



Provisional edition

Monday 9 October 2023, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of the part-session

Opening of the sitting num 20

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): The session is now open.

I declare open the fourth part of the 2023 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Madam Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, ambassadors, members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

May I welcome you all at the start of this autumn part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Thank you so much for coming from all corners of the continent to Strasbourg to represent your national parliaments of 46 member states, as well as the delegations from our partner parliaments outside Europe.

Dear colleagues,

While we are gathering here, representing people from our member states and our associate states, the peoples in our area are confronted with the harsh reality of natural and manmade disasters: earthquakes, floods, fires and tensions, confrontation and open violence.

This includes the ongoing suffering of the people in Ukraine, the exodus of Armenians from the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, and just last weekend, a terrible explosion of violence by Hamas against innocent Israeli civilians.

May I ask you to please share a moment of silence to remember all these victims and to think about all of these terrible things that are happening around us.

[Moment of silence observed].

Thank you.

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.

Just a week ago, I had the honour and pleasure to receive, along with the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the presidents of the parliaments of all Council of Europe member states and associate states, and leaders of related international organisations.

We met in Dublin for the biannual European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments. This conference concentrated its deliberations on three items: on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; on how to strengthen our efforts and abilities to counter the democratic backslide in European countries; and on how to make our parliaments represent our societies more closely.

I was grateful to have amongst us in Dublin speaker Mr Ruslan Stefanchuk of Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada.

He told me that for him, these direct contacts and co-operations with national parliaments and their presidents are necessary to help to overcome the war of illegal aggression against Ukraine, and to restore the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.

Broad international support is vital to rebuild a country which been affected so terribly by Russia's aggression. A similar role is played by the whole Ukrainian delegation, here in our Assembly, which I welcome again, where colleagues from Ukraine can communicate and co-operate directly with delegates from other member states. Once again, I'd like to thank them, especially for their enormous efforts in these times which are so dangerous and so exhausting.

I want to thank you all, colleagues, for contributing to using this Assembly as a real European agora, where differences do not block common positions and proposals.

Dear colleagues,

Since we had all to face the return of a war of aggression on European soil, we managed in this agora to act quickly, decisively and unanimously by suspending and expelling our former member state Russia for its blatant violation of our statute; by organising support for our call for an ad hoc tribunal for the crime of aggression; and by initiating – on the proposal of our Secretary General – the Enlarged Partial Agreement of 44 states and the European Union for a register of damage done to the citizens and the state of Ukraine, as a first step to compensate the victims and to hold accountable those responsible for this disastrous damage to our member state Ukraine.

Our Parliamentary Assembly has shown, in the moments when it really mattered, the courage to choose co-operation when so often we differ so much on so many issues.

May I congratulate you all for your courage. May I call for this co-operation to continue; we are in dire need of it.

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

The Council of Europe is founded on the Treaty of London, whose 75th anniversary we will celebrate in 2024.

In 2023, the Council of Europe has already shown that it has the will, the possibilities, and the structure to survive and increase its relevance.

In mid-May, in Reykjavík, on the initiative of our Secretary General, the Committee of Ministers and our Assembly, the Heads of State and Government of our 46 member states finally met for what was the 4th Summit, only, of the Council of Europe, one of the Organisation's two statutory organs.

It was here that the Reykjavík Declaration was born, setting out a new agenda for the future of the Council of Europe: to protect and promote peace and prosperity through international co-operation and a single treaty system aimed at strengthening the rule of law, human rights, and democracy throughout Europe.

This document is now our roadmap, and our Assembly is once again striving to be among the first to apply it, in synergy with the Secretary General and the Committee of Ministers, for which I thank them warmly.

At the start of my presidency, almost two years ago, I said that on our own we were rather weak, but that together we could demonstrate the strength that can be expected from Europe's oldest and largest treaty-based organisation.

In Reykjavík, we formulated a new set of democratic principles to help halt the general decline of democracy in Europe. In Dublin, at the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments, this commitment was confirmed and concretised, including our obligation to improve the representation of women, young people, and members of minorities in our national parliaments.

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

Bearing in mind the suffering of the Ukrainian people, we cannot forget another tragedy unfolding before our eyes. I already referred to what is happening in Israel, but we also have seen the dramatic exodus of the people of Karabakh in Azerbaijan to neighbouring Armenia. We cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of these thousands and thousands of European citizens who are all entitled to the protection given to them under the European Convention of Human Rights and other Council of Europe conventions.

Dear colleagues, I am pleased to inform you and welcome the decision of our Human Rights Commissioner to visit Armenia and Azerbaijan, including its Karabakh region, shortly and in close co-operation with the authorities of these two countries and member states of the Council of Europe.

Our commissioner will be able to see for herself what is happening to the people of Karabakh and whether or not member states take up their responsibilities to stop this catastrophe.

I also inform you that I have convened as President a meeting on Tuesday of our leaders of all national delegations and political groups with 46 ambassadors of all our member states to discuss how we can collectively address this issue as a matter of urgency.

Dear colleagues, during the session we will learn more from the European Union's Commissioner for Justice, Mr Didier REYNERS, who I hope will update us on the accession by the European Union to the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights, as was recently promised in Reykjavík by President Ursula von der Leyen of the European Commission and President Charles Michel of the European Council.

Once this accession has been completed, hopefully soon, the cornerstone of this organisation, our convention system, will be considerably strengthened.

This also reminds us that all member states of this organisation must respect the Convention and fully abide by the binding verdicts of our European Court of Human Rights.

Continuous refusal to implement the judgments of the Strasbourg Courts can no longer be tolerated and, during our session this week, this issue will also be high on our agenda.

Dear colleagues, in a few moments we will decide which debates, urgent and current, will be added to this week's agenda.

I have to warn you it will be a busy agenda. I count on your involvement and your support.

Before we start our debate we will first celebrate the announcement of this year's winner of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The jury has shortlisted three candidates, who will be represented here in a moment.

Dear colleagues, I'm sorry that you will have to address so many burning questions during the week, but there's also good news.

Just last week the Istanbul Convention for the Protection of Women Against Violence and Domestic Violence has entered into force with respect to the European Union.

A great step forward to make this vital Convention the international golden standard to protect women all over the continent and abroad.

As I said, a busy week lies ahead. Besides a lot of plenary meetings, there will be many committee meetings, side events and all sorts of other meetings, together described as international parliamentary diplomacy. It is my humble idea, dear colleagues, that this kind of diplomacy is perhaps needed more than ever before. I count on your co-operation and your contributions.

Dear colleagues, may I end my opening speech to pay tribute to another president of this house, the President of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, my dear friend, compatriot and colleague, President Leendert VERBEEK, whose term as Congress President is now soon coming to an end.

All things come to an end, dear Leendert. Dear President, dear Leendert, may I thank you a lot for all the good work and co-operation with our Assembly in the past years. If you allow me, I would like to show with our flowers our appreciation for your presidency.

"Thank you, Mister President. Thank you, dear Leen" [spoken in Dutch].

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

The names of the representatives and substitutes are in Doc. 15839. If no credentials are challenged, the credentials will be ratified.

Are any credentials challenged? I do not see any.

The credentials are accepted. I welcome our new colleagues in this hemicycle.

The next item on the Agenda is the election of Vice-President of the Assembly in respect of Türkiye.

The candidate from the Turkish Delegation is Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ. If there is no request for a vote, Mr TÜRKEŞ will be declared elected.

I do not see any request for a vote, so I declare Mr TÜRKEŞ elected as Vice-President of the Assembly.

I congratulate Mr TÜRKEŞ on his election.

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in Document Commissions (2023) 07 and Addendum.

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

I do not see any objections, so they are agreed to.

Now, dear colleagues, before we examine the draft Agenda, the Assembly needs to consider requests for debates under urgent and current affairs procedures.

The Bureau has received the following:

- a request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "Humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh" requested by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights;
- a request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "Call for the immediate release of Osman Kavala" requested by the five political groups;
- a request for a current affairs debate on "Migrants' deaths at sea" requested by the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons;
- a request for a debate under the urgent procedure on "Ensuring a just peace in Ukraine and lasting security in Europe" requested by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe;
- a request for a current affairs debate on "Escalation of violence in the Middle-East following the recent Hamas attack on Israel" requested by the 5 political groups; and
- a request for a current affairs debate on "The situation in the North of Kosovo following the recent attack and the need for de-escalation" requested by the 5 political groups.

Dear colleagues, at its meeting this morning, the Bureau decided to recommend to the Assembly to hold all three debates requested under the urgent procedure and to hold two of the current affairs debates on "Escalation of violence in the Middle-East following the recent Hamas attack on Israel" and "The situation in the North of Kosovo following the recent attack and the need for de-escalation". Under Rule 53, the Assembly may not hold more than two current affairs debates during a session. If the Bureau's recommendation is accepted, it will therefore not be possible to hold a current affairs debate on "Migrants' deaths at sea" at this moment.

We will now consider requests for debate under urgent procedure. Does the Assembly agree to the Bureau's recommendation to hold an urgent affairs debate on "Humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh"?

I do not see any objection, so that's accepted. The request for urgent procedure is therefore approved. It is approved 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 report.

We will now consider the request for debate under the urgent procedure on "Call for the immediate release of Osman Kavala". Does the Assembly agree to the Bureau's recommendation to hold a debate on "Call for the immediate release of Osman Kavala"?

I do not see any objection, so the Bureau's recommendation is accepted. The request for urgent procedure is therefore approved. It is proposed that the debate will take place on Thursday as was set out in the draft Agenda and be referred to the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights for report.

We will now consider the request for debate under the urgent procedure on "Ensuring a just peace in Ukraine and lasting security in Europe". Does the Assembly agree to the Bureau's recommendation to hold this debate?

I do not see any objection, so the Bureau's recommendation is accepted. The request for 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 Political Affairs and Democracy for report.

Then, the Bureau was in favour of the request for a current affairs debate on "Escalation of violence in the Middle-East following the recent Hamas attack on Israel".

Does the Assembly agree to the recommendation to hold this current affairs debate?

I do not see any objection, so the proposal is agreed to. It is proposed that the current affairs debate on "Escalation of violence in the Middle-East following the recent Hamas attack on Israel" will take place on Wednesday afternoon after the communication from the Committee of Ministers and it will be opened by Mr Piero FASSINO.

The Bureau was also in favour of the request for a current affairs debate on "The situation in the North of Kosovo following the recent attack and the need for de-escalation".

Does the Assembly agree to the recommendation of the Bureau that this current affairs debate should take place?

I do not see any objection, so the proposal is agreed to as well. This current affairs debate will take place as the last item of business today, and it will be opened by Lord David BENCATHRA.

As the Assembly has now agreed to hold two current affairs debates, no further requests will be considered, and we can now consider the adoption of the agenda.

The next item of business is the adoption of the agenda for the fourth part of the 2023 ordinary session (Doc. 15822 prov2).

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

Is this draft agenda as amended adopted?

I do not see any objection, so it is agreed to.

I remind members that we have just agreed on the three debates on urgent procedure and two current affairs debates. The debates on urgent procedure will take place on Thursday, as set out in the provisional agenda.

The proposal is to begin with the debate on "Ensuring a just peace in Ukraine and lasting security in Europe" to be held as a joint debate with the report of "The role of the Council of Europe in preventing conflicts, restoring credibility of international institutions and promoting global peace".

This will be followed by the second debate under the urgent procedure on “Humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. The debate on “Call for the immediate release of Osman Kavala would be held as the third debate of the sitting. The current affairs debate on “The situation in the North of Kosovo following the recent attack and the need for de-escalation” will take place as the last item of business today, and the current affairs debate on the “Escalation of violence in the Middle-East following the recent Hamas attack on Israel” on Wednesday afternoon after the communication from the Committee of Ministers.

If that is agreed to, we now come to the next item of the agenda.

We are still making some changes, so I call for a minute to wait. The Secretary General informed me that we are ready. If Despina says we are ready, we are ready. Rules are rules.

Dear colleagues, dear honourable guests, I hereby declare open the Award Ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

A warm welcome to the 11th edition of the award ceremony of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize and a special thanks to our partners for their co-operation, the Czech government, the Václav Havel Library and the Carta 77 Foundation.

Members of the selection panel, whose commitment and dedication are fundamental to upholding the work, legacy, and values embodied by President Havel.

I welcome the esteemed members of the selection panel who are here with us today.

Dear colleagues, this year marks ten years after the first edition of the Václav Havel Prize in 2013.

Our prize has become widely recognised as an important and prestigious award given to truly outstanding people and organisations who dedicate their lives to defending human rights. Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the winners of the previous editions of the prize.

I have special thoughts for those winners who were imprisoned when they received the prize and who remain imprisoned until now. Let me name them starting by the very first winner of the Václav Havel Prize, Mr Ales Bialiatski, who was awarded last year the Nobel Peace Prize together with the Memorial in Russia and the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine and who remains in prison to this date.

Vladimir Kara-Murza, whose wife Ms Yevgeniya KARA-MURZA we are honoured to welcome here amongst us in this ceremony.

Maria Kalesnikava, whose family, friends, and lawyers have not been able to have direct with her for many months.

Ilham Tohti, serving a life sentence since 2014 in a Chinese prison.

Murat Arslan, a stout supporter of the independence of judiciary, who sits in prison since 2016.

They all were robbed of their freedom, social, and family lives, and often kept in prison in dire health conditions, all because their life engagement for the greater human rights cause.

I use this ceremony as an opportunity, once again, to call for their immediate release.

Now, dear colleagues, I invite you all to watch a short video on the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, by which we recognise and honour the work of thousands of individuals and organisations who share our values and goals: the protection of fundamental freedoms and human dignity.

We pay our respects to their sacrifices to uphold these values.

Prize Award Ceremony: Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you for watching this video with us, reminding us what has happened in the 10 years we have had this prize, and we are now having our 11th ceremony.

I welcome the representatives of the three shortlisted candidates. They are here today with us in person, Mr Yevgeniy ZAKHAROV, and please an applause for our nominee. Yevgeniy is from Ukraine, and you just heard why the jury has decided that he should be nominated as a candidate. We also then welcome Ms Justyna WYDRZYNSKA from Poland and also an applause for you, Justyna. We also were informed of the role that you played as a nominee.

The third is not in person with us because he is in prison for a very long time. I'm really honoured that Mr Osman Kavala is represented by Ms Ayşe BUGRA KAVALA. Also the nomination of Mr Kavala, I think, already deserves an applause.

Thank you very much for being here with us.

Three nominees chosen from a long list of possible candidates.

I thank all of you and all others outside this Assembly for nominating defenders of human rights in Europe and abroad. I thank the jury for studying all these nominations and then deciding to shortlist these three final candidates for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize 2023.

The shortlisted nominees all represent causes greater than themselves. Through them, allow me to pay tribute to all defenders of human rights who, sometimes at the cost of their lives, stand firm to protect and promote fundamental freedoms and human rights.

Today more than ever it is of paramount importance to celebrate the women and men who, by their courage determination and strength, show us the path to freedom.

Their fight is an example for resolve. I'm proud and happy that the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize has celebrated their action, your action, ever since its creation 10 years ago.

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it's now time to announce the winner. As I said, the three nominees are already the winners of the prize, because they represent human rights defenders who have shown bravery, courage, determination, and strength. In the end, there's one final winner.

The winner of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2023 is Mr Osman Kavala.

[applause]

Thank you so much for receiving this award.

May I now invite Ms Ayşe BUGRA to speak on behalf of her husband, the 2023 winner of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, after the winner in 2022, Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza. Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA is sitting here with us.

Ayşe, could I please invite you to take the floor?

Ms Ayşe Buğra (on behalf of Mr Osman Kavala): Mister President,

Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

And members of the selection committee for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize,

This is, of course, a great honour for my husband, but I'm very sad that he cannot be with us to receive this prize, this very meaningful prize.

When we learned that he was shortlisted for the prize and when I told him that I was going to come to Strasbourg to represent him at the ceremony, he wrote a letter as a shortlisted candidate to be read at the ceremony. So, I will read that today.

It is my husband's words.

"Dear President and dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the selection committee of Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, I'm honoured by the decision of the jury to include me in the list of shortlisted candidates.

This prize, which bears the name of Havel, has a very special meaning for me.

Charter 77, the path-breaking civil initiative demanding the government to respect human rights and freedoms in compliance with the international agreements to which they had been signatory, has been an inspiring document for us in Türkiye, although the regime and the political motivations behind human rights violations were a different kind in our country.

Havel's lifelong political and civic engagement is a testimony of concern about all people persecuted or threatened by persecution. For him, the attack on the rock group Plastic Band's freedom to play their music was not different from the attack on the freedom to express and defend social and political ideas. It was essentially a threat to plurality of the ways of life and different means of using one's potential for self-realisation.

His appeal to living in truth in his very influential essay *Power of the Powerless* is related to the importance of a sense of solidarity among people who are different in their attitudes towards life.

Havel believed in the possibility of creating a human order based on responsibility, solidarity, trust, openness, and love. He considered humanism as a viable alternative to ideology. I think we should not give up our hopes for the realisation of such an order worldwide.

The ethos of the new and genuine universalist humanism, which entails educating humane living and working conditions on a world-scale could be the steering force in this direction.

This would also require the consolidation of international laws to protect individuals and groups from persecution and to secure peace.

As revealed by the fact that I will be completing my sixth year in prison this month, despite the two rulings of the European Court of Human Rights demanding my immediate release, there is a necessity for the development of new means and mechanisms in order to strengthen the authority of the European Court and to reinforce the moral and practical power of the European Convention of Human Rights.

The practice of non-compliance with the judgments of the European Court nurtures the ways of thinking which devalue the universal norms protecting human rights.

Regretfully, in my country there's an increase in the number of jurists who feel themselves free from the obligation to substantiate charges and verdicts with concrete facts and evidence. Putting people behind the bars on the basis of speculative accusations in line with the prevalent political discourses has become a common practice.

However, I do not think that my country will shift to a closed authoritarian regime akin to what Havel experienced and wrote about. I'd rather believe that Türkiye will become a genuine democracy where the rule of law will exist in the not too distant future.

Such a development in Türkiye could then support also the dynamics towards democracy in our region.

Today, we are faced with the rise of disturbing authoritarian nationalist trends in many countries.

The values of responsibility and solidarity emphasised by Havel are surely important for fighting against the damage caused by these trends

As Havel wrote to his wife Olga from prison in 1980, the most important thing of all is not to lose hope.

This does not mean closing one's eyes to the horrors of the world. In fact, only those who have not lost faith and hope can see the horrors of the world with genuine clarity.

The Václav Havel Prize reminds me of, and I am sure everyone else here, this significant truth. I have felt privileged to be shortlisted with Ms Justyna Wydrzynska and Mr Yevgeniy Zakharov and I express my solidarity with them.

In case the award is given to me, I would like to share this great honour with my citizens who are unlawfully kept in prison, including the four civil activists who were sentenced on bogus charges of conspiring with me against the government, and I would dedicate that award to them."

Thank you.

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much for participating in this ceremony.

As time is always short in this Assembly, the next item of the agenda has to be the debate on the Progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee (Doc. 15834 and Addendums 1 and 2), which will be presented by Mr Aleksander POCIEJ.

This will be combined with the consideration of the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Bureau on the Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Montenegro (11 June 2023) (Doc. 15820) presented by Mr Reinhold LOPATKA.

The debate must conclude by 4:30 p.m. I will therefore interrupt the list of speakers at around 4:20 p.m. I remind speakers that speaking time is 3 minutes.

Now I call Mr Aleksander POCIEJ to present the Progress Report.

Dear Aleksander, you have 7 minutes.

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

The Chinese proverb wishes for us to live in interesting times, but we are living in difficult times.

The Council of Europe must approach these issues seriously but with clear demarcation lines, our red lines, those far and no further.

Russia was expelled from this organisation for attacking another country, Ukraine.

Any war of aggression shall be treated in this organisation in the future as a red line. This is a warning for all member states, those members states which consistently fail to implement, for example, the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. All those countries sign the agreement. When joining this organisation, they committed themselves to obeying some rules. Of course, not implementing this is a serious threat to the rule of law and to this organisation, but this is not a red line.

What will we say about the countries that have political prisoners?

Today I met, my group met Ms Evgenia Kara-Murza. She witnesses that her husband in prison is in a very serious condition in Siberia.

For me, as a Polish citizen, having Polish history, that rings a bell, because Polish heroes were sent to Siberia by Russia for decades.

She asked us to recall the symbolism of 30 October, known as the day of political prisoners, which initially recalled those millions of people who suffered [during] their lives and [for] deeds under the Red Terror of Soviet periods.

Today we have other political prisoners. We just awarded Mr Osman Kavala. His wife just received this prize. Can we do something about this? We shall, but we have Mr Mikheil Saakashvili. We also have Mr Andrzej Poczobut, the Polish journalist who has been in prison in Belarus for a year, more than a year, and many others.

This is approaching the red line.

I strongly believe that this organisation should not allow countries that are in breach of this obligation to not have political prisoners.

For whom the bell tolls. What is going on right now in Israel, in Armenia, of course in Ukraine, but slowly we are getting, even not reacting, because it's already been one year and a half.

Of course, we have debates here, but we got used to this war.

This is why this is so important, to repeat and repeat, that this is state terrorism. This is something which should never happen here.

Today in Hamburg there is a situation. All the flights are stopped. Why? Because we have a terrorism threat.

For whom does the bell toll? For us, for all of us.

Finally, I'm going to say this in French.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): I'd like to talk about the three decades of enlargement of this Council.

Some 30 years ago, the countries of Eastern Europe, the countries that had emerged from communism, which unfortunately lasted in our countries for 40 years or more, had this dream of becoming members of this family.

Countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland joined this organisation nearly 30 years ago; in Romania's case, exactly 30 years ago, and I congratulate you on that.

In the meantime, what's happening, and I was talking to people from the Venice Commission who said that today certain countries, unfortunately like mine, Poland, with the regimes and laws that are passing, should not be admitted, would not be admitted today.

I'm very happy that we're not being expelled, but we have to fight and try to rebuild our dreams of 30 years ago.

Thank you very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): I now call Mr Reinhold LOPATKA to present the report of the ad hoc committee of the Bureau on the observation of the early parliamentary elections in Montenegro.

You have three minutes.

Reinhold, you have the floor [said in German].

Debate: Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Montenegro (11 June 2023)

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA (Austria, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Dear President, dear colleagues,

I had the pleasure to lead the election observation delegation for the early parliamentary elections held in Montenegro on 11 June.

Our delegation co-operated closely with the delegation from the European Parliament, led by our colleague Mr Nikos Papandreou. Of course, as always, we worked closely with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

We had a very smooth and fruitful co-operation in the framework of our international elections observation mission.

The result of our joint efforts was presented during a joint press conference.

As you know, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has been observing parliamentary and presidential elections in Montenegro since 2001.

We have been invited by the authorities of the country to observe these early parliamentary elections because Montenegro is under the post-monitoring dialogue with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and is therefore committed to inviting the Assembly to observe elections.

This is the reason why we also observed both rounds of presidential elections earlier this year.

For this parliamentary election our delegation had 19 members. All five political groups were represented.

The elections were competitive and well run, despite taking place in a context of protracted institutional and constitutional crisis.

The process was weakened by legislative shortcomings as well as divisive campaign rhetoric. There is also a polarised media environment.

The electoral legal framework provides a basis for the conducting of democratic elections, of course. However it contains some gaps. The election law has not been amended since 2014.

Most prior Venice Commission and ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed, including the residency requirement for voting and candidacy rights, registration of candidate lists, or also campaign finance oversight.

Moreover the constitution falls short of sufficiently regulating issues pertaining to the call of early parliamentary elections.

But what I have to say: the campaign was good; the process was transparent; and also on the election day we were satisfied with what we could oversee there.

So we have to continue to contribute to the accomplishment of this process within our framework of the Assembly in our post-monitoring procedure, and in close co-operation with the Venice Commission.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, dear Mister Reinhold LOPATKA [spoken in German].

Now as first speaker on behalf the political groups, I call Mr Stefan SCHENNACH from Austria, who speaks on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mister SCHENNACH, you have the floor.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC): Thank you very much, Mister President.

This progress report takes place, and maybe we should say the positive things first, after there was a committee of justice ministers in this period. A few days ago there was the conference in Riga on freedom of expression and the safety of journalists as part of the Latvian Presidency. It set a new initiative, but unfortunately, Julian Assange is still not free although the Assembly had unanimously pleaded for it and that was more than two years ago.

If we also consider these days what speaks against this progress report is also the humanitarian disaster in Nagorno-Karabakh. That is just terrible. The second one, the poor island of Lampedusa, or the increasing conflict in the Balkans between Serbia and Kosovo, or the terrible situation of the many, many deaths these days between Israel and Palestine. Still the continuing man-killing war in Ukraine. Osman Kavala is still in prison, and the rapporteurs, I think, made a very clear statement about that as well.

Let's move on to the election to Montenegro. It was a very peaceful election day despite this enormous political and social polarisation. Yet, after the election there were enormous problems and political interference attempts. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Jovana Marović was detained at Belgrade airport, then sent back. President Milatović tried to get a majority with an election winner, Spajić. We still have no government. On 10 November the 90-day period ends. Then we might have to go to Montenegro again for an election. The political instability of the country and especially within the government majority is dangerous. The many hate speeches and hate crimes have led to the fact that of the 1.5 million euros that the EU gives as participation, as financial participation, over 700 000 have not been paid out at all. That is, what is happening here is very disturbing.

We can only hope that a government majority will be found by 10 November, otherwise we will have to leave for another election observation mission.

Thank you very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): "Thank you, dear Stefan" [spoken in German]

The next speaker is Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ, from France, speaking on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Madame DALLOZ?

Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ (France, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Rapporteurs, dear colleagues,

Forty-six member states in a changing world with some very painful episodes.

The President of our Assembly reminded us of the difficulties faced by many peoples with natural disasters of course, whether earthquakes or floods, but also fires that have plunged families into mourning, but also and above all with territorial aggression: Ukraine of course, but also Armenia and, for the past two days, Israel.

So much violence, so much hatred must mobilise us to make the voice of peace and the voice of democracy heard. This is the challenge facing our Assembly.

I salute all the work we have done and our ability to find balanced resolutions in the interests of all.

To carry out all this work, of course, we need financial resources, and the Reykjavík Summit highlighted this need with new guidelines. In this respect, the President of our Assembly will be sending a letter to the chairmen of the national delegations to address this issue, for the attention of national parliaments, to ensure that contributions are more substantial. It's part of the solution, of course, but we must be particularly vigilant in balancing our expenditure with our income.

I also note that this awareness has already been taken on board. In fact, I've seen the program. In 2024, there will only be two trips by the Standing Committee to Vilnius and Luxembourg. This is a step forward. In 2023, events had led to four trips being made, and this inevitably came at a high cost.

Another necessity in this spirit is, of course, cost control for all our staff. We are fortunate to have some excellent professionals. On behalf of all my colleagues, I would like to thank them for their work. Before taking on new staff, perhaps it would be more appropriate to reorganise the different missions of our secretariats.

I know that this approach may be displeasing or even disturbing, but our institution must be exemplary. It's also a question of credibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, our work is even more necessary today than it was yesterday. Our commitment must be unflinching, and it is in this spirit that I encourage you to vote in favor of the activity report. The Assembly of the Council of Europe must continue to nurture the light of hope.

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

The next speaker is Mr Damien COTTIER, from Switzerland, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr Chairman.

I would like to thank the rapporteurs for their reports. This activity report shows the importance of the work carried out by this Organisation and by this Assembly.

For my part, I have had the honour of chairing the Legal Affairs Committee for almost two years now, and its reports at each part-session basically underline the importance of the Council of Europe's conventions, of the entire legal framework on which this Organisation is based, with reports that are sometimes more spectacular than others. But it's not because they're spectacular that they're more important. For example, an international tribunal for the crime of aggression is something very important that our Organisation and our Assembly are calling for, but a regular report such as the one on the implementation of the Court's judgments is perhaps less spectacular; it is basic, but ultimately even more important, because we're really at the heart of our Organisation's work.

The Legal Committee has also decided to create a post of rapporteur on political prisoners, and I believe that the ceremony we have just witnessed, Mr Chairman, underlines just how important it is to fight for political prisoners.

The three candidates who were here today deserve all our honours: Mr Kavala who won the prize deserves that we think of him, that we support him, and it's good that we're organising a debate during this week. But let's also think of the three people who have won the prize in recent years, namely Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza, Mr Ales Bialiatski and Ms Maria Kalesnikava, who are currently serving sentences that are both unjust and inhumane.

Democracy is the value of our Organisation; there are important elections on our continent, in several countries, including of course soon in Poland. The ALDE Group would like to call on Polish voters to look ahead, and to remember the fundamental link between this important country and the values of Europe.

And sadly, crises – human crises – continue in every corner of our continent and in its immediate vicinity.

The atrocious war in Ukraine, which unfortunately continues; the importance of the register of damage and the need for it to be activated as quickly as possible and for experts to be appointed; the importance of the next stage, which is the compensation mechanism; and of course the importance, as I mentioned, of setting up an international tribunal for the crime of aggression, but also tribunals to intervene on the issue of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

And this horrible crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh: here too, our Council must be active. It must be able to go there. Azerbaijan has a major responsibility to let our Organisation go there, and also to respect its international obligations, in particular the Geneva Conventions.

And finally, the horrific situation we are currently witnessing in Israel, a partner country of our Organisation and observer in our Assembly; indiscriminate terrorist attacks against civilian populations that are quite simply unacceptable and must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Barbarity has no place in our world. International obligations, and in particular the Geneva Conventions, must be respected by everyone, and no one can tolerate or justify such a situation.

All this underlines the importance of the work of our Organisation and our Assembly, and it is in this sense that we will support these reports.

Thank you all very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): "Thank you, dear Damien." [spoken in French]

The next speaker on our list is Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER from the United Kingdom. He speaks on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

You have the floor.

Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you Mister President.

May I say, how delighted we all are to be here.

Progress is set by what you achieve, Mister President, as you well know.

We now have a situation which in our life span - I'm 64, a little bit younger than the President, but not a heck of a lot - I remember out on those screens, 1968, when the tanks rolled in Czechoslovakia. I remember as a boy watching it, I wasn't older than eight, but it was ingrained in ourselves that this was something terrible.

We move forward to 2023, and we look across Europe and the world. What do we see? We see problems left right and centre. It doesn't mean we shouldn't do anything, but progress must be set on what we can do.

I am delighted, Mister President, with all colleagues here, that we are taking the situation in the Middle East so seriously.

This is a disaster. Sometime in the next 24 hours, 48 hours the tanks will roll. People will die. People will be injured. There will be orphans. There will be widows. That is a high price to pay. Our colleagues from Ukraine, our colleagues in other complications across Europe; but also the migrant boats in the Mediterranean.

Progress is set by what we do and how we do it.

We are the home of democracy. We were set up in 1948 to foster human rights, culture and democracy.

The Greeks didn't coin the phrase for no good reason; they coined it because they understood it was the less of a lot of other ways of doing things.

I would say that we need to redouble our efforts.

I am, Mister President dare I say, disappointed by how few colleagues are here, very disappointed.

It doesn't matter which group you are, or country - I'm just sorry that there are not more members, because together we can do things.

Together we can change the course of history.

I'm always proud to be a member of the Presidential Committee with my colleagues here. We work together to try and do what we can for our groups; to come together to give that impetus, but also to colleagues who give up their time to come here and speak, to lead debates.

Because unless we make progress, what is our relevance?

2023, and the tanks are still rolling.

We have to look at that.

I've always said that I believe that we have to change; streamline the operation, make sure that we can do more for less, and project the power of democracy across this organisation.

Thank you, Mister President.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): [Applause]

Thank you, dear Mister Ian LIDDELL-GRAINER.

Next in the debate I call Mr Andrej HUNKO from Germany. He is speaking on behalf of Group of the Unified European Left.

Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mister President,

The view that we have when we begin this debate, at the beginning of each assembly, as a progress report, is the idea that we are making progress in terms of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and peaceful co-existence.

At the moment, we have to recognise that there is regression in many areas. In addition to the war in Ukraine – which is still raging, where there is no end in sight and no diplomatic initiatives are on the way – in recent weeks, we have seen, above all, the outbreak of previously unresolved conflicts. Whether in northern Kosovo, whether in Nagorno Karabakh, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, whether in Turkey, where there was an attack in Ankara and now Rojava in northern Syria; the Kurdish areas are being bombed again. Or, above all else, whether an old conflict is now erupting again in Israel and Palestine with a force that I think shocks us all.

The red line that we are crossing internationally right now is that unresolved conflicts will eventually erupt again, and they will also reinforce each other when they are resolved militarily. That is what we are experiencing right now.

And I want to say a few words about that, about this terrible outbreak of violence in Israel and Palestine. It is totally unacceptable when Hamas attacks civilians, kills civilians, like in a music festival where people were taken hostage, were tortured, were killed. It is totally unacceptable. It is unacceptable on both sides to attack civilians in this conflict.

I want to recall the words of an Israeli father who said on television that in Gaza that there are also victims – mothers who are crying, mourning for their children. Let us make peace – a real peace. I think that is the problem - we have not used the time that was there to really substantially resolve these conflicts that I have named, and now they are breaking out militarily again.

And finally we need a new mechanism to protect journalists. I would like to remind you of two cases. In Poland, a Spanish journalist, Pablo González, has been detained without charge for over 18 months. Meanwhile, Julian Assange is now entering his fifth year of detention. We have the original cell of Julian Assange outside from tomorrow, an artist has recreated that. Please take the opportunity to look at it to remind yourself of the plight of journalists. Thank you for your attention.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, dear Mister Andrej HUNKO [said in German].

Now we have listened to the speakers of five political groups. We turn to the rest of the list. First on that list is Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ from Croatia.

You have the floor.

Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ (Croatia, SOC): Thank you Mister President, dear colleagues,

I'd like to share a few words and thoughts with you about the parliamentary elections in Montenegro.

First, I would like to start by thanking the leader of the delegation, Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, who was up to the job; so, thank you for the good work that you have done.

As Mr Reinhold LOPATKA already said, the elections were competitive [and] were well organised, actually – of course with, maybe, a few minor issues. The logistics of the elections were very, very good.

We have witnessed a very divisive campaign, as was already mentioned, in the midst of a constitutional crisis and, actually, a lot of questions for the future of Montenegro are opened.

One of the first tasks of the government, therefore, would be to tackle the implementation and legislation of new electoral laws. That would clearly, and without any ambiguity, stipulate for certain situations – like the registration of lists, of candidates, all the procedures and everything that the last few electoral cycles, including the presidential ones, have shown to be, well, not clearly stipulated, and were, therefore, interpreted in different ways.

Unfortunately, months after the elections in Montenegro, we have no new government or no new majority yet.

The formation of the government, I hope, will happen soon, but even more importantly I hope that the new government will have the strength and the political will to tackle all those issues that I have mentioned beforehand: electoral legislation, as well as resolving the constitutional crisis of the constitutional court being not full, not all members are at their seats, and so on, and so on.

In any case, the formation of a stable and determined Montenegro in government is more important than ever because, dear colleagues, our continent is in much worse shape than it was 15 years ago.

We have one huge war going on in Ukraine, on our continent, but the terrorist attack in the north of Kosovo has already shown how volatile, unfortunately, the region that Montenegro is in can be.

This is why we are concerned, and from this August chamber, I hope that we will, very soon, have a new government in Montenegro able to tackle all these issues.

Thank you.

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

Next on the list is Mr Nicos TORNARITIS from Cyprus.

You have the floor.

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS (Cyprus, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

As co-rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly for the Council of Europe for the post-monitoring dialogue with Montenegro, I should note that, as we have observed through the general conduct of both the recent presidential and the parliamentary elections in the country, Montenegro shows strong signs of commitment towards ensuring stronger democratic governance and further political, social and economic stability.

The newly elected parliament of Montenegro should now work in parallel with the new government to effectively strengthen the competence of its national institutions and provide support in the effort to achieve competence and comprehensive reforms and ultimately surpass the constitutional crisis it has been facing.

Montenegro should stay on the path towards European Union membership and accelerate adopting the changes necessary to guarantee the promotion of human rights and the respect for the rule of law and our common European standards.

We do hope that we will be able to terminate the post-monitoring procedure as soon as possible.

Thank you very much.

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

Now I call to the debate Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV from Azerbaijan.

You have the floor.

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

On the eve of the next anniversary year of the Council of Europe – its 75th anniversary – we are debating the latest Progress Report.

In my opinion, we are experiencing an important stage in European history, a period of serious transition.

I believe that the ongoing developments in the South Caucasus will be benefitted as a model for building peace in many other places in the future.

The main node is broken, the cause of the conflict no longer exists. The so-called republic proclaimed in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan has officially dissolved itself.

Terrorists and illegal armed groups in the region have been neutralised, occupied lands have been liberated, and internally displaced persons are gradually settling into their new homes.

And the leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia openly stated that they recognise each other's territorial integrity.

It took a long time to achieve this truce, the peace that everyone longs for.

Since 2001, when the Council of Europe accepted Azerbaijan and Armenia as equal members, there has been constant tension derived from this conflict.

Ineffective recriminations were heard from the Assembly's microphones intended for more important creative debates.

In the history of the Council of Europe, which will soon turn 75 years old, there has never been such a long conflict between two member states.

Let's hope that this never happens again.

I hope that several points in the progress report of our next part-session will be dedicated to this process of mutual understanding and rapprochement which has been so successfully completed.

The most realistic prospect seems to be the conclusion of a peace treaty between the two countries within the next months or next year.

On this sensitive eve of great peace, whether from here or from any other platform, those who commit any instigatory, inflammatory, hypocritical actions designed to prolong the conflict will expose themselves, thus demonstrating that they are not supporters of Armenia and Azerbaijan, justice and truth, but the ones siding with evil, third and fourth black force.

Dear friends,

Yesterday president Ilham Aliyev announced in Tbilisi that Azerbaijan is ready to hold direct peace negotiations with Armenia in Georgia without the involvement of any other state or any other international organisation.

I think this is the most correct choice.

Thank you.

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

The next speaker on our list is Mr John HOWELL from the United Kingdom.

You have the floor.

Mr John HOWELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Thank you very much Mister President,

I would like to thank Mr Aleksander POCIEJ for his report. I'm sure it does not matter which political party we all originated from, but we should all wish him luck in the Polish general elections. I was very pleased to see his use of the Venice Commission as part of that, or of the Polish opposition. I urge all countries to look at that to resolve issues.

In the question of Mr Osman Kavala, which he raised, I don't wish to raise false hope, but there is something we can do. There are two things we can do: we can continue to enjoy, to express our engagement and discussion with the authorities in Türkiye to try to release Mr Kavala. It is no use saying that that is just talk; it is the skills for a mediator that can be brought to bear to get the other side to agree that it was their idea in the first place, to be able to take this forward.

Similarly, I hope that when we look back in the progress on this report next year, that there is more progress on Israel.

There is one important area of human rights that we should not forget in Israel: if you look at the town of Sderot in southern Israel, you will note that amongst the pregnant women there, the number of people who have spontaneous abortions, or miscarriages, has gone up by 59% as a result of the bombardments that have taken place from across the border.

This we cannot carry on seeing and we need to do something important about that.

I think it's also important to learn that the list of Serbian judges has been rejected.

I say this not to cast doubt on Serbia, but it is important that we get the judges to the European Court of Human Rights right the first time, and that they continue to play an important role in taking forward human rights across the whole of Europe.

With Russia and Belarus, I think that we have to be very careful about what we do to encourage the people who are supporting democracy there, because they are so far infiltrated by the existing authorities in those countries.

I think it would be important if we could keep an eye on what they are doing, and how we deal with it in order to make sure that they get honest treatment.

Thank you.

[Light applause]

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

Next in debate, I call Ms Hripsime GRIGORYAN from Armenia.

You have the floor, Ms Hripsime GRIGORYAN.

Ms Hripsime GRIGORYAN (Armenia, SOC): Thank you very much, Mister President.

After around 10 months of warning the world about the high risk, or better to say, the clear strategy of Azerbaijan to make Nagorno Karabakh Armenians exit Nagorno Karabakh. Now two weeks ago, we witnessed a mass exodus, forced displacement of Nagorno Karabakh Armenians which cannot be called anything other than an ethnic cleansing.

For more than 100 000 people have left not just their homes and homelands, but also the lands where their great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers used to live, create and thrive for tens of centuries. This is not a political statement – these are raw facts. This is data.

We talked and debated here and condemned the closure of the Lachin corridor, but we did not go beyond that.

There are too many questions to ask here, but, probably, the biggest is: were there not enough instruments and measures under our mandate, or was there not enough political will?

Well, it is uncountable how many of the rules and principles from the key conventions of the European Council Azerbaijan has broken – violated, during the last years.

Here we've been calling on both sides to come to the table of negotiations, or at most to express deep concern.

What we need to do deeper is to think [about] what [effect] our actions or even inaction can have as a consequence when it comes to such an act against humanity, as ethnic cleansing is.

Talking about negotiations, on 5 October 2023 in Granada, in the framework of the European political community meetings, a quadrilateral meeting took place between the prime minister of Armenia, the French president, the German chancellor, and the president of European Council, followed by a joint announcement.

Mr Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, cancelled his participation at the last minute. This proves that he has no intention of going to peace with Armenia.

Among the number of essential points in the announcement I want to stress three core principles that can serve as the basis of a possible peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

These are: the mutual recognition of each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; the limitation of borders based on the 1991 Almaty Agreement and the most recent USSR General Staff Maps; as well as the opening of regional connectivity links based on the full respect of each country's sovereignty and jurisdiction, as well as on the principles of equality and reciprocity.

I call on all my colleagues here - each one of you - to join the Granada announcement, to urge your government to make every effort to bring Azerbaijan to the table of negotiations, and not to continue the use of threat of force or the war-mongering rhetoric.

What we know is that none of our countries is guaranteed [to be safe] from violence, from terror, and from aggression.

Only by acting and not speaking, we can have a chance for a decent and peaceful future.

Thank you very much.

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

Next in the debate I call Ms Jorida TABAKU from Albania.

Jorida, you have the floor.

Ms Jorida TABAKU (Albania, EPP/CD): Thank you.

Thank you, President, esteemed members of the Parliamentary Assembly.

First of all, let me thank the chair of the delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly, Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, for a well run delegation and work there.

I believe that together with the European Parliament, both teams did an amazing job.

This was my second time in monitoring elections in Montenegro and you could see a little bit of tiredness because in the last four months three elections happened in the country, which was also reflected in the low turnout of elections.

Montenegro is a country in post-monitoring and there were problems during the day of elections, there were small problems related with the legal background with electoral code, but everything could be repaired and I believe that it's within the mandate of the new government which has yet to be formed, now, five months after elections, to continue with the reforms.

Especially European integration should be on the agenda and the fight against corruption.

The campaign was a little bit divisive with hate speech and with attacks, a little bit of discussion took around programmes, it mainly was a political fight, but I believe that the countries of the region deserve more.

And since most probably I'm not going to make it to the other point of the agenda, I want to raise a very important issue related to our region.

For decades, the region has been marked by complex ethnic and political divisions. However, recent incidents including the violent attack by Serbian paramilitaries on 24 September have intensified tensions in the north of Kosovo.

For this reason, I'm very happy that this Assembly will make a debate later on today by condemning the attack.

We must unequivocally condemn the brazen attack on Kosovan territory that transpired on 24 September. Such acts of aggression cannot be tolerated in our region and of course not in Europe.

It is our duty, as representatives of peace and justice, to stand united in these actions.

Secondly, I urge EU member states to consider the measures adapted against Kosovo in June, restoring normalcy is essential for lasting peace and stability in the region.

We must prioritise dialogue and cooperation over isolation.

It is imperative that Serbian authorities bring those responsible for the 24 September attack to justice in accordance with rule of law, in accordance with justice.

Maintaining peace and moving forward, refraining from actions that undermine the constitutional order of the Republic of Kosovo, are very important at this moment.

For this reason I thank the Parliamentary Assembly for having a debate later on today and I hope that we can move ahead especially during this very difficult time not only for the region but for the whole of Europe.

Thank you.

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

Next in the debate, I call Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN from Armenia.

You have the floor.

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

Thank you for your welcoming speech. Thank you for using the word "exodus" when you were addressing the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh.

I remember it was January of this year that me and Mr EFSTATHIOU from Cyprus used the same word. We urge everybody that we need rapid action, otherwise, it would be an exodus. It would be the total extermination of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

I remember when the Lachin Corridor was illegally blocked at the end of 2022. I raised this issue in the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. I requested it to Mr John HOWELL who was, at that time, presiding at the Committee. I requested that he adopt a statement on condemnation. Unfortunately, it was said that we have some regulations, and it should be submitted a couple of weeks before the meeting. When I initiated an urgent debate in this hemicycle, I understand that it might be too late. That by the day of this meeting, we will have no Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ladies and gentlemen, now, in Nagorno-Karabakh, we have only 10 - 50 ethnic Armenian survivors. Most of them are elders or infirm, we cannot just move them. All the others are expelled.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV addressed all the issues of his peace agenda. He said everything but please take into account he did not say any word – any word – about the right of people to come back. You are absolutely right, Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV, the only obstacle of this conflict does not exist anymore. This obstacle was the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in favour of peace. We are in favour of having good friendly relations with everybody but I would like, once again, to remind everybody that when Azerbaijan was allowed – I do not think that now it would be allowed to be a member of this respected forum – but when it acceded to this organisation it had taken an obligation to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means.

Mr Rafael HUSEYNOV said that this is a new pattern for the new peace in the Southern Caucasus and this should be an example. If ethnic cleansing is an example of making peace, I do not think that it would be real peace.

Mister Chairman, Mister President, honourable colleagues, I know that today and the day after this meeting, we will face a lot of procedural manipulations trying to deviate us from the very discussion of this topic. I would like to request all of you: discuss, think and watch, taking into account what we today remember; Václav

Havel. We, today, together we give a Václav Havel prize for Osman Kavala and a lot of political prisoners who are in a few of the countries who are members of the Council of Europe. I do request all of you, please, think, discuss and vote, taking into account that dead people are looking at you.

Thank you so much.

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

Madam Liliana TANGUY, you have the floor.

Ms Liliana TANGUY (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

On June 11, 2023, early elections were held in Montenegro, marking the end of a deep institutional political crisis. After the vote of no confidence in the Abazović government in August 2022, the lack of agreement between the Presidency and Parliament on the appointment of a new government paralysed the country for months.

The call for early elections and the vote of the electorate have put an end to the stalemate in the country's interests both nationally and in Europe.

The Parliamentary Assembly has been following with interest the development of the political situation in Montenegro through the post-monitoring dialogue it has been conducting since 2015. An ad hoc committee has been sent to Montenegro to provide a professional, independent and impartial assessment of the quality of the electoral process.

As it happens, I had the honour of being part of the delegation observing the elections in Montenegro, and I would like to pay tribute here to the excellent work carried out by the delegation chairman, Mr Reinhold LOPATKA. I therefore observed the elections in the constituencies of Niksic and Bar. While shortcomings were indeed noted in terms of electoral legislation, because it should be noted that the electoral law has not been amended since 2014, but also campaign financing, the commission concluded in a report that the elections took place within a legal framework guaranteeing free and democratic elections.

Candidates were able to campaign freely and the fundamental freedoms of all citizens were respected. The media landscape is free and diverse, although political polarisation and a limited advertising market make the media vulnerable to internal and external influences from divergent commercial and political interests.

The committee notes, however, that dispute resolution mechanisms as they currently exist do not yet guarantee complete transparency, nor rapid and effective access to due process. We therefore call on the Montenegrin authorities to comply with the recommendations made by the ODIHR, particularly in the area of dispute resolution.

In the name of the commitment made by the Heads of State and Government at the Reykjavík Summit, in which I had the honor of taking part as part of the French delegation, to strengthen democracy and good governance at all levels and throughout Europe, the Monitoring Committee must continue the support work it has long been carrying out with Montenegro to help it implement the reforms essential to strengthening citizen participation in elections and restoring confidence in democratic institutions.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you dear Ms Liliana TANGUY [said in French].

The last speaker in the debate will be Mr Zsolt NÉMETH from Hungary, because then I have to interrupt the list of speakers as I have announced earlier.

You have the floor.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA): Mister President, dear colleagues,

Reality has again intervened in the programme of the Parliamentary Assembly autumn session.

Israel is bleeding incomparably since 1973, the Yom Kippur War 50 years ago exactly: it is not an accident.

This was a planned and very barbarically executed operation.

We need to condemn the Hamas terrorism in the most explicit way.

There is no justification of this brutality which we are experiencing.

How about the peace process, dear colleagues. The Abraham Accords in the past years was the most promising process in the Middle East in decades. The agreement with Saudi Arabia was also in the pipeline.

Yes, now we can say that this is finished, this is over. Whose interest is this [in]? Is it in the Palestinian interest that the whole Abraham Accords process is now finished?

Escalation of violence is interconnected.

Just this morning, we could listen to the different dimensions of violence coming to the surface in the whole of Europe or just neighbouring Europe.

We have to stop this.

Stopping this process is not going to be easy.

We have to go for restoring the order, restoring the international order, because if you are not able to do this, other violent extremist barbaric events will come to the surface, not just in Europe, but in the whole world.

Dear colleagues,

We need to stand up under the circumstances for Israel.

I am very glad to inform you that at six o'clock this evening there is going to be a demonstration in front of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the initiative of the Jews in France.

No violence, no compromise on this question, and no relativism.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

[Light applause]

As announced, I now have to interrupt the list of speakers. Speeches of members on the speaker's list, who have been present during the debate but were not able to speak, may be given 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 4 hours after this list of speakers is interrupted.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ, do you want to reply?

You have 3 minutes.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you Mister President,

I'm terribly, terribly sorry that my progress report as, rightly one of my colleagues mentioned – so I'm sorry that my progress report shows that in fact there is no progress, but we are here to say the truth.

Maybe there is a feeling that we take care of the roses when the forests are burning.

Yes, I would like to remind you of the last scene in the film *The Name of the Rose*, with Sean Connery when he goes out from a burning library with some books and he is so happy that at least he went out with some books.

Whatever will happen, and we are once again facing a very difficult time – we don't know what will happen in Nagorno Karabakh; we don't know what will happen in Europe and in the Middle East – this is unfortunately just the beginning.

But we shall not stop our work, because we have to save those ideas we stand behind.

We have to save the aim of our organisation, because one day there will be peace.

We will be ready to share our values, so our work – even if we are afraid that this is something minor when we look at this shaking world – I strongly believe that this is something valuable and we should continue.

Thank you very much.

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

[Light applause].

This closes the debate on the progress report.

The Bureau has proposed references to committees for ratification by the Assembly set out in Document 15834 and Amendment 1.

Is there any objection to the proposed references to committees?

I do not see any.

The references are approved.

I now propose that the other decisions in the progress report which you find in Document 15834 and Amendment 2 be ratified.

Is there any objection?

I do not see any.

The progress report is approved.

That means that I will end the debate on the progress report.

The next item of business afternooon, is a current affairs debate on the situation in the North Kosovo following the recent attack and the need for de-escalation.

The debate will be opened by Lord David BLENCATHRA.

The speaking time in the debate is limited to three minutes for all members, except for Lord David BLENCATHRA, who is allowed seven minutes.

So in the debate I first call Lord David BLENCATHRA.

You have the floor; you have seven minutes.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Whilst the report says that the elections were well run I am still worried that it is too easy to distort results when the electorate is so small. The official electorate is 542,000 but there is another 100,000 in the “diaspora” who may largely be Serbian with dubious “dual citizenship.”

There are big flaws in Montenegrin election law but it is more incompetence rather than deliberate rigging of the whole system as I saw in Turkey.

Apart from the dual citizenship problem the other alleged one is party officials going round houses and asking people to hand over their ID cards for the weekend (thus depriving them of voting) in exchange for 40 – 50 Euros. There was talk of that but I did not experience it when I observed the presidential elections.

However despite these comments I accept that the results were genuine and Europe Now won fair and square. But the path to forming a stable government will not be easy.

The new government requires the support of at least 41 members of the Montenegrin Parliament, yet no party or coalition has secured a dominant majority.

PES has the highest number of seats with 24, followed by a coalition around the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) with 21 seats. The pro-Serbian coalition formed after the recent dissolution of Democratic Front (DF) has 13 seats, while Democrats and URA have 11. Other parties, including those representing national minorities, have obtained only single-digit numbers of mandates.

Montenegro has been negotiating EU membership for 11 years, and European sources often cite a lack of political will to implement necessary reforms, primarily in Chapters 23 and 24, which pertain to the judiciary and the rule of law, as the reason for the prolonged negotiation period.

Despite still being the most successful country in the European integration process, due to the political crisis that has been ongoing for two years, and in January of this year, due to the Constitutional Court blockade, Montenegro faced the threat of a blockage of accession negotiations.

The European Commission's non-paper on the rule of law warned that Montenegro has lost focus on key EU reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law. The document states that there was no progress in investigations, prosecutions and trials for old cases of violence against journalists and media workers.

Of course there is hope in the new President Jakov Milatović and Europe Now. Everyone was worried that with massive Serb backing, Mandić would win in the run off. But he was soundly defeated in the first round.

Over 90% of private media in Montenegro is owned by Serbia and despite their front man Mandić being defeated, they will still try to influence Montenegrin affairs.

So we should wish them well in their efforts to join the EU but if they want to do that then they must sort out their legal reform to the judiciary and rule of law.

Current affairs debate: The situation in the North of Kosovo* following the recent attack and the need for de-escalation

Lord David BLENCAHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA): The immediate trigger for the recent escalation, is that the Kosovo government, led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti, took advantage of a crisis in neighbouring Serbia to try to cement control in the north leading to some serious clashes.

These clashes are the latest flare-up in a long-running dispute that was a major driver of conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s. Fighting ended at the close of that decade, with NATO intervention and the separation of Kosovo (with its ethnic Albanian majority) from Serbia.

A series of escalations led up to the most recent troubles. These began in September 2021, when the Kosovo government tried to make Serbs re-register their cars (which sported licence plates from Serbia), thus signifying their acceptance of Pristina's sovereignty. These clashes continued throughout 2022, as northern Kosovo Serbs resisted Pristina's attempts to assert its authority over them by barricading roads, engaging in firefights with heavily armed special police and – in November – resigning en masse from Kosovo government posts.

Since the mass resignation, Kosovo Serb officials, in those four municipalities in the north, have nonetheless continued to work at home or at their offices – but reported only to Serbia, at the same time dispensing a range of services on which the local population depended.

But in 23 April 2023, Pristina held local elections to replace those Serbs who had resigned in November 2022. Serbs boycotted those elections. With only the small Albanian minority voting. Turnout was in the low single digits and the result was a slate comprising exclusively ethnic Albanians.

However, on 26 May 2023, with most Kosovo Serb officials attending a mass rally in Serbia, Pristina took the opportunity to install its newly elected officials in the four northern municipalities.

Taken by surprise, President Vučić of Serbia then ordered the Serbian army to high alert and moved several units toward the border with Kosovo. The step, while worrying, was not an invasion.

On 29 May 2023, hundreds of Serb demonstrators gathered outside the municipal buildings. Fighting broke out and by the time The Kosovo Force (KFOR) restored order, more than 50 Serbs and about 30 peacekeepers were injured.

Now, the international response was that Mr Albin Kurti's decision to take control of the municipal buildings got him an unprecedented rebuke from Kosovo's strongest supporters. The U.S. Secretary of State, Mr Antony Blinken, and the EU's foreign policy chief, Mr Josep Borrell, called on Kosovo to suspend police operations focusing on the municipal buildings and for the protesters to stand down".

In fact on 30 May 2023, the United States formally sanctioned Kosovo, ejecting them from Air Defender 23, a massive NATO exercise, which Kosovo had to do in order to get into other international organisations.

So, the actions of Pristina and the government have derailed EU efforts to breathe life into agreements which it has recently mediated between Kosovo and Serbia. Those agreements sketched out a path toward normalised relations, in which the two sides accepted each other's international personality – flags, passports,

licence plates and the like – and exchanged permanent representations, in effect, kind of, embassies. But the attempts foundered almost immediately over the issue of Kosovo Serb autonomy, because Pristina has refused to implement an earlier (2013 and 2015) set of commitments to expand Serb self-rule by creating an association or a community of Serb municipalities.

Dear colleagues, unless it is checked, the situation in northern Kosovo stands to worsen, including by escalating into more serious fighting, between Kosovans and Kosovan Serbs.

So, what can be done?

While most EU member states worked with the U.S. to bring about Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Belgrade and Pristina have never normalised relations with each other. There are two major issues. One is Serbia's persistent refusal to join over 100 other countries (including all but five EU member states) in recognising Kosovo's independence. The other is the question of how to integrate Kosovo's minority Serb population into its government architecture, particularly in the four northernmost municipalities where Serbs form the majority.

A possible solution may be de jure partition of Kosovo. Belgrade and Pristina have already discussed an exchange of territories, with northern Kosovo going to Serbia, and comparable parts of Serbia's Albanian-majority Preševo valley going to Kosovo, but of course that has knock-on consequences in neighbouring states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

I believe the U.S. and the EU are right to urge the Kurti government to organise genuine new elections in those four municipalities, as Kurti has said he is willing to do.

But the Serbs would probably boycott elections without a commitment to create a self-governing Community or Association of Serb-majority municipalities.

But Kurti is a strong leader who feels he has the people behind him, and he may be unwilling to take those steps, whatever the consequences for his country's relations with its long-term backers.

If he continues to resist these measures, then Serbia and Kosovo could well find themselves in a dangerous escalatory dynamic. That, in turn, would require the U.S. and the EU to rethink their priorities for the two neighbours – focusing more on crisis management, with the search for a lasting solution to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute deferred until better and more peaceful times.

The immediate tasks then would become protecting minorities: the Kosovo Serbs and the Albanian villagers in Serb-majority areas.

In conclusion, Mister President, what about nation status?

Well, over 100 countries recognise Kosovo as a sovereign state but five EU countries – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain do not. Therefore, it would be wishful thinking to believe that if every country recognised Kosovo, that would solve the internal tensions – it will not.

The same goes for EU membership and joining this Assembly. Peace does not come about by merely joining the EU or the Council of Europe. All EU member states would have to vote in favour and only the Council of Ministers can invite Kosovo to join the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In April 2023, Cyprus, Romania, Hungary, and Spain voted against Kosovo joining the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I understand and I think we have to respect their views as much as we respect the views of countries who think that Kosovo should be a member.

Therefore, colleagues, in conclusion it is another fine mess and only dialogue and pressure from The Quint, NATO and EU might persuade Pristina to make sensible concessions to live in harmony with their Serb citizens and we also need similar pressure from The Quint, NATO and EU to tell the Serbian Government to get out of it and stop interfering.

Colleagues, I've introduced this debate, I haven't presented you with a solution, but I have suggested to you some essential first steps. And I look forward to hearing your solutions. And if you've got them, you should be running the United Nations.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much dear Lord David BLENCATHRA for opening this current affairs debate.

Now we are first going to list the five speakers on behalf of the political groups.

First in the debate I call Mr Aleksander POCIEJ from Poland to speak on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

You have the floor.

Mr Aleksander POCIEJ (Poland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

On many occasions here we repeated to different countries that everybody is losing something in a conflict.

There are serious historical allegations from both sides, but we feel that the momentum of this clash is not accidental.

Somebody's pushing those two groups for conflict.

One thing is absolutely sure, that violence cannot be tolerated or justified. Violence is never a solution.

The attack of Serbian parallel paramilitary forces on the Kosovo police should be fully investigated and those responsible should be punished. De-escalation of this violence, as I said before, can be useful only for Mr Vladimir Putin.

The way out of this solution and of this situation and the solution for this conflict is the implementation of the Brussels and ODIHR agreements.

Kosovo should establish the association of Serbian municipalities and protect minorities.

The right of minority, this is also what we stand behind in this organisation.

Serbia should dismantle its structures in the north of Kosovo and stop opposing Kosovo's membership in international organisations.

In the end, in the future, the future of both Serbia and Kosovo is in the European Union.

Without stopping this conflict, both those sides will suffer.

Thank you.

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

Next in the debate I call Ms Sabina ĆUDIĆ from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ms Sabina ĆUDIĆ speaks on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

You have the floor.

Ms Sabina ĆUDIĆ (Bosnia and Herzegovina, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Strategic ambiguity is a term invented by diplomats to, at best, buy time and at worst, justify the policy of appeasement whose failure we have seen for centuries but most recently, of course, on European soil.

And strategic ambiguity is something that, unfortunately, is practised in the Western Balkan region, as well, particularly in the last years.

However, at the same time, Kosovo's constitution contains the European Convention on Human Rights while the citizens of Kosovo cannot access the European Court of Human Rights, both Kosovo, Albanians, Serbs and Bosniaks, while the constitution enshrines something the distant institution is here to protect as well.

So there are two thirds of members of our family – of this institution – who strongly believe that Kosovo should be allowed to be a member of the Council of Europe. This is the time, the right time to recognise and face the fact that we can no longer wait to open doors to those who wish to be part of the Council of Europe family. And the longer we wait the longer reopened the doors to more destructive and malign influence very much present in the Western Balkan region, and allowing it to reign on European soil, starting with Mr Putin who has direct access to both Belgrade and Banja Luka.

The policy of appeasement, therefore, gave birth – as I said in the beginning – to the policy of strategic ambiguity, which allows Putin's puppets to operate in the Western Balkan region, creating a security threat not just for Kosovo, Bosnia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, but all of Europe as well.

So let us not hesitate and let us stop being ambiguous about the fact that citizens of Kosovo need access to human rights mechanisms, and need access to this institution, and need access to the European Court of Human Rights. Because we can debate here for a very long time who is the blame but in the end, it is the citizens who will pay the price. And if we close the doors to these mechanisms to them we are sending them a strong signal that they do not belong not only to the European Council, do not belong to the European family, and we leave them at the whims of those who have created enough conflict around the world to keep us busy, unfortunately for decades.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): [Light applause]

Thank you, Madam Sabina ČUDIĆ.

Next in the debate I call Mr Oleksandr MERZHYKO from Ukraine.

You have the floor.

Mr Oleksandr MERZHYKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, dear colleagues.

The situation in Kosovo is truly disturbing and reminds me of the beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2014. The style of involvement looks familiar, as if someone is acting according to Mr Vladimir Putin's patterns of behaviour.

I don't rule out that Russia with assistance of its proxies in the Balkans is trying to provoke a new Balkan war in order to distract attention away from the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

How to prevent it from happening? It is very simple. Respect the rights and sovereignty of all Balkan states.

Each Balkan state, including those created as a result of the genocide committed against them, deserve to be independent and free from external meddling into their affairs.

Some states in the Balkans should stop using national minorities in neighbouring states as a political tool against the sovereignty of those states.

I believe that Serbia can become a member of the European Union only if it breaks away from its past, will recognise Kosovo *de jure*, and will join the European Union in imposing sanctions on Russia.

I don't believe that Mr Aleksandar Vučić has any illusions regarding the possibility to re-establish control over Kosovo.

To me, it more looks like a political game, where Mr Aleksandar Vučić is using the issue of Kosovo's recognition as leverage in this game.

Interestingly, *de facto* Serbia has already recognised Kosovo.

It would be expedient and fair to do it *de jure*.

It would be in the best interest of Serbia and its people and would show that Serbia deserves the right to be a fully-fledged member of the European family of democracies.

Thank you.

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

Next in the debate I call Mr Andrej HUNKO from Germany on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

You have the floor.

Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President,

Earlier we also discussed in the progress report how in several regions of Europe unresolved conflicts are breaking out again, turning into violence. An example of this is the situation in northern Kosovo, where on 24 September a Kosovo police patrol was ambushed, one policeman was killed, and two were injured. At first, it looked like that was going to continue to escalate. However, it must be said that it was possible to mitigate this

escalation to some extent. Initially, there were troops from Serbia that were massed on the border, but that has all been scaled back. We do not have the dimension of escalation and outbreak of violence as, unfortunately, in other parts. It must be noted that it is not always only on the path of violence and escalation.

The basic structural problem has been addressed. Lord David BLENCATHRA has just described it in great detail. We have the situation in northern Kosovo, which has a majority Serbian population, who boycotted the municipal elections and then with 3.5 percent of the turnout there now Kosovo Albanian mayors have been elected, and so on, and so forth. The conflict is smoldering.

I think it is important first of all, of course, that we prevent it from turning into violence and aggressive nationalism, and that we may need a new kind of European peace conference at some point to deal with the various unresolved, frozen, or unfrozen conflicts. We have to see in the meantime that things do not escalate further.

For a long time, the position of the Parliamentary Assembly with regard to Kosovo and Serbia has always been that we care about standards in these countries. We care about the standard of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in these countries. But we are not the body that should decide the status. I think we should remember that too quick clarification in quotation marks of the status issue can also have an escalating effect, and I would warn against that.

Thank you very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Many thanks, Mr Andrej HUNKO.

The last speaker on behalf of the political groups shall be Mr Mattias JONSSON from Sweden on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mattias, you have the floor.

Mr Mattias JONSSON (Sweden, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much Mister President,

I talk in the name of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

We are living in a very troubled time with war and conflicts in Europe.

We are in a very, very serious situation. What we are witnessing today is a major setback and concern after armed forces entered Kosovo, which must be condemned.

To put this very clearly: we are not partial here regarding a dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. But there is a red line for this Council of Europe.

There are violent attacks by a country or possibly actors controlled by a country to another country or another part of Europe. If we allow this to happen, there would be a new conflagration in Europe.

The re-emergence of this conflict is deeply worrying. A long-term and sustainable solution must therefore be found. The escalation is devastating for the region in particular but also affects the whole of Europe.

Anti-democratic movements are growing in the region, pushing the idea of peace further away.

Many of us had hope and believed in increased stability when a historic EU agreement was reached between Serbia and Kosovo in March 2023.

The so-called Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue and the "France-German" agreement are meant to contribute to the normalisation of relations between these two countries. Both Kosovo and Serbia must now take a constructive role in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, or else there will be no further progress.

Peace and stability in the region are crucial to ensuring a sustainable future for both Kosovo and Serbia, as well as promoting peace and co-operation throughout this area. Therefore, both parties must return to the negotiating table.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has taught us that we cannot take peace for granted and that we must stand up for our democracies. We must therefore engage in increased dialogue in the Balkans and ensure that respect is restored and the agreement reached between Serbia and Kosovo in March of this year is upheld.

Once again, I want to clearly state that the situation needs to cool down, and that conflicts should not be resolved through violence.

Thank you for your attention.

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

Now we are going to continue with the list of speakers. First I call Ms Biljana PANTIĆ PILJA from Serbia.

You have the floor.

Ms Biljana PANTIĆ PILJA (Serbia, EPP/CD): Thank you.

The Republic of Serbia expressed regret for the tragic event that happened on 24 September. As the head of the Serbian delegation, I want to emphasise that Serbia is committed to keeping peace and stability, dialogue, and respect of international law. The root of the problem lies in Kurti's regime, about which we have warned the whole international community as well as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

It is my duty to say that it is not us who are breaking apart the territory of someone's country. We are the ones who are committed to the preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty of all without double standards. The Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija live in horrible conditions. Since Kurti came to power, 11% of Serbs have left Kosovo and Metohija. I ask if it is the goal of the international community to cleanse Kosovo and Metohija of Serbs. Do you support the mass exodus of one nation?

For 130 days, there has been no entry of Serbian goods to Kosovo and Metohija. Babies cannot get the vaccines and hospitals the medicines they need. Since Kurti came to power, 409 ethnically motivated attacks on the Serbs have happened as have over 30 unjustified intrusions into the north by special forces.

There has not been a single charge for the attempted murder and wounding of two Serbian boys that happened on Christmas. The obligation to reduce the presence of Kosovo special forces in the north was not carried out. As well as the obligation to call a new local election. The Serbs have been waiting 10 years for the community of Serb municipalities. The existence of the community of Serb municipality is an international obligation under the Brussels Agreement, but Kurti refused to form them.

When it comes to the tragic event, one of the three killed Serbs was shot from a distance of 12 metres after he dropped his weapon and surrendered. Another Serb was shot from a close range in the head while lying on the ground. That was a classic execution. All deaths must be investigated and the Serbian side will take all necessary steps to establish relevant facts. Do not draw premature conclusions until the official investigation is completed. I invite you to act impartially and see for yourself the presence of excessive use of force. I repeat that this unfortunate event happened exclusively because of the long-term terror against Serbian people and because the international community lied to the Serbs that they would be protected and not prosecuted and arrested.

For the sake of the truth, only 83 countries recognise so-called Kosovo, not 100 and something.

To conclude, peace is in the interest of Serbia and the entire region. We are dedicated to the dialogue and respect of international law.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Thank you dear Ms Biljana PANTIĆ PILJA.

Now we are going to Mr Reinhold LOPATKA from Austria.

You have the floor.

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA (Austria, EPP/CD): Dear president, dear colleagues,

Of course everyone would agree that we need to enter permanent crisis mode and de-escalation in this region.

Therefore I condemn the recent heinous attack in the north of Kosovo. The perpetrators must be brought to justice.

Serbia has promised to assist in all investigations, which is positive, but at the same time we have to see that all parties and actors need to actively de-escalate.

Perpetrators need to be brought to justice: this also applies to the perpetrators of the violent acts against citizens, KFOR troops, law enforcement and journalists in the north of Kosovo in May 2023.

We need to get out of this conflict logic. There is no alternative to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

We are absolutely in favour of EU enlargement including Serbia and Kosovo. However an enlargement without normalisation in the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo is not possible.

Austria has a strong engagement in the KFOR forces in Kosovo to contribute to the stability in the region. We continue to do this in the future.

But most importantly is, and stability needs, that the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo, that they bring stronger contributions from both sides, as we have seen recently.

So I can only ask both sides: please stop this violent speech. Please stop using divisive rhetoric. Come back to dialogue.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Many thanks, Mister Reinhold LOPATKA [in German].

Now, we are going to listen to Mr Arben GASHI from the Assembly of Kosovo.

You have the floor.

Mr Arben GASHI (Assembly of Kosovo*): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, in times of darkness and despair, it is our duty to stand together, to confront the devastating consequences of terrorist attacks and to find hope in the pursuit of peace.

On 24 September, in the village of Banjska, municipality of Zvečan, in Kosovo, a terrorist attack was committed while a group of armed, uniformed and masked terrorists killed one police officer and injured two others. Serbia, which is a member of this great institution, supported and equipped these paramilitary groups with weapons, ammunition, and other means to commit this terrorist attack.

Serbia still continues to support them, as all of the terrorists involved in this attack are hidden in Serbia. In the face of such a grievous event, it is our responsibility to unequivocally condemn terrorism and its supporters in all of its forms. We must not allow terrorists to undermine the progress we have made in building peace based on the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Moreover, we call for a thorough and impartial international investigation into the existence of training camps for terrorists in Serbia. The presence of such facilities is not only a violation of international norms but also a direct threat to regional and global security.

Together with members of the Council of Europe, we must stand in solidarity against terrorism and work tirelessly to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice in Kosovo.

Moreover, we call upon Serbia to remove its military troops from the border with Kosovo. This action is not only essential for regional stability, but also in alignment with international agreements and the principles of peace and security.

The presence of military troops on the Kosovo border has the potential to escalate tensions and jeopardise the fragile peace in the region. We firmly believe that peaceful dialogue and diplomacy are the most effective means to resolve disputes and ensure the security of all parties.

Our collective resolve to combat terrorism upholds the values of the Council of Europe and secures a safer future for all remaining undertakings. Let us move forward with determination and unity guided by the principles of justice and peace.

Thank you very much.

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

The next speaker on our list will be Mr Petri HONKONEN from Finland.

You have the floor.

Mr Petri HONKONEN (Finland, ALDE): Thank you. Thank you Mister President.

Dear colleagues, I must say how deeply sad I am watching the negative development of rule of law and human rights in Europe. We see escalation after escalation.

In the current geopolitical situation I must say that the role of the Council of Europe has only increased.

Kosovo is an independent state. It's clear that we need to attach Kosovo into the European human rights system better in the future.

The situation in Northern Kosovo is very alarming. The violence against police officers and civilians is to be condemned in the strongest terms.

The European Union and the United States have been asking after a clash for de-escalation.

A constructive dialogue between the partners is essential. Without a dialogue, it is impossible to establish the steps towards regional co-existence.

In the meantime, it is totally clear for all of us that somebody is also escalating behind these counterparts.

All European instability serves Mr Vladimir Putin's Russia and its illegal war against Ukraine.

Every conflict on our territory makes it easier for the other side to create chaos, escalation of frozen conflicts, confusion and splitting the public opinion.

We need to keep unity, in the face of threat to European democracy, rule of law, and respect of human rights.

My message therefore is dialogue. Both parties benefit directly. Let's give a real chance to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Thank you.

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

Now we are going to Mr Marco SCURRIA from Italy.

The floor is yours.

Mr Marco SCURRIA (Italy, EC/DA): Thank you Mister President.

We are facing a dangerous escalation due to circumstances that other colleagues have already mentioned this afternoon. A dangerous situation in which an a group of armed Serbian militants carried out an armed assault that cost the life of a Kosovan policeman and wounded others. From there, it created a very strong tension that would not have calmed only for the peacekeepers on the ground, which nevertheless, resulted in some soldiers, including many Italians, being injured.

We absolutely have to aim for normalisation. A normalisation has prerequisites. First of all, that of the protection of Serbia's territorial integrity and secondly, the protection that Serbs must find in Kosovo territory.

Kosovo has applied for membership here in the Council of Europe. We agree because that is what was also in the agreement envisaged with the European Union. It was a very clear agreement. Serbia pledged not to hinder Kosovo's membership in international bodies, and Kosovo had pledged to ensure a level of self-government for Kosovan Serbs, which was aimed at creating the Community Association of Serb Majority Municipalities. However, no one stepped forward on that or took the first step. Recently, the European Union had to revisit these conditions so as to ensure that the agreement can be complied with.

So I think we have to start from here. We have to do everything because the only solution is to enforce the agreement wanted in Brussels in front of, among others, the representatives of the Serbian and Kosovan governments.

What is happening in these hours, these days, in the Middle East with the attack of Hamas on the State of Israel teaches us that radicalisation and confrontation does not lead to anything. In fact it definitely leads to one thing and that is war. Welcome then Kosovo in our family, in the Council of Europe. But we must remember that even in a family there are rules to be respected.

Thank you.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): "Thank you very much, Mister Marco SCURRIA" [spoken in Italian].

Next to the debate I call Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ from Croatia.

You have the floor.

As he is not available because he has meetings as rapporteur, we are now going to give the floor to Ms Ingjerd SCHOU from Norway.

The floor is yours.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President.

Having Kosovo on our agenda is timely and important, especially given the escalation of tension we have seen lately, as well as our process of considering the country's application for membership of our organisation.

Mister President,

I'd join my colleagues here in this hemicycle in condemning the attack on the monastery in the north of Kosovo.

Both sides must do their utmost to keep the level of conflict low, to lower tension and return to dialogue. Only through dialogue can de-escalation be achieved.

With the ongoing process in our Assembly, that work is currently being done by Ms Dora Bayokannis in our Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, and it is important to keep focus on what we as an Assembly are tasked to do.

The evaluation of Kosovo's eligibility for membership should be merit-based. The dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade is a separate matter.

Kosovo is one of the few European states which is not a member of the Council Europe. Its 1.8 million inhabitants do not benefit from the protection of the European Court of Human Rights.

We must keep this in mind in our work on the membership application.

Mister President,

I think it is important that we educate ourselves in the process of considering the application for membership.

Together with members of the Norwegian delegation, I have therefore studied the developments in Kosovo closely, both through meetings in Oslo and a study visit to Pristina.

In Kosovo we met dedicated Kosovars who have worked diligently to qualify for membership.

In my opinion, Kosovo has, in close co-operation with the international community, significantly developed their democracy and improved the status of human rights and the rule of law.

Mister President,

It is important that our Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy should make a thorough and independent assessment of the state of institutions, the human rights situation and the functioning of democracy in Kosovo so that we can send our recommendation to the Committee of Ministers.

Mister President,

Norway supported sending the membership application from the Committee of Ministers to our Assembly.

Our delegation supports Kosovo's application for membership.

To representatives of Kosovo present today, I encourage you to keep up the good work.

As parliamentarians, you play an important role in your democracy, working to ensure that human rights and the rule of law prevail in your country.

Thank you, Mister President.

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

Now, in the debate I call Madam Ms Saranda BOGUJEVCI from the Assembly of Kosovo.

Saranda, the floor is yours.

Ms Saranda BOGUJEVCI (Assembly of Kosovo*): Dear Mister President, thank you.

I promised myself I would not bring myself to this level of discussion but, unfortunately, when I hear my Serbian colleagues not only during this debate but in other debates, I cannot go to this point of what I wanted to discuss.

You see 25 years ago, as a 13-year-old, I survived a massacre from the Serbian army, which was then led by men who actually are leading the country now and were part of that regime. As a 13-year-old, I was left in a pile of bodies of my family with 16 bullets, and I, today, hold these marks in my arm and other parts of my body. To see 25 years after, where we are continuously getting attacked, verbally and in other means, recently with a terror attack in Kosovo, it is unacceptable. Enough is enough.

There has never been an apology. There has never been anything taken into bringing justice, not only what happened then but even now. The men who carried out the terror attack are in Serbia. They are not being tried, and they are not being extradited to Kosovo to face justice.

For me, it is very clear what is happening. We have done everything that we can as a country, and as institutions, to be able to build a better living for all of our citizens in Kosovo, including all of our minorities. Actually, we call them "communities". These are national communities, not even minorities. That is not how we refer to them. We have a constitution, and we have laws in place to make sure that they are fully integrated and fully engaged in our society. There are reserved seats in our Parliament for the Serbian Communities specifically, and also for other communities to make sure that they are represented. We have been working through this to make sure that we do build peace and we do create a better future for our young people. I am a mother now. I have a son, and I do not want my child to grow up with this kind of language and also to think that in the future, there could be a possibility for another war and to go through the same thing that what I went through and other people went through. That is unacceptable, and it is actually shameful. It really is shameful.

Another thing I want to mention here which I think is really, really important in the discussion that has been happening in relation to what has happened in the north of Kosovo. We are not talking about the Serbian community. I do not think the Serbian community should be placed in that negative light in that part of the country, because it is not them doing this. It is organised, criminalised groups, paramilitary groups, directly linked to the President of Serbia, Mr Aleksandar Vučić, who have been causing these troubles in the north, not the Serbian community. They are stuck in the middle of this. That has to be clear. Trust me, anyone that wants to find out all this information and all these facts, you can. It is all there.

I believe it is important that we have dialogue. It is important that we move forward. But it takes two parties to be able to do that. We have done everything that we can in our power to do that. Unless Serbia accepts the fact that Kosovo is an independent state, and we need to move forward from that. Acknowledge all the crimes that have been committed and at least have an apology, if nothing else, but also leave the country alone to be able to move forward and to provide for its citizens regardless of what their ethnic background is.

I apologise. I just realised the time.

Thank you.

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

We have to bear in mind speaking times. Until now, almost everybody is abiding by the speaking times. It is a matter of solidarity that everybody gets the chance to say what he or she wants to say.

Next, in the debate, I call Mr Stefan JOVANOVIĆ from Serbia.

Mr Stefan JOVANOVIĆ, you have the floor.

Mr Stefan JOVANOVIĆ (Serbia, NR): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, at the onset I would like to express my deepest concern over the tragic events in Banjska, Kosovo* and Metohija. I would also like to offer my deepest condolences to the families of those who lost their lives from these tragic events.

The situation in Kosovo* is very dramatic. As we speak, the extremist regime in Pristina led by Prime Minister Kurti is carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing, deliberately turning a death ear to the international appeals to de-escalate the situation.

I said this before and it rings even truer today, west of the front lines of Ukraine, the Kosovo-Serbs are the most endangered ethnic group on the European continent. The Serbian community in Kosovo* and Metohija is under constant threat from Pristina's provisional authorities who use conventional and unconventional methods of ethnic violence, constantly applying pressure on Serbian populations to flee.

The exodus of 11% – I repeat 11% – of the ethnic Serb population from Kosovo* and Metohija over the past two years alone, serves as a stark indication of Pristina's intention, which includes ethnic cleansing, sustained acts of terror and a manifestation of deep-seated ethnic hatred. Under the eye of the secessionist authorities, many innocent lives were lost in these unilateral acts of aggression towards peaceful civilians.

The so-called police forces resorted to violence against the Serb population 62 times in the last year. Pristina on 22 May, escalating moves in the north of Kosovo* and more than 30 unwanted inclusions by the special police forces, so-called, in the last two years.

Moreover, 56 ethically-motivated attacks on Serbs took place. Let me also remind you distinguished delegates, about the case of 11-year-old Stefan Stojanovic who was shot on Christmas Eve earlier this year.

Moreover, the Serb population in Kosovo* and Metohija also faces a deeply troubling denial of their basic healthcare rights. Shockingly, in the past three months alone, they have conducted more than 200 stop and searches on ambulances in North Kosovo*.

To this day, Pristina has not taken any de-escalatory measures or made any effort to improve the situation in the North of Kosovo*.

All these facts speak only of the regime's outrageously poor human rights record, but as a violator of territorial integrity, sovereignty and international law, the Pristina regime remains unrecognised by many distinguished members of this house, to whom I would like to express profound gratitude for remaining principled upholders of international law and the sovereignty of member states.

Pristina's appeals for membership should not be embraced by your organisation devoted to the protection of human rights and international law. Therefore, I would like, once again, to call upon the Parliamentary Assembly to reject the attempts of Kosovo's* provisional authorities to become part of the Council of Europe.

Thank you very much, Mister President.

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

Next in the debate I call Mr Francesco SORBARA who is a member of our delegation of our observer state, Canada.

The floor is yours.

Mr Francesco SORBARA (Canada): Good evening and thank you Mister President.

Dear colleagues, the shootout that took place on 24 September 2023 in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo was one of the worst confrontations in that region since Kosovo broke away from Serbia in 2008 and declared its independence.

I say this knowing that Serbia does not recognise Kosovo as an independent country and that tensions are increasing in that part of the region.

It was reported that about 30 masked men opened fire in a police patrol near Banjska before breaking down the gates of a Serbian Orthodox monastery and barricading themselves inside with the priests and visiting pilgrims.

One police officer and three gunmen died as a result of that shootout.

Following this event, NATO announced that it was increasing its troop presence in Kosovo. The first contingent of 200 British soldiers arrived in Kosovo on 6 October 2023 to reinforce Nato's Kosovo Force, or KFOR, peacekeeping mission.

These soldiers are joining a contingent of 400 UK soldiers already in Kosovo.

On 3 October 2023, the Romanian government announced that it will also be sending an additional 100 soldiers to bolster KFOR.

KFOR consists of over 4 500 troops who come from 27 NATO allies and partners, including Canada.

I recall that NATO has been leading a peacekeeping operation in Kosovo since 1999 in accordance with its mandate under resolution of the United Nations Security Council.

I support NATO's decision to increase its troop presence, to ensure KFOR has the resources it needs to fill its United Nations mandate, to maintain a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement for all people in Kosovo.

I know that Kosovo's prime minister welcomes NATO's decision and stated that the attack is a new sign that Serbia is trying to destabilise Kosovo with the help of Russia, its ally.

The United States also expressed concern about the buildup of Serbian forces along the border of Kosovo.

I also note that the European Union's High representative Mr Josep Borrell condemned the attack in the strongest terms and that MEPs and two reports adopted in May 2023 urged Serbia and Kosovo to engage in the EU-facilitated dialogue and secure a comprehensive legally binding agreement on the normalisation of relations among the parties based on the principles of mutual recognition.

The title the debate mentions the need for de-escalation.

I join my voice to call for that de-escalation, for the normalisation of relations among the parties involved, and for keeping peace in that region.

The future of all peoples in that region must be a bright one.

Thank you, Mister President.

[Scattered applause]

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

Now we are going to listen to Ms Etilda GJONAJ from Albania.

The floor is yours.

Ms Etilda GJONAJ (Albania, SOC): Honourable President, dear colleagues,

We are deeply concerned about the situation created in Kosovo after the Serbian organised military and criminal attack in the north of the country on 24 September.

We had a discussion in the hemicycle some months ago about dialogue and the de-escalation of tensions among Serbia and Kosovo, but despite that, escalation has happened.

I want to appeal today not to the reckless minds, but to all reasonable and cold minds, to the delegations here, that we must be released by the fever of nationalism.

It is not in the interest of our people. Any situation that puts in danger the lives of citizens, the sovereignty of the territory, democracy and human rights is not in the interest of the region, of Europe.

Fundamentalists are dangerous for democracy, freedom, and society.

We are seeing this in Kosovo, Ukraine, and just two days ago in Israel.

We cannot allow another Crimea or Donbas in the north of Kosovo.

I saw today an exhibition with pictures of children from Ukraine. We cannot allow the replication of the histories of Marijka and Marijana, 5 and 9 years old, and of the other children in Ukraine that have been killed, deported or become orphans because their parents have been killed.

The Serbian people do not want this, but they must get rid of the nationalism.

I want to even ask my Serbian colleagues, as politicians, but also as parents if they want and wish for their children to be at war, or even to live through the anxiety of the war. I am absolutely sure that it's a no.

The Council of Europe was created as an organisation of values to promote and to advocate for this serenity, democracy, and fundamental values, such as the right to freedom.

We cannot question the right of freedom. We are not talking here about privileges, but we are talking here about people's lives.

In the twenty-first century and this kind of ghost created in Ukraine cannot and should not be allowed to be replicated in the Balkans.

The Parliamentary Assembly has to condemn this action and to ask for a thorough investigation and to impose on all members that any similar attack is a red line.

We as a base have to remind the European Union that the clear perspective of the Western Balkan countries has to be concrete, the same even for countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

We as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should put in all the efforts so that Kosovo becomes a member of the Council of Europe.

This is the moment.

Thank you.

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

Madame TANGUY, you have the floor.

Ms Liliana TANGUY (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mister President.

Tensions have risen several notches in recent days between Serbia and Kosovo, particularly around the border between the two countries. The trigger for this latest deterioration in relations between Serbia and Kosovo was an attack in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo. As you all know, as a result of this shooting incident on 24 September, an Albanian policeman and three assailants were killed, and several others were wounded.

We Europeans have a responsibility to lend our support to de-escalate the violence in this part of Europe as quickly as possible. Today, as we can see, Belgrade's and Pristina's accession to the European Union is at stake because of these renewed outbreaks of violence.

We Europeans have a responsibility to help Serbia and Kosovo return to the path of dialogue and peace, to guarantee the stability and security of the region and of Europe. The return to normal of Serbian troop levels near the border is a sign of Belgrade's willingness to resume the process of normalising relations with Pristina in a constructive and responsible manner. The two parties must return to the negotiating table as soon as possible to re-engage in discussions based on the proposals drawn up by the European Union.

Political courage will be required to find a compromise that is essential to the implementation of the association of Serbian municipalities, a commitment made by Kosovo in the Brussels Agreement initiated by France and Germany. The strengthening of KFOR's presence in Kosovo is also a guarantee of security and peace along the entire border. This is why we welcome the recent deployment of the NATO mission in northern Kosovo, an essential step towards achieving a short-term calm and ensuring the protection of the inhabitants, who are being held hostage by the deleterious nationalist tensions that threaten not only stability in the Western Balkans, but also the unity of Europe.

Thank you very much.

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): "Thank you, Madam Liliana TANGUY" [spoken in French].

Next in the debate, I call Mr Ian PAISLEY from the United Kingdom.

The floor is yours.

Mr Ian PAISLEY (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Mister President,

Can I at the outset of my comments commend you, sir, for the way in which you introduced this session today, for asking us to stand against violence around the world and to mark our respect for those who are suffering under such violence, indeed to stand against illegal, unlawful atrocities, as we have seen them. In particular, sir, you rightly mentioned the Hamas violence against innocent Israelis, and that was most welcome.

The focus, of course, of this debate is violence in Kosovo. Some 20 years ago I think many of us hoped that that conflict was over. Unfortunately, as we have heard and indeed even witnessed in this Chamber today from Serbian and Kosovan representatives, that it still bubbles under the surface, calling upon the international community those words that we must, as a community, be honest. We must call out terrorism where we see terrorism. It is not to mask our outrage with veiled language or to support and hide behind bogus claims.

Just as we have witnessed in the past 72 hours, unprovoked, unjustifiable, evil Hamas terrorists fighting in Israel, let us call that what it is. It is antisemite, it is terrorism, and it is hatred.

Now, the cradle of Europe, where we stand today, knows what this hatred can lead to. Indeed, this very town that we stand in knows what that sort of hatred can lead to. Let us call out the horrible terrorism, whether it is in Kosovo or whether it is the horrible Hamas in Israel. Let us stand in solidarity with those people who are suffering.

Let us apply those lessons that we have seen in the last 72 hours, that we have seen in the last 900 days in Ukraine. Let us apply the lessons that we have learned to the situation in Kosovo, also. Let us be, let this place be a beacon of hope for the oppressed around the world, not a bubble of meaningless, mealy-mouthed words. In the last 72 hours, we have seen grandmothers, women, and children kidnapped by cowards. We have seen over a thousand people murdered, 10 of them from my own country, from the United Kingdom.

The retaliation of this will now undoubtedly be certain as it will be severe. Let us lead calls to have that hatred that leads this thing, whether it is from Muslim brotherhood being prescribed, right the way through to seeing us being honest as kingdoms and nations around the world with what is going on. I hope that this debate today will help us not only stand shoulder to shoulder with Kosovo but with Israel and with all those people who are suffering in the world.

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

The last speaker on our list will be, due to the time constraints, Madam Elvira KOVÁCS from Serbia.

You have the floor.

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

Distinguished President, dear colleagues,

Let me remind you all, that in addressing the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January this year, I warned that the political dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina had reached its turning point. Either the Community of Serbian Municipalities will be formed or it will sink into irrelevance. And further, we are witnessing the culmination of the long-term crisis, due to Pristina's attempts to completely exclude Belgrade from the negotiation process, using different tactics from passivity to setting up obstacles.

Unfortunately, 24 September 2023 proved our concerns, and we witnessed terrible development in the village of Banjska: the hours-long shootout left one Albanian police officer and three gunmen dead, and others injured. We mourn for all the victims and we condemn such a sad occurrence, expecting at the same time a proper, thorough and impartial investigation, by clarifying all the circumstances.

Serbia's full and unconditional co-operation is indisputable.

The only way out is to open the perspective of regional co-operation, to overcome the politicised gap overflowed by nationalist hysteria and pseudo-mythomania, to promote the importance of an ethics of political responsibility, to re-start a dialogue which is essential to the strengthening of regional security and safety processes.

This is a moment to repeat once again that two key words are: dialogue and compromise, so that agreement between politicians can open the door to reconciliation between people. To cite the famous French writer and philosopher, Albert Camus, "We live in terror because dialogue is no longer possible".

After the last round of political dialogue on 14 September 2023, the EU confirmed that Serbia was a constructive, serious and responsible partner to the international community and that Belgrade accepted the EU's compromise proposal to first talk about the Community of Serb Municipalities, but that Pristina rejected it.

Serbia is committed to de-escalating the situation and constructively continuing the co-operation with the EU mission and Kosovo Forces (KFOR) in Kosovo, ready to contribute to the strengthening of regional stability and peace. We want a stronger KFOR presence, which would be the one way to guarantee the security and safety of the Serbs, especially in the north.

Fully understanding that the EU accession process and normalisation process should run parallel and support each other, Serbia will remain entirely committed to the continuation of the normalisation process and its dialogue with Pristina.

Thank you.

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

As I mentioned, I now have to interrupt the list of speakers. The speeches of members on the speakers list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may be given to the Table Office for publication in the official report.

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

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

I thank Lord David BLENCATHRA for the opening remarks of this debate and all those who participated in the debate for the dignified way of dealing with this issue.

Once again, sorry to those who were not able to take the floor.

That ends the current affairs debate.

This Assembly will hold the next public sitting tomorrow afternoon at 3:30 p.m. with the agenda which was approved earlier today.

The sitting is adjourned.

Ms Tatjana PAŠIĆ (Serbia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

In Kosovo and Metohija there is a planned and well-organized repression against Serbian population led by Albin Kurti.

Serbs are being voluntarily arrested, beaten and threatened by Kosovo police forces.

It is obvious that Albin Kurti is trying to eradicate any Serbian presence in Kosovo and to create mono- ethnic society. There is no willingness on Kurti's behalf to fulfill obligations accepted by Kosovo during the dialogue. The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is stuck and it is not going anywhere, especially after the incident in Banjska, Kosovo, last month.

These events are the consequence of the long and stubborn attempts by Albin Kurti to push Serbs out of Kosovo.

Also, these events are the result of bad decisions by Serbian government to encourage Serbs to leave Kosovo police and all institutions and also to boycott Kosovo elections.

We believe that all responsible for incident in Banjska must be prosecuted and tried.

Serbian people should not be viewed as responsible for actions of certain individuals who are close to our government. Despite numerous examples of wrong doings by our government, we don't believe that Serbia and its people should be put under any European sanctions.

It is obvious that Mr Kurti believes in unilateralism and that he pays little attention on strong condemnations on his actions. As a result, Kosovo Serbs were thrown to mercy of Kurti's special police on one side, and on criminal elements on the other side.

Serbia and its people must not be hostages of any criminals and war mongers. The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is the only way out of this situation.

We believe that Serbia should immediately align its foreign policy with the EU, come back to negotiations with Pristina in best faith and ability.

European Union should quicken the process of full integration of our region into the EU by the year of 2030. This is the only solution in removing all bilateral attempts to block each other in years to come.

Europe once found peace with the belief that it will last forever. Ukrainian tragedy and war after Russian aggression, should remind us that neither stabilocracy nor ignorance will not lead us to stability, democracy and peace.

Serbia must not be part of decaying and non-European ways, but rather on our way back home to Europe.

Ms Dubravka FILIPOVSKI (Serbia, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Belgrade condemns every act of violence, our policy is peace and stability and de-escalation of violence in Kosovo and Metohija. I remind you that the violence in Kosovo and Metohija has culminated in two and a half years. Since the arrival of Albin Kurti to power in 2021, until the tragic events in Banjska, Albanians carried out 409 ethnically motivated attacks on Serbs, of which 17 were on children. Extremely dangerous behaviour of the Prime Minister of temporary institutions in Pristina Albin Kurti, about which the President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic warned the international public countless times, culminated in an armed conflict between local Serbs and members of the so-called Kosovo police in the village of Banjska in the north of Kosovo and Metohija. Four people died, three Serbs and one Albanian.

Belgrade's warning that an aggressive government in Pristina will cause bloodshed was ignored. The alarm was not raised even when the Serbs in the northern Kosovo and Metohija decided to leave the Pristina institutions at the beginning of November last year, DUE TO VIOLENCE, THREATS AND ARRESTS. Moreover, many condemned the action of the Serbs without saying a word about the reasons that led to it.

I will remind you that the tragedy in Banjska happened only 10 days after the meeting in Brussels. Kurti rejected the plan for de-escalation and from the EU headquarters SENT THE MESSAGE THAT SERBS SHOULD PAY AND SUFFER. Silence in the face of obvious threats or tepid reactions of international representatives to the obvious violence against Serbs and their children caused the tragic events on 24 of September this year in the north of Kosovo and Metohija. For the regime of temporary institutions in Pristina, the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija are either criminals or terrorists, while not, I repeat, not one Albanian from Kosovo and Metohija has ever been convicted of crimes against Serbs. The policeman who shot Serbian children on Christmas Day was released. If Kurti's terror continues, Serbs will start to leave Kosovo in large numbers, there have been 11% fewer of them in the last 2 years.

The key question for sustainable peace in Kosovo is how to advance the process of normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina when Pristina refuses to implement the Brussels Agreement and form the Community of Serb Municipalities? Also, for the de-escalation of violence in Kosovo, the illegal WITHDRAWAL OF THE SO-CALLED KOSOVO POLICE IS NECESSARY from the north Kosovo and Metohija, and the creation of electoral conditions so that Serbs could go to the polls.

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

This assembly should condemn in the strongest terms the violent armed attack against the police of the Republic of Kosova on 24 September in the north of the country. This attack is a criminal and dangerous act of aggression against the stability, integrity, independence, and law and order of Kosova, but not only. It is also a grave threat to the security and stability of our whole region, with direct consequences for our common Europe.

The killing of a Kosova police officer in the line of duty makes this act of aggression even more tragic and painful.

Support and solidarity go out to the people and the Government of Kosova, who are facing today dangerous attempts to destabilize the Republic amid their efforts to build a prosperous and European future for all its citizens.

The perpetrators, organizers and instigators of this act must be held accountable and brought to justice the soonest. This is imperative in order not to allow a further escalation of the situation, with possible irreversible consequences.

De-escalation now is key and the only way ahead.

This is the moment when Serbia should make up its mind, finally and clearly, if it wants to be with Europe, or with the shadow of itself at the end of the 20th century.

This is also the moment for the Parliamentary Assembly, European Union and international organizations and partners, to clearly elevate the democratic alarm to the highest level in order to prevent an escalation of the conflict in the north of Kosova, which has entered the most dangerous phase since 1999.

Kosova-Serbia dialogue is the only way to peace. The parties must work courageously towards a comprehensive peace agreement, supported by the international community, which will enable mutual recognition between the two countries, Kosova's membership in the UN, EU and CoE, as well as fair treatment of minorities, in accordance with the Constitution of Kosova.

Recent events show that Kosova today, even more after the tragedy of the killing of a police officer, must persistently seek dialogue, and must seriously believe in dialogue, and should employ all energies for the successful conclusion of dialogue.

Mr Enis KERVAN (Assembly of Kosovo*): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Today, we are addressing an issue of grave concern that has deeply affected the people of Kosovo and highlights the importance of our collective commitment to upholding these cherished principles.

For some time now, we have been observing the provocation of tensions from Serbia and the precarious political situation in the northern part of Kosovo.

However, the recent terrorist attack on the Republic of Kosovo has deeply shaken our nation, causing profound pain and insecurity among our people.

The loss of the dedicated individual, Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku, who paid the ultimate price in the line of duty, serves as a stark reminder of the extraordinary challenges we face, particularly in the northern region of Kosovo. This remains a significant concern for the Republic of Kosovo.

We, MP's of non-Serb minorities representing in the Assembly of Kosovo, expressed our gratitude and unwavering support for the dedicated professionalism of the Kosovo Police. On daily basis they put their lives in danger while being on line line of duty to protect the constitutional and territorial integrity of Kosovo.

In the face of this criminal and terrorist act, we have reaffirmed our collective determination. The Government of Kosovo, entrusted with the primary duty of ensuring the safety and well-being of its citizens, has in ghis issue been given our clear and unconditional support.

We - surely, stand united against terrorists who aim to undermine the hard-earned progress of Kosovo.

We, reiterate that Kosovo remains committed and unwavering in its fight against all acts of terror and the violation of its territorial integrity. We will continue to move forward, guided by the principles of unity, democracy, and the protection of the rights of all its citizens.

Kosovo has made significant progress in recent years, striving to be a democratic, inclusive, and rights-respecting society. These hard-earned achievements should not be put into question by acts of terror such as the one we witnessed. We are determined to continue on our path towards European integration and becoming a beacon of democracy and human rights in the region.

We call upon the international community to stand with us in condemning terrorism and supporting our aspirations for a brighter, democratic, and rights-respecting future.

It is imperative that the international community takes a strong stance against such actions that threaten peace and security. Sanctions are a crucial step towards discouraging further collaboration with these dangerous elements and sending a clear message that terrorism will not be tolerated.

Thank you.

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