



Provisional edition

Monday 10 October 2022, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 27

Address: His Excellency Mr Ignazio CASSIS, Federal Councillor, President of the Swiss Confederation

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

I have the honour to welcome in this hemicycle His Excellency the President of the Swiss Confederation, Mr Ignazio CASSIS.

Welcome, Mr President, to what we consider to be the agora of European parliamentary diplomacy. We are particularly pleased to have you here today. By your presence, you reaffirm your commitment and that of Switzerland to multilateralism and the European project.

You recently said, and I quote: "Switzerland is a concentration of languages, cultures and opinions. We speak, think, laugh and dream in different ways, but we form a single country. A small miracle that we can preserve by continuing to write the future of Switzerland together.

For me, Mr President, this also applies to Europe and the desire of millions of Europeans to live together, despite their differences, in peace and respect for dignity, rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the principles and mechanisms of the rule of law.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Mr President, until recently the prospect of war on European soil seemed unlikely, almost impossible. However, today, this very day, we are confronted with the brutal war of aggression waged by our former member state, the Russian Federation, against our member state Ukraine. An illegal war, a brutal war, a horrible war against fundamental civil liberties and against humanity.

In this report:

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

We should be humble but we can be proud that European peoples and nations have responded with unity and resolve to the illegal war of aggression by reaffirming their commitment to the fundamental values that we share by stepping up cooperation to support Ukraine.

In this context, given Switzerland's commitments to values and its experience of multilateral diplomacy, we highly value the opportunity to hear today your vision of the ways to uphold peace and democratic stability on the continent.

As the war continues, we should reinforce our determination to uphold human rights, justice and the rule of international law on the continent so as to restore peace in Ukraine and rebuild effective and sustainable multilateralism in Europe.

Mr President, you are in a hemicycle in a building that once was constructed, and I learnt that this year it was 50 years ago that the first stone of this building was laid, and it was laid by one of your predecessors: the President of Switzerland, who laid the first stone. I am still looking to see where it is. Perhaps we can document it and send you a picture of it. But as the first stone was laid by a Swiss president, I think we can say that this building is also more or less here thanks to you, Mr President, so if the building is yours, then the floor is also yours.

You have the floor.

Mr Ignazio CASSIS (President of the Swiss Confederation): Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before sharing my speech, it is my duty to condemn here in the strongest possible terms the inadmissible attacks on civilians in several Ukrainian cities as of this morning while I am inside this Council of Europe building.

Switzerland calls on Russia to stop the strikes immediately. Switzerland calls on Belarus to show the utmost restraint. We call on all parties to de-escalate the situation militarily.

Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Madam Secretary General, Dear Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ,

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Parliamentary Assembly,

It is chance, or it is fate.

Thirty-one years ago, the President of the Swiss Confederation stood before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for the first time. Like me, he was also from the Italian-speaking minority in Switzerland. It was September 1991.

President Flavio Cotti spoke of the upheavals that had been gripping Europe for two years. I quote, "Half of Europe is overthrowing the structures born of the greatest hypocrisy in history".

Sadly, the recent death of President Gorbachev has taken us all back to an era that we in Europe took for granted. An era carried by a shared belief in the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

This belief was so strong – and the enthusiasm so powerful – that some, like Francis Fukuyama, have spoken of "the end of history". In this conception, we were witnessing the triumph of the ideal of liberal democracy.

And a few years later, in 1996, the Parliamentary Assembly, your Parliamentary Assembly, recommended to the Committee of Ministers that Russia join the Council of Europe, considering that the country, in the words of the rapporteur at the time, another Swiss, the Swiss National Councillor Ernst Mühlemann, and I quote, "has clearly demonstrated the will and will be able in the near future to comply with the provisions of Article 3 of the Statute of the Council of Europe".

You are familiar with Article 3, which stipulates the rule of law, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and the commitment "to collaborate sincerely and actively in the pursuit of this aim".

Nevertheless, the crises we are currently experiencing, first and foremost the military aggression of Ukraine by Russia, which as of today has experienced a further escalation, argue for a more cyclical conception of history. Above all, they force us to question what we took for granted.

These crises should not, of course, plunge us into disarray. They cannot leave us indifferent either. On the contrary, they remind us of our duty to commit ourselves to the values which are ours and which are those carried by the Council of Europe since its foundation. In this commitment, we must be constant, strong and consistent.

I am therefore honoured to have been invited to speak before your Assembly, as a sign of the times, and I am deeply grateful to President Kox.

My presence is also a token of Switzerland's gratitude to the Council of Europe for its work in favour of European unity and the defence of the values that bring us together.

What is common with the first visit is that it is also to a Secretary General, to you, dear Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, that I have the pleasure of expressing Switzerland's gratitude for your work carried out with conviction and determination.

As I mentioned, at the end of 1991, Europe was entering a promising era marked by the disappearance of the Iron Curtain, the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War. The minds and hopes were all turned towards the construction of Europe. The Council of Europe gathered these hopes to build a larger Europe based on democratic will. The time had come to make trust and solidarity between peoples prevail.

Thirty-one years later, we have to admit that enthusiasm and trust are no longer the order of the day. Solidarity has been shaken by the many crises we are facing. Yet it is more necessary than ever.

I was shocked by Russia's brutal military aggression against Ukraine. By violating the most basic principles of international law, Russia has forced us to take action against a state that has become, time after time, a threat to the Europe of democratic values.

The consequences of this war are not limited to a questioning of our model of society. No, they are felt throughout the world, adding to the effects of multiple existing crises here and multiplying them there. War is not the cause of change: it is the consequence of change. This war forces us to face the following challenges:

1. The disruption of the security architecture of our continent.
2. The insecurity of energy supply.
3. Food insecurity,
4. Worsening inflation due to the pandemic crisis and expansive monetary policies.
5. Climate change with its violent meteorological crises.
6. The birth of *reshoring*, or nationalistic protectionism, which responds to the disruption of supply chains and puts the "just in time" market model in deep crisis.

Perhaps the most cultural element of all, the revival of the myth of the "strongman", as Gideon Rachman explains so well in his book *The Age of the Strongman* and with this myth of autarchies versus democracies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These shocks are a brutal reminder of truths that have been valid since the dawn of time: our freedom, our values, our fundamental rights are always being questioned. This, while we thought we had archived the horrors of the Second World War. A posteriori, an illusion.

This democratic retreat and these crises are not, however, a fatality but phenomena against which we must, together, fight. This is the clear and unambiguous position of my country, Switzerland.

Switzerland is distinguished by its system of direct democracy, its federalism and the stability that characterises its politics and economy. All of this is strongly rooted in our diversity and our ability to draw on it for richness and innovative solutions, and I mean our inner diversity.

These characteristics shape the way we manage conflict and solve complex problems in our country. The culture of compromise and consensus is the order of the day despite the growing anxiety that is also evident in Switzerland today. Problems are always addressed and solved through dialogue. This takes time, but it is the only way to achieve a broad consensus for an accepted and sustainable end result.

From these characteristics, three main lines emerge, all of which can be found in Switzerland's commitment to solving the challenges before us. These three main lines are:

First, respect for public international law, which includes international humanitarian law, in particular the Geneva Conventions of which my country has the honor of being the depositary, and human rights, of which the Council of Europe is the vigilant guardian on our continent. In this context, values are the compass of our action. Solidarity with the international community and commitment to sustainable development are fundamental for us in Switzerland.

The second main line is the inseparability of independence and co-operation. Switzerland, with its almost 9 million inhabitants, has four national languages and a great historical and cultural diversity. It is made up of 26 cantonal states (called Cantons) responsible for the policies closest to the people, as is typical throughout the world: education, health, internal security, and taxation. Given these characteristics, we have learned that co-operation, mutual respect and permanent dialogue are the only way to face difficulties.

Independence and co-operation, I might add for the second main line, are not mutually exclusive. I often hear people say, "Yes, but you can't be independent and at the same time want to co-operate". Yes, we can. Not only do we want to, we can. We have done so for decades, even centuries. Independence and co-operation are two sides of the same coin. Without co-operation, independence would mean isolation. And without independence, co-operation would be a constraint. This is also why Switzerland, a country that is very attached to its independence, believes so strongly in the virtues of multilateralism, the commitment to peace and security.

This brings me to the third main line of action. Switzerland is a neutral country. Our neutrality is permanent and armed. This means that we strictly observe the law of neutrality, which is anchored in international law. We do not get involved in military conflicts and do not provide military support to any party to a conflict. Nothing can call this into question. But neutrality does not mean indifference or lack of solidarity. We are committed to safeguarding the principles of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, values that are enshrined in our Federal Constitution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Switzerland is well aware that it cannot work alone to resolve the global crises that affect us all. It simply could not, nor does it have the ambition to do so. This is why it bases its commitment on co-operation, both bilateral and multilateral.

The role of International Geneva as a centre of multilateral diplomacy is fundamental. This concerns global governance, peace, human rights, disarmament, the environment, health, education, but also other themes that reflect this new century.

I am thinking here in particular of the challenges related to scientific and technological advances that are occurring at an unprecedented rate. For all these challenges, we do not yet have a clear vision of the consequences and their impact.

I invite you to ask us three fundamental questions:

1. What does it mean to be human today in the age of robots, gene editing and augmented reality?
2. How can we all live together and at the same time foster inclusive development?
3. How can we simultaneously ensure the well-being of humanity – with the demands we have – and the sustainable future of our planet?

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, with his maxim, shows us the way. I quote him: "As for the future, it is not a matter of foreseeing it but of making it possible".

Anticipation is thus essential to build the future by making full use of the potential of new scientific and technological advances, with the aim of improving well-being and promoting inclusive development. This is why Switzerland created the Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator (GESDA) Foundation three years ago in 2019 in Geneva to address this issue as an international think tank and action group.

It is also an expression of the necessary marriage between science and diplomacy. But our commitment is not limited to Geneva. My country works for dialogue, the search for consensual solutions and the defence of our values, based on our national experience, in all international organisations. Two examples stand out for me.

My country was elected for the first time this year, on 9 June, with 187 votes, to the UN Security Council. We have thus shown that we are ready to assume our responsibilities for safeguarding peace and security in the world. We will work tirelessly to live up to the trust that your countries have placed in us to embody, as our slogan says, "A plus for *peace*".

Secondly, in the Council of Europe, Switzerland has been committed for almost 60 years to a prosperous, peaceful and influential Europe. In the Council of Europe, Switzerland finds its platform to participate in the development of international law and to support a responsible multilateralism on the continent, which lays the foundations, as I said at the beginning, for a peaceful society.

Of all the existing international organisations, the Council of Europe plays a very special role for Switzerland. It is also thanks to the Council of Europe that Switzerland participates fully in the construction and development of our European continent, as Switzerland is not a member of the European Union.

Together with the other member States, we can continue to develop international law to guarantee the rule of law over military force. A rule on which our countries depend; a rule from which our societies benefit every day.

The importance of the issues that the Council of Europe deals with in its daily work and in its committees makes it an inevitable organisation. This is true for its 46 member States, for those who have acceded to the open conventions and for all their citizens.

The contribution of this Council to the development of our society, and well beyond Europe as well, touches our fellow citizens on a daily basis.

They are often unaware of it, because they are used to it. But there is indeed a bit of Strasbourg in the daily life of each of us, of each of our fellow citizens. As so often in our lives, we notice the importance of "something" only when that "something" disappears, and by then, it is far too late.

Unlike other multilateral institutions, the parliamentary component that you represent here in this room offers a unique democratic legitimacy to our action and to the work of the Council of Europe. It allows us to anchor our action in the reality of our countries and regions and is close to our citizens.

Above all, this parliamentary component ensures a welcome proximity between the governed and the governing. This morning, a member of my delegation asked me the question: "How can we bring the Council of Europe closer to the people?" I told her: "That is why you are here. It is precisely to create this link between the population and the institution.

As a Swiss, for whom the principle of subsidiarity is a cardinal value, I can only welcome this and encourage the strengthening of this parliamentary component.

It is difficult to talk about the Council of Europe without mentioning the European Convention on Human Rights, whose implementation is monitored by the European Court of Human Rights. Although some of its rulings have caused, and continue to cause, upheaval in Switzerland as well, we have always implemented them, aware that the Court's system enshrines both the rule of law and the individual freedoms of our fellow citizens.

It is a trust that our country has in this institution, which must be continually nurtured and earned, since it is not given once and for all. This is the whole discussion that is currently underway, even here in your Parliamentary Assembly: the trust of the founding States. Switzerland has made the defense of the fundamental rights of the individual one of its priorities. We are proud of this.

For us, the geographical scope of the Council of Europe makes it a unique organisation, which we hold dear to our hearts. At a time when the temptation to turn inward and to exchange only with those who are similar to us in every way is great, its pan-European dimension offers it a unique added value. I would like to emphasise this pan-European dimension, which is the real wealth of this multilateral organisation. Where else could we exchange on an equal footing? Where else could we cultivate our diversities, our specificities and participate in this transformative process of dialogue? Where else could we work together to build our continent on a foundation of common values?

Unfortunately, the effects of the current crises are also felt in multilateral fora. Their legitimacy is being questioned, their resources diminished, their capacity to offer timely solutions diminished.

This destabilisation of the multilateral system has consequences for us all. In particular for small countries like Switzerland, which needs strong multilateral institutions, capable of moderating the aggressive impulses of the powerful and maintaining dialogue, capable of responding to the very human needs for peace, security and prosperity.

The Council of Europe is not spared from the crisis of mistrust that is affecting multilateralism. I spoke about this this morning with your President, with the Secretary General. On the contrary, it is particularly exposed to the turbulence of our times.

The exclusion of the Russian Federation in March for its military aggression against Ukraine is a failure for us all. It is not a failure because we should have been conciliatory in the face of this aggression. Rather, it is a failure because the exclusion of Russia illustrates the abrupt end of three decades of co-operation for the benefit of integration around our common values, to which the Council of Europe was working.

The end of the conviction of this Assembly, expressed in 1996 by a Swiss, that the Russian government is willing and able to comply with the Statute of the Council of Europe.

The choice of Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza as the winner of the Václav Havel Prize in this very hall this morning sadly underlines the importance of this gap between the hopes of the 1990s and the reality of 2022.

The end of Russia's inclusion, or even exclusion, also represents a painful step backwards in the pan-European nature that is so important to us of the Council of Europe, and thus in its ability to bring together different States, whose variety of opinion was the added value of the Organisation.

If we are now more united around our values, we are also less different.

Faced with such observations, what should we do?

We must react. And we must do so in a meaningful way. The Council of Europe and its 46 member States are at a turning point, at a key stage in the future of the Organisation. At this decisive moment, we must all work together to give it a new ambitious vision, a new political impetus.

Only such an effort will enable the Council of Europe to retain its specificities and therefore its strength. Only such an effort will give it the necessary assets to find its place in the new Europe of the 21st century. The report of the Council of Europe's high-level reflection group, which has just been published, proposes some very interesting avenues for reflection.

Without this new impetus and political will, the Council of Europe risks losing credibility and becoming less relevant. This will be to the benefit of other organisations and political initiatives or to the withdrawal movements that we observe everywhere. Above all, it will be at the expense of our citizens, who benefit from its work and the advances it has made possible.

How should we shape this new vision and this new momentum?

There is discussion, I have discussed it today, about the organisation of a 4th Council of Europe Summit. This discussion is on everyone's lips. Switzerland is of the opinion that it is necessary to organise such a summit. Let me be clear: it is necessary to do so.

However, it is imperative that it not be limited to an exercise in style. We must be ambitious and go beyond the usual formats for this type of event. If we don't, we will only disappoint the expectations that have been placed upon us. We must speak frankly. We must speak openly. We must say what we really think, not what we don't mind. Democracy is the celebration of our differences, a celebration that is sometimes emotional but always respectful, with the goal of finding compromise solutions and committing to them together.

I present here seven subjective reflections, to be taken or left, but with which I would like to nourish this debate, to organise a possible 4th forum of the member countries of this Council of Europe:

1. To reflect on how we can perpetuate the existing political and geographical balance, or even enlarge it, in order to maintain the truly pan-European vocation of the Council of Europe.

Geographical diversity, but above all diversity of opinion, is necessary, because it reflects the differences of our populations.

We must transform these diversities into wealth, which requires curiosity and respect, and thus lay the foundations for our common stability and prosperity.

It is essential for my country that the Council of Europe keep this specificity, which has proven to be a real forum for dialogue open to different opinions.

2. Unequivocally support the Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. And that this Court can generate debates that animate the democratic process! It is then up to the member countries, with their institutions, to make the necessary societal choices within the framework of fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law. However, the Court must guarantee a remedy to protect individual human rights, and it is therefore essential that its judgments be applied.

3. Highlight the work done by your Parliamentary Assembly. This democratic anchoring gives the Council of Europe a strong legitimacy. Never forget: you are one of the very few multilateral organisations with a parliamentary component.

4. Encourage close co-operation between all the Council of Europe bodies, with the aim of prioritising activities and thus increasing efficiency. We cannot do everything at the same time: we must set priorities.

5. Encourage synergies with other international organisations that work for stability and peace on the continent, as well as those of the United Nations, particularly those based in Geneva, such as the Human Rights Council. A strengthened Strasbourg-Geneva axis would seem to me to be useful for both organisations and their action.

6. Identify themes on which the Council of Europe must develop its own expertise, an expertise that it alone, or it with a clear lead, is developing. I am thinking, for example, of artificial intelligence, where this Council has demonstrated that it can play a key and pioneering role.

7. Finally, it seems to me essential in general to refocus multilateralism on essential tasks aimed at maintaining fundamental values: democracy, the rule of law and peace. Here again, prioritise what is absolutely important to us in order to focus on action. This is where we have most of our common interests and therefore the greatest chance to aim clearly and to be effective in action.

I hope that you will not have to wait another thirty-one years for a Swiss President to appear before you again. I hope, above all, that when he does, his future speech will allow him to applaud the successes that we have achieved together, for the benefit of our values, our fellow citizens and Europe.

I would like to congratulate you again, dear members of the Assembly, for your work and your dedication, often far from the spotlight, in the service of the values of the Council of Europe.

I also thank you, Mister President. I am pleased to know that tomorrow you will have in this rostrum President Michael D. Higgins, to whom I already express my respect and thanks for the active role that Ireland assumes in the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr President, for your reflections, your analysis of the current situation in Europe and your suggestions to the Council of Europe and to our Assembly.

I have noted your advice to us all: be ambitious.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you again for addressing this Assembly, Mister President.

Now you have accepted to answer the questions from our members.

The questions are limited to 30 seconds.

The first on my list are the speakers on behalf of the political groups. The first speaker is on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI from San Marino.

Questions to His Excellency Mr Ignazio CASSIS, Federal Councillor, President of the Swiss Confederation

Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI (San Marino, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, President, for your further address to the Assembly to answer our questions.

Noting and underscoring Switzerland's generosity to Ukrainian refugees, for whom excellent reception results have been achieved in a short period of time, and considering the federal government's valuable international and diplomatic role, as well as its financial endowment, how can it extend this model of solidarity to those from other places with equally serious problems, such as North Africa?

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Mr President.

Mr Ignazio CASSIS (President of the Swiss Confederation): Thank you for the question,

Switzerland as you know it, an associate member of the Schengen area, and Swiss migration policy is strongly integrated into the Schengen-Dublin migration policy of the European Union.

Consequently, because we realize very well that it is unimaginable that being in the heart of this continent, to operate with a different migration policy than our neighboring countries.

As far as the refugees from Ukraine are concerned, between 65 and 70 000 have been received so far, mostly women, 80 percent with children, who have been allocated to all cantons, are scattered all over the territory.

And the thing I like to remember with some pride is that the Swiss people, private citizens, made available in the weeks immediately after the opening of the borders to these people who were seeking and continue to seek help, they made available 50 000 beds of private housing.

So it was an incredible effort, accompanied also by great financial generosity. The Swiss population of 8.5 million on Solidarity Day in March and the following days donated more than 120 million Swiss francs.

This means that there is this great solidarity in our country that makes me proud as president, and that has manifested itself in the face of this immigration and this specific statute. Statute S as we call it in Switzerland is little different from the European statute, it is more or less the same: in the European Union it lasts six months, with us it can last even longer, you can renew it.

As I say, we will follow the same path, probably, as the Schengen area countries because we could hardly really do otherwise.

Your question is why not apply this status to all migrants? Because that is not the goal of this statute. The goal of this statute is to give a quick, uncomplicated bureaucratic space to those who are fleeing war and are in immediate need of help. With the idea that the vast majority of these people want to return to their homes, and this is not the case for ordinary asylum seekers.

So a second reason why we give this S status, particularly to the people of Ukraine is precisely also so that we don't flood the asylum seeker system, which continues to exist in parallel, where every application is assessed under the Swiss asylum procedure laws.

So these are two different tracks that have different purposes.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr President.

The next question is for Ms Ingjerd SCHOU, from the Group of the European People's Party.

Ms SCHOU, you have the floor.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Chair, and President.

Considering the major challenges we face in Europe today with an ongoing war and the values of liberal democracy being threatened more than ever before, how should Switzerland and other well-functioning democracies best contribute to the Council of Europe's agenda, and the protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law today and into the future?

At the same time, the biggest political party in Switzerland, the Swiss People's Party is known for being Eurosceptic and for very restrictive immigration policies. To which extent, President, in your opinion, does this affect Switzerland's ability and will, as a member State, to contribute to a most needed reinforcement of human rights and law-based international co-operation in Europe?

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much for this quite interesting question.

Nevertheless, Mister President, the answer is yours.

Mr Ignazio CASSIS (President of the Swiss Confederation): Thank you, madame, for this question.

Switzerland adopted the EU sanctions, the sanctions of the EU against Russia, and immediately, four days after the beginning of the war, and it was so aligned with the common response of the European member states, most European member states, anyway, all EU member states. Doing this showed Europe and the

word that Switzerland stands for our common values of democracy, rule of law and human rights, and that it was important to do something to a cease or to stop the war. The best way that we could imagine at the beginning of March to stop the war was to block the economy in Russia in order for it not to have enough money to make war.

What we did not want, in any case, was an escalation of the war towards scenarios that we cannot even imagine.

The second part of the question: what is the role of the Swiss People's Party. Switzerland is a very sound democratic country. We respect the opinions of the citizens, and the citizens are free to express their opinion. This is a human right, and democracies have to deal with different opinions.

I tried to explain in my speech that the diversity of opinions is not only a richness, but it is of paramount importance for any democracy. Otherwise, it would be a dictatorship and not a democracy.

Actually this party is in the government together with the Social Democratic Party, with the Liberal Party, with the Christian Democratic Party. You know we have a very, how should I say, 360-degree coalition in Switzerland, and this since 1848, since the parties have existed.

We have learned to deal with each other. Every week in the government and every session in the Parliament we have a very lively discussion and debate about our questions. At the end the majority decides independently of the opinion of the single parties.

[gets interrupted by the Chair]

Maybe just also one that through our very direct democracy, we have for many decisions the occasion to validate the decision by the population through these referenda, which are either for challenging a law that passed at the Parliament or for what we call "popular initiative", which means to change the Constitution, and the Swiss population is invited to vote 4 times a year, every year.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much.

Next question comes from Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA, from Ukraine.

He speaks on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, dear Chairman, Mr President.

So this honoured Assembly, as much as the Council of Ministers, set a very brave and just example for expelling Russia out of this honourable organisation for its absolutely barbaric actions against the rules-based society.

Unfortunately, not all the institutions followed, and for instance, I am talking about the United Nations, where as of April 2022, Russia has used its veto power in the Security Council 143 times more than all other permanent members of the Security Council combined.

Now, can I ask you, will the Swiss Confederation use the President's support to expel Russia from the UN as much as you did here?

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Mr President.

Mr Ignazio CASSIS (President of the Swiss Confederation): Thank you.

The question of excluding or including Russia from the multilateral system is a very profound and difficult question.

We cannot just argue that since Russia's aggression against the Ukraine has started, we have to expel Russia from all multilateral institutions.

The discussion isn't that easy. If not, we wouldn't need multilateral organisations if we are going to be expelling everybody who violates the rules that these organisations give themselves.

Unfortunately, humankind is not so easy to deal with, and it changes its mind, of course, also.

What I will try to do, as Switzerland, is to differentiate the multilateral organisations and to establish in which ones it was important, because of the treated issues, it was rightfully important to exclude and expel Russia, and other multilateral organisations where it was not a good decision and we decided to abstain with our vote in those situations.

I'm convinced that even this war will have to find a solution that will be a diplomatic one.

Without dialogue, you can't find any diplomatic solution. This is the reason why we always try to maintain dialogue, even if it is a critical dialogue, even if it is difficult to maintain dialogue with every country in the world, because we are convinced that this is the only chance we have to stop wars.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister President.

The next question comes from Ms Krista BAUMANE on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Ms Krista BAUMANE is from Latvia.

You have the floor.

Ms Krista BAUMANE (Latvia, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Your Excellency,

Recently, a new Swiss ambassador to Belarus presented her credentials to Mr Aleksandr Lukashenko – the first and only western European diplomat to do so since August 2020.

The Belarusian authorities support the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

Excellency, can you assure this Parliamentary Assembly that this diplomatic procedure does not mean that the Swiss authorities are moving towards the recognition of the legitimacy of Mr Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime?

Another question:

We would also like to know what thought has been given to the Ukraine Recovery Conference that took place in Lugano in early July this year?

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Mr President.

Mr Ignazio CASSIS (President of the Swiss Confederation): Thank you so much for the two questions.

The first one I can answer very briefly:

It is an act required by protocol. Switzerland does not recognise any government. Switzerland only recognises states. We want to have an embassy in Belarus because it is important to be there exactly because of difficulties we have with human rights, democracy and so on. We want to be on place.

Our ambassador has already been there for months. The accreditation is an act required by protocol and means no recognition of the government.

This has always been the position of Switzerland anywhere in the world. This is also the reason why we are present in 170 countries of the world, independently of the government leading the country.

The second is a much longer answer, but I'll try to make it short.

The Ukraine recovery conference in Lugano was a common decision from Switzerland and Ukraine, from President Zelenskyy and myself, last year. We had to organise in Lugano what we called the Ukraine reforms conference. It was a cycle of conferences taking place during the past five years.

Of course, when the war started, it was not conceivable to hold a conference as usual. So we had, in many phone calls, the idea to transform this conference into something useful for the future. Something that can give hope to the population who is waiting for a ceasefire, for stopping the war, and waiting for peace.

We decided to make a conference as a first step for a common process of reconstruction in Ukraine, defining some common rules and principles. Some kind of charter of the reconstruction of the country, which is the Lugano Charter with the seven principles that have been adopted by the plenary session at the end of the conference.

I just met the prime minister of Ukraine in Prague a few days ago for the first European Political Community meeting, and he told me that there is no single discussion, no single meeting around the world, on the reconstruction of Ukraine which is not based on the seven principles of the Lugano Charter.

Again, if we reach this target, it is already very much.

Secondly, it was a good occasion for many exchanges between the economic communities from Ukraine and from Switzerland, and Italy, Germany, France attending the meeting. It was of course a good occasion for networking and finding connections together in order to be able to start as soon as the security situation allows.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister President.

The last question on behalf of the political groups comes from Mr George LOUCAIDES from Cyprus. He speaks on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

George.

Mr George LOUCAIDES (Cyprus, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Welcome once more, Mister President.

I would like to ask you about Switzerland's neutrality in connection to Europe's present day political and security architecture.

Drawing from the experience of your country, could you possibly inform us as to how this neutrality has helped Switzerland contribute to solving or mediating between conflicting parties in Europe or elsewhere?

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Mister President.

Mr Ignazio CASSIS (President of the Swiss Confederation): Thank you, Mr President. Thank you chief of groups for your questions.

Neutrality is part of the identity of Switzerland. Neutrality has slowly developed from the 17th century in Switzerland and was definitively adopted in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna. It is enrooted in international law in the high laws of 1908 and it is fully respected by Switzerland. The laws of neutrality are not quite a lot. We are not allowed to export troops or weapons to a country that is at war, or you can do it but you have to do it with both or all the countries that are at war, so we decided not to do it with anybody. And secondly, we cannot let your territory be passed by other troops or weapons. Third, you cannot join a military alliance, like NATO, or so on. And fourth, airspace and so on.

So there are not a lot of obligations but these obligations are strictly respected by Switzerland because of our permanent neutrality. And then, we actually did not invent neutrality ourselves. We had to be invented neutral because of the powerful countries around us. We have France, we have Germany, we have Italy who were very important, very big European powers in the past and the fact that they had a buffer zone in the middle was of course in the interest of all these countries. And it was also in the interest of Switzerland because therefore we could find our independence which was so important during our history.

Nowadays, through neutrality, we can say that we have not engaged in a war for more than 500 years, and we are known not to make war or take part in war. This is one of the reasons why our humanitarian tradition is so well known in the world and so well respected because people know we never take part in any military conflicts, even in Africa, even in Asia, in south-east Asia and so on.

So nowadays with the adoption of the new sanctions against Russia we did not break the laws of neutrality. This is absolutely possible and it is also possible to be a member of the Security Council of the United Nations, it is possible, it is compatible with our neutrality, but again neutrality does not mean indifference. We have to take stock and make decisions to show what kind of values we stand for and what we are willing to do.

So now in this war, we are doing many, many things from humanitarian assistance to demining of the territories, to delivering any possible goods and services to the population, healthcare. And we are, of course, welcoming all the 60 000–70 000 refugees coming from Ukraine during this transition phase of their lives and we are trying to do everything that is asked by the Ukrainians in order to help them to face this very difficult situation.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mister President.

I now have to interrupt the list of speakers; we have run out of time. Sorry for those who had put their names on the list, but we have spent the time that we were able to spend. We will have a current affairs debate immediately after this debate.

May I thank you very much for being with us, for addressing this Parliamentary Assembly and giving your analysis, your proposals, and answering our questions. I wish you well with your great country in the heart of Europe. We want to thank you and Switzerland for being so strong amongst our family. Thank you very much, Mister President.

(Applause)

Dear Colleagues,

Before we start our next debate, I want to give you this information from the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination in solidarity with women and girls in Iran who are protesting at this very moment to have their fundamental rights respected. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination is organising a group photo tomorrow in the lobby of the chamber just outside here at 9:55 a.m. You are all invited to show them your solidarity. At 9:50 a.m. in front of the chamber let us show that our solidarity is with these brave women and girls in Iran who are standing up for the respect of their fundamental rights.

We now interrupt for a moment to change the Chair. Then we continue with the current affairs debate, which will be introduced by Mr Paul GAVAN.

Current affairs debate: Military hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, including strikes against settlements and civilian infrastructures

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): And then we continue. The next item of business this afternoon is the current affairs debate on "Military hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, including strikes against settlements and civilian infrastructures".

The debate will last one hour and speaking time is limited to three minutes for all members, except the first speaker chosen by the Bureau of the Assembly, who is allowed seven minutes.

We will try to close at 5 p.m., so it's in a little less than one hour.

In the debate I call first Mr Paul GAVAN.

You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL, Rapporteur): Good afternoon and thank you, Madam Chairperson.

On 12 September 2022, a series of clashes erupted between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops on Armenian territory.

The violence resulted in nearly 300 deaths and dozens of injuries on both sides over a three-day period.

At least 204 Armenian servicemen were killed or missing, while Azerbaijan acknowledged 80 fatalities amongst its forces, bringing the total number killed to at least 284.

A ceasefire brokered by Russia on 13 September broke down within minutes, but thankfully, a new ceasefire was successfully concluded between the two countries the following day, 14 September, with considerable international assistance.

I think it is significant that all of the violence took place on Armenian territory. None of the violence took place in the vicinity of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Furthermore, the violence included strikes against settlements and civilian infrastructures. These have been well documented. They include attacks on the spa town of Jermuk, where numerous residential and tourist locations were hit by shells and other military weapons, including the ropeway, three hotels, a sanatorium, and a cafe. In Sotk, 200 houses and a municipality building were damaged. In total, according to Armenia's Security Council, 36 towns and villages were targeted, including Goris, Sisian, Kapan, Vardenis, Tegh and Geghamasar. The Armenian government tells us that 4 civilians were killed, 1 more was missing, and 7 wounded.

It is significant that Azerbaijan does not deny launching these attacks, but rather has accused Armenia of using civilian and residential structures as firing points, and argued that, therefore, they were legitimate targets.

I do not believe this to be an acceptable response.

I also note that Azerbaijan has referenced and blamed "large scale provocations" from the Armenian side.

But surely, in this year, above all years, we must all be clear that it is never acceptable for one country to invade the sovereign territory of another.

It is also important to note that Azerbaijan continues to occupy parts of Armenian territory as a result of this incursion. And again, this is unacceptable.

There have been disturbing reports of possible war crimes being committed by the Azerbaijani armed forces, horrific video evidence of seven Armenian soldiers being executed, and also desecration of female bodies.

I have seen these videos and they are truly horrendous in their content, and indeed they may constitute evidence of war crimes.

I further note that Check News, the respected fact checking site, has examined the video and found nothing to indicate that it is a fake. They have also established that it was first shared on Azerbaijani Telegram channels, and it did significant work to geolocate the site of the video as being in the mountains of Lake Sev. It also confirmed that it was very likely made in the time period that would correspond to the outbreak of this conflict.

It is also important to note that the Azerbaijan government has said that if the video proves to be genuine, they will seek prosecutions for these actions.

I also note correspondents from Azerbaijan stating that they have uncovered evidence of potential war crimes that were committed in the earlier conflict in the 1990s, when parts of Azerbaijan's sovereign territory were occupied by Armenia.

They referenced the discovery of mass burial sites, and evidence of torture and executions. We must never forget that there are still 4 000 Azeris and 1 000 Armenians missing from that earlier conflict.

Having witnessed firsthand last year the evidence of the aftermath of occupation by Armenian forces – specifically the destruction of Agdan, rightly described as the Hiroshima of the West – there is no doubt in my mind that these charges too, require thorough investigation.

Indeed, I think it only fair to reflect that the Council of Europe did not pay enough attention to the whole issue of occupation by Armenian forces of up to a fifth of Azeri territory for the best part of three decades.

But again I have to be clear: these charges, these potential war crimes from this earlier period in no way justify this most recent incursion by Azerbaijan.

What makes these events particularly regrettable is that they took place just two weeks after a fourth round of EU-mediated, high level talks in Brussels between the two leaders – Azerbaijani president Mr Ilham Aliyev, and Armenian prime minister Mr Nikol Pashinyan – where progress was being made.

I understand that difficult issues around transportation routes, a possible interstate treaty, and the rights and security of Karabakh Armenians had all been advanced to some degree.

Last year, I was rapporteur with regard to the humanitarian consequences of the 44-day conflict that broke out in 2020. I highlighted key issues around the disappeared, deaths from mines, Armenian prisoners of war, and hate speech – all of which remain largely unresolved. Indeed, I note there are 259 either deaths or serious injuries from mines over the last couple of years.

None of these issues will be resolved by war. I would note the observation of Mr Thomas de Waal, that the biggest stumbling blocks with regard to resolving all of these broader issues is the total lack of consequences for whichever side says no to compromise and agreement.

I believe that all members of this Parliamentary Assembly must be clear that the use of military force is totally unacceptable in settling disputes between Council of Europe member states.

My report called on the Committee of Ministers to play particular attention to the needs of displaced persons, and focus on confidence-building measures for all affected communities, and measures necessary to build tolerant societies and tackle hate speech. Regrettably, we seem still very far away from such a scenario.

The pressing need now is for both sides to reengage in peace talks without further delay.

We need to see much greater effort from the international community to ensure that this happens.

Above all, we cannot have this issue being subject to global political gains between superpowers vying for influence and control.

I also believe Türkiye, which played a significant role in supporting Azerbaijan during the last outbreak of violence in 2020, should adopt a more balanced approach to the wider issues of establishing a just and lasting settlement between these two countries.

In this regard it is welcome news that both Armenia and Azerbaijan have agreed to a civilian EU mission alongside their border. I understand the mission will start by the end of this month, and aims to delineate the border between the two countries.

The proposed timeline of two months seems rather short to me, but the real significance of this decision is that it arose from a meeting involving both prime ministers, as well as European president Mr Charles Michel and French president Emmanuel Macron.

In conclusion, I hope this mission will act to build confidence and dialogue between both countries.

We cannot see any further slideback towards conflict; it resolves nothing. All it does is further delay justice for all of those families of the disappeared, and victims of the war on both sides.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Paul GAVAN.

We continue with the speakers on behalf of political groups.

The first speaker is Ms Boriana ÅBERG, representing the Group of the European People's Party, from Sweden.

The floor is yours.

Ms Boriana ÅBERG (Sweden, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): President, Dear Colleagues,

A few days ago I received a video showing a horrible execution of a woman, an Armenian prisoner of war. I am still haunted by these atrocious scenes and the inhumane cruelty taking place. It's not the only video where such dreadful evil occurs.

Since the large scale military aggression against the territorial integrity of Armenia launched by the armed forces of Azerbaijan, numerous videos have been publicised by Azerbaijani users on social media.

These videos demonstrate war crimes, horrible scenes of the killing of Armenian prisoners of war, the torture of Armenian servicemen, including women, and the desecration of human corpses.

The reaction from the international community was unequivocal. The European Union, US, France, Germany, and several other countries expressed a clear demand for a full and impartial investigation of these brutal executions.

Our position is clear: those responsible for war crimes must be held to account. We noted that the military prosecutors office in Azerbaijan has initiated a comprehensive investigation.

Madam President, Dear Colleagues,

Today's debate is very timely and needed because the situation in the South Caucasus remains very tense and alarming.

We have a situation where one member State of this organisation attacks another member State. Any ignorance from us will enable new violence, new atrocities.

On 13 September, we witnessed aggression against Armenia, which resulted in the ongoing occupation of the sovereign territories of Armenia, horrendous sufferings, human losses on both sides, and a large scale destruction of civilian infrastructure in Armenia.

The use of force or greater force is becoming the new normalcy, which is absolutely unacceptable.

As Josep Borrell said recently responding to MEPs questions, the fact of the matter is that Azerbaijan has bombarded and occupied part of Armenian territory, adding that Azerbaijani forces must be withdrawn from those border areas.

We urge Azerbaijan to withdraw its armed forces from the sovereign territory of Armenia and to return to positions held prior to this escalation.

We call on Azerbaijan to cease any action that could further aggravate the already terrible situation on the ground.

If I may quote Antony Blinken, who said, "There cannot be military solutions to the conflict. Diplomacy is the only way forward".

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Ms Boriana ÅBERG.

The next speaker is Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, from Ukraine, representing the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

The floor is yours.

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

First of all I want to wish the Armenian and Azeri people peace.

We Ukrainians understand how important it is, better than many others.

We want to support with our words our friends from Azerbaijan and from Armenia.

We believe that they can find a solution. We've seen progress in the negotiations between these two countries, with the help of Europe. I encourage them to continue. I'm sure they will find the solution which should definitely respect territorial integrity and sovereignty of both of these countries.

I want to thank my group, the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, for the possibility to speak now, because today is a very important day when a Ukrainian voice should be heard here.

Why?

Because while we are here discussing the rule of law, human rights, democracy, this morning, our capital is on fire. Kyiv is on fire. But not only. Other Ukrainian cities too.

There was the most terrible missile attack on Ukraine since 24 February. More than 10 people killed, dozens are injured.

Putin said he would use highly precise weaponry, but then we've seen a playground being destroyed, Kyiv University.

A young lady was making a video for her friend, and then, at that exact moment her apartment was hit by a Russian missile. Yes, that was highly precise weaponry from Putin. He wanted to kill civilians, as many as possible, that's why he did it on a Monday morning.

I want to address all of you. How many more Ukrainians should die? How many more of our children and women should die before the west and the free world will give us all the weaponry we need to protect our sky? To give us tanks, fighters, everything we need to save our children?

Today, my two children are in Odesa, and my heart is bleeding like millions of Ukrainian hearts.

So please, help us today. Don't wait for anything.

Every country can take any Ukrainian city and protect the sky over any Ukrainian city. We will remember it for decades.

Give us weaponry. One Leopard today means more than one million words. That is the situation for the moment.

If it is a question of money, we will find money, we will give everything we've got. We will take any possible loans. We will find it and we will buy it. But just give us this possibility.

I'm sure that ordinary people, not only from Ukraine, but from all of our countries will help us do this. But this political decision should be made today, to finish this awful war.

Once again, there is one country on this continent that wants this war. It's the Russian Federation. What is happening in the South Caucasus is also because of them.

So I want to ask all of you to stop this tyrant as soon as possible.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

And the next speaker is Mr Jacques LE NAY, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. The floor is yours.

Mr Jacques LE NAY (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

After the conflict that left more than 6 500 dead on both sides in 2020, the guns have spoken again between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two states that are members of our Organization. It seems that Azerbaijan has opened fire and its troops have moved into Armenian territory. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, claims that it only retaliated against Armenian provocations. At least 286 people were killed in these clashes.

For my part, and on behalf of my group, I obviously condemn the use of force, which is totally unacceptable to settle disputes between the member states of our Organization.

The clashes that took place a month ago, are the most violent since the end of the war in 2020 and are not isolated incidents.

In the face of this situation, which could very quickly lead to a new war, it is necessary to recall a number of fundamental points. First of all, the territorial integrity of Armenia must be preserved and Azerbaijan must withdraw from the territory of Armenia in accordance with the ceasefire agreement of 10 November 2020.

Moreover, as member states of the Council of Europe, both belligerents must respect the rights of prisoners of war and commit themselves not to organise abductions. However, the press reports videos circulating on social networks showing Armenians being abducted and tortured by Azeri soldiers. Azerbaijan must investigate these incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Finally, I call on both states to quickly negotiate a peace agreement that must be respected. To this end, the Council of Europe must fully play its role as a pan-European platform for discussion and contribute through political dialogue to an easing of tensions and respect for the fundamental rights of the citizens of both States.

Dear colleagues,

The international community cannot remain indifferent to the situation in this region. The European Union and the United States, but also Russia and Turkey, must work together to resolve this conflict. However, it will not be easy to mobilise the international community on this issue given the war in Ukraine.

Indeed, it also has repercussions on the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Thus, Russia is more isolated than ever on the international scene, which will not facilitate discussions. Moreover, it is not clear that it is in Russia's interest to become more involved in this conflict when it is currently mired and in difficulty with the conflict it has opened with Ukraine.

In this context, I believe that our action is more necessary than ever to make our governments aware of the need to act for the benefit of peace in this region.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Jacques LE NAY.

We continue with Ms Laura CASTEL from Spain and the Group of the Unified European Left.

The floor is yours.

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

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, I want to express grave concern regarding the most recent outbreak of violence between Azerbaijan and Armenia last month. I want to make the following points in regard to what has happened.

Firstly, it is important to note that the evidence points to this most recent violence as rising from Azerbaijani incursion in the sovereign territory of Armenia. Up to 300 soldiers died between 12 and 14 September.

Secondly, to recognise that all of the violence took place on Armenian territory. None of the violence took place in the vicinity of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. I do note that Azerbaijan has referenced and blamed provocations from the Armenian side but it is not possible to verify these claims.

Thirdly, it is important to note that Azerbaijan continued to occupy parts of Armenian territory as a result of this incursion. Again this is unacceptable.

Fourth, there have been disturbing reports of possible war crimes being committed by the Azerbaijani armed forces. Horrific video evidence of Armenian soldiers being executed and also the desecration of bodies are in circulation.

I also note recent correspondence from Azerbaijan alleging evidence that they have uncovered potential war crimes that were committed in the earlier conflict in the 1990s when parts of Azerbaijani's sovereign territory were occupied by Armenia.

Having witnessed first-hand the evidence of the destruction by Armenian forces of Aghdam, there is no doubt that these do require further investigation but in no way justify this most recent incursion by Azerbaijan. What makes these events particularly regrettable is that they took place just two weeks after the fourth round of European Union mediated high level talks in Brussels between the two leaders, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev and Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, where progress was being made.

I understand that there are difficult issues around transportation routes and interstate treaty on the rights and security of Karabakh Armenians.

This Parliamentary Assembly must send a clear message that the use of military forces is totally unacceptable in settling disputes between Council of Europe member states. We therefore call on Azerbaijan and Armenia to pull back from any further steps that might worsen the situation to respect international agreements and to engage in peace talks without further delay. And I conclude, we urge both member states to abide by the commitments taken upon accession, notably to settle the conflict by peaceful means. The Council of Europe is ready to support them in this effort.

Thank you very much.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much, Ms Laura CASTEL.

We continue with Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, from Austria, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Madam President.

Our President of the Assembly said today at the opening: the delegations of Azerbaijan and Armenia should use this week to engage in positive exchanges and talks. I would like to fully agree with Mr Tiny KOX on this. We have to be careful; we have here in a lightning development again the death of people in warlike clashes, this time not in Nagorno-Karabakh, but carried by Azerbaijan to Armenian territory, near the towns of Goris, Sotk and Djermuk. And both sides are using heavy weapons. There is a lot of information on the way now where I would warn-because there is a lot of propaganda here as well.

What we need is a return to a cease-fire. We certainly have a situation here that was triggered by the Ukraine war, and in the shadow of the Ukraine war. We need to bring about a ceasefire. Russia certainly doesn't have the power right now because, after all, Russia brokered the last ceasefire. We can't do that now. That means now that the European Union and the Council of Europe, are very strong here, and other international organizations, like Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have to step in here. Yes, what we need is a civilian EU mission on the borders. We also need to appeal to Türkiye to use its potential here to come to a ceasefire.

As Mr Paul GAVAN, the rapporteur has said: we still have many landmine deaths. We have to remind the Armenian side to finally give up the map of the buried landmines. Conversely, we must clearly remind Azerbaijan that the exchange of prisoners of war was agreed in the brokered ceasefire. There are still prisoners of war, Armenian prisoners of war in Azerbaijan; they also have to go back home. Any ceasefire agreement is not bad.

What is important - I have been a rapporteur now for seven years for Azerbaijan, and in every official talk in Azerbaijan, you are in seconds or minutes to the trauma of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. What is important is not only a ceasefire but disarmament in the minds. Enemies cannot live next to each other. One must come to a common neighbourly relationship and hatred must disappear from school curricula. This is the only way to create a prosperous future between neighbours.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

We continue on the speakers list.

The next speaker is Ms Isabelle SANTIAGO, from France and the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

The floor is yours.

Ms Isabelle SANTIAGO (France, SOC): Madam President,

Dear Colleagues,

Among the objectives of our Assembly are, of course, respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but our work must also contribute to peace. This is why I am particularly moved by the fact that my first speech today, in this Chamber, as a new parliamentarian who sits on the Council of Europe, concerns this conflict which we hoped would be over and which is resuming after the 44-day war, which has never stopped and which has resumed, since 14 September, in an extremely serious manner, with incursions on Armenian territory.

I sincerely hope that our Assembly can vigorously denounce the resumption of hostilities by Azerbaijan on Armenia, with strikes on Armenian civilian settlements and infrastructure.

My colleagues have said it well, and I hope that we can collectively express our full solidarity with the Armenian people and their representative institutions. This country is a democracy in the South Caucasus, which is, technically anyway, in a difficulty on the belligerent side. The belligerent party must be reminded of its commitments. The ceasefire must be respected.

We must also open the dialogue for peace. The provisional settlement of hostilities in 2020 only endorsed the *fait accompli* and the use of force. The question of borders must be put back on the negotiating table. It is no longer possible to watch the videos that are sent to us, which are unbearable: prisoners who disappear and of whom we have no news, kidnappings, prisoners who do not return, demands that are made extremely strong, torture.

I believe that we must carry this message of peace. It is essential that the Armenian people be able to live in peace on their own territory, within their own borders. I believe that here we must, as others have said, reopen the dialogue between all the countries that could facilitate this peace. I also believe that it is necessary for us to have a mission that goes to the region to bring this vision and this peace that we want, and above all, that we can resolve this conflict and find solutions for the Armenian people who have been living for years in these difficulties of territory, where the war is causing victims in an extremely strong way. It is important that the children can grow up in peace.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much, Ms Isabelle SANTIAGO.

And for Group of the European People's Party, Mr Ruben RUBINYAN from Armenia.

The floor is yours.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all I would like to thank all the speakers who spoke before me, especially Mr Paul GAVAN, for telling the truth and establishing the facts.

Indeed, my country, my democratic country, was recently attacked by its authoritarian neighbour. The attack was completely unprovoked and unjustified. Many civilians were killed. Settlements were damaged. Civilian infrastructure was damaged. Mr Paul GAVAN presented it all.

Why did this happen dear friends?

It happened because the aggressor wasn't condemned before.

I remember during the last session, here in this hemicycle, I was talking about another Azeri incursion on sovereign Armenian territory which happened in 2021. I was talking about Armenian prisoners of war that are still kept in Azerbaijan. They were kept in Azerbaijan back then, they are still kept there.

Now, a couple of months later, we have a new aggression, a new occupation, new prisoners of war, some of whom were killed, and there is footage of these videos, of them being summarily executed by the Azerbaijanis immediately after being captured. This happened because they were not condemned before.

Dear colleagues, Mr Samad SEYIDOV, the Chair of the Azerbaijani delegation is going to speak after me. Most probably, he is going to resort to the good old Azerbaijani tradition of denial saying that Azerbaijani aggression simply did not happen, but the Armenians deserved it. This is what he is going to do. He is going to tell Mr Paul GAVAN, Ms Boriana ÅBERG, and the other speakers that they are wrong. That there is no incursion into Armenian territory.

Why?

Because it's his job. Mr Samad SEYIDOV's job is to justify the actions, the illegal crimes, of his authoritarian government here.

Speaking about the necessity of talking about peace in this organisation, I want to inform you that the President of PACE, Mr Tiny KOX, invited me and Mr Samad SEYIDOV to have a meeting in Paris when we had a Monitoring Committee meeting.

This meeting had to be held on 15 September. Why did it not happen?

Simply because two days before this meeting my country was attacked by Azerbaijan and I didn't go to Paris.

Dear friends, it's possible to talk about peace when your colleague wants to talk about peace. It's impossible to talk about peace while they are shooting at you, while they are occupying your territory. It's impossible.

I understand that many of our friends have been reluctant to take sides when it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It is complicated. I understand.

This is different. Whenever there is a case of an authoritarian government attacking its democratic neighbour and occupying its territory, this must be condemned, and the Azerbaijani troops have to withdraw from Armenian territory immediately, and Armenian prisoners of war should be released.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Ruben RUBINYAN.

The next speaker, on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance is Mr Samad SEYIDOV from Azerbaijan.

The floor is yours.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Thank you, madam president.

And I think Mr Ruben RUBINYAN tried to mislead this organisation.

I think his job is to present everything upside down.

Unfortunately, he is speaking about the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but he didn't mention that there are still Armenian military forces inside Azerbaijan.

He didn't mention that before September hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenian military forces infiltrated into the territory of Azerbaijan and put mines inside the territory of Azerbaijan.

Why Mr RUBINYAN did not mention about each day casualties of the Azerbaijanis?

Why he didn't mention about the infrastructure and civilians which have been killed and killing on a daily basis because of the Armenian invasion of Azerbaijani territories?

My dear colleagues, my dear friends, you know, unfortunately there is a war against Azerbaijan. An information war against Azerbaijan. With videos, with accusations, with attacks on our embassies, with this kind of presentations that only one side is guilty. But that's not true. The truth is that, immediately after peaceful negotiations between the president of Azerbaijan and the prime minister of Armenia, these clashes have happened.

That immediately after the positive developments which we are trying to do, something very strange is coming from our neighbouring country.

We should understand that they are not in favour to fulfil the obligations under which they have signed. They have to withdraw the military forces from Azerbaijan, they have to sit together and to think about delimitations and demarcations of the territories.

They have to bring those who committed crimes against Azerbaijanis in Ganja, in Khojaly, to justice.

Because we did it, of course, during the war something could happen but the prosecuted general from Azerbaijan already stopped its mission in Azerbaijan.

Have you heard about any initiative from Armenia?

No, and that's why if we are going to be balanced and objective we should take into account that this Assembly is becoming a tool in the hands of those who are thinking about war, not peace.

We are, in spite of all things, for peace. And we will do our best for peace in the region.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Samad SEYIDOV.

The next speaker is Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV, from Azerbaijan and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

The floor is yours.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV (Azerbaijan, ALDE): Thank you, Chair.

Dear Colleagues,

For almost 30 years Azerbaijan has faced great hypocrisy and lies.

It was an international hypocrisy that lasted almost 30 years, thus having prevented Azerbaijan from clearing its occupied lands from the invaders. Nonetheless, everything comes to the end sooner or later.

In the fall of 2020, Azerbaijan had its final say in the war against Armenia and liberated its occupied lands within 44 days without the intervention of any foreign forces.

Forces that cannot come to terms with this reality resort to neo-hypocrisy.

An attempt to revive an already resolved issue and ended war, to put it back on the agenda, is a new manifestation of hypocrisy.

Dear Colleagues,

The role and importance of Azerbaijan in insuring the energy security of Europe has recently increased dramatically. Intensive work is underway to reach a final peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Already, the presidents of France and the European Council are more actively involved in this process with a mediation mission. The successful meeting between them and the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan last week in Prague is a clear confirmation of this.

Well, why is this storming of glass finally created when the process goes that way? Who cares about all this?

Those who oppose Azerbaijan's contribution to Europe's energy security are not only working against Azerbaijan. First of all, they are making mischief toward Europe. Those who allegedly care about Armenia and resort to such fictional ways are actually acting against Armenia and the Armenian people.

Armenia, which carried out armed attacks on Azerbaijan with the aim of provocation and which suffered heavy defeat in the border regions that have not yet being delimited, is trying to convince those who are ignorant of the nature of these events. The goal of the network, which is actually acting against Azerbaijan, is to maximise the tension at the present time.

I appeal to those who fall into the same net. Never let yourself become a pawn on the political chessboard doing their dirty work. Sooner or later this rotten campaign that was started will also collapse very soon. The network of hypocrisy will be broken.

Do not disturb the ongoing negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Do not prevent the great peace which is underway. Avoid actions that hinder the benefits that Azerbaijan will render to Europe's energy security.

Don't let any temptations mislead you.

Thank you.

Ms Ingerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Rafael HUSEYNOV.

The next speaker is Mr Ahmet YILDIZ from Türkiye.

The floor is yours.

Mr Ahmet YILDIZ (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear Colleagues,

I hope this discussion will contribute to assisting the normalisation process between the two countries here.

Indeed, it is unbelievable that we are discussing these issues here when almost the whole continent is in danger of the threat of war and nuclear threats. We are in a post-conflict era after the liberation of Azerbaijani territories from three decades of occupation which consists of 20% of its territory and almost one million IDPs.

What we need here in the post-conflict era is a comprehensive peace treaty as was proposed by Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, until now, we see that Armenia is refraining from meaningful negotiations on this issue and the basics of any peace treaty, of course, is the recognition of the territory of each other as in any other peace treaty it must for lasting peace.

I encourage Azerbaijani and Armenian colleagues to come to the table based on these principles. From the beginning of this conflict it is clear that this is the only lasting solution. We encourage dialogue between the two countries, but we are happy that Azerbaijani and Armenian representatives meet in different fora. Also, we have a normalisation process with Armenia. Mr Ruben RUBINYAN – our colleague Ruben – is the Armenian representative. We have Turkish representatives that are in constant dialogue. Also in Prague during the first summit of the European Political Community, President Erdoğan and Mr Pashinyan met.

When Mr Paul GAVAN and others say that the Turkish principle should be more balanced, the Turkish institute is very, very principled from the beginning as in any other dispute between any two countries. It is a peace in the territories, in the territory of nations, countries as was stipulated in several UN decisions.

From now on, I hope that both parties will be in better and direct dialogue. Yet, I am still concerned – as I said in another meeting – that Armenia should give maps of landmines they decorated the Azerbaijani land with for three decades.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Ahmet YILDIZ.

Next speaker is Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN from Armenia, Group of the European People's Party.

The floor is yours.

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

Thank you, Dear Colleagues.

I would like to express the words of gratitude to all the political groups supporting and actually reflecting the reality.

I would like to address Mr Samad SEYIDOV on the issues he raised. Mr Samad SEYIDOV, you are playing a very complicated role. You cannot even understand how far I [do not] understand you. How it is possible for many years to defend evil.

In any case it's your choice, but here we are in the organisational values, and let's speak about values. It's very important when we are speaking about commitments.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV,

Our Colleagues,

When Armenia and Azerbaijan began membership of this respectful organisation, we took the obligation not to use force, or the threat of force to solve political problems. It happened in 2020, and nobody reacted.

We knew that this day would come. Today, fortunately, many of you understand what's going on there.

When Mr Samad SEYIDOV is speaking about the Armenian forces in Azerbaijan, I would like to say that it's totally false.

The people of Nagorno-Karabakh have the right to defend their existential life. Look at what's going on. Dismemberment, humiliation, wilful killing. We have the right to self-defence, at least. They're trying to use this right.

When Mr Samad SEYIDOV was speaking about provocations, I remember the Nazi-time rhetoric, "Polish troops organised provocation; that's why we invaded Poland."

When I listened to the words concerning the Aghdam or the other regions, let's come back to 1915. Let's speak about the Armenian genocide. Let's speak about pogroms in Shushi. We are speaking about what's going on now, here. We have prisoners of war. We have missing persons. We have the cases of war crimes. We have cases where the European Court of Human Rights should react immediately.

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your support. Azerbaijani troops in Armenian territory should be withdrawn immediately. This is the requirement of the UN Charter. This is the requirement of the order of the United Nations.

Armenian prisoners of war should be released. This racist rhetoric should be stopped. This racist attitude of killing Armenians, because we are just Armenians. Imagine the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. Every day they are fighting for their lives not to be killed because of being Armenians. It's not a territorial dispute. It's not a situation between the two countries. It's a situation of existence of a people, of human beings, the reason why this respective organisation was created.

I would like to say to Mr Samad SEYIDOV, Mister Samad SEYIDOV, remember, all the good things will come back, and all the evil will come back to you.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN.

Before I interrupt the list I give the floor to the last speaker, Mr Bernard FOURNIER, Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Bernard FOURNIER (France, EPP/CD): Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is once again occupying our Assembly.

The situation has deteriorated again in the month of September, with several hundred deaths following the outbreak of hostilities for which both sides accuse each other. I regret this situation in which Azerbaijan seems to me to take advantage of the situation caused by the war in Ukraine to be able to impose its views on Armenia and thus recover territories lost since 1991.

Indeed, the war in Ukraine leads to a lesser involvement of Russia in the region. Let us remember that it was Russia that was able to impose a ceasefire in 2020, after more than a month and a half of a particularly deadly conflict.

Today, it is under the aegis of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, that negotiations are being held to reach a final peace agreement. While he was optimistic at the end of August, the fighting that took place at the end of September calls this optimism into question. It is not certain that the European Union alone can help the two belligerents reach a peace agreement.

It is clear today that Azerbaijan is seeking to expand its territory beyond the ceasefire agreement signed in November 2020. This bellicose attitude must be severely condemned.

Moreover, we can only note the very partial implementation of the resolution adopted by our Assembly in September 2021 on the humanitarian consequences of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Indeed, the violations of the rights of the Armenian civilian population are increasing due to the exactions committed by the Azeri army in Armenian territory. The safety of Armenian citizens in Nagorno-Karabakh is still not guaranteed.

Similarly, Armenia continues to fear for the prisoners of war held by the Azeri authorities and has therefore asked the International Court of Justice to enjoin Azerbaijan to protect those arrested after the 2020 conflict. In this regard, I would like the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to visit both states to examine the fate of prisoners, and not only Armenia as provided for in the Committee's work program. Indeed, the Committee's last visit to Azerbaijan was in 2019, prior to the 2020 conflict, which seems to me to justify a new inspection.

Dear colleagues, the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia should not distract us from what is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Kamal JAFAROV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

If you can conclude that there is a crime by watching a single video, then what is the need for courts and prosecution?

You can see many things in the video. But image and fact is not same thing. What is fact in the video? This is very delicate issue needs to be responded not by politicians by the law enforcement bodies.

From the legal point of view, all the facts of alleged crime need to be established. Mental and material elements need to be proved.

From the point view of justice, both parties to the war have to investigate each claim.

Azerbaijan Military Prosecutor Office announced the initiation of investigation regarding the alleged crimes. And we did it because of our adherence to international law.

But we have not heard anything from Armenian side regarding videos depicting degrading treatment to the corpses by Armenian military personnel.

What we heard was that Armenian Prosecutor Offices initiated criminal investigation to the released armenians by Azerbaijan. They come here, they advocate for the release of detainee Armenians, but initiate criminal investigation when we release them back. Now, some detained armenians don't want to go back.

This is clearly example of hypocrisy. We have not forgotten and we will never forget what happened in Khojali? Armenian military forces brutally murdered 613 civilians in just one day.

Since 1st Karabakh war, 4000 Azerbaijani remain missing. Armenian political-military leadership refuse to provide mass grave locations. Just one week ago, mass grave of tortured and killed Azerbaijani military personnel by Armenia during 1st Karabakh war identified in Edilli village. Edilli was used as a concentration camp for Azerbaijani hostages by Armenia.

Since November 2020, up to 250 people either killed or seriously injured by land mines. After liberation of Lachin city, we found out that 1400 new land mines were planted in 2021. This means that while they were giving fake mine plans, they were planting thousands of new ones in our territory.

Mr Halil ÖZŞAVLI (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear President, Dear Colleagues,

As a historian, it is an honor for me to speak on this current affairs debate that deserves particular attention from all members.

It is vital to send appropriate messages from our Assembly confirming the support of the international community to ultimately end hostilities between two nations.

First of all, to better understand the essence of the issue, it is essential to recall four UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno – Karabakh adopted in 1993.

The four resolutions highlighted that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved in accordance with the principles of territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders of Azerbaijan.

Before these resolutions, the fact that Nagorno Karabakh is under the Republic of Azerbaijan's sovereignty was accepted undisputedly in the framework of the Almaty Declaration and during the examination of the memberships of Azerbaijan and Armenia to the UN.

So, we see in the mentioned UN resolutions and the declaration that Azerbaijan has not occupied any place but just took back its occupied lands.

Therefore, from now on, we should support any peace initiative for a long-lasting solution to the crisis between the two states.

To this end, we should encourage Armenia to sign the peace agreement proposed by Azerbaijan as soon as possible.

Dear members,

Any unsolved issue should be discussed openly between the parties.

Any initiative to ease the tension is welcomed. In this respect, we commend Azerbaijan for the steps taken in this direction, including the release of some Armenian prisoners.

We call on Armenia to reciprocate the positive steps of Azerbaijan and adopt a positive approach in their discussions with Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, from our side, we support the normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Currently, there is an ongoing process of normalization of relations between Türkiye and Armenia, which is also vital for the further stability and development of the region.

We really hope that these two processes will provide a strong base for long-lasting peace and stability in this region.

I believe there is a ground for cautious optimism that common sense will prevail. The contribution of the entire international community to this by refraining from one-sided actions and statements is thus valuable.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Stéphane BERGERON (Canada): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Mr Kamil AYDIN (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear President, Dear Colleagues,

I am glad to address you on this important topic. Recent armed clashes showed us that unless a peace agreement is signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, stability in our region will remain fragile. However, we must not allow recent developments to hinder progress. We are happy that the two sides reached a rapid ceasefire after direct communications on September 14.

As it stated in the UN Security Councils resolutions Nagorno Karabakh is in Azerbaijan territory. Hence, Azerbaijan has every right to ensure security along its internationally recognized borders and that is what Azerbaijan has done so far. However, the war ended after Azerbaijan took back its occupied territory and peace must be established after this long-lasting conflict.

We believe a comprehensive peace is possible between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this sense, both sides should commit themselves to regional peace, stability, and development. Establishment of good neighbourly relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is key for building security and stability in South Caucasus.

In such manner Azerbaijan proposed a comprehensive peace agreement. As Türkiye we firmly welcome this development and the ongoing direct dialogue. Türkiye is always firmly supports Azerbaijan's just cause and, in this case, the much-needed peace initiative.

However, there are commitments which Armenia should fulfill under the Trilateral Statement. To that end, Armenia must complete withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan territory, where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily deployed and build new transport passage to connect Nakhichevan and the western regions of Azerbaijan.

There are clear signs that shows us Armenia is refraining from signing a peace treaty. Thus, we call Armenia not to undermine and prolong the peace process by military provocations and hate speeches toward Azerbaijan.

As the last clash shows, it already hard to keep ceasefire. In this context, it is important more than ever for the Member States to contribute to this process, and thus, refrain from one-sided actions and statements that would complicate the already delicate situation.

Thank you.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Bernard FOURNIER.

I must now interrupt the list of speakers. The speeches of members on the speakers list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may be given to the Table Office for publication in the Official Report. I remind colleagues that type-written texts must be submitted electronically, if possible, no later than four hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

I remind you that at the end of a current affairs debate, the Assembly is not asked to decide upon a text; but the matter may be referred by the Bureau to the responsible committee for a report.

And also thanks to Mister Paul GAVAN.

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow morning at 10 a.m. with the Agenda which was approved this morning.

The sitting is adjourned.