, it would be important for the UK to give continued attention to the following areas:

The sustainability of funding for specialist services, including those led by and for migrant women, Black and minoritised women, and disabled women;

Ensuring equal and non-discriminatory access to protection, so that no woman is discouraged from seeking safety, including on the basis of immigration status;

Enhancing data collection and parliamentary oversight, in order to support transparency, accountability, and public confidence in systems of protection and justice.

Finally, I echo the resolution's call for collective responsibility. I urge all members States Parties to engage constructively with GREVIO's findings, to share good practice, to invest sustainably in prevention and protection, and to reaffirm our shared commitment to the Convention's principles.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

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

Thank you, Mr President,

I would like to congratulate the rapporteurs on both reports, which provide sound analyses and useful recommendations for strengthening the protection of women.

I am proud that Spain, under a Popular Party government, was one of the first Member States of the European Union to ratify the Istanbul Convention, 12 years ago now.

That is why I advocate for the strict implementation of the Istanbul Convention, with sufficient resources, coordination between administrations, and a justice system that works. Furthermore, any criminal law reform relating to consent must be approached with the utmost seriousness, ensuring legal certainty and avoiding unintended consequences that could increase the perception of impunity, as occurred in Spain with the law known as 'Only Yes Means Yes'. During its passage through parliament, various voices — including legal experts, victims' associations, and long-standing feminists from within the Socialist Party and the People's Party — warned of a clear risk: the automatic reduction of sentences for sex offenders.

Even so, the Government, acting in a sectarian manner and bowing to its coalition partners, pressed ahead. The result was: over a thousand downward revisions of sentences and releases from prison that should never have taken place, causing public alarm and deeply damaging victims' trust in the system.

Faced with this situation, an urgent reform of the law was necessary, which went ahead thanks to the responsible support of the People's Party, which prioritised the protection of women over any political calculation.

And this legislative error was compounded by another: the failure of the electronic monitoring system for the ankle bracelets, which were intended to ensure the safety of women under threat but did not work due to poor quality.

Honourable Members, when we speak of violence against women, protection must be effective, with policies that work, ensuring prevention and comprehensive care.

Governments must act transparently, evaluate their decisions and correct what is not working.

In the fight against gender-based violence, we must work hand in hand, seeking consensus among all political forces.

We cannot afford to take a step backwards.

Ms Birutė VĖSAITĖ (Lithuania, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

My country, Lithuania, is among those that have signed but have not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention. The main reason lies in narratives that misrepresent the Convention as being contrary to traditional family values or even to constitutional principles. These narratives also distort the concept of gender as defined in the Convention. This has resulted in a delay in its ratification.

Despite this, significant progress has been made in Lithuania. Thanks to the efforts of Parliament and NGOs, the Convention has already contributed to real change over the years.

However, much remains to be done. We are currently working on amendments to legislation on sexual violence, aiming to base it on the lack of freely given consent to a sexual act. This would allow for the prosecution of cases that could not previously be criminalised under earlier legislation, which required evidence of the use of force or threat by the perpetrator. Only “yes” means “yes”.

In Lithuania, we can already observe steps in the right direction: stronger protection measures, increased support for victims, improved co-operation between institutions, and a growing public understanding that violence is not a private matter. This is important progress.

New and emerging forms of violence against women also require greater attention, including those facilitated by artificial intelligence systems. A clear legal framework is needed to ensure that the growing digital manifestations of gender-based violence are effectively addressed, including those created or enabled through the use of artificial intelligence.

Ms Nerea AHEDO (Spain, ALDE): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The Istanbul Convention is the first legal instrument—made possible thanks to the drive of the feminist movement—that obliges those who ratify it to implement policies to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women. It is worth highlighting the countries that have still not ratified it. It requires, indeed demands, genuine political will and guaranteed funding.

The Spanish state ratified it in 2014. In the Basque Country, we had been building a comprehensive response system since 2001, beginning with the First Inter-Institutional Agreement, which established a model of multilevel governance. This led to the Basque Law on Equality and the Eradication of Violence in 2005.

Work is carried out not only with victims but also on the structural causes. And work is done with men to transform masculinities (the Gizonduz programme is a benchmark).

It is a model that GREVIO itself identifies as a reference. It also highlights regional levels as indispensable actors in the implementation of the Convention, since policies are deployed in the territory, close to the people.

We need policies that go beyond immediate protection and that promote the empowerment of women (including economic empowerment) so they can lead full lives free from violence. Policies that help them leave violence behind and provide them with the tools not to fall back into it. For this reason, the associated rights must be recognised: training, employment, housing, health, support networks, and more.

Regarding consent, it must be said that we should not legislate sexual freedom but legislate non-aggression. And we should not subordinate women’s rights to the criminal process; it must be possible to prove the existence of gender-based violence and sexual assault without filing a complaint, enabling access to resources without requiring one.

Today we are faced with a worrying reality. A discourse is growing that denies the very existence of violence, its gendered nature, and it is taking hold, especially among young people. This discourse fuels, for example, digital violence, attacks sexual and reproductive rights, and criminalises the feminist movement. Unfortunately, at this moment, those who promote this discourse are entering governments, and we are all taking steps backwards.

Let us give a firm and coherent response and, above all, let us educate.

Because women’s rights are not negotiable and with violence—that is, without equality—there is no democracy.

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

Dear Colleagues,

Ukraine fully supports the approach of the rapporteur, Ms Zita GURMAL: without action aimed at addressing the root causes of violence, legal measures will be insufficient.

That is why education, awareness-raising and real empowerment of women must form the core of public policy. Ukraine has unique experience in implementing the Istanbul Convention. We were among its creators and signed the document back in 2011. However, the path to ratification was not easy and took 11 years. It was only in June 2022 that the Ukrainian parliament—specifically, the 9th convocation—completed this process. And this decision was not just a formality. It marked a turning point. We incorporated the key provisions of the Convention into national legislation. In particular, criminal liability for sexual harassment was introduced for the first time.

The principle of consent has been clearly defined in criminal law as the basis for defining rape, including in cases involving marriage or close relationships. The results are already evident.

In 2023, there were 20% more cases of domestic violence recorded than in the previous year. This is not an increase in crime, but rather a sign that the system has started to work, and that victims are becoming more willing to trust the authorities and seek help. Following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, Ukraine has introduced criminal liability for sexual harassment and supported a draft law on public prosecution, which allows cases of sexual and domestic violence to be initiated upon the complaint of any individual, simplifies access to medical-legal examinations, reduces the traumatic nature of questioning, restricts reconciliation at the perpetrator's initiative, and strengthens the protection of child victims.

But we must admit: laws alone are not enough. Violence has deeper roots — inequality, stereotypes, and silence.

That is precisely why investing in gender equality, education and changing social attitudes is no less important than prosecuting such crimes.

Dear colleagues,

Ukraine's experience shows that even in times of war, we can and must move forward in the protection of human rights. We are not standing still; we are continuing to strengthen the system for the protection of women, to implement the standards of the Convention, and to shift our approach—from a formal response to effective protection.

Because the Istanbul Convention is not just a document. It represents our commitment to European values.

I hope it will bring Ukraine closer to full membership of the European Union.

Thank you.

Ms Patricia STEPHENSON (Ireland, UEL): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Violence against women is an epidemic.

In Ireland, 35% of women have experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner. 25% of women have experienced sexual violence from a partner as an adult.

This year on the island of Ireland, we have seen 4 women murdered:

In the North:

Amy Doherty - mother-of-two from Derry was killed.

Ellie Flanagan A childcare worker was killed in March.

In the South:

Scarlett Faulkner was in killed in Tipperary

Linda Costello was killed in her own home in Carlow.

Ireland is well below the standard on refuge provision – we have around 200 units, while the Convention recommends 500 units – 9 counties have no refuge at all, a glaring gap in the protection of victims.

Victim/survivors have spoken about their harrowing experiences in the justice system – it's common practice for their counselling notes to be used as evidence against them in the courts, a deeply retraumatizing and cruel practice.

The threshold for accessing legal aid is a significant barrier to justice – waiting lists are long, and financial thresholds are rigid. If you earn more than 18,000 EUR a year you don't qualify – yet we know financial abuse is a common tool of violence, survivors may not have access to their bank accounts.

Ireland is failing to meet its obligations on data collection, we have still don't have comprehensive GBV data, and we fail to collect any proper data on femicide.

Violence against women is normalised in society. Until we stamp that out culture, we won't prevent it.

The Grok nudification scandal exposed a culture of digital violence in its most visceral form – millions of non-consensual sexually explicit images generated by AI.

While we saw shock from leaders in Ireland – the slow reaction to shutdown nudification tools was a failure to protect victims.

It took weeks for an investigation to be launched in Ireland, while sexual abuse images were generated with ease.

The people generating these images should be prosecuted, but what message does it send to girls and women that the platform responsible for enabling that content has gone largely unsanctioned.

We should all be ashamed by this inaction.

Ms Filiz POLAT (Germany, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in German*

Mr Georgios PSYCHOGIOS (Greece, UEL): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, called the Istanbul Convention, is a key and leading instrument in the fight against violence against women, gender-based violence, and domestic violence. The Report underlines the need for full and overall implementation of the Convention, as well as its signature by all member States of the Council of Europe.

In my country, Greece, the Convention was ratified in 2018 by the government of SYRIZA and Alexis Tsipras. However, since then, very little progress has been made in applying the recommendations of GREVIO Committee.

It is clear that we must do more to ensure its effectiveness in practice, both in terms of prevention and in addressing physical, verbal, psychological, and economic violence against women.

We need to strengthen services, public structures, and field organizations in terms of staff, infrastructure, and resources, as well as to enhance cooperation among them.

However, we also need to do something more than this. We must reinforce, in the strongest possible way, the legal framework for protection against criminal acts and gender-based violence, through policies and measures, such as legal recognition of the term "femicide" and increased penalties for practices, such as "revenge porn".

Last but not least, it is essential to address the root causes of violence. These include patriarchal stereotypes, social inequalities, social exclusion, racism, and the belief that some people are superior or "more equal" than others.

The future, as the Honourable Minister of Spain has also stated, lies in more rights, more democracy and, ultimately, in modern societies of cohesion and human emancipation.

Ms María FERNÁNDEZ (Spain, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I would like to congratulate Ms Zita GURMAL on her reports and to expressly acknowledge her work and political career in defence of women's rights.

Violence against women is the most brutal symbol of the inequality that persists in our society.

At a decisive moment for women's rights, the Istanbul Convention — which marked a qualitative leap forward in the protection of those rights — has proven, over its twelve years of implementation, to be a transformative and effective tool, raising legal standards, driving comprehensive public policies, and placing victims at the centre of public action.

However, its implementation remains uneven across countries, and many have yet to ratify it.

The Istanbul Convention represents a commitment to the dignity, justice, and freedom of women. Defending it means defending a more equal, more democratic, and fairer society.

Spain ratified it in 2014, becoming one of the first States to do so.

Since then, and always hand in hand with socialist governments and the feminist movement, it has developed a legislative framework that has become a global reference.

The Organic Law on Comprehensive Protection Measures against Gender Violence was a pioneering law in Europe.

The State Pact against Gender Violence consolidated a State policy that has been key to advancing the eradication of violence.

In recent years, the Spanish Government has strengthened this institutional architecture with new measures, becoming — with the approval of the Organic Law on the Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom — one of the countries that has most decisively promoted the transition towards a legal model based on consent.

A good law whose aim was the comprehensive protection of victims, a law that stands as yet another example of the feminist progress achieved by the Spanish Government.

Today, Spain, through the Minister for Equality, wishes to send a clear and unequivocal message to this Assembly:

"Equality between women and men is a fundamental pillar of our democracy and a non-negotiable commitment, the central axis for building a progressive, equitable, and just society."

We face an important collective challenge: to consolidate the progress achieved, to shield it against real threats of backsliding, and to ensure that all women can live in freedom, free from violence.

Thank you very much in advance.

Mr Denis BEGIC (Sweden, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Chair, dear colleagues,

The Istanbul Convention is not controversial. Violence against women is.

And yet, instead of focusing on the women and girls who need protection, too many political forces have chosen to attack the Convention itself. They spread disinformation, distort its purpose, and try to turn a human rights instrument into an ideological battlefield.

When you attack the Istanbul Convention, you are not defending families. You are weakening protection for women and girls. When you replace facts with false narratives, you do not defend values. You defend silence, denial and inaction.

Nearly twelve years after the Convention entered into force, we know that it has made a difference. It has improved laws, strengthened policies and increased protection. But we also know that this is still not enough.

Let me say this clearly as a man: women's rights are not only women's issues. Violence against women concerns all of us. It is about power, inequality and control. It is about whether we accept that half of our population should still live with fear.

That is why I am concerned when some want to make this issue gender-neutral. Because if we erase the reality that violence against women is rooted in inequality between women and men, then we also erase the truth.

And we must also be honest about priorities. Across Europe, including in my own country, we see governments talking about law and order – but at the same time failing to invest enough in prevention, protection and support for victims. You cannot be tough on crime while being weak on protecting women.

What we need now is not less commitment, but more.

The Istanbul Convention does not threaten democracy. It strengthens it. Because no democracy is strong when women are unsafe, unheard and unprotected.

So let us stop debating myths and start defending rights. Women do not need our empty words. They need safety, dignity and justice.

Thank you.

Ms Giulia MURATORI (San Marino, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in Italian*

Ms Irena FERČIKOVÁ KONEČNÁ (Czechia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear colleagues,

Dear Rapporteur, Ms Zita GURMAI, thank you for your wonderful reports.

My country, the Czech Republic, is one of the countries that, despite being among the most secular societies in Europe, has not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention. Here are a few reasons why that is the case.

The Czech Senate rejected the ratification in a heated vote. What unfolded in the public debate can be described as a long-running disinformation campaign by advocates of so-called traditional family values, who portray this Convention as a threat to family life and social order. Women's organizations in my country have long warned that the convention is the subject of targeted disinformation campaigns—yet the political will to stand up against this is lacking.

This is not a domestic anomaly. The EPF's Next Wave report, published last year, revealed that a staggering \$1.18 billion in funding had flowed into anti-gender and anti-rights movements across Europe between 2019 and 2023. These movements operate under the guise of 'tradition' and 'human dignity', and form an intricate transnational network. These movements are no longer on the margins; they are becoming increasingly professionalised and better financed, and are becoming embedded in mainstream political institutions. Czechia is a case study in how this influence can poison even secular, liberal democracies.

My second and equally urgent point is this: we must ensure this Convention reaches those who are most invisible to it.

I stand here in solidarity with sex workers, whose right to consent is routinely contested by the very legal frameworks meant to protect them. I stand with trans women, who face heightened levels of violence simply for who they are. I stand with undocumented women, who are too afraid of deportation to report abuse — and for whom the justice system offers no safe harbour. And I stand with women who use drugs, who are doubly criminalised and doubly abandoned.

As the report itself acknowledges, the Istanbul Convention is most powerful when it changes mindsets — not just laws. Yet too often, a critical gap remains between legislation and its implementation on the ground. Frontline police officers are often the first — and the last — barrier these women face. When those officers are misogynistic, transphobic, or xenophobic, marginalised women do not report, do not access services, and do not get justice.

We must ensure that interventions addressing violence against women are designed with and led by the communities most affected. Intersectional discrimination is not a footnote — it is at the heart of why this Convention must be ratified, implemented, and enforced in full.

I urge this Assembly to act.

Thank you.

Mr Dimitrios MANTZOS (Greece, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I would like to warmly congratulate our esteemed colleague Ms Zita GURMAI for her excellent and well-focused report, but also for her long-standing commitment as a dedicated defender of human rights -a true beacon of equality, both in Hungary and across Europe.

This report captures a reality that persists throughout our continent. Beyond national differences, and despite the progress achieved in countries such as Spain, the problem remains. It is deeply rooted in anachronistic prejudices and entrenched social hierarchies.

We must actively support the Istanbul Convention. In fact, we must move beyond mere compliance towards genuine conviction.

It is therefore not only incomprehensible, but also unacceptable, that member States of this Organisation have still not ratified the Convention. Ultimately, this is a matter of political will -the will to protect and care for all citizens, without discrimination on the basis of gender.

Raising awareness within our societies is of paramount importance. This requires effective legislation, meaningful education, strong social institutions, and adequate resources.

At the same time, we must reinforce the notion of consent as a cornerstone of individual freedom and dignity.

Let us also be clear: this is not only about women or children. It is about fundamental rights. It is about democracy, real freedom, and genuine equality.

We are human beings -with emotions, aspirations, liberties, and inalienable rights. No one, no authority, can ever take these away.

In essence, this is not just about gender equality. It is about our culture. About building an inclusive society, free from discrimination. It is about safeguarding our democracy against the rise of authoritarianism.

Democracy is under threat. And it is our responsibility to defend it.

Ms Iris LUARASI (Albania, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I take the floor today with a sense of deep personal responsibility. I speak not only as a member of this Assembly and as a representative of Albania, but also as someone who spent eight years inside GREVIO, including as its President, watching this Convention come to life in the laws, institutions, and lives of women across Europe.

I warmly commend our colleague Ms Zita GURMAI for her tireless work as rapporteur. This draft resolution reflects a truth we must all confront: the Istanbul Convention remains the most advanced and comprehensive international legal instrument to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and yet, its full potential is still far from realised.

From my eight years on GREVIO, I can tell you that monitoring is not a bureaucratic exercise. It is a moral commitment. Every evaluation visit, every baseline report, every State dialogue represents the collective effort of independent experts to hold governments accountable, to turn legal obligations into tangible protection for women. GREVIO's work has driven real change: new criminal offences for forced marriage, stalking and female genital mutilation; reformed rape laws; and expanded support services in States Parties.

But colleagues, the progress is uneven and fragile. We continue to see gaps in national legislation, insufficient shelters, inadequate funding, and a troubling absence of reliable gender-disaggregated data. And perhaps most worryingly, we are witnessing deliberate misrepresentations of the Convention, politically motivated attacks that seek to dismantle the very standards we have built together.

This Assembly must stand firm. Resolution 2479 (2023) and Recommendation 2247 (2023), which many of us debated in this very Chamber already called on the Committee of Ministers to promote ratification, lift reservations, and ensure the Gender Equality Strategy 2024–2029 prioritises combating violence against women. The new draft resolution before us must go further: it must strengthen the link between GREVIO's findings and parliamentary action at national level. Parliaments must not simply receive GREVIO reports, they must act on them.

As an Albanian parliamentarian, I am proud that Albania has fully engaged in both the baseline and thematic evaluation procedures. But I also know from experience that implementation requires political will, sustained resources, and institutional coordination. GREVIO's recommendations are only as powerful as the parliaments that champion them.

I urge this Assembly to support the draft resolution, to reinforce the Parliamentary Network Women Free from Violence, and to send an unambiguous message: the Istanbul Convention is non-negotiable. It is not a Western agenda. It is not a threat to the family. It is a lifeline for millions of women.

The Convention was born here, in the Council of Europe. Let us defend and advance it with the same conviction with which it was created.

Mr Namık TAN (Türkiye, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mr President,

Esteemed Colleagues,

The Istanbul Convention stands as the most comprehensive legal frameworks in its field. It is built on a fundamental truth: violence against women is not a private matter, but a structural violation of human rights.

However, experience has shown that adoption is merely the first step. For the Convention to be effective, it must exist beyond legal texts, it must live within our institutions, our policies, and our everyday realities.

To achieve this, we must focus on three pillars: strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing accountability, and fostering societal transformation.

First, law enforcement, judicial actors, and social services must be adequately trained, resourced, and coordinated.

Second, the findings of mechanisms like GREVIO should not be viewed as mere critiques, but as essential blueprints for continuous reform.

Lastly, legal change must be accompanied by normative change. Through education and civil society engagement, we must dismantle the root causes of violence.

We must also acknowledge the fragility of progress. Türkiye's withdrawal from the Convention in 2021, as the first country to have ratified it, is a sobering reminder of what happens when political commitment weakens.

This setback underscores the absolute necessity of sustained political will and institutional ownership.

Yet, this should not lead to resignation. Instead, it must reinforce our determination.

At a time when gender-based violence still affects millions, our collective responsibility is not only to uphold principles, but to translate them into meaningful, measurable action.

Finally, I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Ms Zita GURMAI for her outstanding contribution in upholding women's rights.

Thank you.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I'm afraid we've reached 11:45 a.m., so I had hoped to call one or two more speakers, but time has beaten us.

So I now must interrupt the list of speakers.

The speeches of members on the speakers' list who have been present during the debate but haven't been able to speak can be given to the Table Office for publication in the official report.

Speeches must not exceed 400 words, please.

I remind colleagues that typewritten texts can be submitted electronically, if possible, no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

Thank you.

That concludes the list of speakers.

I now call Ms Zita GURMAI to reply – you have 5 minutes.

Ms Zita GURMAI (Hungary, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very, very much dear colleagues, dear Minister, for your participation in the debate and of course your excellent contribution.

This is what we need, that type of debate. I would say as violence has no ideology, so I think it became absolutely clear. Of course I believe that this House was built on consensus.

In the current context of disinformation, manipulation and false narratives that passion and need for gender equality and women's rights is more important than ever, to have an evidence-based policy and good quality data to assess the need and effectiveness of law and policies to combat violence against women.

We also need to be aware of manipulative narratives that seem to be protecting women, while in reality they attack their rights by contesting human rights instruments such as the Istanbul Convention, which is considered, as I already said, the gold standard by the United Nations.

Let me bring to our discussion the latest report on gender-based violence against women which has been published by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in March.

Policy data shows that 85% of intimate partner violence victims, 76% of domestic violence victims and 98% of rape victims are women. The majority of perpetrators are European men.

Important gaps in data collection remain today, despite the obligations set by the Istanbul Convention and the recommendations issued by Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO).

This means that there is an urgent need for systematic disaggregated data and comparable justice sector data to enable a meaningful assessment of institutional effectiveness and accountability in cases of violence against women.

Women victims of all types of gender-based violence in Europe need to trust the system that is designated to protect them. They have to believe in it. They need to be listened to and believe their safety and protection and that of their children should be at the core of state responses to gender-based violence. The question of concern should not be ignored or minimised.

We, as parliamentarians, have played a crucial role in getting the Istanbul Convention adopted and ratified by most of the member states. Let's continue this fight.

Let's hope that the new Hungarian government is going to ratify it.

Of course this Parliamentary Assembly will keep promoting the Convention at the national level and regularly taking stock and reporting on the progress and challenges.

We must deliver a continent free from violence. Our citizens, women and men in all diversity, demand it.

Of course I could reply to a lot of questions, but let me talk to Ms Catia POLIDORI, who was a former chair.

We already have a Parliamentary Network Women Free from Violence, led by Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO, who is the general rapporteur. We are also keen to engage the non-parties to the Convention to follow up. So I think it's an excellent idea. I'm sure that they are going to do that.

Of course, I leave when the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe achieves gender parity, for the first time since 1949!

It is a historic milestone, partly driven by the rule of changes and partly driven by you, because without you, we could never achieve it. So thanks to all the men who understood how important parity is. Women are equal partners of society as well.

Of course I have to tell you that we are no longer facing isolated attacks on gender equality.

What we are witnessing is a co-ordinated transnational backlash. Actors sharing narrative strategies and resources across borders to roll back rights and weaken democratic systems. This backlash does not only target women and LGBTQI people, it targets the very foundation of democracy, pluralism, the rule of law and, of course, social justice.

I also would like to thank the work of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of our former chairs, the current one, of course, Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO.

And of course Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Ms Petra BAYR, Ms Maria SYRENGELA, Ms Catia POLIDORI, Ms Annika STRANDHÄLL, and of course the Secretariat.

Can I tell you that we had no head of the Secretariat! So a very special thanks to Ms Louise BARTON and of course the whole team: Ms Elodie FISCHER, Ms Carolina LASÉN DIAZ, Ms Louise MORLON, Mr Giorgio LODDO, Ms Sorina LECLER and Ms Leonor TEJADO HINOJO, because I think without these amazing people we could not achieve what we achieved.

Yes we should have a round of applause.

[Applause]

Yes, and of course violence, as I told you, has no ideology. Women's rights are indispensable and human rights should not be questioned.

The last thing: I will go to the court because I got suspended imprisonment for one and a half years, three years probation.

May 11 is going to be the day when I go to the court, because I was part of a demonstration in Hungary, just to show my solidarity for peace.

So I hope that with the new Hungarian government, fingers crossed – nobody can be silenced.

So I am here for you, to thank you for the great work now at the end, to all the parliamentarians.

I just wanted to let you know, if you don't fight, you don't count.

I give very special thanks for all of you here, women and men, what you did for this House to get parity.

So I love you.

I will go in a good respect that this is going to be a very important report. I get great support from all of you. Just to show that we cannot allow any woman to die.

So let's make a good report!

Thank you so much.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Ms Zita GURMAI, thank you for your service, for your contribution and the passion you display when you speak.

I know that you'll be much-missed in what is your last appearance here, certainly for the time being, in this chamber.

Let's move on then. Could I ask Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO, the Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, if she wishes to speak?

Your 3 minutes, Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO.

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Thank you, Mister President.

It's hard to speak after you, Ms Zita GURMAI!

Dear colleagues,

Ever since the Gisèle Pelicot case came to trial in France, we have been talking about consent as if it were self-evident. But it isn't, and that's precisely the problem. If consent were truly integrated into our societies, in 2026, we would no longer be debating its definition, its proof or its absence.

What's more, the European Court of Human Rights would not be condemning member states for their failure to deal with sexual offences. The reality is more brutal. Our societies still tolerate grey areas, and these grey areas never benefit the victims. Consent is a collective blind spot. The recent failure of a common definition of rape at European level, despite being based on the simple principle that only a yes is a yes, is the most blatant demonstration of this.

So certain legal texts, such as the Istanbul Convention, are not mere standards, but veritable compasses guiding action in the real world. And we have to be willing to rely on them to move forward. And despite the refusal of certain states to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, it is up to us, with the support of the Group of Experts on combating violence against women and domestic violence (GREVIO), to demand concrete reforms and rigorous monitoring so that they fully assume their responsibilities towards the victims.

Today, you are being asked to vote on two rich reports that propose real mechanisms for combating sexual violence. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination urges you to support these two texts. I am thinking, in particular, of the practical application of protection orders, which are still insufficiently used by the judicial services to ensure the safety of victims.

That said, changing the law is not enough to change behaviour. If we go back over the course of history, the law appears to be one of the first great teachers of community life. It was not content to simply impose penalties, but drew invisible lines between what was permitted and what was prohibited, and in so doing shaped people's consciences. By learning to obey the rules, individuals also learned to think about their place among others. But as societies become more complex, this educational role shifts.

The school then became a central place, not only for transmitting knowledge, but also for shaping minds. Schools play a key role in the way sexual relations and relationships between individuals are perceived. In this context, teaching a culture of consent from the earliest age does not mean imposing moral rules, but learning to recognise and respect the desire, limits and words of others.

So the question we need to ask ourselves today is not whether we have made progress, but whether we are ready to question what, in our social norms, continues to produce non-consent. This morning, these are the last two reports submitted to the Assembly by an extraordinary parliamentarian who has worked hard for equality and women's rights, for social progress and against discrimination.

Personally, dear Zita, I have learned a great deal from you and your commitment. And I can say that on behalf of the members of the Commission, on behalf of the members of the Secretariat, on behalf of all the women and, I think, all the men who are here today, we'd like to thank you for all the work you've done at the Assembly.

Thank you, Zita.

Thank you very much.

Vote: Promoting the Istanbul Convention and improving its implementation: building on lessons learnt / Paving the way for a culture of consent

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The debate is now closed.

So we move on now to the consideration of the amendments.

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination has presented a draft resolution, you will see, entitled "Promoting the Istanbul Convention and improving its implementation: building on the lessons learnt".

It's Document 16372.

Two amendments have been tabled.

Now, I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that both amendments to the draft resolution, which were rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority, be declared as definitively rejected.

Is that so?

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): "That's right, Mr Chairman" (spoken in French).

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Firstly, I will deal with Amendment 1. So let me deal with Amendment 1.

Are there any objections to Amendment 1? I beg your pardon – if no one objects, I will consider the amendments to be rejected. Thank you.

Is there an objection to Amendment 1?

No.

Amendments 1 and 2 to the draft resolution are therefore rejected and will not be called.

There are no objections to amendments. Okay. There are no objections.

We will now then proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16372.

A simple majority is required.

The vote is now open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution is adopted.

The Committee on Equality and Non Discrimination has presented a Draft Resolution 16370 entitled "Paving the way for a Culture of Consent" to which one amendment has been tabled.

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

I call on Mr Pablo HISPÁN to support Amendment 1.

Okay. In that case I call the speaker to speak. Speaker 2, Amendment 1.

You have 30 seconds.

Ms Regina BASTOS (Portugal, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Thank you for your attention.

This is a genuinely technical amendment. It does not call into question the political objective that we all share.

On the contrary, it aims to ensure that this objective is translated into a solid, coherent and genuinely effective law.

A good law requires careful, rigorous drafting, in-depth legal analysis and the advice of specialists capable of anticipating the practical consequences of its application.

This is precisely what this amendment aims to ensure.

Thank you for your support.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Yes.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC): Mister President,

I'm sorry to say that this is for sure unfortunately not the aim of the amendment.

The aim of the amendment is to undermine the meaning of the legislation in Spain.

The "Yes Means Yes" legislation is a leading example for all of Europe.

We have to be thankful to the government and to the parliament of Spain for this legislation.

What we should really not do – and I really ask each and every one, even those who have a very prominent role in this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – to misuse this organisation here for national debates.

We are not in chambers in Spain or somewhere else. We are in the Council of Europe.

Please refrain from this.

So I strongly ask you to vote against this amendment.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): What is the opinion of the Committee on the amendment?

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): The Committee rejected the amendment.

Lord Carwyn JONES (United Kingdom, SOC, President of the Assembly): I will now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed.

Amendment 1 is therefore rejected.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16370.

A simple majority is required.

The vote is now open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution is adopted.

Address: H.E. Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ, Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues,

May I ask you to take your seats, so that we can continue with our agenda after celebrating.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to start the next part of our session.

May I ask you to take your seats and to calm down... I think now all selfies have been taken!

Thank you. Please, let's continue.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): We will now hear an address by His Eminence, Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ, Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After his address, Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ will take questions from the floor.

But first of all, let me welcome you. It's a great pleasure that you are with us.

Dear Chairman,

Welcome to this hemicycle which is the heart of our organisation.

You are no stranger to parliamentary life. You began your political career in the House of Peoples in 2000.

In 2006, you were elected to the House of Representatives, where you served three consecutive mandates.

Since 2022, you have held the office of Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since 2026, you have assumed the role of Chairman of the Presidency.

It is both a great honour and a sincere pleasure to receive you today on the occasion of your official visit.

Your political journey shows a strong and lasting commitment to public service, to democratic values and to strong institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

From your early work as a historian and academic to your responsibility at the highest level of the state, you have always worked to promote dialogue, stability and a European future for your country.

Since joining our organisation on 24 April 2002, and as we are about to mark the 24th anniversary of this membership in just a few days, your country has made steady progress in strengthening democracy, guided by the principles of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has supported this journey.

Today, this path remains essential.

Bosnia and Herzegovina clearly stated its goal of full membership in the European Union. It has shown its commitment to European values and policies.

At the same time, we know that challenges remain. Continued reforms, well-functioning institutions and lasting stability are key to moving forward on the European path.

In this context, dialogue, co-operation and a shared sense of responsibility are more important than ever.

Excellency, the floor is yours.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina): Esteemed President,

Distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address you as the Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the home of European democracy, an institution which for decades has safeguarded and promoted fundamental values, human dignity, freedom, equality and the rule of law.

I thank you for the adopted resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January this year, in which you expressed clear support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a committed member of the Council of Europe since 24 April 2002. During 24 years of membership, we have consistently demonstrated our commitment to fundamental values, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Our membership represented a strategic and civilisational choice.

Bosnia and Herzegovina links its future to the European system of protecting human rights and democratic governance. Next year, we will mark, in a dignified manner, 25 years of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership of the Council of Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina actively participates in the work of the Council of Europe. Among other things, I would highlight our contribution to the Council of Europe's cultural co-operation through membership in the Eurimages Fund. Thanks to this mechanism, films from Bosnia and Herzegovina have been made over the past two decades, in partnership with European producers. Our Sarajevo Film Festival has become an important platform for the implementation of the Council of Europe's cultural policies and for the development of the European audiovisual space. This long standing co-operation confirms that Bosnia and Herzegovina, through its institutions and the Sarajevo Film Festival, actively contributes to strengthening the European cultural space and shared democratic values.

Honourable members, we live in highly uncertain and turbulent times. The contemporary process of global geopolitical multipolarisation is faced with new geopolitical, geo-economic, geo-energetic, military, security and demographic global challenges. We are witnessing the decline of civilisational norms and values, aggression, wars, migration pressures, trade wars, climate change, energy insecurity, as well as the unpredictable consequences of the new technological revolution which, among other things, brings with it the unregulated development of artificial intelligence.

Global changes are significantly reflected in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country with a thousand-year history. I remind you that the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was subjected to brutal aggression from 1992 to 1995. During the aggression, grave crimes against humanity and other war crimes were committed, as well as genocide against the Bosniaks. This is the only genocide that took place in Europe after the Second World War.

Dangerous great state policies are still present today in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. The protagonists of great state policies have changed tactics, but the goal has remained the same. They are currently attempting to achieve it through political and diplomatic means in order to achieve their wartime objectives in peacetime. This is the main cause of all problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Dayton Constitution brought peace, but also numerous mechanisms of blockades and obstructions. The intention was for this constitution to evolve towards democratic standards and values such as those contained in the objectives of the Council of Europe. The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms is an integral part of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet evolved towards democratic standards and the European Convention has not been consistently implemented.

Ladies and gentlemen, last year we witnessed a dangerous attack on the constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The attack on the Dayton Agreement was initiated by the leaders of the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska, attempting to destroy the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and to prohibit the work of the state judiciary and security agencies. However, through the responsible actions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the High Representative and pro-democratic forces in the country, the worst scenario was prevented.

Unfortunately, the policy of undermining Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Dayton Agreement has also continued in 2026. At the beginning of this year, we learned that the leaders of the Bosnian entity, Republika Srpska, concluded a contract with a lobbying firm in which lobbying for the break-up of the internationally recognised country of Bosnia and Herzegovina was explicitly agreed. This is direct anti-Dayton and unconstitutional conduct that directly goes against peace and security. The Council of Europe, the United Nations, the European Union and the entire democratic world should be informed of these anti-Dayton moves. Together, we must not allow the escalation of such destructive and dangerous policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Bosnia and Herzegovina, without denying collective rights and collective identities, should become a civic state. This does not mean anyone's hegemony, but enabling citizens, regardless of their affiliation to a particular collective, to enjoy fundamental human rights and freedoms. As long as Bosnia and Herzegovina does not become a civic state, we essentially cannot be a well-functioning European state.

Bosnia and Herzegovina must abolish systemic discrimination, as also established in the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. All these judgements establish the existence of discrimination based on ethnic affiliation or place of residence. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been ordered to implement the necessary amendments to its constitution, from which all elements of discrimination must be removed. Discrimination is unacceptable in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in modern Europe. The lack of genuine democracy is in complete contradiction with the fundamental objectives of the Council of Europe. Therefore, it is the task of the progressive forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina to fight for a society in which all citizens are equal before the law.

Our goal is liberal democracy in which there will be no inequality. It is of key importance to consistently insist on the protection of human rights and freedoms. Bosnia and Herzegovina, de facto and de jure, should be a democratic state in which human rights and freedoms are not declaratory in nature. It is up to us to consistently implement the standards that we share with all members of this organisation. In this we expect partnership, but also principledness. European values must not be the subject of political compromise.

I recall that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted in 2006 an important resolution entitled "Constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina". In this resolution, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe requested that the mechanism of ethnic representation be replaced by representation based on civic principles, and that efficient and rational procedures for political decision-making be found. The same resolution called for a review of the territorial organisation of the country and its division into entities, cantons and municipalities, as well as the distribution of powers between the state and the lower levels of government, with a view to increasing efficiency and sustainability. These positions and assessments of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are equally relevant 20 years after their adoption.

Ladies and gentlemen, here in Strasbourg, in the Council of Europe, I particularly wish to warn of concerning proposals advocating for the further ethnic territorialisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a concept is contrary to the principle of universal citizenship, the prohibition of discrimination and the idea of integrative democracy. From the perspective of international human rights law, further ethnic division represents a form of discrimination. Such a concept formally offers protection for collectives, but in practice limits freedom of choice, political mobility and electoral equality. The consequence is not stability but the ghettoisation of political life. From the perspective of political practice, such solutions cement divisions, discourage constructive co-operation and lead to institutional deadlock.

Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot allow new lines of division. Our country needs a transformation of the existing model towards an inclusive, functional, civically-based democracy. The protection of collective identities may exist, but not at the cost of violating individual rights. Reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be guided by the principle of integration. It should be borne in mind that the Dayton Agreement is the foundation of peace, but that the European Convention is one of the foundations of modern democracy. It obliges us to consistently implement guaranteed human rights and freedoms.

Reforming the Dayton system does not mean abandoning peace; it means its evolution. It does not mean abolishing collective rights; it means aligning them with individual rights. It does not mean centralisation; it means functionality. As a member of the Council of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina has, among other things, accepted the obligation of the full and immediate application of standards prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal suffrage. These obligations, contained in the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights, are binding in nature and require legislative and constitutional reforms. Final judgements of the European Court of Human Rights do not leave room for partial solutions. Their implementation implies the systemic harmonisation of the constitutional and electoral framework with European standards of individual rights.

In other words, the right to stand for election and political representation must belong to every citizen under equal conditions, without constitutional or legal barriers based on ethnic or territorial affiliation. Only a regulatory framework based on equality, non-discrimination and the functionality of institutions can ensure a stable and sustainable democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The system established by the Dayton Agreement must become more functional.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we speak about the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is necessary to conduct the discussion in the categories of law, institutional functionality and international obligations. In that regard, I consider that in Bosnia and Herzegovina we should implement constitutional and electoral reform with the aim of eliminating systemic discrimination and the full harmonisation with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Consistently implementing the rule of law ensures the functionality of democratic institutions, which implies transparent electoral processes, electoral integrity, citizen trust in political representation, protecting human rights in the broadest sense, freedom of expression, freedom of the media, prohibiting discrimination, gender equality, protecting minority and vulnerable groups and building a democratic culture which implies strengthening local self-government, education for human rights and the institutional accountability of public administration.

Democratic values are not established only through norms, but also through everyday administrative practice. Ultimately, the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on the acceptance of simple legal facts. Membership in the European legal space implies the consistent implementation of common standards.

Ladies and gentlemen, what should be done in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina? Among other things, it is important to accelerate the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to full membership as part of the European Union and NATO. Take into account the previous opinions of the Venice Commission on the political, social, electoral and judicial system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Harmonise the political, social and economic system with the norms, values and standards of the European Acquis Communautaire on which the European Union is based. Undertake adequate measures to eliminate the systemic discrimination of citizens and harmonise electoral legislation with European electoral principles and standards.

At the end of this address I would like to express a concluding thought. The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in the comprehensive democratic reform of the social, economic and state structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which will ensure that the basic political subject is the individual as a free citizen.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ, for your most interesting and important and timely address.

Members of the Parliamentary Assembly will have questions to put to you now.

We will first hear questions from the speakers on behalf of the political groups, each followed by a response of Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ to those questions.

I want to remind you that the questions must be limited to 30 seconds and no more.

Colleagues should ask questions and not make speeches.

We start on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group with Mr Denis BEGIĆ.

Mr Denis BEGIĆ (Sweden, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President and "welcome" Mister President [in Bosnian].

The European Court of Human Rights has since 2009 repeatedly ruled, starting with the Sejdić and Finci case, that Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitution is discriminatory because it excludes citizens from running for the presidency based on ethnicity.

More than 15 years later, the judgments are still not implemented and discrimination remain in place.

So my question is really simple.

When will Bosnia and Herzegovina finally amend its constitution to ensure equal political rights for all citizens, regardless of ethnic background?

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ, you have the floor.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: In its constitution, Bosnia and Herzegovina includes the European Convention on Human Rights. According to which, if the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina was consequently fully implemented, we would not have those judgments by the European Court of Human Rights, including the Sejdić and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina judgment and all the subsequent judgments by the European Court of Human Rights.

Unfortunately, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, within Annex 4 of the Dayton Agreement, which is also the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we have a whole system which is hyper-sensitive when it comes to collective human rights, but on the other hand it is hyper-insensitive when it comes to individual human rights.

It is my opinion that we need to ensure individual human rights for all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in line with the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights so in that sense it is a task for progressive forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina to insist on the implementation of such judgements.

Unfortunately, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we also have certain destructive political forces which, for a long time now, have been blocking the implementation of said judgments as well as the consistent implementation of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a major problem for our country.

Still, I hope that with time we will have more and more pro-democratic and pro-European forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that the October elections will bring an even stronger position for the democratic and pro-European forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is one of the very important preconditions for the implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Next on behalf of the European People's Party is Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Your Excellency,

It's been more than 30 years since the war in Bosnia was over, but still the consequences of the war are still there.

My question is, how much do you devote in your policies to human recovery and mental health support after the war?

What lessons can you actually share with those societies and those countries which are actually only starting to implement such policies?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: Well, over 30 years ago, the aggression against the internationally-recognised Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was stopped. So, in the years and decades after that, the judgments were made by the highest courts of the United Nations, establishing that this was not about an internal civil war.

What this was was an aggression against an internationally-recognised state. The judgments confirmed that there was a genocide committed against the Bosnians of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also, the judgment by the UN Court established that there were also joint criminal endeavours taking place in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

30 years later, you are absolutely right: the consequences of the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina are still felt.

However, no problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina originated from Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of our problems were created or imported from abroad, from outside the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina wish to have peaceful lives, to live normal lives.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is full of Europeans. Our citizens are Europeans who wish to be part of the European Union.

Our strategic goals are full membership in the EU and NATO. In the last three years, we have accomplished certain significant results in that regard.

On 15 December 2022 specifically, Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained the status of a candidate for EU membership.

On 21 March 2024, the European Council adopted a decision to open negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the last three years, our foreign policy has been fully harmonised with the foreign and security policies of the European Union, to almost 100%.

We have been making progress towards full membership in NATO.

I really hope that, in the years to come and for the benefit of all its citizens, Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue making such progress, even quicker progress, in its ascension towards full membership in the EU and NATO.

In order to make this progress, we need to continue building trust, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in the whole region.

A major opportunity for catharsis in the whole region, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically when it comes to our neighbouring country of Serbia, was the adoption of the resolution on Srebrenica, adopted in 2024 by the United Nations General Assembly.

Unfortunately, the current leadership in Serbia did not seize that opportunity for catharsis.

Our policy is the policy of respecting the facts as well as the judgments of the UN Courts, as well as the struggle to build better regional co-operation and reconciliation based on peace and justice.

So, in that sense, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been sending some important global messages, lessons from the 1990s in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If those messages had been correctly understood, what happened after the aggression in Bosnia and Herzegovina perhaps would not have happened.

Today we can see the situation that the whole world is now in, which is a very turbulent global situation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an example that peace needs to be preserved, as well as international law; that neighbouring countries should not be interfering in the internal matters of Bosnia and Herzegovina; and that, all together, we need to find a way to reaffirm the Helsinki Final Act which speaks of that very topic in detail, as well as numerous other declarations of the United Nations.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We will now listen to the question of Mr Zsolt NÉMETH on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots and Affiliates.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President,

Welcome, in the name of a person who has prepared the last report.

Thank you for referring to that.

As you know, I have been working for five years as a rapporteur on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

My main question would be to you, do you support, President, the right of the Croatian community to elect its own member to the state presidency?

If you do, what kind of legal solution do you foresee to find a solution for this long lasting problem?

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we first of all need to respect the Dayton Peace Agreement and implement the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the previous elections, were in line with the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we have three members of the Presidency elected, one representing Bosnian people, one representing Croat people and one representing Serb people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, those three members are elected from certain ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, when they become members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they have the obligation, according to the oath they take, to respect and fight for the same human rights and citizens' rights of all people and nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

So in that sense, each member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a member of the Presidency of the whole state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, taking care of the human rights of all of our citizens.

The current member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Croat group in Bosnia and Herzegovina is fully legally elected.

I believe that our electoral legislation needs to be aligned and harmonised in a way that all the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of their ethnic background, will have an equal vote.

They have – and should have – the right to declare themselves as they wish in other European countries.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are no additional spaces for any lines of separation, for new discriminations, for any ethnic-based apartheid. Those times are over.

We need to build Bosnia and Herzegovina in line with European standards and principles.

That is the European future of our country.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next on my list, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, is Ms Liliana TANGUY.

Ms Liliana TANGUY (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

"Mister President" [spoken in Bosnian and French],

As we approach the next elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina scheduled for October 2026, how do you view the challenges that remain, particularly in terms of the transparency and integrity of the electoral process and its alignment with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights?

The EU recently reduced a significant part of the Growth Plan funds earmarked for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

What guarantees can you give that the remaining measures will be implemented to avoid the country losing further EU support?

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: Future elections, coming up in October this year, are very important elections for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I believe that citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina will give even more of their trust to the pro-European democratic forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to all the public polls that we had in Bosnia and Herzegovina, between 70% and 80% of our population wishes for the speedy, full membership of our country in the European Union.

It is up to Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries in the region to handle the challenges that we are facing.

So, for that sake, it is very important that the whole electoral process is transparent, that we utilise new electoral technologies, guaranteeing that the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina are transparent, fair and democratic.

In the last three years, we have accomplished very important results on our path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, but if you ask me if I am satisfied with the dynamic of this process – and now let's focus on the EU – I would say no, because this dynamic needs to be faster in the time ahead of us.

This is very important for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but why isn't it already faster? Because of certain destructive political forces acting in our country, which in 2025 specifically caused a major crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We had the open attacks against the constitutional order in our country. Only this year, we learned that leaders of the entity of the Republika Srpska engaged a lobbying consultancy in North America working on breaking down the Dayton Peace Agreement, and along with it the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This is the first time it has happened since the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, and this is very dangerous.

Unfortunately, partially to an extent, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is tied to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The attacks against the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been strengthened since the onset of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

So the global circumstances have been reflected in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as South-East Europe.

Still, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the institutions of our country, along with our friends in Europe and throughout the world, can preserve peace and security in our part of Europe by acting together.

Also, ensuring the implementation of the necessary reforms, necessary for the future of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

An example: in the last eight to ten years, we lost, due to brain drain, around 800 000 people. That includes Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats and others.

The question is, where have they ended up? Ninety-nine point nine per cent of those people ended up in the West: in EU member states. None of them went to Russia. That tells us all enough about what the majority of citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina truly wish and hope for.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The last one, on behalf of our five political groups, is Mr Georgios PSYCHOGIOS from the Group of the Unified European Left.

Mr Georgios PSYCHOGIOS (Greece, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you "Madam President" [spoken in French].

Your Excellency, allow me to stress two important sectors, such as access to education and access to healthcare, that affect the everyday life of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and are fundamental rights within the European Convention and the European Social Charter.

I want to ask you what steps and policies have been implemented in order to ensure adequate human and financial resources for a quality public healthcare system and an inclusive democratic education for all, together with sufficient facilities?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: Well, this is a very important question.

Unfortunately, the education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the health system in our country, are not at state-level jurisdiction. This is mostly entity-level jurisdiction and in some cases at cantonal level jurisdiction. However, in the last decades, specifically in the last years, we have made some progress in this area as well.

For the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina it is extremely important to have a well-functioning education system.

If we have an event in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that event cannot be presented in three different ways by three different truths.

We need to teach the new generation about human rights, about the building and the necessity of building a democratic society and the need to develop new generations, so that they would fully uphold those values throughout the educational institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, starting from elementary school through to secondary school system, through the university and higher education systems – though they have been increasing their quality, they have been establishing connections with the major European institutions in the area of education.

The same applies to health by the way. These processes definitely need to be even further upgraded in the future.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I will now give the floor to other speakers and will take them in groups of three.

Please also remind yourself that you have 30 seconds.

The first one is Piero FASSINO from Italy.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Thank you President, I really appreciated your speech.

My question derives from your speech, because we know that Bosnia and Herzegovina is an entity made up of three communities and two state entities.

This division, in the 30 years that separate us from the Dayton Accords, has actually resulted in a rigid ethnic management of all institutions that has often resulted in a paralysis of institutions.

How do you intend to overcome these obstacles?

You have spoken a lot about it but, concretely, what are the actions that you intend to take to ensure a much greater cohesion and unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, also in the light of the separatist movements, for example in Republika Srpska, which often jeopardise the very existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Now, Mr Saša MAGAZINOVIĆ from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mr Saša MAGAZINOVIĆ (Bosnia and Herzegovina, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

President BEĆIROVIĆ, I have a short but not so simple question.

When it comes to reconciliation and co-operation in the Balkans region, what are the preconditions and the necessary steps to be taken in the future?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The third in this group is Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA.

Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA (North Macedonia, SOC): Thank you.

Mr BEĆIROVIĆ, I would like to ask you what, according to you, would be the role of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for acceleration of the Western Balkans' EU full integration?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now, we come to the answers, please.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: Bosnia and Herzegovina has an excellent co-operation with the Republic of Italy. Italy is one of the major foreign trade partners of Bosnia and Herzegovina and we really wish to continue developing our co-operation with your country. Bosnia and Herzegovina, following the signing of the Dayton Agreement, ended up with a very complex constitutional structure.

So in Bosnia and Herzegovina we have two entities: we have cantons, cities, municipalities and other structures. However, what we need to keep in mind is that both entities and all the lower administrative and territorial units in Bosnia and Herzegovina are of multi-ethnic character. And according to the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the constitutions of the lower administrative units of our country, all citizens and all people in Bosnia and Herzegovina must be equal.

Regular people have a great co-operation among each other. The problem is the political elites. Because of the votes they are trying to obtain, or for any other potential reasons, they continue to try to cause tensions and disturbances in our society, and this is how they keep their positions of power. This is something that we need to keep in mind, together with our friends and with the mechanisms that were established by the Dayton Agreement. I think that we all together need to think of ways to prevent any potential abuses and blockades of the decision-making processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A very important role relates to two safeguards of the Dayton Agreement that exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Those are primarily the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina established in Annex 4 of the Dayton Agreement and the Office of the High Representative of the international community established in Annex 10 of the Dayton Agreement. Some are attempting to weaken those two institutions but any reckoning of the Office of the High Representative or the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina could have far-reaching consequences in our country.

The problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not the Office of the High Representative; the problem is those who are disputing the Constitution, and one of the key provisions of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina is that we are determined to maintain the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, there are destructive forces that are acting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that are disputing this, so we really need to preserve all those institutions that can unblock and restore the processes and phenomena that are against the Dayton Agreement.

When it comes to regional co-operation, Bosnia and Herzegovina is fully determined to maintain good regional co-operation and Bosnia and Herzegovina has never made any moves to cause problems in this regard. We always reach out to others.

And the problem is that in Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans, some of the capitals of some of the countries in the region still feature some of the politics of territorial expansionism; they are still promoting and nourishing this and have never given up on this. For example, Serbia. In 2024, in Belgrade, they adopted the so-called Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People, signed between a neighbouring country, the Republic of Serbia, and a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina called Republika Srpska. This is absolutely unacceptable. This whole gathering was held under the motto "one nation, one people, one union". So the conclusions of this gathering are absolutely against international law, against the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also question and jeopardise the sovereignty of some other countries in the region.

Could you even imagine a situation where any of the EU countries applied this approach? This would cause immense problems. I don't think this is the future of Europe. We need to nourish the principles of international law, we need to develop good economic co-operation and we need to abandon the policies and politics that led to the major tragedy that took place in our part of Europe in the 1990s.

Now, regarding the question how the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe can help Bosnia and Herzegovina: I would answer by thanking you for expressing strong support for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina in your last declaration. Thank you for clearly identifying those who jeopardise the constitutional order in Bosnia and Herzegovina and peace in our country.

It is very important to say that the Council of Europe insists on European standards, and values need to be upheld and lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We cannot have one set of rules for EU member states and certain European countries and a different set of rules applying to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina historically, geographically, communications-wise belongs to Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the heart of Europe and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we all need to continue to strengthen and apply European principles and European standards.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We now come to the last three members who have a chance to raise a question.

We start with Ms Seda GÖREN from Türkiye.

Ms Seda GÖREN?

Ms Seda GÖREN (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Welcome once again, Mister President.

How do you assess the potential of the Balkan Peace Platform, recently launched at the instigation of Türkiye, to strengthen regional stability and promote the Council of Europe's values in the Balkans?

What levers do you think would maximise its practical impact on the ground?

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Now Mr Bertrand BOUYX.

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE): Thank you, Madam Chairman,

Mister President,

More than 30 years after the Dayton Accords put an end to a bloody war, the Bosnians need support and understanding.

The logic of division is still at work.

Internal fractures are all the more dangerous in that international geopolitics can intervene at any time.

In short, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30 years after the Dayton agreement, remains a European weakness that could become, or return to becoming, a question of collective security in the future.

So my question is simple, Mister President: how can we help your country, help you to overcome its divisions and become part of the wider European family?

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Finally, Mr Mladen BOSIĆ from Bosnia Herzegovina.

Mr Mladen BOSIĆ (Bosnia and Herzegovina, EPP/CD): Thank you.

I have a question for Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ.

You blamed others for the dire situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, neighbours of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and your fellow politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Having in mind that you are and your party are a part of the ruling coalition in Bosnia and Herzegovina, do you have any responsibility in that sense?

Given that you have constantly called the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to intervene in Bosnia and Herzegovina, do you think that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a sovereign country?

Is it sustainable without external pressure?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ, please.

Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ (Chairperson of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina)*: Speaking on the Balkans platform offered by the Republic of Türkiye, we partially discussed this with the President of the Republic of Türkiye several days ago, on the occasion of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum meetings.

We want good co-operation, as good as possible, with all the EU members, with all NATO members.

We have a very good co-operation with the friendly Republic of Türkiye. All initiatives, all proposals which contribute to economic development, the lessening of tensions and which build a better future are definitely something that we should support.

Our foreign policy goals are clear, and we wish to implement them. They were unanimously adopted by the responsible state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I repeat, all ideas helping Bosnia and Herzegovina implement its foreign policy goals – all ideas – enabling stabilisation in the whole region are always only welcome.

The second question had to do with the situation 30 years after signing the Dayton Agreement.

Well, we are a country where there are a number of challenges that we are facing, for sure. However, we do have to say that we have established some significant progress in different areas. This has been recognised by the EU institutions as well as others. It has been obvious that when there are no obstructions, when there are no blockades, we can, indeed, take significant strides forward towards membership in the EU and NATO.

"How to fight those in Bosnia and Herzegovina who have been causing problems?" is a question that we do need to answer.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is not an isolated island; it is part of Europe. Indeed, global developments are definitely affecting the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. A part of that problem is caused by such global developments.

Despite all that though, we are trying to maintain a principle-based foreign policy of our country, reflecting the state-defined interests of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the foreign policy goals of our country.

Though, to that extent, it is important to say that Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to be a reliable ally to the EU and NATO. This is something that we have indicated in the past. We have expressed full solidarity with Ukraine. I personally went to Kyiv. I spoke to President Volodymyr ZELENSKY. I expressed full support to the people of Ukraine.

The voice of Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to be heard throughout Europe, throughout the United Nations.

We are against all the policies jeopardising human rights and civic freedoms of people throughout the world.

We express solidarity towards the Palestinian people in Gaza and all other people throughout the world who are suffering.

Finally, the third question was related to the neighbours, and some of the politicians, and so on.

I would not say that I blamed anyone. Everything I said is also in official reports, also in reports submitted by the High Representative to the United Nations Security Council.

Those facts can also be found in the reports of the European Parliament, the Council of Europe. Those are facts that were established by almost all states – everyone clearly condemned certain things: Washington, London, Ankara, Madrid, the whole of Europe and the whole democratic world has condemned some of the activities that are focusing on the undermining of Dayton Agreement and the constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

So this is not my personal opinion. Those are the things that are as they are. We need to call them by their right name. We need to call out and identify those things before they jeopardise peace and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to its constitution, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a sovereign state.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state that will be even more sovereign if there were fewer anti-Dayton politics and anti-Dayton forces acting in order to jeopardise the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Denis BEĆIROVIĆ,

On behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly, I want to thank you very warmly for answering our questions so concisely and that you could take so many. Thanks a lot for that. It was a pleasure. I very much hope that we can celebrate the 25th anniversary of the membership of your country at the Council of Europe next year together. Thank you very much.

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of Committees. These are set out in Documents Commission 2026 04, Addendum 2.

Are there any proposed changes in the membership agreed to?

They seem to be agreed.

So there is no option following Rule 44.8.

I refer that. No, I don't refer something to anybody.

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

The sitting is adjourned.