



Provisional edition

Monday 28 September 2026, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the fourth part-session

Opening of sitting No 28

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): I declare the Fourth Part-Session of the 2026 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe open and ask everyone to take your chairs.

Dear colleagues, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We have no army. We have no fleet. No threat to make.

We have standards, judgements and a word to keep. They turned out to be the most durable defences Europe ever built. Tanks rust. Judgements do not.

This morning we will award the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. Three names on the shortlist. One laureate. Behind all four women, the same arithmetic: courage costs. It costs careers. It costs freedom. It costs families. Sometimes it costs a life.

We do not hand out this prize as a decoration. We hand it out as a shield.

Václav Havel knew what a powerless person can achieve. He also knew what can happen to that person the moment the world looks away. So let this be heard in every capital watching us today: when a human rights defender is named in this Chamber, the cell walls get thinner. She stops being alone. He stops being alone.

Nobody's courage recovers in isolation. It recovers when somebody replies.

Now to the week ahead. There are seven subjects I would like to raise. I will be short on all of them.

First, Ukraine.

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.

Ukraine is fighting a war and running a democracy at the same time. Martial law is a hard floor to do clean politics on. That is exactly why we stay close. And exactly why we stay demanding. A friendship that asks nothing is not friendship. It is applause, and it is a hollow applause.

Two commitments from this Assembly.

On the one hand: anti-corruption. Our support is not a blank cheque, and nobody says that louder than Ukrainians themselves. Fighting corruption is not a favour we ask of Kyiv. It is armour we help them put on. It is the part of the war that continues after the shooting stops.

On the other hand: elections. When conditions allow, Ukraine will vote. And a vote cannot be improvised. Voter lists; displaced citizens; millions abroad; soldiers at the front. That work begins before the ceasefire, not after it. Peace always arrives faster than the paperwork.

This Assembly is ready. Let us be useful early, not surprised late.

Second, democratic forces and oppressive regimes.

We welcome a new Belarusian democratic representatives to this Assembly, six new colleagues. You are very warmly welcome here.

A dictatorship indeed can empty a parliament at home. It cannot empty one in Strasbourg.

I have just returned from the United States, where I sat with colleagues working on the same question we are: what a democratic Russia could look like, and who is already building it. My conclusion is simple. We are doing the same work in separate rooms. It is time to open the door between them. I intend to open it, and I intend to keep it open.

Russia is not one man. Russia is also the people he has jailed, exiled and silenced. They outnumber him.

And Russia is more than Moscow. We have deliberately deepened our contacts with the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation, peoples whose languages, whose land and whose young men this war has consumed far out of proportion. Empire always sends the edges to the front first. A democratic Russia will only be credible if it is a decolonised one.

Third, Ceuta and the wider migration challenge.

Our compass is the Chişinău Declaration: human rights and solidarity together, never one traded against the other.

Borders can be managed. Dignity cannot be suspended.

And we must name the second problem clearly. Human beings are being pushed at our borders, as a result of desperation and wrong promises, or as an instrument of hybrid attacks, to squeeze political concessions out of us. That is a war tactic in a humanitarian disguise. But people misused as ammunition are still people.

So our answer is clear: eliminate poverty and hopelessness. Refuse blackmail. Protect the hostages.

Fourth, the environment.

We hold a special debate this week, and I want to be plain about where I stand.

This organisation has protected people from torture, from discrimination, from arbitrary power. It has not yet protected them from poisoned water and unbreathable air.

There is no human right that survives an uninhabitable continent.

I want us to move, together, towards a binding convention on the right to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment. Not a declaration. Not a recommendation. A treaty, with binding commitments behind it. A right without robust implementation mechanisms is only a wish.

And let us start now. I ask the responsible committees to open the preparatory work this autumn, so that the text exists before the next disaster dictates it for us.

Fifth, the future of the Council of Europe.

We all welcome the efforts to ensure that the Council of Europe remains relevant in the current volatile political context, that it remains fit for purpose and capable of effectively responding to current and emerging challenges – and we all know that there are several of them everywhere – while preserving its unique identity and continuing to play its statutory role.

Our Assembly is one of the two statutory organs of this organisation.

A bird flies with two wings. Clip one, and it does not fly more effectively, it falls. This is why we will develop a comprehensive consolidated position in the form of a report.

To prepare the ground and move fast, we took the decision to hold a General Policy Debate on the “Council of Europe: grounded in core values to meet the challenges ahead” during this week already. The format of the debate will allow us to hear the views of political group leaders and Committee Chairs on the future of the organisation.

I look forward to working in synergy with the Secretary General and the Committee of Ministers to ensure that the Council of Europe continues to play its important role in maintaining Europe as a continent where human rights, rule of law and democracy are the core principles.

Sixth, Rome.

In mid-October we meet at the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, where Canada will have a substantial voice for the first time. It is not only the European Union that's moving closer to Ottawa. It is also our organisation.

Our values were never a regional speciality. Partners are not a luxury item. In this decade they are infrastructure: synergy, political weight, economic safeguards.

When the ice gets thinner, you do not stand alone. You link arms. That is the work I am doing on your behalf, on every continent that will take our call, and I will keep doing it.

And finally, governing artificial intelligence.

We have the world's first binding Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. First. Not second.

We also have something new: the people who build these systems are asking themselves for guardrails. We know why: they are afraid of claims for damages. When the engineers ask for brakes, parliaments have run out of excuses.

So, a request to every delegation in this room, and I will follow it up personally, please take the Framework Convention home. Put ratification on your committee agenda this autumn. Tell me in the spring how it continued, what happened. A convention with signatures and only two ratifications, so far, protects nobody. It is a promise locked in a drawer.

Machines calculate. Humans decide. Because we define the values, and because we are the ones to be held accountable. No technical system has ever stood before a court and answered for what it did.

And this debate cannot stop at the Atlantic. Europe and North America write these rules together, or we both live under rules written by someone nobody ever elected.

Colleagues, one week, one method. Argue hard. Respect our code of conduct. Decide together. Then go home and implement.

I do not want a quiet presidency, I want a useful one. And I cannot have one alone. Look around this Chamber. Separately we are opinions. All together we are a standard.

Democracy rarely dies in a coup. It dies one small concession at a time. Let us never concede to anything that undermines human rights and rule of law.

I want to end with a quote of Mr Ernst BLOCH from his book *The Principle of Hope*, and I read it in the German version. So first, the German, and then the English translation of this quote: "Die Hoffnung ist ins Gelingen verliebt statt ins Scheitern." In English: "Hope is in love with success rather than failure."

With this I declare the autumn part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe open.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Before I move on to our first item, I remind members that, in order to be registered for the sitting, you should insert your badge when you take your seat, and keep it inserted for at least 30 seconds.

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

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.

The first item on the agenda is the examination of credentials of new members.

The names of the members and substitutes are in Document 16488. If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified.

Are any credentials challenged?

I don't see any.

So that means that the new delegations are credentialed.

The next item on the agenda is the election of Vice Presidents of the Assembly in respect of Armenia and Finland, Document AS/INF (2026) 02, revision 3.

The candidates are Mr Hayk KONJORYAN and Ms Tuula HAATAINEN. If there is no request for a vote, Mr Hayk KONJORYAN and Ms Tuula HAATAINEN will be declared elected.

I do not see anybody asking for a vote.

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in document Commissions (2026) 10 and Addendum 1, and Commissions (2026) 11.

Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Assembly Committee agreed to?

They are agreed to. Thank you very much.

Before we examine the draft agenda, the Assembly needs to consider requests for debates under the urgent and current affairs procedure.

The Bureau has received the following:

Current affairs debate requested by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination: "Targeted attacks on LGBTI community and its rights in Türkiye a further alarming sign of democratic backsliding".

The second: urgent procedure debated requested by Mr Sam RUSHWORTH and 21 other members of the Assembly: "Repression and targeted attacks on LGBTI persons and defenders in Türkiye".

Current affairs debate requested by the leaders of the five political groups: "Solidarity with Ceuta, a test case for Europe".

And an urgent procedure debate requested by the leaders of the five political groups: "Fake 'elections' in Russia and its destabilising attacks on Europe".

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau decided to recommend to the Assembly to hold two urgent debates and one current affairs debate during this part-session, as follows:

An urgent procedure debate requested by Mr Sam RUSHWORTH and 21 other members of the Assembly: "Repression and targeted attacks on LGBTI persons and defenders in Türkiye".

Second, a current affairs debate requested by the leaders of the five political groups: "Solidarity with Ceuta, a test case for Europe".

And third, an urgent procedure debate requested by the leaders of the five political groups: "Fake 'elections' in Russia and its destabilising attacks on Europe".

Does the Assembly agree with the Bureau's recommendation?

Thank you very much.

So the Bureau's recommendation is accepted.

The current affairs debate on "Solidarity with Ceuta, a test case for Europe" will be held on Tuesday morning and the first speaker will be Lord Michael GERMAN of the United Kingdom.

The request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "Fake 'elections' in Russia and its destabilising attacks on Europe" will be referred to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy for report and the debate will take place on Wednesday afternoon jointly with the debate on "How to ensure the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning the Russian Federation, including payment of compensation awarded".

And third, the request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "Repression and targeted attacks on LGBTI persons and defenders in Türkiye" will be referred to the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination for report and will be debated on Thursday afternoon.

The next item of business is the adoption of the agenda of the Fourth part of the 2026 Ordinary Session as in Document 16469 provision 2. The draft agenda submitted for the Assembly's approval was brought up to date and adapted by the Bureau this morning.

I remind you that we have just agreed on two urgent procedure debates and one current affairs debate set out in the draft before you.

To allow more members to participate in this very busy part-session, the Bureau has decided to reduce speaking times in debates on Tuesday and Wednesday to two minutes. So please respect this two-minute time frame.

I would like to inform you about the decision made by the Bureau on special agreements for a general policy debate on Tuesday morning on "Council of Europe: grounded in core values to meet the challenges ahead". I just mentioned that in my introduction. Given the limited time available, participation will be restricted to the speakers on behalf of the five political groups and chairpersons of committees, following an opening contribution from Mr Knut ABRAHAM. Further debate on this subject with wider participation is envisioned for a future part-session.

Is the draft agenda as amended agreed?

It is.

Thank you very much.

Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the parliamentary elections in Armenia (7 June 2026) / Observation of the early elections to the Assembly of Kosovo (7 June 2026)

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): So, the next item on the Agenda is the debate on the Progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee. It's Document 16484 and Addendums 1 and 2.

The Progress Report will be presented by Mr Mogens JENSEN.

With this, we will consider the report by the Ad Hoc Committee of the Bureau on Observation of the parliamentary elections in Armenia (7 June 2026), that's Document 16486, revised and presented by Mr Damien COTTIER; and the report by the same committee on Observation of the early elections to the Assembly of Kosovo on 7 June 2026), that's Document 16486, revised and presented by Mr Iulian BULAI.

The speakers list closed at 4 p.m. on Sunday.

We will suspend this item before 12:30 p.m. to enable the prize award ceremony for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. The debate will then continue at 3:30 p.m. this afternoon.

I call Mr Mogens JENSEN to present the Progress Report. Mogens, you have 7 minutes now, and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Please, the floor is yours.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Madam President.

Dear colleagues, at its meeting on 26 June, the Bureau appointed me as rapporteur for this report which covers the activities from the last Bureau meeting of the third part-session and until this morning's pre-session Bureau meeting.

As you know, the Progress Report is essentially a compilation of the decisions taken at Bureau meetings. Furthermore, Addendum 2 to the present Progress Report presents the conclusion of the Committee of the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights on the list of candidates submitted by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Spain and Switzerland.

Let me now first highlight some of the main activities and other events that occurred during the period covered by the present report. First, election observation missions. This period was very rich and intense in terms of electoral activities. On 23 August, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe observed early parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan. The delegation was headed by our colleague Ms Sevilay ÇELENK.

A 20-member delegation of the Assembly led by our colleague Ms Elisabetta GARDINI travelled to Morocco from the 21 to 24 September to observe and conduct the parliamentary elections there. A pre-electoral delegation from the Assembly headed by Mr Jone BLIKRA visited Bosnia and Herzegovina from 15 to 17 September to assess the electoral and political environment ahead of the observation of the general elections which are scheduled for 4 October. And moreover, subject to receiving an invitation, the Bureau also decided to set up an ad hoc committee to observe early parliamentary elections in Serbia and presidential elections in Kazakhstan.

Of other relevant initiatives during this period, I will mention that on 2 August, an ad hoc committee of the Bureau (chaired by our President, Ms Petra BAYR) participated in European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Assembly's participation in this commemoration reflected its continued commitment to preserving the memory of the Roma and Sinti genocide and to promoting equality, inclusion and human dignity across Europe.

At the end of August, the selection panel of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize met in Prague and decided on the three shortlisted candidates for the 2026 edition of the prize. These are, in alphabetical order, Ms Masih ALINEJAD, Ms Márta PARDAVI and Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH. The Bureau took note of the list at its meeting on the 3 September and I invite all of you to attend the ceremony taking place here in the hemicycle later this morning at 12:30 p.m.

On 3 September in Paris, members of the Bureau had the opportunity to exchange views with the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, who was on her third day in her new position. Please allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate Ms Tanja GONGGRIJP once again on her election.

Then to a number of issues which were high on the political agenda of the reporting period and will continue to be among our key priorities in the months to come. Ukraine must remain our number one priority. I deeply regret the Russian Federation's continued escalation of the war of aggression over the summer. At this critical moment, our Assembly must stand firmly with Ukraine and do everything in its power to ensure that those responsible for this aggression are brought to justice. This includes stepping up our support for the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine and work to make it fully operational as soon as possible.

Secondly, we have all witnessed the devastating effects of climate change across Europe and far beyond over the summer. Record-breaking heat, historic droughts and devastating wildfires have once again shown that climate change is not a distant threat; it is reality. They are a stark warning that our climate commitments must be translated into concrete and urgent action. I therefore very much welcome that on Thursday this Assembly will hold a general policy debate on Europe, the fastest-warming continent, accelerating climate action with young people.

Another matter of huge concern is the unwanted effects of the development of artificial intelligence (AI). While the Council of Europe has a groundbreaking framework convention on AI, and we as Parliamentarians should do everything in our power so that all member states of the Council of Europe ratify it, there are growing fears regarding the dangers of artificial general intelligence (AGI). These fears have been exacerbated by a series of recent incidents that have occurred during the summer. In light of the pressing nature of the situation, I believe that the Assembly should raise awareness of this essential risk and encourage a global discussion about the development of AGI.

Finally, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has continued to follow developments concerning the governance of international football in line with its long standing work on good governance, human rights and accountability in sport. In this context, let me inform you that tomorrow the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media is due to adopt a statement on governance, human rights and accountability in football, criticising the developments under President Gianni INFANTINO at FIFA, underlining the importance of transparency, accountability and independent scrutiny in international football governance. This follows the Assembly's long-standing work in this area.

To conclude, I remain at your disposal should you require further information on the activities of the Bureau during this period. Thank you.

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

And now we will hear Mr Damien COTTIER, presenting this report on the observation of elections in Armenia.

You have 5 minutes, Damien.

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you.

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen,

Parliamentary elections were held in Armenia on 7 June.

On polling day, the electorate had a genuine choice and made their views clear.

Overall, the elections were well organised, technically sound, peaceful and inclusive. The legal framework provided a solid basis, the electoral administration enjoyed the confidence of the main stakeholders, and, in the vast majority of polling stations, the voting proceeded smoothly.

But let us be clear: Armenian democracy came under significant external pressure.

The geopolitical context was extremely tense, marked by direct Russian interference of an unprecedented nature: trade restrictions, threats to energy supplies, diplomatic pressure, influence campaigns and direct security threats at the highest level. Threatening messages portrayed Armenia's European aspirations as a threat in order to influence voters.

The multi-party delegation which I had the honour of leading comprised 22 members from 15 states, the two co-rapporteurs and representatives of the Venice Commission and the Secretariat.

I would like to thank my colleagues and the technical teams, as well as the Council of Europe Office in Yerevan, for their commitment.

I would like to thank the Armenian authorities for their invitation, as part of the follow-up procedure.

We commend the professionalism of the polling station staff, as well as the constructive attitude of the majority of candidates, observers and voters.

Yes, overall, things went well on the day of the election. But an election is not just about a single day. Far from it!

And here, our assessment has highlighted weaknesses and shortcomings:

The campaign was fierce and highly polarised. Allegations of vote-buying led to numerous prosecutions, particularly against opposition candidates and activists.

Pressure exerted on civil servants, as well as generous social and economic measures announced by the government ahead of the elections, raised serious concerns.

Campaign finance is still inadequately regulated.

The media landscape is pluralistic, but it is highly polarised.

Online, disinformation, AI-generated content and fake accounts have fuelled division and sought to discredit political opponents.

Finally, the Central Electoral Commission's invalidation of the results from several polling stations – which were decisive for an opposition party's parliamentary representation – raises concerns. This decision was crucial in determining whether that party had reached the 4% electoral threshold. The final result gave it

3.99%, and therefore: no seats. Holding new elections in the districts concerned would have been a perfectly valid option. It was rejected by the Central Electoral Commission without any real explanation. A decision of such significance must be based on sound, transparent and verifiable grounds; unfortunately, this was not the case.

Madam President, I would like to say that, following these elections, despite the shortcomings and external pressures of a worrying nature, the Armenian people have shown great resilience. They have placed their trust in the outgoing government to continue on a path based on the values of the Council of Europe.

This places an obligation on the elected authorities.

Our report proposes a roadmap to address these shortcomings, in particular by strengthening protection against interference; guaranteeing the independence of the electoral administration; penalising the misuse of administrative resources; combating disinformation; and explicitly providing for a new election to be held if fundamental representation is at stake.

Armenia has demonstrated that it can organise technically successful, peaceful and inclusive elections.

Voters had a genuine choice.

But a democracy is also measured by equal opportunities, impartial information, effective redress mechanisms, public trust and the ability to withstand pressure. And in these areas, progress still needs to be made.

The authorities have a clear mandate; they must now fulfil it.

Our Assembly and the Venice Commission stand alongside the authorities to consolidate Armenia's institutions on the basis of the Council of Europe's standards and its electoral cycle.

Thank you.

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

And I now call Mr Iulian BULAI on the other election report.

You also have 5 minutes.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you.

Madam President,

Dear Secretary General,

Dear colleagues,

I had the honour to chair our 11-member Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) delegation that observed the early parliamentary elections to the Assembly of Kosovo on 7 June 2026.

We were the only international organisation invited to observe these elections. And here you see the exceptional mandate and profile of PACE. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) wasn't there, obviously. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) weren't there. So it's been a great responsibility on our shoulders to have this mission, and we have gladly answered this invitation.

These elections were called after a prolonged institutional crisis. The 120 members of the Assembly elected in December last year failed to elect a president within the constitutional time frame, leading to the Assembly's dissolution. For the third time in 16 months, voters were asked to return to the polls to elect their representatives. This inevitably generated public frustration and political fatigue, resulting in a sharp fall in turnout to 37 compared with approximately 45 in the previous elections.

Our delegation concluded that the elections were conducted peacefully and professionally, without major incidents. The Central Election Commission managed the process efficiently, electoral dispute mechanisms functioned effectively, and voters were able to exercise their right to vote freely. This achievement deserves recognition. We also welcome the reduction in electoral complaints and the measures taken to prevent a recurrence of the manipulation of preferential votes, which was identified during last year's election.

However, we heard serious concerns about unequal conditions of competition, particularly the use of public resources and last-minute government measures widely perceived as favouring the incumbent party.

Now, our recommendations are practical and focused, and we call for the following:

An impartial and depoliticised electoral administration;

A revision of regulations that unnecessarily restrict independent domestic election observations;

Transparent rules and effective sanctions against the misuse of administrative resources;

Greater transparency in party and online campaign financing;

Improved accessibility for voters with disabilities;

And fair ethnic and linguistic representation in local electoral bodies.

And as a result of this election, Mr Albin KURTI's self-determination movement remained the strongest political force in the Assembly with 47% of the vote and 53 seats. The Kosovo Democratic Party retained 22 seats, while the Democratic League of Kosovo, joined by former President Vjosa OSMANI, gained three seats, bringing its total to 18. Srpska lista, which was able to register without undue obstacles this time, won nine out of 10 seats reserved for the Kosovo Serbs community.

Our message is very clear after this election observation mission, and I will quote an ambassador without saying his name out of the meetings we've had in Kosovo during the June visit: "Until this moment, probably the greatest challenges of Kosovo were the international recognition challenges outside Kosovo. The biggest challenge of Kosovo now is inside Kosovo, within its parliament, with the trust being given by people to the politicians that are not being able to create a majority".

So this is a serious call to both Mr Albin KURTI's party and the opposition. Try to understand the great responsibility you have been given, the amount of trust you have been given, because otherwise people will strengthen their sense of fatigue with elections, and this will have a negative impact not only on you personally as politicians, but on the whole country.

And there are 10 days left for Kosovo to elect its president. The deadline is 6 October. Please understand the mandate you have got from the Kosovo people in order to elect the president. Otherwise, we'll continue the cycle of elections, and you are about to call new elections in November. That is very regrettable, and we call upon Kosovar politicians to create a majority and designate a country president. We are here to assist and to help, but now the responsibility is on your side.

Thank you for entrusting me with leading this mission.

And thank you for all the staff support and also the support of the vice chair, Ms Maria SYRENGELA. Thank you.

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

We will now start a debate with the representatives of the political groups. And the first on my list is, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO.

Please, you have the floor – 3 minutes.

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC)*: Thank you, Madam President.

Honourable members,

The Bureau Progress Report reminds us that between June and September, the Assembly was working on the outline for the conclusions of the third part-session, while finalising the agenda for the fourth part-session.

Of course, continuity in our priorities is important. If we are to maintain consistency, equality and protection for women, we should ensure that that issue be part of the structural approach. It shouldn't be an isolated debate.

In the debate on electoral reform in Armenia, progress has been made. The fact is, however, none of the electoral lists are headed up by women. A certain number of seats are still *de facto* reserved for men. This does not mean equal opportunities.

Moreover, gender violence is still a serious and structural problem. Let us make it clear: Armenia has to sign up to the Istanbul Convention. Not as a political gesture, but as a binding commitment to justice. The democratic credibility of the country depends on this.

So pressure from outside, internal pressure and a displacement crisis. In the face of these, democracy is not a luxury, it's essential. In the face of external influence and internal dissent, protecting women is essential.

The Istanbul Convention is the Council of Europe's most important instrument for the protection of women. Its full protection would underpin the democratic resilience of the country, which is necessary if we are to guarantee safety and dignity to all women and girls in the country.

Secondly, the conflict with Azerbaijan and the elections which took place against the backdrop of the normalisation of relations with Azerbaijan and the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. This is not merely rhetorical. This affects hundreds of thousands of lives and has a direct impact on trust in institutions.

Moreover, the borders and the future of displaced populations remain an ongoing challenge which must be addressed with a keen eye on human rights. Armenia needs technical support for elections. Equality and protection against violence, however, are still structural issues that can't be allowed to wait.

Madam President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The challenges facing us today remind us that democracy is not something we can ever take for granted. The Bureau Progress Report to the Assembly shows that we have to continue working on human rights, democratic participation and the rule of law throughout Europe.

Let's maintain our commitment with consistency, determination and an eye to the future.

Thank you.

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

Now, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Ricardo CARVALHO.

Mr Ricardo CARVALHO (Portugal, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

I had the honour of being part of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) observation mission for the 7 June parliamentary elections in Armenia. It was an opportunity to witness on the ground a particularly important moment for the future of the country and to better understand the profound political and geopolitical transformation that Armenia is undergoing.

These elections took place in a particularly challenging context. Significant regional tensions, a redefinition of the country's external relations and unprecedented external pressure and interference, particularly from the Russian Federation, through economic pressure, trade restrictions, threats related to energy supplies and information operations aimed at influencing voters choices.

Despite this context, Armenian citizens were offered a genuine choice between different political alternatives and participation in a process that international observation mission considered to be generally well run.

Naturally, challenges remain. Strengthening the rule of law, confidence in the institutions, media freedom and pluralism, institutional independence and the protection of democratic space all require continuous work. These are challenges that the Council of Europe must continue to follow closely and where it should remain ready to support Armenia.

But there is one dimension on this election that deserves particular emphasis. As the report of the Assembly explicitly states, the results demonstrate the Armenian people's choice of a pro-European path and their democratic resilience in the face of significant external pressures. That choice must be respected. Armenia's rapprochement with Europe should not be understood as a choice imposed from the outside, it must result from the sovereign will of its citizens and from the country's own commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

This is precisely why the role of the Council of Europe is so important. It is not for us to choose Armenia's future. Our role is to help ensure that Armenians can freely choose their own future.

And as someone who was on the ground during these elections, I would conclude with one simple conviction. A more democratic, more sovereign Armenia, closer to Europe, also contributes to a safer Europe and a more stable region.

Thank you very much.

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

Next on my list is on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH please.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, President.

Dear Secretary General,

Rapporteurs,

I was also privileged to participate in the Armenian elections – a pearl of European cultural heritage – which, as was said, is a country with a solid basis for the electoral system.

I would only like to make one remark, and I ask your attention to this aspect. Freedom of religion must be respected, and arresting bishops is not in line with basic democratic freedoms.

Also, I would like to welcome our new colleagues in the organisation, and I hope we will be able in the future to work along the lines of the basic principles of our organisation.

Secondly, I would like to touch upon the democratic situation in Hungary. As you know, half a year ago, there was an election in Hungary. And the experience, instead of being constructive collaboration between the two sides of the political spectrum, was an organised revenge against the former government; a kind of state capture took place and the annihilation and intimidation of the main opposition party.

This is unfortunately a European trend. I would like to draw your attention to the very worrying signs in Portugal, in Germany and in other countries in this regard. This morning, for example, two ministers' immunity was lifted in the Hungarian National Assembly's extraordinary session, and then they were arrested – Minister Balázs HANKÓ and Minister Miklós SESZTÁK.

Is this the rule of law or is this the rule of arbitrariness?

I hope that our monitoring mechanisms will be useful in reflecting these developments in our member states, not just in Hungary. And I hope that these monitoring mechanisms will perform successfully in saving our basic fundamental values.

And finally, a few remarks on the reform process which was started by our Secretary General. We Conservatives highly appreciate the dynamic work of the Secretary General. But I would like to make clear at this stage that no reform can go without the Parliamentary Assembly. And if the Council of Europe is the soul of Europe, I would say that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) is the soul of the Council of Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

And now, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Claude KERN.

Mr Claude KERN (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam Chair,

My dear colleagues,

Please accept my apologies, but for my final contribution, I wished to take some liberty with the task set before me. I was asked to take stock of the last few months, but I shall broaden this to cover the nine years that have passed since I joined this House in 2017, because the world has changed.

War has returned to our continent. And we have seen democratic principles that we thought were firmly established being eroded.

I am thinking of Ukraine, of course, but also of Georgia. I had the opportunity to monitor developments in that country as part of a mission you entrusted to me, during which we saw the rule of law, political pluralism and civil liberties erode, year after year.

But we would be wrong to believe that these abuses concern only a few states. Today we see major democracies sanctioning international judges or refusing to invite international observers to their elections. What seemed unthinkable a few years ago is now becoming possible.

I have just returned from an election observation mission in Morocco. The poll was organised under favourable conditions. However, fewer than four in 10 registered voters cast their ballots.

This is a vital lesson: simply organising elections is not enough to sustain a democracy.

When citizens stop voting, we must regard this abstention as a sign of failure. And France has no lessons to give in this regard.

We often cite pressure, disinformation and foreign interference. These things do exist, and we must combat them. But it would be too easy to stop there.

We parliamentarians also bear a responsibility. And I accept my share of that responsibility.

Have we always managed to honour our commitments? To address the concerns of our fellow citizens? To defend our institutions, even when they go against our wishes?

Over the years, I have observed elections, monitored countries and voted on resolutions. I have also come to realise the limits of our action. We raise the alarm, we condemn, we make recommendations, and yet, despite all this, the situation continues to deteriorate.

But these limitations must never become an excuse for giving up.

It is precisely when our tools seem inadequate that our principles must remain firm.

We must stand firm on the rule of law.

Stand firm on the independence of the judiciary.

Stand firm on press freedom.

Stand firm on pluralism.

Stand firm on the truth of the facts.

And stand firm on the conviction that underpins the values of the Council of Europe and our Assembly: force must never prevail over the law.

I leave this Assembly concerned, yes, but not resigned.

Democracy does not belong to us. It has been entrusted to us.

It is up to us, as political leaders, to prove ourselves worthy of it.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. And all the best for your future plans, wherever they lead you.

I'm very sorry that I now have to interrupt the list of speakers. So Mr George LOUCAIDES, you will be in the afternoon because we now come to the ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

May I ask the nominees and the jury to come in.

Prize Award Ceremony: Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, welcome to one of the highlights of this week for sure. Welcome to the 14th ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

As President of this Assembly, it is a great honour for me to open it.

Let me be clear from the start. Human rights are not just one priority among many. They are our first priority. They are the reason why this Assembly exists. And today we put them centre stage.

I'm especially happy that we are joined today by the 2021 winner of this prize, one of the Belarusian opposition leaders, Ms Maria KALESNIKAVA.

Dear Maria, it is a pleasure and a relief to see you here with us. You have come a long way to be here. You became one of the three women who symbolised the Belarusian political opposition. You became a face of the struggle of the people of Belarus for civil and political liberties and fundamental rights.

In September 2020, you were abducted in Minsk. At the border, you tore your passport. You refused to be forced into exile. You chose to stay in your country and to fight from within. We all remember that moment very well. In 2021, you were sentenced to 11 years in prison for your political activity. For most of these years, you were held incommunicado. No word from your family, no word from your lawyers.

In December 2025, finally you were released, together with Mr Ales BIALITSKI, Nobel Prize laureate and winner of the 2013 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, and other key opposition figures.

Dear Maria, seeing you here is a genuine relief. They tried to silence you. Today, it is my immense honour to give you the floor. And I know that I give the floor to a very loud voice. Maria, please.

[Applause]

Ms Maria KALESNIKAVA (2021 Prize winner): Madam President, members of the Assembly, dear friends,

When I received the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize in 2021, I couldn't come to Strasbourg. I was in prison.

I remember very clearly the moment I learned of the Prize. I can't fully put into words what it means to stand here today and speak to you myself. I thank everyone who didn't forget me, who continued to speak about Belarus, and who believed in the power of solidarity.

In one of his last public appeals, Václav Havel spoke in support of political prisoners in Belarus. He said that the world must not look away from violations of basic rights in our country. Having been in prison himself, he knew how much it matters for a person deprived of freedom to know that someone outside still remembers them. For those who have known prison and isolation, and even incommunicado, solidarity is not a symbol. It's the knowledge that you haven't disappeared, that you haven't been forgotten, that this won't last forever.

I am free now. Hundreds of political prisoners in Belarus are not. Fear, pressure and repression affect the whole of Belarusian society – a European society. Europe doesn't end at the borders of the European Union. It's more than geography and institutions. It's a space of human dignity, freedom and responsibility for one another. These are values by which Belarusians still strive to live. That's why Belarus remains part of Europe. And a part of Europe in danger should not be isolated.

I know how isolation works. First, a person is cut off from the outside world. Then contact with family and friends is reduced. Finally, one is made to believe that one has been forgotten, and that this is permanent.

To fight isolation, we need hope and solidarity. As Václav Havel once said, hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

A year ago, nobody believed that other political prisoners and I could be freed. The impossible became possible. And there is one person here today whom I want to thank especially. When I had no voice, she became my voice. When I had no freedom, she fought for my freedom. Despite countless objections, obstacles and disbelief, she broke through the ice of indifference. I am standing here today because she never gave up.

My sister, Tatsiana KHOMICH.

[applause]

Tanya, thank you. This victory is yours.

Solidarity means responsibility and action.

I ask you not to abandon Belarus to Russian domination. Stand by those who remain in the country, and by those who remain in prison. Keep the living ties with Belarusian society. Help defend the independence and sovereignty of Belarus. Because Belarus belongs to Europe, and Europe cannot look away. Europe is larger than the European Union, and its responsibility does not end at its borders.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, dear Maria, for this incredible testimony.

It shows us vividly what courage looks like. And what courage looks like also from many, many other Belarusian human rights defenders living in exile. Also some of them being represented here in our Assembly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I now invite you all to watch a short video about the prize. With this prize, we recognise and honour the work of thousands of individuals and organisations who share our values and our goals to protect the protection of fundamental freedom and human dignity.

Please, the video.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Let us welcome the members of the selection panel of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize who are with us today. Mr Tiny KOX, Ms Liliane Maury PASQUIER, Mr Josef PAZDERKA, Mr Jiří PŘIBÁŇ, Ms Ingjerd SCHOU and Ms Klára ŠIMÁČKOVÁ LAURENČÍKOVÁ.

On behalf of all members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I thank our partners very much; The Charta 77 foundation, the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation, Visa 97 and of course Her Excellency Ambassador Kristýna NAJMANOVÁ and the Government of Czechia. Without your commitments and contributions, this prize simply would not exist.

Today's prize honours outstanding civil society action in defence of human rights in Europe and beyond. For this Assembly, human rights come first. Not sometimes: always. And this prize asks us a question: what does it mean to live responsibly in an unjust world?

Today, candidates give a clear answer. It means refusing indifference. It means defending those who have been made vulnerable. It means to tell the truth when lies are politically convenient. And it means protecting the space where citizens can organise, speak and demand change. And it means fighting for freedom, even when the outcome is uncertain.

The three women we honour today embody exactly this courage. Their nominations carry deep symbolism in this special year, the 90th anniversary of Václav Havel's birth. Ms Masih ALINEJAD, Ms Márta PARDAVI, Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH, represented by her daughter.

Each of them stands for what that prize was created to honour: principled courage, moral integrity and an exceptional commitment to human rights. Different backgrounds, different contexts, one shared conviction. No government, no ideology, no political pressure can ever justify denying human dignity and fundamental freedom.

One uses journalism and public mobilisation. One uses legal advocacy and institutional scrutiny. One defends individuals in court and confronts repression at its hardest. But all three show us the same thing: defending human rights begins with solidarity. It begins with refusing to look away. They stand with women who are denied equality. They stand with refugees and asylum seekers who are denied protection. They stand with prisoners, journalists, activists, minorities and children whose voices are threatened or ignored. They often work under intimidation. They face smear campaigns, surveillance, legal harassment, prison and threats to their life. And still they do not stop.

Today we honour not only these three finalists. We honour every human rights defender in the world who stands firmly for fundamental freedoms, sometimes at the cost of their own safety and freedom. Their steadfastness inspires us all.

And on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I congratulate the finalists of the 2026 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

Each of you has already made an exceptional contribution to human rights. Each of you has turned conviction into action. And each of you carries forward the legacy of Mr Václav HAVEL. May your example strengthen human rights defenders everywhere in this world.

May I remind governments of their responsibilities. And may it inspire all of us to defend human rights dignity and human dignity not only with words, but with deeds.

Human rights are our first priority today and every day. So I thank all the three of you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

It is now an immense honour and pleasure and privilege to announce the laureate of the 2026 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

The prize is awarded to Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH.

[Applause]

Dear all,

Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH today could not travel to Strasbourg. She is represented today by her daughter, Ms Mehraveh KHANDAN HERIS.

Dear Ms Mehraveh KHANDAN HERIS, today is a very special day for your family. I understand when we speak, your father has a court case in Iran.

And I think also that your mother has expressed the wish to talk to us through a video which I ask now to be displayed.

Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH (Winner of the 2026 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): Distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

The news of my being awarded your Assembly's Prize in 2026 overwhelmed me with joy.

At times like this, we remember past struggles, our shared ideals and the people who are with us in every corner of the globe. And then, we reach the common point of our ideals and say to ourselves: "One day, they will be realised. One day, the sun of freedom will shine on our country too. Perhaps, one day, the truth will come to our country too. Perhaps, one day, we will no longer have to pick out our daily supply of carrots and vegetables from the posters of government lies that cover the city and take them home". As Václav HAVEL explains: "In that magical moment, perhaps our city too will be filled with truth, smiling shoulder to shoulder with our daily lives".

Thank you for your patience and I thank the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for giving me the honour of receiving this year's award. I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to my colleagues, Ms Márta PARDAVI and Ms Masih ALINEJAD, for their efforts.

Thanks a lot.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): And also, Ms Mehraveh KHANDAN HERIS would like to add some words, please. Yes.

Ms Mehraveh KHANDAN HERIS (On behalf of Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH): Yes, thank you so much. Thank you everyone.

It is not so easy for me to give a hopeful speech on my country's future while the threat of a possible return of war seems to continue and become part of my friends' and family's lives. And, on the other hand, watching the regime of Iran become more and more brutal every day.

The number of executions continues to rise; intelligence agencies of the regime are busier than ever, extracting information from citizens, threatening them, arresting them, and torturing them. Economic sanctions that were designed to weaken the arms of the regime seem to only harm the people significantly, and the grief of the victims of January's massacre never had a chance to be processed, but was only washed away by the fear of bombs and missiles.

And, as predicted, the news of the resistance of Iranian civil society, activists, and prisoners was lost, ignored and replaced by the news of those in power in Iran, the US, and Israel. As a result of all, there is a concerning increase in numbness due to an overload of horrific events that prevents people from engaging with political society in a concrete way. Yes, war and repression always go hand in hand. And yet there are people sitting outside of the disaster, justifying this or that side's victims.

At least in this time of semi-ceasefire, let's hope that the victims of the Iranian regime, and the victims of the war, have more chance to be seen and heard, and that we will all have time to heal our wounds, especially those that have accumulated since the beginning of the year.

My kind appreciation and respect go to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

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

And I would now also like to invite the other two shortlisted candidates for a short intervention. We will do that in alphabetical order. I'll start with Ms Masih ALINEJAD.

Ms Masih ALINEJAD (Nominee for the 2026 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): Madam President,

Distinguished members of the Assembly,

Dear friends and freedom fighters,

Today I am not here to receive a prize. I am here to be a microphone to my people from Iran. Thank you so much for thinking about the Iranian people.

I am here to ask European leaders to stand with freedom fighters instead of shaking hands with our killers. I am here to introduce thousands of innocent people who sacrificed their lives to protect freedom, not in Iran, but across the globe.

During Bloody November – this is the real war against my people that I want to introduce to you – in November, they shut down the Internet. They killed 15 000 innocent protesters in just three days. In 2022, during the Women, Life, Freedom movement, they again shut down the Internet and they killed more than 700 innocent protesters. In a recent uprising in January, they killed tens of thousands: some said 30 000, some said 40 000. And it is beyond sad that we don't even have the real number of people who have been killed. They are the sisters and mothers and daughters of someone. Hundreds of protesters have been blinded, intentionally blinded. This is the real war being imposed on my people by the Iranian regime.

And I want to introduce one of them to you. I invited her to be here. Ms Kosar EFTEKHARI. Stand up, Kowsar. She was blinded by the Islamic Republic. She lost one of her eyes, but as you heard, not her voice. She's here to advocate for her brother, Mr Ali ZAREI, who is in prison right now, blinded, but waiting to be executed right now.

I am here to tell you that if you don't stand with the people of Iran to end this regime, believe me, you will face them here on your own soil. I want to warn Europeans about the threat of transnational repression. Yes, I am the evidence. I have survived three assassination plots. I have seen my would-be assassins in front of my home in New York. Five of them are in prison right now in America.

And I want to introduce another victim of transnational repression. I invited her here. Ms Marzieh HAMIDI from Afghanistan who is fighting against the Taliban. Stand up.

[Applause]

So I am here to use the opportunity to ask you to create an alliance between the leaders of democratic countries and the lead activists and dissidents from authoritarian regimes. Believe it or not, China, Russia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, North Korea, these dictators are more united than democratic countries. So the time has come for us to be united, to bring the walls of dictatorship down.

We will bring the women from authoritarian regimes to the German Parliament in November. I want to have the same venue to bring an army of women here to meet with Europeans to fight against authoritarianism together. Together, we are stronger. Thank you so much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Thank you. And now I invite Ms Márta PARDAVI for her short statement.

Ms Márta PARDAVI (Nominee for the 2026 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize): Thank you very much.

Madam President and honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to congratulate my fellow finalists, but also the winner of this prize, Ms Nasrin SOTOUDEH and her daughter.

It is a profound honour to be among people who have displayed such courage in face of such hardship. And I know that you will continue to go on. It is a pleasure to be alongside.

Mr Václav HAVEL talked about hope, and it has been mentioned a lot. And hope is really the energy that carries one forward. But, we Hungarians have understood this very well. During 16 bleak and difficult years, Hungarian human rights defenders, civil society persevered. And we did that also because Mr Václav HAVEL also had other important ideas that ring so true today. He also said, the only lost cause is the one we give up before we enter the struggle. This struggle we knew from first-hand experience, before 1989 and also before April 2026. And we stayed in this struggle. And now, finally, after so many long years, we have the chance to turn our country around, to turn our hope into institution building, into accountability, into a democracy that is strong enough to withstand the next crisis that will inevitably come. This is the hope and this energy that has carried us forward.

And in our team at the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a team of about 40 people, we have done more than take cases to court, also the European Court of Human Rights, we have done more than do legal analysis to show how rule of law had been perverted by the previous government. We actually hedged our bets on European solidarity. We reached out and we were met with friendship from Warsaw and Prague and Berlin and Paris and Oslo and Stockholm and Brussels. And the list really goes on. This support also kept us going and And I want to be extremely grateful for that, because it is this transnational solidarity that can help propel the right cause forward, so that people will continue to believe that they are doing the right thing. Although the outcome, that positive, hopeful outcome, might be far away.

Of course, I am very proud to share this work, this hope, this joy, this joyful hopeful moment we have in Hungary, with great colleagues in civil society, with a great team at the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, and with all the human rights defenders and allies we've met and we've learned to work together with in Europe and beyond.

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): That closes the awards ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

I would like to invite all the participants, all the representatives of the winners, those shortlisted, of course, Ms Maria KALESNIKAVA and members of the jury to join me here in front for a family photo.

The sitting will resume at 3:30 p.m. this afternoon.

Thank you very much.

The sitting is closed at 1:05 p.m.