



Provisional edition

Monday 24 April 2023, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of the part-session

Opening of the sitting num 10

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Mister Deputy Secretary General, Madam Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly, ambassadors, members of the Parliamentary Assembly, all those who are following our meeting online, or from the public gallery,

We are just coming from the opening of a very moving exhibition dedicated to the solidarity with the people who suffered and died as a result of the horrible earthquake in Türkiye and Syria in February of this year. I wish once again to convey my sincere condolences to the families and friends of those who died in this horrific natural disaster that took the lives of more than 50 000 people.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to those who worked relentlessly to rescue people, and to all countries and all our member states who provided generous assistance. Thank you very much for your solidarity.

Dear colleagues,

Today we are meeting for the first time in the chamber of the European Parliament while our hemicycle undergoes substantial renovation and modernisation.

I am grateful to the European Parliament for offering us its premises this year, which allows our Parliamentary Assembly to continue its work in an effective manner.

Unfortunately this temporary move means that we will only have five plenary sittings during the week instead of the normal nine, but our agenda, I assure you, will still remain relevant and busy, and we will continue to address the subjects that are most important for Europeans in the coming year.

I hope that we will be back in our hemicycle in a year's time, in April.

And I promise that you will have there the modern equipment that we all need, and that the chairs we will give you will be even better than the ones we have now, perhaps even better than the ones you are now sitting on! So no complaints about the chairs in this hemicycle.

Dear colleagues,

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.

This part-session is also the last one before the Fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the Council of Europe will take place, where many important decisions for the future of this organisation, and of Europe – it's the place of the Council of Europe and the European multilateral architecture – will be taken.

We have called as a Parliamentary Assembly for this summit for many years. It is now most satisfactory to see that it is indeed taking place and has a relevant and meaningful agenda.

I want to thank the Secretary General for all the good work done to make it possible. The same thanks goes to the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly. I also wish to thank the Committee of Ministers for their excellent cooperation, given the proposals to the proposals formulated by our Parliamentary Assembly in the report prepared by our colleague Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN, adopted during our previous session in January.

Later this week, we will have another exchange on the state of play in the preparation for the Summit with the Committee of Ministers in the form of a joint committee. We will also have the chance to discuss this with the President of Iceland, Mr Guðni Jóhannesson, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iceland, Ms Thórdís Gylfadóttir, who also chairs the Committee of Ministers, as well as during a possible current foreign affairs debate this week on the "Road to Reykjavík".

Dear colleagues,

I wish to stress that although the Fourth Summit will by and large be an intergovernmental event, a serious parliamentary dimension will also be ensured. Our Standing Committee will hold its extraordinary meeting on 15 May in Reykjavík, and the Parliamentary Assembly delegation which has been approved by the Bureau this morning will attend the Fourth Summit itself.

Dear colleagues,

Understandably, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and its implication for Europe and the wider world will be in the focus of this summit's debate. This also remains at the centre of our Parliamentary Assembly debates. The war continues, and so does the suffering of the Ukrainian people. This war that should never have started and should end as soon as possible should, as I said several times, never become a normality.

Therefore, I would like to invite you again to join in a moment of silence for all the victims in this brutal war of aggression by the Russian Federation against our member state, Ukraine.

[Moment of silence observed]

Thank you so much.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN: a point of order.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Today is 24 April.

Worldwide, we are commemorating the victims of the Armenian genocide, which happened between 1915 to 1923.

I would like to request another minute of silence, to pay tribute to the victims of this international outrage, taking into account that it is quite symbolic that in 1987 the European Parliament adopted a resolution recognising it as genocide. Afterwards, the vast majority of our colleagues from different parliaments and members of the Council of Europe adopted such a resolution.

I would like to request another minute of silence, please.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much for reminding us that today is also the day where many people think about what atrocities happened to Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire.

Your proposal to also have a minute of silence, I give it to the Parliamentary Assembly.

I think it is a fair proposal to have a moment of silence to think about those who died in these dark days.

[Minute of silence observed]

Thank you very much, Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN, for raising this issue.

Dear colleagues,

The Russian authorities wage war against Ukraine, but inside Russia they also fight, those people who are not afraid to publicly voice their opposition to the ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

Exactly one week ago, the Russian authorities sentenced the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize winner of the Council of Europe, Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza, to 25 years – a quarter of a century – of imprisonment for telling the truth and nothing but the truth about this horrible war.

Earlier today, I and my colleagues, the leaders from the political groups of this Parliamentary Assembly, in the presence of the wife of Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza, Ms Evgenia Kara-Murza, made a public statement expressing, on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly, our strong condemnation of this outrageous verdict, and demanded the immediate release of Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza. This statement was done also on your behalf.

Dear colleagues,

In our work we must continue to focus on the Russian aggression against Ukraine and its consequences. This week, provided you will agree to hold an urgent affairs debate, we will examine this situation of Ukrainian citizens, notably children, abducted by the Russian forces in Ukraine, and forcibly moved to Russia. We expect that this debate will be preceded by a statement by the First Lady of Ukraine, Ms Olena Zelenska, who will join us via video link.

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

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we meet in the European Parliament, the number of our plenary sessions has been reduced but the possibilities for committee work have increased. This week we will have an extremely interesting programme in different committees, including several hearings on topical issues, such as a joint hearing of the Political Affairs and Legal Affairs Committees on responsibility in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, or the public hearing of the Committee on Culture on the participation of athletes from Russia and Belarus in the Olympic Games.

The Committee on Equality will also hold another hearing to mark the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This is a unique legal instrument, created in part at the initiative of the Parliamentary Assembly. Currently more than 80 regional and minority languages are protected in the 25 member States that have ratified it.

Of course, the growing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Lachin corridor will not be overlooked by our Assembly either. The Committee on Migration is carefully examining the situation in this region.

Finally, colleagues, I would like to remind you that last week we celebrated the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a unique event during the Second World War, in which extremely courageous people stood up against the oppressive Nazi regime in a hopeless battle to defend not so much their lives as their dignity.

I conclude my introductory remarks today by giving the floor to Mr Aleksander POCIEJ, chairman of the Group of the European People's Party, for a personal statement on this last subject.

Mister Aleksander POCIEJ, you have the floor.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

19 April, 1943. Several hundred fighters from the Jewish combat organisation and the Jewish military union began the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Before the Uprising, nearly 300 000 Warsaw Jews had been murdered in Treblinka's gas chambers. 60 000 people were then hiding in the Ghetto. Only a few escaped death – a fate shared by 6 million European Jews. Out of several hundred Jewish fighters, only a few survived. Yet the fight was for something more important than life. They fought, as they said, to die in dignity. The dignity of the entire Jewish nation. And they won.

The action also conveyed a clear message to the Nazis: the extermination of an entire nation will be punished, and the murderers held accountable for the genocide.

Those responsible indeed did not go unpunished. The international community clearly said that everybody who commits genocide will be condemned. No more racism, no more anti-semitism. Daffodils, the yellow flowers that were distributed, are a symbol of remembrance, respect and hope. They are associated with the figure of Mr Marek Edelman, the last leader of the Jewish combat organisation, and guardian of the memory of the Uprising. He received these flowers from an anonymous person on each anniversary on 19 April.

After decades of peace, Europe is at war again. The aggressor commits war crimes. Remembering the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto, we also say this to today's victims of war: you are not alone. The perpetrators will be brought to justice.

Thank you.

[Applause]

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

It's good that we show our respect to those who died and suffered then, by wearing these yellow daffodils.

Now let's get to work.

As this is our first time meeting in the European Parliament, we will now carry out a short test of the voting system.

Please ensure that you are sitting in your designated seat – no one is seating in the wrong seat, no?

Then insert your voting card – which is distinct to your parliamentary badge – with the chip facing downwards, and leave your card in the slot throughout the vote.

If you insert the card incorrectly, the system will indicate that you need to reinsert it.

Up until now I do not see any panic...

For this test, the question is:

Are you satisfied with the transport links to travel to Strasbourg?

(In my opinion, this is kind of a political question, but nevertheless...!)

Now you can vote as you wish, either for, against, or abstain.

For as long as the vote is open, you can change the vote.

The vote is open.

We are still missing seven people who have inserted their voting cards, but did not cast a vote. It could be that for political reasons you do not want to vote, but if not, please use the opportunity to abstain, so that we can check that everybody is connected to the system. We are missing five.. we are missing three.... one is not working, ok.

Ok, we will check your voting machine, but I now close the vote and I call for the results to be displayed.

We have quite an interesting result of the vote, but the vote does not matter at all, I have to tell you.... It shows us that the system works. Those who have seen problems, please get in touch with members of staff and we will solve those problems.

I hope you are now all comfortable with using the voting system. If you have any concerns, please raise your hand and a member of the Secretariat will come to talk to you.

You can now remove your voting cards from the system.

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

The names of the representatives and substitutes are in Document 15746. If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified.

Are any credentials challenged? I don't see any.

The credentials are ratified. I welcome our new colleagues.

The next item on the Agenda is the election of Vice-President of the Assembly in respect of Italy. The candidate from the Italian delegation is Ms Elisabetta GARDINI. If there is no request for a vote, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI will be declared elected.

I do not see a request for a vote.

So I declare Ms Elisabetta GARDINI elected as vice-president of the Assembly.

I congratulate her on her election.

[Applause]

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed to the memberships of committees. These are set out in Document Commissions (2023) 04 and Addendum 1.

Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Assembly's committees agreed to?

I don't see any objections. They are agreed to.

Before we examine the draft Agenda, the Parliamentary Assembly needs to consider requests for debates under urgent and current affairs procedures.

The Bureau has received the following: a request for a current affairs debate on the "Road To Reykjavík", from the five political groups; a request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "The situation of Ukrainian civilians, including children, forcibly displaced or transferred to the Russian Federation or Ukrainian territories under the de facto control of the Russian Federation" from the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons; and a request for a current affairs debate on "Russia's role in escalating tensions in the Republic of Moldova", from Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS and 20 other members.

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau decided to recommend the Assembly hold all three of these debates during this part-session.

We will first consider the requests for a debate on the urgent procedure.

Does the Assembly agree to the Bureau's recommendation to hold an urgent debate on "The situation of Ukrainian civilians, including children, forcibly displaced or transferred to the Russian Federation or Ukrainian territories under the de facto control of the Russian Federation"?

I do not see any objection, so the Bureau's recommendation is accepted, and the request for a debate under the urgent procedure is therefore approved. It is proposed that the debate will take place on Thursday as set out in the draft Agenda and be referred to the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons for a report, and to the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development for opinion.

If that is OK, we now come to the consideration of the requests for a current affairs debate. Under Rule 53.1 the Assembly may hold one or two current affairs debates in a part-session.

The first request is for a current affairs debate on the "Road To Reykjavík" from the five political groups.

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau approved this request, and therefore recommends to the Assembly that this matter be debated during this part-session.

Does the Assembly agree to this recommendation?

I do not see any objection.

So I consider the Bureau's recommendation is accepted. The request for a current affairs debate is therefore approved. The debate will take place tomorrow, as on the Agenda, and will be opened by Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN.

We now come to the second request for a current affairs debate on "Russia's role in escalating tensions in the Republic of Moldova" from Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS and 20 other members.

At its meeting this morning, the Bureau approved this request, and therefore recommends to the Assembly that the matter be debated during this part-session.

Does the Assembly agree to this recommendation?

I do not see any objection. Therefore I consider the Bureau's recommendation is accepted, and the request for a current affairs debate is therefore approved. The debate will be opened by Mr Aleksander POCIEJ.

The next item of business is the adoption of the Agenda for the second part-session of the 2023 Ordinary Session. You will find it in Document 15722 provision 2.

The draft Agenda submitted for the Assembly's approval was adopted by the Bureau this morning.

Is the draft Agenda agreed to? I don't see any objections, it is agreed to.

The minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on 2 and 3 March 2023 in the Hague have been distributed in Document AS/per 2023 provision 1. I invite the Assembly to take note of these minutes.

The next item:

On the agenda is the debate on the progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee presented by Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER.

This will be combined with the consideration of the report of the ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on the observation of the presidential election in Montenegro, which took place on 19 March and 2 April this year. It will be presented by Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ on behalf of Mr Joseph O'REILLY.

As the debate must conclude at 4 p.m., I will therefore interrupt the list of speakers at around five minutes to 4 p.m.

I remind members that speaking time is limited to 3 minutes, and 3 minutes means 3 minutes in all 46 member states of the Council of Europe.

I now invite Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER to present the progress report.

Mister Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER, you have 7 minutes now, and 3 minutes at the end to reply.

You have the floor. Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER.

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the presidential election in Montenegro

Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Rapporteur ; Bureau of the Assembly): Mister President, thank you very much indeed.

I have just been talking to one of my British colleagues, who never thought that he would actually ever sit in this building. He then said, "Look at us now! You've got the Brits back into the European Parliament!"

[Laughter, applause]

Can I first of all please praise my friend and colleague for us all, Mr Aleksander POCIEJ. That was very a moving speech indeed. The irony of that terrible time in Warsaw was that the Soviet forces stopped short of Warsaw to allow the Germans to kill as many of the Poles that they could. It's somewhat ironic 70 years later that we are talking about Russia as opposed to the Soviets, but the same issue.

The war in Ukraine, as our President has said, is a sore on all of us.

All wars come to an end; all wars stop. At the end of the day, you have to go through the pain of a protracted, terrible situation. The longer the war goes on, as we have seen after war after war after war, the people that suffer the most are the civilians: the children, the women, the disabled, the elderly. They are the ones who are so easy to kill. You can launch a missile above, a shell, and you probably will hit something. This is what this terrible war shows: that these are the innocents. These are the bystanders in what they cannot control. Most, I suspect, cannot conceive that in the 21st century their country would be being ripped apart by an aggressor, whose sole aim, as far as I can make out, is now to kill as many people as they can, to abduct children and to remove people from the frontline and take them to... we don't know.

Here we are, in the home of democracy, saying we're frightfully sorry. I don't disagree with what Mr Tiny KOX has said. It's hard to know what we can actually do. I do find what we can actually do quite frustrating. All of us are bound, collectively to our parliaments, internationally probably through this organisation, and some in others, but collectively it is hard.

I listen to my Ukrainian colleagues who not only are incredibly brave, but show us that democracy is worth fighting for, and I am afraid, in some cases, dying for.

This brings me to the "#RoadToReykjavik", a debate that we are going to have. I have discussed this with the President. I have not been altogether happy as Mr Tiny KOX, the President, knows. I feel that we are the dog, and that the Council of Ministers should be the tail. We are the elected parliamentarians. We are the people who are sent by our respective parliaments here, to represent our countries and our creeds. Yet, when we go to Reykjavik, it is the Council of Ministers who will run everything. They are the ones that are setting the agenda. They are the ones that are allowing everybody to do what they are allowed to do. We are rather like, in English we would say, the little boy peeking through the curtains. We are not actually part of this, which I find almost offensive, because we are the elected bodies. Yes, we will have presidents there, and we will have prime ministers, and we will have foreign ministers, and we will have deputy prime ministers, we will other bodies. Surely, if we are to influence the future of the Council of Europe, the future of what we believe in, then surely we should be the ones having the say through our President and through the Presidential Committee, etc.

I think this is a great missed opportunity that we are going to Reykjavik to sit and listen to what the great and the good wish to tell us from above. Talk about welcome to Valhalla! That is precisely where we are going to be. I worry about this.

I want to, if I may, move on to what we stand for. It is ironic in a way, and I was flippant to start with, about my colleague getting into the European Union. As I have said already, we are the home of democracy. We were set up in 1948, after a terrible time, to which Warsaw was merely part of that terrible issue. Here we are, in the 21st century, the 23rd year, saying well where have we got to? We're in the middle of another war. We're in the middle of genocide. We're in the middle of starvation. We're in the middle of Sudan, where we're having to send troops to another country to get our own troops out.

Have we moved on from where we were in 1948, when Sir Winston Churchill with many other great and good came here to set this organisation up? I would argue, yes, in certain respects we are. Of course we are. We've got countries, 47 of us that sit together, or 46 of us, whatever we are now. Actually, if you look at the wider picture, I wonder where we have got to. We stood together in silence now for a situation in Armenia, from 1915, but we can go back over the very times that this has all been an issue. We have to look at the lessons of history.

But this place, we need to decide what we stand for. I will come back. I've said this to Mr Tiny KOX and my friends in the Presidential Committee. We do too many reports. We are sometimes erring on the side of what is our relevance. It's very noble to do certain reports and certain things, but what does it matter? Why would a person in the middle of Latvia, or Britain, Ireland, or Spain, or Portugal, or Malta, or Greece, actually care? The answer is, probably they don't. Our legitimacy is over our ability to inspire the people of our nations, inspire the people of the Council of Europe, inspire, dare I say it, the world –you just have to look at America to see political meltdown– as to why we should we pushing democracy, the very thing that we were set up to do, the very thing that we need to do. Mister President, with your permission, it's the very thing that we should do: live, look forward, and we need to do it together.

Thank you.

(Applause)

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

I said you have 3 minutes at the end of the debate to reply. I can take care that you sleep well, Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER, we are in the building of the European Parliament but this is now the hemicycle of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. So you did not make it to the European Parliament, you are still in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, if that is helping you to sleep well, then I am happy to tell you that.

Before giving the floor to Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ to present the report on the ad hoc committee, on the election observation of the presidential election in Montenegro, I want to share one interesting, peculiar event which one of the members of our election observation mission is now here with us. He did not only observe

the elections, and we will hear the results of that observation from Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, but he was also brave enough, when he saw a baby falling into the water, he was brave enough to come to the baby's assistance and save its life.

[Applause]

Mr Adnan DIBRANI from the Swedish delegation is here with us. You did sign a declaration on how you should behave during the election observation – this was not included, but thank you very much on behalf of the relatives of this baby who is now looking quite well. Thank you very much for doing so.

Now I give the floor to Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ to present the report of the ad hoc committee, on the presidential elections in Montenegro.

Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ (Croatia, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you Mister Chair, you already mentioned the highlight of the mission, I am sure.

My dear colleagues,

I am presenting this report, as mentioned before, on behalf of Mr Joseph O'REILLY of Ireland who, unfortunately, is not present in Strasbourg this week.

Our Parliamentary Assembly has been observing presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as referenda in Montenegro, since 2001, because Montenegro is under the post-monitoring dialogue procedure with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

First we were in Podgorica, with the pre-electoral delegation in February. Our attention was brought to a number of issues of concern about the election as a process. Our pre-electoral statement underlines a series of shortcomings, particularly: the crucial need to ensure the composition of the Constitutional Court is completed, or at least that it has a quorum in order to be able to validate the election results; the stagnation of the reform of the electoral legislative framework; the high level of corruption in the country; a highly politicised media environment; persistent doubts about the independence of the judiciary; a continued culture of procrastination and a lack of political will to take important decisions.

We were happy to see that soon after our departure the first issue I mentioned has been finally dealt with: the Constitutional Court.

The full PACE ad hoc committee, which observed the first round of the presidential election on 9 March, operated as part of the international election observation mission.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY returned to Montenegro to also observe the second round of the presidential elections, on 2 April, again in the framework of the IAOM. He concluded that the second round, as the first round, was competitive and free, but the tone in the second round was increasingly negative, and the gaps in the legal framework became even more apparent.

It is important to stress that, already on election night, the incumbent gave a concession speech acknowledging the results and congratulating his opponent.

The general conclusion is that the presidential elections in Montenegro were competitive and adequately managed. Fundamental freedoms were respected in the campaign. However, the legal framework has numerous gaps and ambiguities that undermine its effectiveness. The election administration worked transparently; nevertheless, politicisation and a lack of inclusiveness in the candidates registration process reduced public trust.

The delegation feels that concrete measures should be taken by Montenegro in order to improve its electoral legal framework, starting with the electoral code, as well as certain electoral practices.

Therefore, the delegation encourages the authorities in Montenegro to address all previous Venice Commission and ODIHR recommendations, and to make reforms in the legal framework regulating elections, starting with an electoral code; to review the permanent residence requirement of voters and candidates, and ensure its compatibility with international standards; to ensure the permanent functionality of the Constitutional Court; to improve the protection of journalists and to ensure the independence of the media as a crucial element for a balanced coverage of electoral campaigns; to ensure that all shortcomings observed on election day and mentioned in the report should be dealt with in an appropriate way.

The work should be accomplished within the framework of the Assembly's post-monitoring dialogue, and in close cooperation with the Venice Commission.

Thank you very much.

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

First of all, I would like to thank you on behalf of my group for several things that you did today.

Your clear compassionate words on the earthquake victims, your words on Karamusa, and together with Mr Aleksander POCIEJ on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Thank you very much for that.

If we read the report, there is also in the progress report the reference to our discussion on the Lachin Corridor. In the last few hours, this has become even more dramatic. The humanitarian and human disaster here has become greater, and I think we should definitely let June 2023 begin with a new debate on this.

But overall, I would strongly urge the rapporteur not to devalue the reports that we write here, that we prepare here. I believe that for many in civil society, in politics, in certain professional groups, the reports that are prepared here in the Council of Europe are extremely helpful and necessary and also give you a new identity and strengthening in your work.

I would also like to remind you today that exactly ten years ago, one of the biggest disasters happened - namely the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh with 1 300 workers killed. I can only appeal to all Member States in this sense - let the supply chain law finally become reality. It is not acceptable that people who sew clothes for us work under these circumstances for a maximum of 70 euros a month. That is not acceptable.

The road to Reykjavík was also mentioned several times in this discussion - I think this is something very important, and I would like to make a request to the Secretary General: something very concrete must indeed come out of this and perhaps even a new member of this community called Kosovo.

Let me say two or three sentences on the report of my friend, Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, on Montenegro; I think this election has shown - and Mr Joseph O'REILLY, who chaired the ad hoc commission, also wrote it in his statement - that this election took place in an incredibly relaxed atmosphere and that this has reached a high level of democratic culture and he sincerely congratulated.

Especially when we think about the ups and downs that we heard again and again in Montenegro, we can say here from the bottom of our hearts - we congratulate the citizens of Montenegro.

In this sense, however, I also appeal to the rapporteurs who have taken on a reporting; not to prevent the missions - but also to make them a reality.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): *Danke schön* [Thank you], Mister Stefan SCHENNACH.

As you see, colleagues, we do not have a bell that indicates that your speaking time has come to an end. If you look at the screens, they will indicate exactly when your time starts and when it is over.

Now I call Mr Davor Ivo STIER to the debate, from Croatia. He speaks on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Mister Davor Ivo STIER, you have the floor.

Mr Davor Ivo STIER (Croatia, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, President.

Let me start also by thanking Mr Aleksander POCIEJ for his speech on the Warsaw Uprising.

Moving to this item of the agenda, let me also thank our two rapporteurs as well as our Group of the European People's Party colleague Mr Joseph O'REILLY, who led the observation mission in Montenegro.

Those were really elections that signalled a turning point. Of course I agree with our colleague Mr Stefan SCHENNACH that we need to commend Montenegro for organising elections and a change and a peaceful transition, which is, of course, very important for democracy.

Now, it is also important for democracy to live up to expectations, to honour promises and commitments. I say this because the winner of the election Mr Jakov Milatović won on a pro-European agenda.

It is true that these elections were unfortunately carried out, as our rapporteur Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER rightly said, in a context of Russian aggression toward Ukraine. There were, of course, geopolitical considerations and repercussions in these elections in Montenegro as well.

We noted that the pro-European agenda was supported. We also noticed that some forces that were anti-West and pro-Putin supported the winner also. However, I think that the clear expectations for president-elect Mr Jakov Milatović is to really walk the talk and not just to talk the talk. On that I think that a clear alignment with Western values and the geopolitical interests of the West is expected, as well as the respect of national minorities, good neighbourly relations, respecting the independence of all the countries in the western Balkans.

On that, I do believe that the president-elect and the authorities in Montenegro can really count and rely on the Council of Europe to support it with expertise in fostering a pro-European agenda.

It is a time where, of course, we are preparing for the Summit in Reykjavik. It's a time where this Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly need to strengthen their ambition to support democracy, working together with the European Union, monitoring elections, and, of course, fostering democratic values.

I do believe that the example of our observer Mr Adnan DIBRANI in Montenegro could serve certainly as an example of how we are committed to all the citizens of the Council of Europe. I said this also having in mind that we have elections again in Montenegro in July. We do hope, of course, that this pro-European agenda and these democratic values will be strengthened also in that democratic process.

Thank you.

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

Now we go to your neighbour, Ms Petra STIENEN from the Netherlands. She is speaking on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

You have 3 minutes, Ms Petra STEINEN.

Ms Petra STIENEN (Netherlands, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group, I would also like to commend both rapporteurs and the speakers who have commemorated the atrocities taking place on this continent, a hundred years ago, 75 years ago and [which] are still ongoing, because the past two years have seen a horrendous time for Europe, for peace, for democracy and for human rights.

Of course, Russia's war against Ukraine has revived the worst nightmares of all Europeans that war can come back to our continent. On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, I say we should not waiver in the support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, even if this is going to take longer than we would want it to take.

The war has also provoked a terrible human rights and democracy backlash in Russia itself. It has already been mentioned, that the sentence of 25 years of prison against our friend and our long-standing partner, Mister Vladimir Kara-Murza, is unacceptable. He spoke up for the truth and he is being imprisoned? We cannot let this happen. And we see this in other parts of the member States of the Council of Europe.

Now we, as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, have a side event on Wednesday 26th, where we will look into what this backlash against human rights defenders means for their family members. Women, children, and husbands; they are all fighting for the human rights of their loved ones. So I would like to invite you to come to our side event.

Now, as the the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group, we are very pleased to learn that the European Union will ratify the Istanbul Convention in the coming months because for ALDE, gender equality, gender justice and LGBT rights are like canary-in-the-coal mine issues. When the atmosphere becomes toxic for minority groups, for human rights defenders, it will not take long before we will all be in danger.

So, yes, then the next one, Reykjavik, the Summit in Reykjavik. This is a unique opportunity for all of us to put the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, on the agenda of all of our citizens. How can we show new generations that we can protect their rights? It is not only human rights, it is social rights, it is social justice and I would call this a better climate for everybody.

We would like to see a real push for the ad hoc international tribunal because we really have to fight for justice against those responsible for the crime of aggression.

Let me conclude, Mister President, this is the last time I will speak on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group because I will be leaving the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I have learned so much from all of you here in this room, especially from the ones who are sometimes critical of where we stand, because I think we are proving to each other that we can show the new generations in Europe that we can discuss our disagreements, but in the end, we can be good ancestors for those future generations who want to live in peace and prosperity on our continent.

Thank you, Mister President.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): *Merci à vous* [Thank you in French], Madam Petra STIENEN, for your contribution to this Parliamentary Assembly and the work of this Assembly.

People come and go. It's the decision sometimes of the voters, sometimes of those who have been elected, and sometimes of those who have said that they would not want to be reelected this time.

Thank you very much for all of your great contributions, Madam Petra STIENEN.

You have, indeed, got a lot of friends here in all political groups.

The next speaker in the debate will be Mr Zsolt NÉMETH from Hungary. He speaks on behalf of the European Conservatives Group.

Mister Zsolt NÉMETH, you have the floor.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President, our Secretary Generals,

Dear Mister Aleksander POCIEJ,

Today we are all Warschauwers/Varsovians.

I would like to mention three questions very briefly: the 4th Summit, the register, and Kosovo.

The 4th Summit is approaching in three weeks. Our main aim is the renewal of the Council of Europe.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has been the engine behind this process. Congratulations to everybody who played a role in that. We must remain the engine in the future as well.

We shouldn't forget that it took 18 years for us to organise this Summit.

There is an important task in front of us to make sure that it doesn't take another 18 years for there to be another Council of Europe summit; to make sure that between two to four years, these summits will happen.

They also have to clarify, obviously, some very important substantial political questions between different European organisations, like the division of labour between the Council of Europe and the European political community.

Concerning the register of the damage caused by the Russian aggression, I would like to underline that this is a key potential achievement in front of us relating to the war, and actually that of the whole of the 4th Summit.

No impunity can be allowed. This is the message of the register.

Accountability will be reflected, hopefully in a partial agreement which is a very important novelty.

In this way the Council of Europe can demonstrate that we are really the soul of Europe.

Finally, as far as Kosovo is concerned, it is a kind of a cloud approaching on the sky of the 4th Summit.

We are all aware of the instability in the western Balkans but, still today, an extraordinary Committee of Ministers meeting has been convened for some reason.

I will draw your attention to yesterday's development.

The Serbian minority elections happened with only a 3% turnout, which is an unbelievable sign of the existing instability.

I believe that the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue is a very important value. The Council of Europe is not at all interested in undermining the success of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue.

Dear Colleagues,

Unity is a precondition of every action, but especially now, before the 4th Summit. We need to look at it and to keep it. It is the situation where we need to have utmost caution. It is required in tense regions like the western Balkans.

Thank you very much.

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

The last speaker on behalf of political groups will be Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON from Iceland. He speaks on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON, you have the floor.

Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON (Iceland, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President, our Parliamentary Assembly has been faced with extraordinary circumstances during the last 14 months.

We have responded strongly and in unity to the dark alleys that the illegal invasion of Ukraine has brought on Europe. Swift actions were taken towards expelling Russia from the Council of Europe on the initiative of our Parliamentary Assembly. The lead our Parliamentary Assembly has taken in its capacity to support Ukraine and the Ukrainian people has been crucial and of utmost importance to unite Europe and international institutions behind Ukraine. The Ukrainian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has been leading by example in this regard, while being under brutal attack.

The Fourth Summit would not be happening with the Parliamentary Assembly and its president would not have taken the lead in an impressive and unified manner.

The agenda of the upcoming Reykjavík Summit is based on the recommendations unanimously adopted by our Parliamentary Assembly from Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN's excellent report on the summit.

Civil society was given a chance for involvement and input. Following this open process our member States are now in the final steps in preparation for the Reykjavík Summit. There will be strong deliverables from the Reykjavík Summit. A set of principles for democracy is to be adopted along with a recommitment to our values. At the centre of the summit will be support for Ukraine, accountability of the aggressor, and the establishment of a Registry of Damages – the first legally binding act of this nature.

The establishment of the Registry is extraordinary and the main output of the conference. A first necessary step of a comprehensive mechanism for the victims of war of aggression, this will allow setting a legal state to act on crimes committed, in due time.

The situation of children affected by war will be discussed. Furthermore, it is important that the issue of a special tribunal be addressed at the meeting.

The member States are ready to play an important role in holding Russia accountable for its atrocities.

The Reykjavík Summit will deliver on artificial intelligence with regard to human rights.

The heads of state and governments of the Council of Europe further need to show the courage and wisdom to take the lead in establishing environmental protection rights, as well as taking further action against global warming.

A legally binding framework to guarantee the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is key.

The UN has already voted on this, including many of our members. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought Europe together more than ever before to take charge of its own future. We can do this through strong multilateralism, which is the weapon against brutal unilateralism.

This summit enables us to cement a first serious step toward uniting Europe.

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

Now I call in the debate Mr Ruben RUBINYAN from Armenia - you have the floor.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you Mr President, dear colleagues,

In her speech, Ms Petra STIENEN rightly noticed the symbolism in the fact that today we have commemorated horrendous atrocities from more than a hundred years ago, around 80 years ago, and the atrocities that are happening now.

It's an illustration of the fact that we have not managed to exterminate hate and war from our continent.

There's also another component in this symbolism - and that is the atrocities of the future. The atrocities that we can and should at least try to prevent, so that we don't have to commemorate future atrocities in future hemicycles and future sessions.

My friend Mr Aleksander POCIEJ made a moving speech about the Warsaw Uprising and this reminded me of the fact that there were actually two uprisings in Warsaw.

The first one was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; the uprising of the Jews and ethnic groups confined in a small territory by a force, by a state which hated them for what they are.

Unfortunately in 2023 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh - Armenians, representatives of another ethnic group who were killed for who they were a hundred years ago - are basically being forced to live in a ghetto, because yesterday Azerbaijan officially blocked Nagorno-Karabakh completely, by illegally installing a checkpoint at the beginning of the Lachin corridor, which was supposed to connect Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Now 120,000 people have been taken hostage by a country which hates them.

This comes only a week after the president of Azerbaijan publicly said that Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh either have to accept Azerbaijani citizenship or they have to find another place to live.

The fact that yesterday they now officially started blockading Karabakh is a manifestation of the genocidal intent in Azerbaijan.

Dear colleagues,

This is probably the fifth or sixth session [in which] I have been talking about the risk that the 120,000 Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh have been facing.

I'm not talking about some political risk, I'm not talking about risks to their rights, I'm not even talking about a risk of war.

I'm talking about a risk of a real genocide.

I hope we will be able to prevent this.

I hope all together we will be able to prevent us having to commemorate other atrocities in the future, in this or other hemicycles.

Thank you.

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

Now I call in the debate Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV from Azerbaijan. You have the floor.

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

On 27 January, the last working day of the first part-session, we received terrible news while in Strasbourg. There was an armed attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in the Islamic Republic of Iran, there were [people] killed and wounded.

We immediately prepared a document, and a number of deputies who were still here signed this written declaration. However, after this text was posted on the Assembly's website, soon the signatures of the MPs from the member States under this document began to grow rapidly.

The Secretary General also immediately voiced sensitivity about this undesirable event. The first conclusion of such active solidarity was that it could unite and mobilise for the fight against evil.

Iran is not a European country. It is not directly related to the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, Iran is becoming more and more dangerous, and these threats are directed at a number of European countries in the world.

A few words about a very important issue of the last few days: over the past two and half years, since the signing of the trilateral statement by the leaders of Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation and Armenia, the Azerbaijani side has consistently drawn attention to the wide-range abuse of the Lachin corridor by the Armenian side, which includes the abuse of the road for illegal military purposes, including for the rotation of personnel of the armed forces that continue to be illegally deployed to the territory of Azerbaijan.

Since August 2022, more than 2,700 anti-personnel land mines produced in Armenia in 2021 have already been detected in parts of the Lachin and Kalbajar districts of Azerbaijan. Evidently, all those mines have been deployed to the territory of Azerbaijan through the Lachin road.

Taking into account the deteriorating security situation on the road due to the systematic and large-scale misuse of the road for illicit purposes, the government of Azerbaijan decided to establish border controls on the Lachin-Khankendi road at its starting point in the interstate border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This is fully in line with the sovereign right of the Republic of Azerbaijan to control its borders while ensuring the use of the Lachin corridor exclusively for the purposes envisaged in the trilateral statement of 10 November 2020.

Therefore, we strongly reject the statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia dated 23 April on the measures taken by Azerbaijan to establish a border, a checkpoint as a starting point of the Lachin-Khankendi road on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border. The statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia and today's speech from our Armenian colleague is another attempt to interfere with the internal affairs of Azerbaijan - and it is unacceptable.

The establishment of a border control mechanism at the starting point of the Lachin corridor will serve as transparency over the movement along the road, the rule of law, and thus, ensure the security and safety of the movement.

Thank you.

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

Next in the debate I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO from Ukraine - you have the floor.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Thank you. Thank you very much.

Dear colleagues,

Now is a historical moment. For the first time in history, a Ukrainian parliamentarian is speaking in this chamber not as a guest, but as a parliamentarian with all rights, with a voting card in my hands. So this is historical for us.

Ukraine is Europe.

That's why the best people of our country are fighting on the front lines. I am absolutely happy for this moment. I am happy also for other countries - for Georgia and Moldova - which want to become members of the European Union and again today their parliamentarians are here. This is very symbolic and this moment is very special for me, and for millions of Ukrainians.

But what I want to tell you is: here we are the allies of democracies. Our values - democracy, rule of law, human rights - they started – these basic values – they started here in Europe. From here, they conquered a big part of the world, and I am sure in future will conquer the whole world.

But for the moment, not the whole world.

For the moment we see that when we are united as democracies, the same dictatorships and autocracies do. Just several weeks ago, the President of China, Chairman Xi Jinping, was meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

What do you think they were discussing? How to promote democracy? How to promote the rule of law or human rights in the world?

No, they were discussing how to take our freedoms. How to make the world a world of dictatorships, where several strongmen will decide everything for thousands and millions and billions of people. That is something we can never accept, and something we should fight.

For this we should be united here, together, to fight these ideas.

And you saw the recent statement of the Chinese ambassador in Paris who put under question the sovereignty of the post-Soviet Republic, as it was said.

I just want to remind you, eight nations out of 46 of the Council of Europe are so-called former Soviet republics, and almost all countries were at some time part of some empire. That is unacceptable [*he continues his speech in French*]

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): I would like to address President Macron: "One for all, all for one" (Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers*).

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): All for one, one for all: that should be our principle and our motto.

So I ask France to declare the Chinese ambassador *persona non grata*.

You know what the Ukrainians said to Russian warships?

The same should be said today to the Chinese ambassador.

If you question our sovereignty, that is something unacceptable.

We should be strong enough together with our ally, the United States of America, and other countries.

For decades we were dependent here in Europe for insecurity from the United States of America.

Again we are dependent.

So let us be with them; when they're challenged by China, do not play any games.

Democracy should be united.

Let us be together, let us win, and let our general ideas - democracy, human rights - conquer the whole world.

Slava Ukraini [Glory to Ukraine in Ukrainian].

Ukraine is Europe.

Long live democracy.

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

I understand your positive feelings but - as said - this is now the hemicycle of the Council of Europe, but I understand your good feelings and I would not like to spoil those.

I now call in the debate Ms Boriana ÅBERG from Sweden - you have the floor.

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

Dear colleagues,

I'd like to thank the rapporteurs and Mr Aleksander POCIEJ for his moving speech.

Yet another progress report without much progress to report about. Mr Vladimir Putin's army continues slaughtering innocent people in Ukraine. Last week Mr Vladimir Putin's regime sentenced the opposition politician Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in a Russian penal colony.

The situation in the Caucasus has worsened.

The Lachin corridor, the only road between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, is still blockaded. One hundred thousand people behind the blockade are suffering. There is a shortage of food and medicine, including for children and persons with long-term medical conditions.

Since the blockade started, several hundred inhabitants of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh have been blocked in Armenia, because they could not cross the Lachin corridor.

Yesterday, Azerbaijan declared they would install a checkpoint in the Lachin corridor, which is a clear violation of the trilateral statement.

Mister President,

Today is Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. We commemorate the one million and five hundred thousand victims of massacres and starvation committed by the Ottoman Empire.

Some can object that it's an inappropriate exaggeration to mention the Armenian genocide when speaking about the blockade of the Lachin Corridor. No, it's not.

"Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part", is a defining element of the definition of "genocide" under the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The world can no longer pretend to ignore the situation.

The European Union has sent a civilian mission to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The European Parliament "urges Azerbaijan to remove any obstacles that would hinder freedom and security of movement".

The International Court of Justice orders Azerbaijan to do so.

A civilian population is suffering. We have the duty to guarantee them the enjoyment of the rights protected by the European Convention of Human Rights.

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

Now in the debate, I call Ms Maja VUKIĆEVIĆ from Montenegro. You have the floor.

Ms Maja VUKIĆEVIĆ (Montenegro, NR): Thank you, Mister President.

First of all, I would like to thank our rapporteur Mr Joseph O'REILLY and Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINER, as well as all the members of the observation mission of the presidential elections in Montenegro for their devoted work over the past months.

As you are all aware, we had two rounds of presidential elections: the first one was held on 19 March, and the second on 2 April this year, with the participation of two candidates, Mr Milo Đukanović, who was supported by the forces gathered around his Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, and Mr Jakov Milatović, who was supported in the second round by all parties of the parliamentary majority.

It is important to acknowledge that this victory of the forces who won the last parliamentary elections marks the end of an era in Montenegrin politics, and led to the final defeat of the regime that ruled the country for over 30 years. I would also like to emphasise that one of the most important things in this process has been a peaceful transition of power, despite several incidents that followed the electoral process. The new president is due to take office on 20th May, by taking the oath before members of parliament.

Additionally, I would like to underline the good co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly's observation mission. The meetings we had in the parliament of Montenegro were, in my opinion, very productive and useful. Maybe we do not agree on all issues, but when it comes to the recommendations given in this report, I believe that most of them can be implemented in the future.

As you know, we elected three judges of the Constitutional Court. Unfortunately, the fourth candidate failed to get enough votes, because the current opposition led by the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro was not ready to support him. This issue will have to be solved after the parliamentary elections.

As you know Montenegro, certainly, needs a renewed electoral legislation. The truth is that we had difficulties coming up with a common solution, due to various obstructions, but I do believe that the issue of electoral legislation reform will be easier to resolve following parliamentary elections.

On the other hand, what raises concern is that some diplomatic representatives of the Western countries are trying to influence the political situation in Montenegro, and various processes in our country, including processes of forming the government, thus neglecting the will of citizens and acting beyond the principles of diplomatic practice. Everyone in Montenegro is committed to the European part of our country, but as a sovereign state, we also have the freedom of citizens to choose their own representatives in both parliament and government.

As I already mentioned, we will soon have parliamentary elections, after which Montenegro will get a stable parliamentary majority. I do believe that the co-operation between the parliament and the government will be much better, as will the overall functioning of the state institutions.

Once again, I would like to thank the Parliamentary Assembly and all of the colleagues who took part in this observation mission and in today's discussion. I believe that the co-operation between the Council of Europe and Montenegro will be even better in the future.

Thank you.

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

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Bernard FOURNIER from France.

Mr FOURNIER, you have the floor.

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

Dear Colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank our colleague Mr Joseph O'REILLY for his report, which gives a good account of the progress made by Montenegro since its independence in 2006. Indeed, we have come a long way! In 2007, Montenegro joined our Organisation and set up a political system aimed at strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Today, these elections represent a particular turning point in that they mark a political changeover.

The arrival in power of Mr Jakov Milatović is a reminder of how much Montenegrins are attached to the values of the Council of Europe, and marks their desire to be linked to Western liberal democracies. I can only welcome this, especially since Montenegro is engaged in the process of accession to the European Union. For our part, we must continue to give the Montenegrins European perspectives and support them in implementing the reforms that are indispensable.

I would like to start by mentioning the fight against corruption and the reform of the judicial system, which remain key challenges for Montenegro. GRECO has made a number of recommendations to improve the independence of the judiciary and to establish a system of appointments that will guarantee this independence. Unfortunately, the political crisis that the country has been going through for more than two years has made any reform difficult. Today, it is necessary that the next legislative elections allow for a stable majority that is not in open conflict with the executive power, and in particular with the President of the Republic.

In addition, the report presented to us today points to shortcomings in the independence of the media.

While the candidates had equal access to the media, the media showed bias in their coverage of the campaign, which tends to show that the media are particularly vulnerable to the influence of commercial and political interests.

I hope that the upcoming parliamentary elections will bring Montenegrins together around a clear project and that the *rapprochement* with the Western democracies will not be a source of internal tensions. However, there is a real risk that Russia will try to stir up tensions in order to destabilise the country. Indeed, I recall that Montenegro was put on the list of enemy countries by Russia because of its support for the Western sanctions imposed following the invasion of Ukraine.

I therefore hope that Montenegro will be able to ward off this threat and rally around common values, and in particular the values of the Council of Europe.

Thank you for your kind words.

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

The next and last speaker in this debate will be Mr Damien COTTIER from Switzerland.

Mister Damien COTTIER, you have the floor.

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

You are right, Mister President: this is the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, but it is true that it is also special for me, as a representative of Switzerland, to speak here in this house which is the house of the European Parliament. I believe that this shows, finally, that all the countries represented here are fighting for the same values: the values of the rule of law, democracy and human rights which are the foundation of our institution. The commemorations that we made earlier in the Parliamentary Assembly and the small sign that we are all wearing today remind us of this.

Basically, as Ms Simone Weil said: Europe was built on the ashes of Auschwitz. It is to prevent tragedies from happening again that we want to defend and promote its values. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded sufficiently, but we must fight even harder for these values, simply because we know that democracies do not wage war against each other. Therefore, we must strengthen our activity and the upcoming summit must be a moment to move in this direction.

One of the founding elements of our institution is democracy. I was very happy to be part of the delegation that went to Montenegro for this election observation, since it is at the very heart of democratic processes. We will have the opportunity to talk about this in a few weeks during the conference that will be held in Bern on the observation of "Elections in times of crisis".

We must congratulate Montenegro, which is a country that has really developed and deployed its democratic spirit. We could really feel it during this electoral period, and also the way in which the succession was carried out: the immediate recognition of the victory by the person who was in office, and his concession the same evening are very strong democratic elements.

On the other hand, there are a lot of things that still need to be improved in this country. We have heard it: geopolitical tensions and interventions from outside, media that remain very polarised, corruption that unfortunately remains strong in this country, sometimes a reluctance to cooperate between the different political forces and the different institutions, or procedural problems such as the need to reform the electoral code, to compose differently the electoral commission that takes decisions that are too partisan, too politicised, or to complete the Constitutional Court. This has been partially done, but we must continue to work in this direction, because it is not yet complete.

The Parliamentary Assembly placed its trust in Montenegro a few years ago by switching to the post-monitoring process: this is a strong sign of confidence. It is absolutely essential that this country continue along this path. I say this as co-rapporteur of the Monitoring Committee, and I am sure that this is also the opinion of my other co-rapporteur, Mr Nicos TORNARITIS. It is absolutely necessary that Montenegro continue in this direction, which will also bring it closer to the European Union. This is its wish. This path is difficult, but it is necessary to continue. We are also here to support it on this path.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): *Merci.* [*Thank you.* in French], Mister Damien COTTIER.

As said, I now have to interrupt the list of speakers.

The speeches of members on the speaker's list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak, may give it to the Table Office for publication in the official report.

I remind colleagues that the texts are to be submitted in typescript, electronically if possible, no later than four hours after a list of speakers is interrupted.

I now call on Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER to respond.

Do you have a point of order, Mister Samad SEYIDOV?

A point of order is a point of order. You have the floor.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Thank you very much Mr President.

Taking into account that the members of the Parliamentary Assembly several times mentioned Azerbaijan and my name...

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): No, sorry, this is not a point of order... sorry but I have interrupted the list of speakers - I know that you are the next on the list but I'll give it to someone else...

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Mr President,

I am the leader of the Azerbaijani delegation. This is the second time...

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): I do not take this as a point of order... sorry Mr Samad SEYIDOV.

Now I give the floor to Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER, you have three minutes to respond.

Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Rapporteur ; Bureau of the Assembly): Thank you very much indeed, Mr President,

Can I say what an interesting debate.

There are a lot of things in here and I'll try and go through some of them very quickly.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, you made a very good point about the corridor in Azerbaijan. Just to let you know myself and Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN have agreed, as the rapporteurs, to go there as soon as we can; the invitation has been sent to Azerbaijan today.

Mr Davor Ivo STIER talked about the Balkans and also what that means. It was also mentioned by other people.

I think it's very important to remember that we have a fundamental and potential change here with Kosovo, given the situation with Serbia. It is something we need to look at long and hard.

Sometimes - and I won't name countries - you can have two countries, you bring them in, and they spend the whole time talking about each other. Maybe that's something relevant at the moment - I don't know.

We then had a very interesting conversation about Ukraine in Europe from most colleagues. That's obviously something that is on all our minds for the reasons that we've discussed as a Parliamentary Assembly, but also because of the terrible situation that has been forced upon Ukraine by Russia.

We've heard a lot of comments about Reykjavik and the way that we need to renew ourselves.

I think it's actually vital, Mr President, that we do keep the pressure on the Council of Ministers and over our ambassadors here, who I hope are listening, that we are the parliamentary elected representatives - their appointees - there is a subtle difference. We have legitimacy - that's why we're here, and that's what we represent.

Mr President,

We've also heard a bit about the way that we should move in the future.

One colleague from Ukraine obviously made the point - he's made it in the European Union - I know you say it's obviously the Council of Europe, this is our chamber for the time being - but there is a certain synergy with all of this.

The ones that wish to come in - and I know who they are - are the ones who have a sort of view on the subject.

I think it's important to remember that we are a democratic organisation so everybody is entitled to their opinion.

I certainly was listening very closely when we heard points made by both Azerbaijan and Armenia just now.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV - he is part of my group - was making his position clear and I know you heard it, Mr President. It is a devilishly difficult position, some would say intractable.

We've been here before so many times across the millennia and across the years, that it is hard to know sometimes what to say other than: please keep talking, please listen to each other's point of view.

Sometimes you can't come to a position, but let's try.

In conclusion, for the report, a colleague who is no longer in her place said there has been little progress.

I think there has been progress.

Maybe not always in the way we want, Mr President, but we are a democratic organisation. Progress has to be the way forward and I believe that we are moving forward.

Thank you, sir.

Mr Jacques LE NAY (France, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Ms Emine Nur GÜNAY (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear President,

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to thank the Rapporteur Mr LIDDELL-GRAINGER for his report that presents us the activities of the Bureau and the Standing Committee, and our colleagues and secretariat of the Assembly for their hard work and efforts that allowed these activities to be carried out.

Within the scope of this report, which briefs us on our work done so far after the first part-session of 2023, I would like to bring up an issue that I find crucial for the way we work.

As a democratic forum for monitoring and debate, our Assembly should provide a more inclusive environment to its members and partners. Therefore, it is of high importance that an inclusive approach, not an exclusionary one, is adopted in the work of the Assembly, all work is carried out in unity, and we all adopt an attitude aligned with this approach.

On a separate note, in view of our recent agenda, as we have made our contributions to the 4th Summit to be held in the forthcoming period, I think it is important as well that the implementation of the decisions to be taken at the Summit is followed up by the Assembly.

Finally, I would also like to refer to the deplorable statement made by the Armenian Delegation at the beginning of our part-session. I believe we should leave these tragic events to historians for a scientific research based on facts and documents.

Türkiye has opened its archives to public to support such historical research studies. We expect the same from the Armenian side. We also proposed the establishment of a joint commission of historians which regrettably has not been accepted so far by Armenia.

I call my colleagues in PACE to support the continuation of bilateral talks between Türkiye and Armenia. This is the most direct and efficient way to solve existing problems and to support peace and stability in our region.

Mr President, I wish you would have announced a moment of silence for the victims of earthquakes which happened two months ago instead of the disputed events that took place 108 years ago.

Thank you.

Mr Hayk MAMIJANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I want to start by sharing a story. I was in elementary school when I first read a quote from Armenian National Hero and philosopher Garegin Nzhdeh: "Strength gives birth to rights". Many years later when I joined the Republican Party of Armenia, whose ideology is inspired by Nzhdeh's philosophy I was thinking to myself that this expression is out-dated: nowadays we do have international organizations, international law etc. I was sure that those institutions are more than enough to protect the rights of the small nations. I was so naive. Today, on the Day of Commemoration of the Victims of the Armenian Genocide I once again realized that nothing has changed. Yesterday Azerbaijani authorities started to install an illegal checkpoint in the Lachin corridor. 120000 people are in a blockade for 4 months, there are international agreements, the ruling of the ICJ, statements of various international institutions and no results. Azerbaijan, with the backing of Turkey turns out to be able to neglect basic human rights, international law and international society. What is the point of our speeches and statements? What good does it do? Nothing has changed since 1915. The bloody scimitar has now become a Bayraktar, Hamidie groups had turned into so called "eco-activists", but the essence is the same: there is an ethnic cleansing happening in Europe at the moment and those who are responsible for that are sitting in this chambers: at the altar of christian-democratic values. I am sure there will be speeches from the representatives of Azerbaijan and Turkey denying what I said.

I do not doubt that Armenia and Artsakh will come through. It's in our blood. We had fought tooth and nail for everything we have. But we and the history itself will remember not only those who were side by side with us in our struggle, but those who were silent during dark times. I am not ungrateful: we do value all the statements, but it is extremely hard to protect innocent people against bullets and missiles with those papers. You know it is quite easy to be a hero or to make history. You just have to do the right thing: stand up for the people of Nagorno Karabakh and let them implement their right of self-determination. The time for words has come to end - it is time for deeds.

Question time: Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ, Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER.

I now close the debate. The Bureau has proposed references to committees for ratification by the Assembly. Is there any objection to the proposed references to committees?

I don't see any, so the references are approved.

Then I go to page 25...

I propose now that the other decisions in the progress report be ratified. Any objections to that?

If that is not the case, then I go further on my agenda.

That means that we have now arrived at the question time of our Secretary General, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ.

Earlier this morning she was on her way from the Council of Europe to discuss important items in Luxembourg with the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union.

Now she's back.

You are most welcome, dear Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, and you have – as always – been so kind to answer questions from our delegates.

We will first take five questions from the political groups, one by one. Then I will group them three by three. We will see how many of the questions you can answer.

So the briefer everybody is, the more questions we can deal with.

First I call to put a question to Mr Frank SCHWABE from Germany. He speaks on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Frank SCHWABE, you have the floor – 30 seconds.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President, Madam Secretary-General,

We decided this morning to have a current affairs debate about Moldova and not about the Lachin corridor, because we want to have a report in June, but I would like to ask you about the situation.

There were several colleagues to discuss it with, so: How is the situation? What are the concerns? What can we do? How can we prevent a humanitarian crisis in the region?

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

Madam Secretary General?

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Thank you for this question.

As you say, I can only share your concern and that of all those who have raised this issue.

The establishment of an Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin corridor was already questionable, in terms of how free movement was going to go through that corridor. It is certainly a further deterioration of the situation in that area. It certainly does not help in confidence-building and reducing tensions.

I made my point clear in December when the Lachin corridor was first blocked. I can only restate what I said there. I call for a need to restore the free movement along the Lachin corridor. In the meantime, we also have the court that issued a related interim measure. Even further down the road, there is more reason to free it and not to go in the other direction in the Lachin corridor.

I can only say that it needs to be freed, because the situations of humanitarian and other issues were already questionable. With this situation, when it's completely blocked, I think that the situation of people living in that area goes beyond imagination.

On the other hand, I would really like to call on both sides, because both sides have recently been meeting each other, talking on a very high level, and they were committing to working on peace in the region.

I can only, coming from this position, from this institution, as so many times today, mention how it started. What are the first articles of our statutes: that we are a peace organisation. Therefore, we can only call for our member States to restore peace.

Let us remind ourselves of one thing: that back in history when the two countries were admitted to the Council of Europe, they both accepted to work on seeking a resolution to their issues in a peaceful manner. I can only call and recall that promise that was made back then.

Needless to say, this is something I always reiterate. We need the possibility for all our Council of Europe bodies to be able to go to all areas covered by our member States, including this one, I hope. I know that some of the bodies want to go there to have first-hand information, because what we heard from one or the other side was contradictory.

I think the best way to bridge that issue of what is really going on there, would be to allow our bodies - that can be our commissioner for human rights, a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegation. But someone should probably be able to go there and assess the situation and inform us on the real issues.

I can only call for that. For quite a while now it has been the case that our bodies were not allowed to go there. I hope that this will change. This is the only way we can really have an impact and it is how we can really have a good decision in order for us to know what situation is really at stake in that area.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Secretary General, the next question comes from Ms Elvira KOVÁCS from Serbia on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party. You have 30 seconds.

Ms Elvira KOVÁCS (Serbia, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Distinguished Madam Secretary General, 25 years after the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities entered into force, the situation in the field of minority rights has changed, following social and political changes in the world. Besides the fact that the Council of Europe works quite well as a norm-setting organisation and does have the power of normative reference, how did you see the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities as a possible instrument to reduce the politicisation of national minority issues? How could the monitoring tandem of a political committee and an expert committee as an advisory role tackle such a politicisation?

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

Madam Secretary General?

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Thank you very much for mentioning one of the two very important pieces in the area of minorities.

One is indeed the one which we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of its entering into force, which is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The other is also important, the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

So let me say that in order to make the work on minorities more efficient and effective, we have reformed the monitoring work of the two bodies. From my document that I sent to you recently, on the implementation of the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, you will see it has improved actually, since we did this joint monitoring of the two conventions.

But you are right: strengthening compliance with minority rights - although a priority for the organisation - is facing several challenges such as extreme nationalism and xenophobia in parts of Europe.

This hasn't been helpful during the pandemic, where it was really minorities and some other groups that were more vulnerable in societies which were seeing the biggest pain and [having] the biggest problems, because their rights were not in line with what they needed. I need to underline that under all circumstances - including very difficult ones, such as during the pandemic - our standards should apply.

So I really would like to say that we need to work on minority rights, because it is often said that the way you treat minorities is actually the weakest parts of society— and it is [a reflection] of how strong your democracy is.

So I hope that we can all work on implementing these two big and important treaties on minority rights together, in order to make our democracies stronger, and minorities more protected and more integrated in the societies that we live in.

We always say that inclusiveness is important - and that also covers minority rights.

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

The next question comes from Ms Stephanie KRISPER from Austria. You have the floor.

Ms Stephanie KRISPER (Austria, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Dear Secretary General,

The summit in Reykjavík is a precious opportunity to be a starting point to strengthen human rights and democracy, but the path towards the summit led us, at the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, to be concerned about certain issues to be omitted, such as the state of affairs regarding a commission on democracy; such as a new generation of important human rights on, for example, environmental issues, being omitted; and also the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal to investigate and prosecute the crime of aggression allegedly committed by the Russian Federation, and its not being sufficiently discussed.

My question therefore is: Which outcome should the summit have for you?

In other words, when the summit is over, what would you like to see in the newspapers, which would make the citizens of the member States of the Council of Europe know that they can rely on the Council of Europe as a protective force for their human rights and democracies?

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

Madam Secretary General?

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Well, now we are at the stage where an agenda is more or less set, and where deliverables are being decided by our Committee of Ministers. Had this question been put to me a while ago, I would rather have shared with you what I would have liked to see.

But now, I think what is important is that we have a summit. Someone mentioned that it is only the fourth summit in our long history of 74 years, and that we did not have a summit in the last 17 years. In that respect, let me from my side, congratulate you, Parliamentary Assembly, for regularly reminding us of the need to have a summit. When I was questioned before about what would be the most important reason to call a summit, I was saying that it would be about EU accession to the European Convention on Human Rights.

In the meantime, unfortunately, we have a war in Europe, the war of aggression against Ukraine. It was only possible to address a number of issues that actually are changing in Europe, or which need to be changed in Europe, including the priorities of the Council of Europe. We are finally there: in [about] three weeks time, we will have a summit.

Now that we are there, what is certainly front and centre is the issue of how we can support our member State, Ukraine.

The one way - apart from some other [things] that we have been doing for more than a year - is to address the accountability issue. And if you ask me what would be one of the important issues to be registered in the press then, I would say accountability and the Register. Although we will maybe not have everything that we thought [we would have] at the beginning [when it comes to] accountability, be aware that if we agree to the Register - and the Committee of Ministers deputies have already agreed to allow forming, in large partial agreements, and creating the Register.

Now the second part is the creation itself, we hope to have that decision before the summit. Then this will be actually the first legally binding document on accountability of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

If we do so, we really deserve headlines and a very important place.

And not only because this is it, but because that would be - as a human rights organisation, we are there to protect citizens. Actually the Register really is victim-centred. As was said, unfortunately, every day the victim [numbers] mount. We need immediately, urgently, to address this issue so that victims that are there can deposit their claims about the moral or material loss that they have suffered. Of course, this is only the first part of the compensation - an overall comprehensive compensation mechanism to be decided. So the Register is certainly the one.

Then, something that is very important for the organisation and that has been discussed quite extensively by this chamber are what we call already the "old challenges". They are not so old, but they are old enough to be able to reverse the problems that we have. One is backsliding in democracy, which we have witnessed in Europe. It predates the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. We certainly need our leaders to meet and recommit to values and standards. What we need there is political will. We have the means. The means are the Council of Europe standards, which are embodied in 223 pieces of conventions or other treaties. And another, of course, linked with that, the execution of judgments. In general, strengthening the convention system - but within that, the citizens see that if there is a judgment of the European Court, that judgment is an obligation for all states' parties, so all our member States can abide by this is by implementing them.

Then, of course, the "new challenges" - and this was also already tackled today in different contexts. Someone was talking about what young people and the younger generation expect from us, but I would say it is not only the young generation: I think everyone expects something of us. For instance, environment and human rights: we actually have some cases before the Court that were brought by senior ladies, where they feel that the governments are not protecting their rights enough and, of course, artificial intelligence and human rights.

So if there is a main headline that I would like to see, it would really be [about] the Register.

But immediately after that, that we recommit to the values, that our leaders will really, really make change in the times to come, in order to really provide for a reverse in democratic backsliding and the implementation of the judgments of the courts.

But, of course, there will be other things to be tackled at the summit, like co-operation with the European Union. The president mentioned this morning, I addressed upon their invitation, the Chair - the Minister of Iceland - and myself, we have an informal meeting with ministers before their regular meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council.

Really, I can assure you, that the Register was overwhelmingly supported, because that is understood to be a very important move for accountability.

We all share this view that accountability is the only path to get peace and justice in Ukraine. That's what we need, and that's what we want to achieve.

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

I forgot to say that Ms Stephanie KRISPER's question was on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Now on behalf of the European Conservatives Group, Ms Nicole HÖCHST from Germany will ask her question. You have 30 seconds.

Ms Nicole HÖCHST (Germany, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Chair.

Madam Secretary General, dear Madam Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, I have in fact two questions for you personally: Are you planning to run again for a second mandate? And, if yes, why?

And secondly, what is your view on Kosovo joining the Council of Europe?

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Madam Secretary General?

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Well, I have quite a bit of my mandate ahead of me.

So at this moment, I haven't decided. You will trust that my mandate was anything but ordinary. I think what has already happened during this mandate, including the summit that is forthcoming, is extraordinary.

So, at this moment, I'm very, very busy with preparing everything that is needed from our side. So I would have plenty of time until the time comes to deposit if I'm going to run for the second mandate.

Now, for the application that I received, I can tell you what my part in that is.

Last year, when I got the application, I transferred it to the Committee of Ministers, actually within less than a week. So this was my part in the application.

Now the main work is to be done by the two statutory bodies: one is at this time being discussed at the Committee of Ministers' deputies, and then by the Parliamentary Assembly. And again, by the Committee of Ministers. So, I would say that the process has started and that we need to follow the rules which we have, which are steady there.

The one message I could have is that we need to work in the region in order to preserve peace and stability. In seeing the war waging in Ukraine, we should never think that these could not have some spillover to some other areas, the Western Balkans being one of them.

Whatever move we make - and we have already made some moves - it needs to be very careful. It needs to be a thought in mind that we really need to have everyone on board to move ahead.

And someone said the other day that if the countries in the regions were moving when they were moving, then they all would benefit from that.

Let's hope that they will all be a part of this process. So that would be my answer to your very important question.

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

Madam Secretary General, the last question on behalf of the political groups comes from Mr George KATROUGALOS from Greece, on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left. 30 seconds.

Mr George KATROUGALOS (Greece, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mr Tiny KOX.

Madam Secretary General, it has already been a year, more than a year, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The only peace diplomatic initiatives on the table are coming from China and Brazil.

Do you think that this is normal? Should we try to formulate a diplomatic proposal of our own? A European one?

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

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Well, the aggression on Ukraine is happening in Europe; in that respect you are right, yes, this is a war that is waged in Europe.

But unfortunately this war is lasting for a very long time. It has a global impact. Take it from the inflation that has spread all over the place: energy prices, reduced supplies, barriers to transportation routes, and so on.

So actually one can only admit that a very big part of the world is already being affected one way or the other with this, so I'm not so surprised that there are countries wishing to have peace.

But I think our stance that we need a just peace - I just explained what a just peace is for me: to have accountability for the horrible war crimes and other crimes that are happening all the time in Ukraine. Until we get it right, we cannot talk about peace. So I hope that Ukraine will win this war and the just peace will be there, because if we go for peace which is not sustainable, I think that wouldn't be a good path to follow.

We already voiced [our thoughts on] peace, but we voiced it through this accountability. I more than agree that we could also go further than that, but I think let's start with accountability. Let's see how many countries will join the Register.

Let me just remind you that the work on the Register is very important because it is not only member States of the Council of Europe who can join: [it is also] observers to the Council of Europe, but also any country in the world. And provided that we have a really big coalition of willing in signing the Register, then we can hope also to have some deterring effect on the Russian Federation.

So I think the just peace and sustainable peace is something we need to work on.

We do our part - but of course if the situation allows for it, we could in the future also go one one step further.

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

We are running out of time, but I will allow three more questions and then you can answer them. I will take them together: the first question comes from Mr Samad SEYIDOV from Azerbaijan. You have 30 seconds.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Madam Secretary General,

Unfortunately, we still have been waiting for information from the Armenian side about the fate of 4 000 missing Azerbaijanis which, unfortunately, after the first Karabakh war we have.

Even in the reports, which were presented to the Council of Europe, this number has been mentioned. But how can the Council of Europe convince Armenia to open the curtain of secrecy over the fate of these poor people?

Thank you.

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

The next question comes from Mr Francesco Sorbara from Canada - you have 30 seconds.

Mr Francesco SORBARA (Canada): Thank you sir. Good morning Madam Secretary General.

Canada and the Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association are committed to being engaged observers at the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

We see our work here as an important part of our parliament's diplomatic initiatives and our engagement in Europe.

I would like to ask you, Madam Secretary General, how you view the role of observers like Canada.

How do you think observers can make more of a meaningful contribution to PACE's work, in particular as it relates to important issues like the war in Ukraine?

Thank you, Madam Secretary General.

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

And the last question comes from Mr John HOWELL from the United Kingdom - 30 seconds.

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Thank you.

Madam Secretary General, this morning we heard that there were going to be future summits, and a call for future summits as well.

Can you tell us what it is that they are going to concentrate on that we cannot deal with at this summit alone?

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

Madam General Secretary, would you please answer these three last questions?

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Well, let me start with the missing persons.

I cannot more than agree that in any war there are always missing persons. And I can tell you from different parts of our membership where this issue is raised, and I know how painful for the family it is. So you are right: we need to know the whereabouts for the families to rest in peace.

So I can only urge that wherever –not only in the case of the war that you mentioned– that we need to address all human rights violations during the conflict and only if when doing so we will be able to cross the next page. And when I was talking to the importance of having confidence, I think that is part of this confidence-building in the longer term, but let me say that the Council of Europe is active on confidence-building measures in different areas, and the third one between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place in March in Istanbul.

So, I think we should continue to work on all issues that are pertinent for peace and for really acknowledging the basic rights of the families to know and bury the remains of their dear ones.

Now, for what observers can more do for PACE, I would say more for the Council of Europe, I'm very grateful that we have observers that are big and important countries and that can really voice the important conventions that have global reach, like Cybercrime, like Violence Against Women, and some others that can adhere to them but also to voice in other parts of the world, because in both of these cases, but one can mention others, at the moment the standards that are issued from the Council of Europe are the golden standards for the world.

So this is certainly one.

And talking about conventions, Canada is participating in the new Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, so we can certainly ask for more Canada joining Council of Europe open conventions.

For the other things and in particularly related to Ukraine, of course we have, I didn't mention, we have an action plan for Ukraine that we have adjusted for now and for the future, on resilience, reconstruction, and reform, tackling the issues at hand now during the war, but also projecting into what Ukraine needs in the future.

So with that in mind, I can only kindly ask observers, including Canada, to participate in financing this important work, because will be a lot needed for Ukraine once the peace will be established there.

What Council of Europe does is really giving expertise now for certain things how to work during the war times, in particular for judiciary, for the Prosecutor General, but also how to prepare Ukraine for future membership in the European Union, and in general how to have an inclusive and peaceful society in the future.

So, certainly financing of the action plan would be very much needed.

And the last but not least, and certainly not at all the least of what the observer countries could do in the Council of Europe is joining the register, because we invested first a lot of time with Ukraine, because you would agree nothing for Ukraine should be done without Ukraine. So we involved Ukraine very much in devising the register, but also some other countries like Canada, US and Japan, who could be members of the register. And I think that would be symbolically very important to have the big observer countries joining the register at the outset when it's founded because that would be a powerful message to Ukraine, a powerful message to other countries around the world that share the same values and same stance towards this war of aggression, and certainly would be very important for the register itself to be established.

Now for the last question concerning how we deal with the many good proposals that were put forward from the Parliamentary Assembly, from the Civil Society, from the High Level Reflection Group, and others who were kindly invited to give their opinion on that, I'm sure that this summit will have very meaningful deliverables, but not everything that we would wish is included there.

One of the proposals of the High Level Reflection Group was to have more regular summits, so to have some kind of frequency at which summits will happen. I'm not sure we are yet there, but I would wish for that, I would wish that we have really regular meetings every five years because that's a circle I think in which midterm we can say whether what we do is fine or what we need to adjust. And I think really committing at the highest level is important to implement all the standards that we have. And in particular in the time of war, in particular of changing geopolitics, in particular of anti-right movements that we are we are witnessing around the world.

So I can only say that these proposals that will not be on the agenda in Reykjavik, certainly will remain with us, and we can see what we can do afterwards or in the future about that.

But I think what is the most important is that we tackle really the issue at hand, you know, for environment and human rights.

I think we really, last three-four years, at least the time I'm here, I can witness a huge boost of activities, starting with the Parliamentary Assembly, but also with subsequent presidencies that started with Georgia, then with Germany, with Greece. So actually, with the youth sector, with all parts... with the court organising also conferences on that, so I think the environment and human rights is there, and I will be also talking to your group on Wednesday on that particular issue.

So I think there are ways we can tackle the issue. The real meaning of why there wasn't such proposals would not be taken by the by the summit, but we should not give up.

We should work in order that the spirit and the idea behind would be applied, but for some things, who knows, maybe we will now be more clever and we'll have summits more often, that some of these things may be taken in the future if the summits would be convened.

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

Your advice to be more clever than we have been - that's a challenging one, but we will do our best.

May I thank you very much for answering the questions of our colleagues today.

May I once again praise you for the fact that you had the courage together with our Parliamentary Assembly to say yes, we will go for a summit of heads of state and government, it will take place.

I'm happy that you gave us the hope that the deliverables will be worthwhile and that we will make some headlines about our summit.

Thank you very much, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, for working so hard for our organisation.

I have also seen that another important person elected by this Parliamentary Assembly has arrived in our hemicycle, Ms Dunja MIJATOVIC, our human rights commissioner.

I have the pleasure to welcome you now here, Dunja, because this is the moment where you will present your annual report for 2022, a presentation which will be followed by an exchange with parliamentarians.

Let me first say some words dear commissioner, dear Ms Dunja MIJATOVIC,

Last year, 2022, was especially an extremely busy year for you, with visits amongst others to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, the Republic of Moldova, the Slovene Republic, the Western Balkans and, of course, Ukraine, which you visited twice in May 2022, and more recently in February and March of this year, where your visit focused on the situation of Ukrainian children transferred to Russia or Russian-occupied territories.

This is an extremely shocking issue that our Parliamentary Assembly will also debate later this week.

You also made statements on the deplorable human rights situation of Crimean Tatars.

You issued a statement at the end of this visit calling for urgent action and concrete measures, including a mechanism for reuniting children with their families or legal guardians, and more clarity with regards to the entities and procedures in place for helping families and children.

Your work, Madam commissioner, dear Ms Dunja MIJATOVIC, is essential in awakening consciousness on human rights abuses and sounding the alarm in whatever country they happen.

It is not pleasant, but we have to be realistic - there are a lot of human rights violations in our 46 member States. You are there to be the watchdog of our organisation.

May I thank you very much for all the good work done until now, and for your close cooperation with our Assembly, and me personally.

I'm not going to steal any more of your time, Dunja, the floor is yours, to present your annual report.

We are looking forward to it.

Address: Annual activity report 2022 by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (CommDH(2023)11)

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): Thank you, Mister President, Madam Secretary General,

Honourable Members of PACE, Dear Colleagues,

It is, as always, a great pleasure and honour to have the opportunity to inform you about the work I did and I do together with my team but also to have the opportunity to exchange views and answer any questions you might have.

The year 2022 will be remembered as the year of mass atrocities on European soil. Exactly 14 months ago today, the people of Ukraine woke up to the sound of explosions and shelling. For more than 400 days now, Russian forces have been killing, injuring and displacing tens of thousands of people, including many children. The Russian military attack on Ukraine has resulted in serious and massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law with disastrous effects on the enjoyment of virtually all human rights by people in Ukraine. Of course, it affected the whole of Europe and beyond.

Since the outset of Russia's war against Ukraine, my office and I have been engaged in responding to its human rights consequences based on the mandate that I have but even much more than that. At the beginning of March last year, we conducted six emergency missions to countries neighbouring Ukraine hosting people fleeing the war, went to 15 border crossings, visited many reception centres and engaged with people fleeing the war, immediately met with, of course, those people that were coming from different parts of Ukraine but also with human rights defenders, with activists, journalists, international organisations that were present at the border, and of course, with national and local authorities in several countries that we visited.

During the visit to Ukraine from 2 to 7 May 2022, together with my team, I witnessed that in only two months, the war had caused widespread human suffering, including the death of thousands of civilians, the displacement of millions, the abduction of children, and numerous cases of torture, extrajudicial executions,

arbitrary detention and sexual violence. In Irpin, Bucha, and Borodyanka, I saw evidence of the destruction and heard shocking accounts of the human rights violations that Russian forces caused, again, just in a few months before I visited Ukraine.

In a memorandum on the human rights consequences of the war that I published in July 2022, I warned about the danger of forcible transfer of Ukrainian citizens including children to the Russian Federation or temporarily occupied territories. Even at that time when we went, this was an issue that we were trying to raise awareness about. I noted, already then, with concern, reports that following a legislative change to facilitate the granting of Russian citizenship to Ukrainian children some of them had been adopted in Russia in what appears as a deliberate exploitation of these children's vulnerability. In this regard, I emphasise that international humanitarian law prohibits the changing of children's personal status including nationality by an occupying force. During the visit, I conducted interviews with victims and witnesses of serious human rights violations, and their relatives. I travelled to several localities in the Kyiv region which had previously been under the control of Russian troops or witnessed heavy fighting.

During the PACE Summer Session from 20 to 24 June 2022, together with the President, I hosted a pop-up exhibition called "Listen" in the lobby of the hemicycle to underline the necessity of having the voices of children affected by war heard. This was a very important moment. The president and founder of the War Childhood Museum, Mr Jasminko Halilovic, and the Museum's Ukraine project manager, Svitlana Osipchuk, asked for stronger European support for the children of Ukraine and expressed hope that every visitor to this exhibition will be more motivated to demand concrete help with which Ukraine can ensure the safety of its children.

The War Childhood Museum, the world's only museum focused exclusively on childhood as affected by armed conflict, opened its door in 2017 in my hometown Sarajevo for obvious reasons. The War Childhood Museum's collection today features over 5 000 objects from 16 armed conflicts with offices in Sarajevo, Kyiv, the Hague, and New York City. An activity centring on research, exhibition and education implemented in other countries, the War Childhood Museum is gradually becoming an international platform for all whose childhood has been affected by war. I also want to emphasise something that I find extremely important. In 2018, just when I started working in this organisation, the War Childhood Museum received the Council of Europe Museum prize under the European Museum of the Year scheme. I think this body, the Parliamentary Assembly, recognised the importance of this particular way of raising awareness of the suffering of the children. By recognising the multi-layered consequences of conflicts, we can better understand our responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of all children.

Last month, as the President already stated, I carried out my visit to Ukraine. This visit focused mainly on the human rights of children who have been separated from their families or legal guardians and transferred to Russia or temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. I hope that the findings and the recommendations from this visit can also be useful in the context of the upcoming discussion on the situation of Ukrainian civilians including children forcibly displaced or transferred to the Russian Federation or Ukrainian territories under the *de facto* control of the Russian Federation. Several categories of children are affected, including unaccompanied children, orphans, but also children in care institutions, and in Russia, they have often been placed in foster care without sufficient efforts being made to establish contact with their relatives or legal guardians in Ukraine

Some children have been given Russian citizenship, as you know, and I already elaborated on this. They have been adopted by Russian families, a practice encouraged by Russian public officials, even though children separated from their parents during the humanitarian emergency can never be considered orphans and are, therefore, not available for adoption.

In the statement I issued after the visit, I condemned Russia's failure to return these children as a clear violation of their human rights. I called for unimpeded access to be given to records and information about all affected Ukrainian children. I also called for more urgent action and international co-operation on the family reunification of the affected children.

Of course, that is not all that needs to be done. Concrete solutions should be identified to support the reunification of these children. I will just mention a few: by establishing and supporting mechanisms for reuniting Ukrainian children with their families and legal guardians, by providing more clarity regarding the entities and procedures through which parents, relatives, legal guardians and children can seek assistance in family reunification, by supporting and co-operating with reliable organisations and networks of Ukrainian and Russian human rights defenders and civil societies who are involved in facilitating the family reunification work—this is a very crucial step—and, of course, by assisting Ukraine in pursuing a comprehensive

deinstitutionalisation reform and the creation, as soon as the situation allows, of a nurturing environment in which children are raised in families. This is something I discussed with the Advisor Commissioner to the president of Ukraine for children's rights, and I intend to continue working with her on it.

I note, in this respect, that since then the International Criminal Court judges have issued arrest warrants against the President of the Russian Federation and the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights in relation to the war crime of unlawful deportations of children and that of unlawful transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation.

During my last visit to Ukraine, I also focused on the human rights situation of Crimean Tatars. It was a project, an issue, a topic, I dedicated quite a lot of time to with my team talking to people, listening to them, their being placed in different regions, areas around the world listening to their leaders, talking to the Majlis, talking to civil society, NGOs, journalists, families of the ones who are suffering and have their loved ones unjustly imprisoned.

Last week, I published this report and the aim is mainly to amplify the voice of Crimean Tatar human rights defenders and victims and to draw attention to Crimean Tatars' long-standing struggle for dignity and human rights. It provides a brief historical overview of the persecution of the Crimean Tatar people. It also identifies multiple patterns of human rights violations suffered by Crimean Tatars, especially after the illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

I welcome the strong emphasis of the Council of Europe Summit on accountability and the need to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed in Ukraine. Continued international support for the national justice system in Ukraine and Ukrainian human rights defenders who document crimes and human rights violations is also important, as are universal jurisdiction investigations in several European countries.

Justice, remembrance of past human rights violations and recognition of the suffering of the victims are necessary foundations for a long-term peace based on respect for human rights and the rule of law. On all these issues the Council of Europe has something to say. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine should also provide a context for reflection on lessons learned about the effectiveness of our work and on the priority thematic areas of focus going forward.

This is necessary as human rights backsliding with its accompanying progressive relinquishment of multilateralism and distancing from democratic and rule-of-law principles is putting hard-fought rights and freedoms at peril elsewhere in Europe, too. While the emphasis on supporting Ukraine is both right and necessary, it is crucial that it not in any way translate, including inadvertently, into a loss of focus on ensuring respect for human rights in all our member States. I think this is very important.

I would like to highlight some areas where this is particularly crucial based on my country and thematic work throughout my mandate. The first is the obligation to fully implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Failure to do so would be an outright rejection of the commitment to upholding human rights. As highlighted in the latest report of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the execution of the Court's judgments, more than 6 000 cases remained to be implemented at the end of 2022. Almost 1 300 of these are leading cases. Delaying or failing to implement court judgments results in repeated human rights violations continuing to occur. Another long-standing problem is the continued violation of the human rights of migrants and their instrumentalisation for political purposes. There is almost not a day that I do not raise a certain issue related to migration in one of the Council of Europe member States. Some authorities have proposed or adopted laws that violate established human rights standards and the basic principles of human dignity. This is a very dangerous path, you notice. Removing cornerstones from the edifice of the international human rights law runs the risk of others failing until the whole edifice collapses. Politicians have to be more farsighted, more courageous. In particular, parliamentarians should pass laws and monitor government practices to prevent *refoulement* and ensure that asylum seekers have access to individualised and efficient asylum procedures.

Search and rescue efforts also need to be strengthened. Loss of life at sea is a tragedy that cannot and should be prevented and it is happening as we speak. State authorities must also improve reception conditions and integration. In addition to failing to meet international standards on migration, some member States compound the problems by preventing human rights defenders from working freely. In some countries, human rights defenders who protect migrants are stigmatised and harassed for purely political reasons, and I am talking based on facts.

It is worth repeating that when human rights defenders, civil society and individuals help save lives and provide assistance to migrants, it is largely because the state has failed in its obligations to do so. Those who attack them are not only violating human rights obligations, they are also doing a disservice to something that is really crucial to all of us, and that is democracy and the rule of law. Protecting human rights is also inextricably linked to protecting the environment. The degradation of our ecosystem not only poses a direct threat to our physical health and well-being but also undermines people's ability to enjoy a range of human rights, including the right to life and health. I am concerned about the increasing repression of environmental human rights defenders, especially young people, who demand to be heard sometimes through unconventional means instead of being listened to and also given a place at a table, they are all too often silenced through violence, abusive litigation, slaps, arrests, and smear campaigns. This is the wrong response to one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity. There is a need for a greater commitment including by national parliaments to address the root causes of environmental degradation and to promote social justice and equality as well as recognition of the multiple ways in which people are affected by environmental degradation. Environmental problems often have social and political root causes. They require collective actions to be addressed effectively. The lack of such action has often led to protests including in Europe. Regrettably, I have observed that all too often state authorities in Europe unduly restrict the rights to peaceful assembly, including through the use of excessive force and the criminalisation of peaceful demonstrators. Freedom of assembly is not only an important right in itself but also in the context of other human rights, such as freedom of expression, association, and participation in public affairs.

In this context, it is also important to protect media freedom better. Last December, I had an exchange of views with your Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media during which I underlined the important role that parliamentarians can play in ensuring the safety of journalists. This is crucial for the resilience of democracies, especially in the face of an alarming decline in the safety of journalists and an increasingly restrictive environment hampering their work in many European countries. I have also observed a worrying decline in the safety of human rights defenders and increasing restrictions on their ability to work in a growing number of European countries. They face various forms of reprisal, including judicial harassment, prosecution, illegal deprivation of liberty, abusive controls and surveillance, smear campaigns, threats, and intimidation. This situation undermines democracy as I stated. If human rights defenders cannot work really and safely, it becomes more difficult to shed light on human rights violations on corruption or abuse of power and undemocratic forces thrive.

The climate of hostility against them is also part of a wider problem of polarisation in a society characterised by hate speech against different social or minority groups. A dramatic example of this is the pervasive climate of intolerance against LGBTI people who face a variety of threats to their dignity, safety and freedoms. Instead of addressing this problem, some politicians – high-level politicians – are surfing or even creating this wave of intolerance by instrumentalising fundamental issues related to their human rights, such as the legal recognition of same-sex couples or their right to family life. The time has come to change this.

Another area where progress is still needed is the protection and promotion of women's rights and gender equality. Women and girls in Europe in the 21st century, still face significant challenges from gender-based violence to obstacles in accessing their sexual and reproductive health and rights, from discrimination to unequal pay, and limited representation in leadership positions. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have highlighted the impact that crises can have on women, exacerbating existing inequalities and putting them at risk of further marginalisation. A multipronged approach is needed to address these challenges. First, there is a need to better address gender-based violence in all its forms. This includes not only physical violence but also sexual harassment and online abuse. Legislation must be strengthened to hold perpetrators accountable, provide effective remedies and support services for survivors and promote the respect and upholding of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Second, the gender pay gap must be tackled head-on. It is illegal. It is unjust and unsustainable for women to be paid less than men for work of equal value.

We must also act to break down the many barriers that still prevent persons with disabilities from participating fully in society, and we are often forgetting about them. I have urged member States to prioritise legal capacity reforms and to put in place adequately designed and funded community-based services to support independent living. More generally, there is a need to close gaps in laws and policies and to improve their implementations so that persons with disabilities have access to education, employment, and healthcare on an equal basis with others.

Mister President, Honourable Members of PACE,

Commitment to upholding human rights standards has been waning in many of our member States for several years, but this is no reason to give up. As I have often stressed, amid the gloomy picture, there are also reasons for hope. I see this when States ratify conventions, protect their national human rights structures and co-operate effectively at the multilateral level. In all the countries I visit, I meet NGOs, journalists, human rights defenders, activists, citizens, national human rights and ombudsman institutions, and they continue to defend their rights and the rights of others, despite the grave dangers they often face for their commitment. This is a sign that the European system of human rights protection contains the necessary antibodies. We need to make better use of them to improve the lives of millions of people in Europe.

Our continent is in dire need of more, not fewer human rights. The Council of Europe must remain the guardian of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Summit will hopefully also commit to harnessing better the power of youth, whose right to participate leads not only to better and more effective decisions but also enriches democracy and helps develop citizenship competencies for life.

Now is the time to truly recommit to the values of our organisation, as the Secretary General already stated. It is the responsibility of member States to do so. The founding principles and values of the Council of Europe continue to be the cornerstones of our societies. Putting them into practice must become a top priority for us all. Together, we need to strengthen freedoms, promote participation and enable all people to enjoy their human rights. Politicians not shying away to call for more, not fewer human rights.

Only united will we be able to rise to the challenges of our time.

Thank you very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Madam Commissioner, for your in-depth presentation of the work that you are doing as elected by us, and to be our watchdog with regard to the respect of human rights.

It is not a very nice picture that you have drawn of what is happening in Europe, but it is necessary that we are aware. It is good to have heard, at the end of your intervention, you say that there are also signs of hope.

Now, you agreed to answer questions from our members. First, you will get five questions from political groups and then if there is time left, from other members.

First, I call Ms Petra BAYR from Austria on behalf of the Socialist Group - you have 30 seconds.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Dear Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ,

Thank you very much for the work that lies behind your report.

Your report also mentions the right to live in a healthy environment.

We know that last week, Mr António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, published a letter to his fictional great-great-granddaughter, where he stresses his concern that maybe humankind will not manage the challenges of the climate crisis.

I think it's also a task for us to do work on this. My question is: What exactly can the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly, do to enlarge the human rights framework, and really legally, robustly enshrine the right to live in a healthy environment within the human rights framework?

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

Madam Commissioner.

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): Thank you, Ms Petra BAYR, for this question.

I already, in a way, have replied to several issues related to the human rights and environment.

I think the Council of Europe, as an organisation, started looking into this issue at a very early stage.

Of course we are different from the United Nations.

The different international organisations have different mandates, but it seems to me that there is a strong political will and also a recognition from our member States, that this is not an issue that can and should be neglected.

And of course it is about future generations. It is about all of us and our responsibility when it comes to the question "what are we leaving behind? Which kind of earth?", related to human rights and related to environment and many other issues.

We've done many bad things as human beings when it comes to the environment, so I think now is the time. It should be a wake-up call to all of us to do more.

My office focused on an issue that we also worked closely on with the Parliamentary Assembly.

When the Parliamentary Assembly started talking about the environment some years ago, we decided to focus on human rights defenders. I started building a network that has direct access to my office of young [people], sometimes children, who were trying to participate in decision-making.

So I think my advice again would be: talk to the youth. Listen to their voices and include them in all the discussions at the Council of Europe in order to have a very clear view, and also to see results, and also [have a] recognition of this organisation and what the organisation is doing when it comes to the issue of human rights and environment.

I think it's something that is going to be quite challenging, but at the same time I think the results and also the appreciation from many of those people that are raising the issue of the environment in our member States will be something of great importance. I really do hope it will translate into action.

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

The next question comes from Mr Pablo HISPÁN from Spain on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party - 30 seconds.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

First of all, we want to congratulate the commissioner and say that our Group of the European People's Party group supports your superb work and supports what you say about Ukraine, about Moldova, and about Armenia that is now threatening a repeat of what happened in the 20th century.

In our continent there are numerous bilingual communities, and extremist nationalists use education to undermine the rights of children, to eliminate cultural plurality and try to build falsely homogeneous communities.

I want to ask you, if you are following what is happening in Catalonia, and if this question is taking your attention?

Thank you, Commissioner.

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

Madam Commissioner.

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): Thank you for your question.

Of course this is an issue that we are looking at regardless of the country.

As you probably know, I visited Spain just before New Year, and among the issues covered were also issues related to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly.

When it comes to the languages, of course, no matter which country or which region, this is an issue that I'm looking at constantly. I just mentioned the report on Crimean Tatars.

Language, culture, tradition is something that is absolutely crucial for any community or people or part of a society. So I can only say that this is very high on my agenda.

But apart from my work, there is also the work of many other parts of the Council of Europe, like the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and many other colleagues are working hard in order to raise the issues of minorities and also the rights of people.

The report on Spain will be something that we will use as a sort of guideline in addressing these issues, because we always do follow-ups on certain topics that are important. We cannot cover all human rights issues each and every time, which is understandable.

But of course when it comes to Catalonia we had an issue that was raised by me at the very beginning related to freedom of assembly and police violence and of course freedom of expression, which was also something that we tackled.

But of course, I can only say that we will continue doing so.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): The next question comes from Mr Bertrand BOUYX, from France, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Madam Commissioner,

Your position and your visibility give you privileged access to the various aspects of the increasing tension in the world. The war in Ukraine and the sound of boots on the Taiwan Strait are the most striking signs of this. You said: "The Ukrainian people's struggle for freedom sends a clear message. They reject the rule of violence in favour of the rule of law".

This is clear, and we can only agree with this statement.

But beyond words, our Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe wants to know what this means in practice. How many times have you visited Ukraine? What are the results of these visits and how has the follow-up been done? In other words, what has been your visibility on the ground?

Thank you very much.

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

Madam Commissioner?

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): Well, I think it's difficult to talk about myself when it comes to visibility. But when it comes to the visibility of my work in relation to Ukraine, I think it was quite exceptional.

From the interviews at the very beginning to CNN, to several international media outside Europe reporting about my last visit in relation to the children issue - the latest one on Crimean Tatars.

So, what we have at the Council of Europe, is we receive press reviews when it comes to this visibility about the work we do. I cannot tell you the statistics on these issues, but what I can tell you is when it comes to engagement, this is something that has been extraordinary from the very beginning.

I already mentioned, but I can repeat that I visited, at the beginning of May 2022, I was the first human rights official that visited Kyiv with my team. We also went to Bucha, Borodyanka, and Irpin, and after that we worked hard with the Ukrainian authorities and different ministries on issues related to accountability.

And I also stated, if you heard, that already at that time we had raised the issue of children that were being forcefully removed to the Russian Federation, and also this citizenship law that was, in a way, picked up by many others afterwards.

I also stated just now that I have just returned from Ukraine where I focused on children's issues. I discussed it with the commissioner of president Volodymyr Zelenskyy who is dealing with human rights, and we are of course following up on this and many other issues.

Last year, I followed up on many topics - they are also all public on my website, from issues related to sexual violence, where I connected victims in Ukraine already at that early stage with women that organised NGOs dealing with the victims of sexual violence coming from my part of the world, with the unfortunate destinies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Kosovo, from Croatia.

So I mentioned the exhibition that we organised here, which was something extremely important. Now people are working in order to make it possible also in Kyiv for the stories of children to be heard, but there are many other ways that we are working on accountability, on issues related to jurisdiction.

I work constantly with the general prosecutor. I also met with Mr Karim Khan, and we are in touch with him, of course limited to the mandates that they have.

So there are different ways of dealing with these issues.

I just mentioned the project that took quite some time and it's one of the most important projects: I was even praised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, which is not something that happens quite often, on the work on Crimean Tatars.

So there are numerous things - it's not for me really to make statistics, but if you ask me if we managed to raise awareness and if we were seen as visible, I can only say yes to you.

Even the European Parliament has recognised the work done by this office as something of great relevance; they included it in their paper preparing for a debate they will have on the issue of deported children.

But of course if there are any other details you wish to know, I would be ready to answer.

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

The next question comes from Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO from Ukraine - you have 30 seconds.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, dear Commissioner.

First of all, thank you for your job in support of human rights of Ukrainians.

My question is about definitely deported children, because from all crimes, awful crimes committed by Russian Federation in Ukraine, for me that is the most awful, because we all are children, majority of us are parents. Just imagine: you've been taken from your family forcefully, or your children, it's even worse, are taken from you forcefully.

So, what concrete steps do you see to take back all Ukrainian children back home? Because this is part of what is genocide. Do you agree with this?

And before all Ukrainian children will be at home, will be back, that will mean that all children in the world are in danger.

Thank you very much.

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

Madam Commissioner?

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): Thank you, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

I stated several issues that I also shared with the Ukrainian government and different offices.

I also discussed this with the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of issues related to the temporarily occupied territories when I was in Kyiv, and of course with the Children's Commissioner, but also many other officials, but also with the civil society.

What I think is important first of all is to recognise that we have a problem. The problem is the fact that there is no access for any international organisations dealing with the issue, not only on children, but human rights in general, to the Russian Federation.

So, in order to verify, in order to work based on accurate data, which is extremely important on these issues because those issues are not only sensitive, those issues are painful, people are suffering because of this. I have spoken to many and I know that they are struggling with it.

Ukrainian civil society organisations, together with the Russian civil society organisations, so I'd rather say activists and sometimes citizens that are willing to help, are doing an enormous job. But this is just a drop. This is not like a state-organised way of dealing with this.

I recently spoke to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, who is in charge of the issues related to children in conflict. We intend to meet next week already in order to see what can be done.

There are also other organisations that we're in touch with, like UNHCR and many others struggling in order to address these issues.

So there is nothing I can tell you in order to sort of say, "OK, yes, we have a way to do it".

What we have is a clear obligation, first of all, to do something as the international community, but this cannot be done without more cause for unrestricted access in order to really go and find the children, to go to those places that are known as recreational camps that I mentioned in several reports and statements that I had, and also an issue that I suggested when I came back from Ukraine: a need for maybe some kind of international mechanism that will be able to do these issues in a very low profile manner, talking to the parents and also making sure that those parents, when they return children, can really try to do something for them.

I heard stories that many parents had to leave the territories, they lost everything, including their children. So, some kind of fund for families returning those children is something that I think could help.

So, my office intends, as I already said, to work with other international organisations to see what can be done in order really to have some kind of breakthrough. Children are returning and we hear every day there is a new number, but those numbers are very small numbers, and of course we are happy about this, but I can only assure you that I will do everything in my power as commissioner, but also as a human being, to do everything that can be done on this extremely difficult and and painful issue.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): The last question on behalf of the political groups is from Mrs Anne STAMBACH-TERRENOIR, from France, for the Group of the Unified European Left.

Ms Anne STAMBACH-TERRENOIR (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Madam Commissioner,

In your report, you express concern about the decline in freedom of expression. However, in France, since March, hundreds of people have been arrested during demonstrations against the pension reform, without valid reason, sometimes with violence.

You expressed your concern in a strong statement on 24 March. The next day, during an environmentalist demonstration, a disproportionate law enforcement operation led to unprecedented violence and dozens of injuries. Since then, bans on demonstrations have multiplied and the Human Rights Ombudsman has received 115 complaints of police violence.

Your voice is strong, Madam Commissioner, and listened to in France. What is your view on the evolution of the freedom to demonstrate and can new recommendations be expected?

Thank you very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Madam Commissioner?

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): Well, on this issue I think I was very vocal.

As the gentleman asked me, about visibility, I think it was very visible what I did and what I said in relation to the issues in France. I had raised this issue already in 2019 in relation to *Gilets jaunes* and also offered recommendations to the government.

I also heard president Emmanuel Macron in our Parliamentary Assembly stating publicly that they would follow the recommendations that we offered. Unfortunately we came into the situation where I had to raise the issue again, when it comes to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

Those recommendations now, not to go into too many details, are all public. They are related to many issues, starting from training the police on how to use certain weapons, making sure that any violence or attacks is investigated, making sure that people can demonstrate freely.

If there is a country where this is allowed, and this is something that we all are looking at coming from different countries, this is this freedom to freely express yourself and to go on the street and rally to say "I disagree with something".

Doing this in times of austerity and problems is not an easy thing, but it is the responsibility of the state.

And of course I do intend to work with the French authorities. I can say that I have exemplary cooperation in raising these issues.

Of course there are certain disagreements on the issues that are raised, but regardless, I think the dialogue is there, as is recognition of the importance of this topic, not only for the French Republic, but also a signal that the French Republic sends to other member States, which I think is also extremely important.

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

Now we are running out of time but I can allow three more questions and I would like to ask you to take them together, Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ.

The first question comes from Ms Deborah BERGAMINI from Italy - 30 seconds.

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD): Thank you. From the beginning of this year, illegal migration in Italy has quadrupled. Thirty-seven thousand migrants have arrived along the Italian coastline, which amounts to about 8 000 kilometres, and the situation is going to worsen in the summer months. The government has declared a state of emergency. Now when it comes to respecting human rights, this is not an exact science, it is a good practice that is made of good laws, good words, good intentions, but also resources and resources have not quadrupled.

So my question is whether you agree or not with the requests of the Italian government for an urgent integrated and supportive approach on the part of all members of the European Union to face this dramatic issue?

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

The next question comes from Mr Ruben RUBINYAN from Armenia - 30 seconds.

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

Today, the Secretary General said that it can be a good idea that you visit Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor. We have spoken before, and I know you also want to, so my question is: when are you going to visit the Lachin Corridor and Nagorno-Karabakh? In case you want to say that you will do it when Azerbaijan allows you to, then please answer me what are you going to do? What are you intending to do to convince Azerbaijan or rather make Azerbaijan allow you to visit the region? Because I think it is a part of your job.

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

And the last question comes from Mr Samad SEYIDOV from Azerbaijan.

30 seconds for you as well.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC/DA): Madam Commissioner,

Everybody knows that you are very sensitive about the violations of human rights all over the Council of Europe member States, but just a couple of weeks ago, Azerbaijani servicemen were tortured and ill-treated in Armenia and these pictures were distributed by social media.

We have sent this information to you but still we are waiting for a reaction. Why, in this case, is your office keeping silent?

Thank you very much.

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

Madam Commissioner, would you please answer the three questions?

Ms Dunja MIJATOVIĆ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights): When it comes to migration and Italy, of course, this is a particularly relevant issue that I'm following. When it comes to, if I correctly understood, the solidarity and the importance of other countries joining in order to take the burden, this is an issue I addressed in relation to Greece, in relation to Malta, in relation to countries that are actually at the forefront of accepting migrants.

One of the reasons why migration policies are failing is because of a lack of solidarity. I called for it numerous times, but of course, I cannot change the policies or the issues that are related to the statements and decisions taken by the European Union when it comes to migration.

I criticised it also, on several occasions, and I will continue to do so. As long as this is not a case, the issue related to migration is very much related to the state responsibility in order to make sure that it is done in a human rights compliant way, even though it is very challenging. I know that there are funds that are given to member States to establish reception centres, huge reception centres with surveillance cameras like in my own country, Bosnia and Herzegovina. One was built. It cost enormous sums of money that I would rather like to see be given to integration processes and to possibilities for migrants or asylum seekers to become part of society. Yet, it's not for me to decide how certain funds will be spent by member States.

The burden is there, but I think the main reason that we are failing when it comes to migration is a simple lack of political will - not only by EU member States, but also other Council of Europe member States.

If there were a policy, burden sharing, and solidarity for legal routes for looking at each and every case individually, as is written in international law, then I think we could see some light at the end of this tunnel.

At the moment, the picture is, as you heard in my introduction, very gloomy, very dangerous. The question remains, and I've been asking this question on many occasions: "Where are we heading to? Are we building Fortress Europe or are we building a Europe that is based on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law?"

Armenia and Azerbaijan: I can repeat once again in relation to Lachin corridor that my job is not really to check borders as such. I tried to look at the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh from the human rights point of view, being able to do human rights work. Until now I was not able to do so.

The issue related to blockage is something I raised with the statement. I also tried to find the best possible way to engage with both sides in question.

After the trilateral agreement was signed, I was ready to travel immediately, but I could not.

I issued a memorandum with clear issues and clear recommendations to Armenia and to Azerbaijan on issues related, already it was raised: missing persons, access, the human rights of children and elderly. All the issues that are important in this conflict and not one single issue from either side was tackled. Now it's been more than two years. Not one single issue: demining, prisoners.

The Secretary-General already stated that you are meeting and discussing. My question is I do not know what is part of the discussion where human rights institutions and people cannot go. It's not just, you know, the fact that I cannot go; nobody can go there.

I tried several times recently, maybe a month ago. The fact is that I'm not able to go. The question comes from many of you: why are you not there? Why are you not travelling? It is because of you, it is because of member States that are not co-operating with the Commissioner in order to make access possible. That is the case.

For me, I can travel now, this very moment, but I can't, because you need a state or states to work in order to ensure... I can go to a war zone, but I cannot go to Nagorno-Karabakh. I said many things in relation to this on many occasions, but you should remember each time you ask yourself why your Commissioner is not somewhere. It's not because I do not want to go. It is because I can't. It's for member States to answer why I can't.

When it comes to this video, with all due respect, sir, I never comment on this kind of video. There was a similar video last year in relation to Azerbaijan doing similar things to an Armenian soldier. These videos are a horrifying way of torturing people, exposing their identities. Yes, I know, I received it. I was tagged on my Twitter, on my social media accounts with this horrifying video identifying a person without one single moment of thinking about the dignity of this person, of this victim, that is tortured or their family.

This is for the judiciary to investigate. It is for institutions to look at these issues, not to be shared on social media, with the Commission of Human Rights, in order to call for my attention and my statement on this.

This is not how I do my work.

This is, of course, not the first time [this kind of thing] is happening.

I do not use my social media in order to expose torture. Instead, I use it in order to make sure that there is accountability for grave human rights violations that are happening in both countries. That happened not only during this last war, but also previously, which is something that has been dealt with again in my memorandum in very many details.

I invite you to look at it and to engage with me, with the ombudspersons in both countries, in order to see some light. Accusing each other constantly is not going to help. I will still not be able to go and do my human rights work. Do not try to politicise the institution of the Commissioner.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Madam Commissioner. I now have to conclude the questions to you.

There were many more. But I think you answered the questions posed to you in depth.

I want to thank you once more for answering our questions and for updating our Parliamentary Assembly. We are looking forward to cooperating with you in the coming time.

Thank you very much, Madam Commissioner.

The Parliamentary Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow afternoon at 2:30 p.m., with the agenda that was approved today.

I invite you to be in the hemicycle at your seats in good time for the presentation by the Chair of the Committee of Ministers at 2:30 p.m; and the election of a judge with regard to Romania.

The sitting is adjourned.

Mr Jacek PROTASIEWICZ (Poland, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Madam Commissioner,

Thank you very much for the comprehensive report on your annual activity in 2022 you have presented today to the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe. It reflects your sincere commitment to the issue of human rights in Europe. I would like particularly to praise your work for victims of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Both in terms of monitoring the situation of war refugees in all European countries neighbouring Ukraine and witnessing Russian atrocities on spot.

You also rightly pointed out already in July last year the danger of forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation or Russian-occupied territories. As we know International Criminal Court recently issued arrest warrant against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation exactly in that

context. That proves how valuable you and your team work is. Once again - thank you Madame Commissioner very much for all you have already done for Ukrainian people who has been experiencing horrible crimes committed by Russians for exactly fourteen months.

The sitting is closed at 5:40 p.m.